

Huntsville Center Offers Transformation Through Education

Lee College Huntsville Center, in partnership with Windham School District, is proud to announce it has been approved by the U.S. Department of Education as an official Prison Education Program (PEP). Because of this significant achievement, Lee College is now able to offer Pell Grants to most students who enroll in Lee College programs at campuses within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), equipping them with education and skills to succeed upon reentry and reducing overall student debt.

The rigorous process for the PEP takes more than a year to complete, and Lee College was one of the first colleges in Texas to receive this approval. With this approval, eligible students can immediately begin receiving Pell Grants to pay for tuition and related expenses.

Dr. Douglas Walcerz, vice president of Academic and Student Affairs at Lee College and chair of the Higher Education in Prison Consortium stated, "Lee College has one of the first and largest prison education programs in the country. Research consistently shows that a college education significantly increases the likelihood that people will successfully integrate with society after they are released, and it is our mission to provide a high-quality Lee College education to every student within TDCJ who seeks to improve their future through the power of higher education."

For the past year and a half, Lee College has awarded Pell Grants through the Revised Second Chance Pell Experiment. However, that program is set to expire in 2027, and has operated under restricted budget constraints with limited student participation. The approval of the PEP removes the limit on the number of students who can receive Pell Grants, allowing the college to offer educational opportunities to many more individuals within TDCJ.

Windham Superintendent Kristina J. Hartman said, "For years, Lee College has been a vital post-secondary partner for Windham School District, and we are excited to strengthen this collaboration while expanding higher education opportunities for our students. With the approval of the Prison Education Program, Lee College stands among the first institutions nationwide to break barriers and provide transformative access to post-secondary education through the federal Pell Grant. Windham is proud of Lee College for achieving this significant milestone."

Donna Zuniga, associate vice president of the Lee College Huntsville Center, believes the updated PEP will help break down barriers in education, and the rigorous requirements of the PEP will help colleges continue to offer programs that students need most to be successful after reentry.

"This new development is a game changer in terms of meeting our students' needs and making sure all colleges stay accountable," said Zuniga. "Lee College believes in the transformative power of education and has always worked to provide the best possible opportunities for our students. This new approval will help us do that even more effectively."

About Lee College Huntsville Center

For more than 50 years, the Lee College Huntsville Center has been preparing individuals within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) with the work skills

and soft skills necessary to find and sustain gainful employment upon reentry, while breaking the cycle of crime and poverty in our local communities. Lee College provides quality educational programs to more than 1,000 qualified students incarcerated within TDCJ in the greater Huntsville, Texas area, including the A.A.S. degree in business administration and management. Academic and technical based programs provide students in TDCJ with unique learning opportunities to acquire new job skills and industry certifications leading to more productive lives for themselves and their families.

About Windham School District

Windham School District (Windham) provides academic, career and technical education and life skills programs to eligible students within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). With 100 campuses located in prison facilities across Texas, Windham strives to equip students with the necessary education and skills to progress to post-secondary education programs and successfully reenter the workforce within their communities. As supported by the Associated Press (AP) Stylebook, this article includes utilizing person-first language. The district uses terms such as "student" and "graduate," to describe people incarcerated in TDCJ facilities, building the foundation for personal and professional growth. For media or partnership inquiries, please email Danielle Nicholes, communications administrator, at danielle.nicholes@wsdtx.org.