

Celebrating 60 Years of Transformation

Lee College, TDCJ and Windham School District Mark 60 Years of Transforming Lives Through Higher Education

Lee College, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) and Windham School District recently celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Lee College Huntsville Center, commemorating a partnership that has transformed educational opportunities for students during incarceration and become a national model for higher education in corrections.

What began in 1966 with five college classes serving 176 students has grown into the largest prison education program in Texas and the second largest in the nation. Today, the Huntsville Center serves more than 1,200 students across nine TDCJ prison units, providing associate degrees, workforce certificates and reentry support that help students build meaningful careers and successful lives after release.

The anniversary celebration brought together college leaders, TDCJ and Windham administrators, elected officials, alumni, and community members to recognize six decades of collaboration among three organizations united by a shared belief: that education creates opportunities, strengthens families and benefits communities throughout Texas. Together, Lee College, TDCJ and Windham have helped thousands of students gain the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to successfully reenter their communities.



“Congratulations to Lee College on 60 years of exceptional service as a postsecondary partner to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice,” TDCJ Executive Director Bobby Lumpkin said. “Effective rehabilitation is true public safety, and TDCJ is proud to partner

with Lee College in expanding these opportunities and opening doors that lead to lasting change.”

Lee College President Jacob Atkin said the anniversary honored not only the longevity of the partnership, but the thousands of lives changed through education.

"When you spend time with our graduates, you quickly realize this isn't just about earning a degree," Atkin said. "It's about people finding purpose, rebuilding their futures and creating new possibilities for themselves and their families. That's why this partnership has mattered for 60 years."

Lee College's Huntsville Center offers a nationally recognized community college-based reentry program. Ninety-four percent of students who complete the program secure employment and avoid returning to prison after reentry, demonstrating how education benefits not only individuals but also families, employers and communities statewide.

"Lee College has helped generations of students achieve their goals and strengthen our Texas communities," Windham Superintendent Kristina J. Hartman said. "Windham School District is proud to partner with Lee College in expanding access to high-quality postsecondary education for students, creating pathways to meaningful careers and successful reentry. As we celebrate this important milestone, we congratulate Lee's leaders, faculty, staff and alumni on six decades of service and impact."

Donna Zuniga, executive director of the Lee College Huntsville Center, took a moment to honor the program's alumni whose stories illustrate the lasting image of educational opportunity. "We recognize those who seized the opportunity to pursue education, earned degrees and certificates, and invested in themselves and their future. You are the living legacy of this program and the reason we celebrate this milestone today."

Several graduates shared how earning college credentials while incarcerated became the turning point that allowed them to rebuild their lives, support their families and give back to their communities.



Jacob Walden, an alumnus who entered prison at age 21 believing his future had ended, described stepping into his first Lee College classroom as the moment he began to rediscover hope.

"When I first walked into a Lee College classroom, I wasn't just looking for credits or a certificate," he said. "I was trying to find myself. I was searching for proof that my life story wasn't over."

He credited Lee College faculty with seeing his potential instead of his past, helping him rebuild his confidence and envision a different future. Seven months after his reentry, he is now employed building rockets for SpaceX.

"There were many points in my past when I probably looked like a lost cause," he said. "But my instructors didn't look at me through the lens of my past. They chose to see my potential."

Reflecting on the program's impact, he added, "When you show up every day willing to believe in someone who has lost the ability to believe in themselves, you aren't just teaching a class anymore. You're saving lives, restoring dignity and changing the course of history one student at a time."

Looking ahead, the Lee College Huntsville Center is entering a new era of growth with expanded academic, workforce, and reentry initiatives designed to transform opportunities for incarcerated students across Texas. By Spring 2027, the college will offer Associate of Arts degree cohorts at nine TDCJ units, creating a transfer pathway to a bachelor's degree through Sam Houston State University. New workforce programs, including HVAC training for women at Plane State Jail and an expanded Logistics Operations and Management program, will prepare students for high-demand careers. At the same time, the center's enhanced reentry strategy is strengthening employer

partnerships, connecting students with job opportunities before release, and building foundations for lifelong success after reentry into the community.