

Challenges and Coping Strategies in the Implementation of College Education Behind Bars at Davao Prison and Penal Farm

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ABSTRACT

College Education Behind Bars (CEBB) is recognized globally as a transformative tool for reducing recidivism and fostering the successful reintegration of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs). Despite its growth, there is limited research on the operational realities faced by implementers navigating these highly restrictive environments. This study investigates the challenges encountered and the coping strategies employed in implementing the CEBB program at the Davao Prison and Penal Farm in the Philippines, a collaborative initiative involving Davao del Norte State College (DNSC) and the Davao Prison and Penal Farm, with support from a private implementing partner. The private implementing partner plays a key role in facilitating program implementation through logistical support, coordination, and educational service assistance, strengthening the partnership between the higher education institution and the correctional facility. This qualitative single-case study utilized purposive sampling to interview eight program implementers, including three coordinators and five faculty members. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover the challenges and coping mechanisms inherent in prison-based schooling. Implementers faced significant structural barriers, including institutional support constraints (funding gaps), credential-based eligibility hurdles, faculty workload strain, and stringent custodial security restrictions that disrupt academic continuity. Adaptive coping strategies employed included carceral inter-agency continuity meetings, collaborative document support systems involving families to secure academic records, and instructional resource substitution, which relies on printed modules and simulations to overcome technological gaps. The study concludes that prison higher education is a highly negotiated system where pedagogy and correctional control continually intersect. Sustaining such programs requires implementers to act as adaptive leaders who can reconstruct teaching processes to fit the realities of confinement.

Keywords: *college education behind bars; correctional education; program implementation; prison higher education; transformational leadership*

INTRODUCTION

College education behind bars (CEBB) has gained global recognition as a significant rehabilitative approach that promotes the reintegration of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) into society. Empirical evidence consistently shows that participation in correctional education contributes to lower recidivism rates, improved employment outcomes, and enhanced reintegration prospects for PDLs (Davis et al., 2013; Bozick et al., 2018). A large-scale meta-analysis by Davis et al. (2013) found that incarcerated individuals who participated in educational programs were significantly less likely to reoffend, underscoring the role of education as a critical mechanism for breaking cycles of incarceration. Similarly, correctional education has been shown to increase postrelease employment, further supporting successful reintegration (Bozick et al., 2018).

The expansion of prison education is strongly supported by international human rights instruments that recognize education as a fundamental right of all individuals, including prisoners. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (United

Nations, 1966), and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules) (United Nations, 2015) collectively affirm that persons deprived of liberty retain their right to education. These frameworks position correctional education not only as a rehabilitative intervention but also as a human rights obligation that supports dignity, rehabilitation, and social reintegration (United Nations, 2015; Fantuzzo, 2022). Despite its recognized benefits, implementing college education in prison settings remains complex due to the restrictive nature of correctional environments. The existing literature identifies persistent barriers, including security restrictions, limited institutional flexibility, inadequate instructional resources, administrative constraints, and logistical challenges, that hinder educational delivery. These structural limitations often require educators to adapt instructional strategies while balancing educational goals with custodial requirements, making prison education highly regulated and demanding.

In the Philippine context, correctional education is grounded in constitutional and legal mandates that uphold the right to education for all citizens, including PDLs. The 1987 Philippine Constitution guarantees access to education, while Republic Act No. 10575 (Bureau of Corrections Act of 2013) emphasizes rehabilitation and reformation as central goals of the correctional system. These legal frameworks support the integration of educational programs within correctional facilities as part of national rehabilitation efforts. One notable initiative is the partnership between Davao del Norte State College (DNSC) and the Bureau of Corrections (BuCor) to implement the CEBB program at the Davao Prison and Penal Farm. This collaboration reflects a multi-sectoral commitment to rehabilitation through education by providing incarcerated individuals access to tertiary education within a controlled institutional environment.

However, despite these efforts, program implementation continues to face significant challenges. These include strict security protocols, limited access to learning materials and technology, funding constraints, workload pressures, and logistical difficulties within correctional facilities (Davis et al., 2013; Tzatsis et al., 2019). Such conditions directly affect instructional continuity, curriculum delivery, and overall program sustainability. In response to these challenges, program implementers employ adaptive coping strategies to sustain educational delivery in restrictive environments. These include inter-agency collaboration, flexible instructional approaches, resource optimization, workload redistribution, and continuous coordination with prison authorities. Such strategies reflect the resilience and adaptability required in delivering education within carceral settings (Bozick et al., 2018).

Although extensive research confirms the effectiveness of correctional education in reducing recidivism, few studies have examined the lived experiences of program implementers. Most existing literature emphasizes learner outcomes, with insufficient attention given to the operational realities, institutional negotiations, and adaptive practices of educators and administrators working in prison settings (Fantuzzo, 2022; Kim & Clark, 2013). This gap is particularly evident in the Philippine context, where empirical studies on CEBB implementation remain limited. This study is viewed through the lens of Kouzes and Posner's (1987) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership, situated within the transformational leadership perspective. The framework explains how program implementers demonstrate leadership by modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart in implementing the CEBB program. The study seeks to deepen understanding of how educators and coordinators navigate institutional constraints and sustain educational delivery within highly regulated correctional environments.

The purpose of this single-case study was to examine the challenges program implementers faced and the coping strategies they employed during the implementation of the CEBB program at Davao Prison and Penal Farm, in partnership with Davao del Norte State College. Specifically, the study sought to understand how institutional, operational, and contextual challenges affect the delivery of higher education within correctional settings and how implementers navigate these challenges to sustain educational opportunities for (PDLs).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach grounded in an interpretivist perspective, which posits that meaning is constructed through individuals' lived experiences and social interactions within specific contexts

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). A single-case study design was utilized to facilitate an in-depth examination of the challenges encountered and coping strategies employed by program implementers in the CEBB program at Davao Prison and Penal Farm. This design was appropriate because it enables a comprehensive exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life setting, particularly when contextual conditions are integral to understanding the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2018). The study focused on CEBB program implementers as the unit of analysis, examining their experiences in delivering higher education within a correctional environment. A case study approach was particularly suitable for capturing the complex interplay of institutional, operational, and contextual factors that shape program implementation in prison-based educational settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). Data were collected primarily through in-depth interviews, allowing participants to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and responses to implementation challenges in detail (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The flexible nature of qualitative interviewing enabled the emergence of rich, context-specific insights into the challenges and coping strategies associated with implementing the CEBB program.

Participants

Participants in this single-case study were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of information-rich individuals directly involved in implementing the CEBB program (Patton, 2015). The study involved eight program implementers from the CEBB program at the Davao Penal and Prison Farm, consisting of three coordinators and five faculty members. The inclusion of both coordinators and teachers provided complementary administrative and instructional perspectives within the bounded case of prison-based higher education. Selection criteria included: (a) direct involvement in the implementation of the CEBB program, (b) at least one year of experience in program delivery, supervision, or instruction, (c) active participation in instructional or coordination activities, and (d) willingness to participate voluntarily in the study. Coordinators contributed insights regarding policy implementation, inter-agency collaboration, and operational management, while teachers provided perspectives on instructional delivery, learner assessment, curriculum adaptation, and classroom practices within a correctional setting. Recruitment was facilitated through coordination with program administrators and relevant correctional authorities. Ethical safeguards were observed throughout the research process, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned and used in all records, transcripts, and research reports.

Data Sources

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews (Cresswell and Poth, 2018) with eight implementers of the CEBB program. This method enabled the researcher to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, challenges encountered, and coping strategies employed in the implementation of prison-based higher education. Before data collection, necessary permissions were secured, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews were conducted using an interview guide, audio-recorded with participants' permission, and supplemented by researcher notes. The recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed and analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns relevant to the implementation of the CEBB program.

Data Collection

This study used in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method to generate rich, detailed insights into participants' experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A validated semi-structured interview guide, developed from the research questions, was used to ensure alignment with the study objectives while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. Before data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Davao del Norte State College, and necessary permissions were secured from relevant authorities. Eight participants who met the inclusion criteria were recruited, informed of the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, voluntary participation, and audio-recording procedures, and provided informed consent. Interviews were conducted using the validated guide and audio-recording devices, enabling participants to share their experiences and perceptions regarding program implementation freely. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by the point at which subsequent interviews yielded

no new themes, categories, or significant insights relevant to the study objectives. All interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim, reviewed, and organized to preserve the authenticity of responses and serve as the primary data source for thematic analysis.

Implementation

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, guided by Creswell's (2013, 2014) framework, was employed to analyze the qualitative data. The researchers repeatedly reviewed the transcripts, coded significant statements, and grouped related codes into categories to identify recurring patterns and themes. The resulting themes were refined, interpreted, and aligned with the study's research questions and relevant literature. Direct participant quotations were incorporated to substantiate and enrich the presentation of findings.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical principles to protect the rights, dignity, and welfare of all participants (Israel & Hay, 2006). Before data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate Research Ethics Committee, and formal permission to conduct the study was secured from the relevant correctional authorities. Participants were provided with informed consent forms detailing the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty (BERA, 2018). Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were free to decline answering questions they considered sensitive. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used in all records and reports, and research data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher (Flick, 2018). Given the correctional setting, particular attention was given to safeguarding participants' autonomy, privacy, and well-being throughout the research process (Sanjari et al., 2014). These measures ensured compliance with internationally recognized ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adhered to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as proposed by Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba (1985). Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, and triangulation of data sources. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and procedures, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was ensured through a systematic documentation of the research process, including data collection and analysis procedures, creating an audit trail that supported consistency and transparency. Confirmability was strengthened by maintaining reflexive notes and preserving records of the data and analytical decisions, ensuring that the findings were grounded in participants' experiences rather than researcher bias. Collectively, these strategies enhanced the rigor and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher served as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in this qualitative case study, consistent with the interpretivist position that meaning is constructed through the researcher's engagement with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this role, the researcher designed and validated the interview guide, secured ethical clearance and necessary permissions, and coordinated the conduct of semi-structured in-depth interviews in accordance with established case study research procedures (Yin, 2018). During data collection, the researcher facilitated interviews, ensured compliance with ethical protocols, and managed audio recordings and documentation of responses in accordance with qualitative interviewing standards (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). After data collection, the researcher transcribed interviews verbatim, organized the data, and conducted thematic analysis to identify patterns and emerging themes related to the implementation of the CEBB program, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework.

Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained reflexivity and implemented strategies to minimize bias and enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, consistent with the qualitative rigor principles of confirmability and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The possibility was also recognized by the researcher that program failures, challenges, or shortcomings may have been underreported by the participants, as program implementers, while successful coping strategies may have been overreported due to professional pride, institutional loyalty, or a desire to present the program in a favorable light. To mitigate this potential bias, participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, encouraged to share both positive and negative experiences, and asked probing follow-up questions to obtain balanced and comprehensive accounts of program implementation. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' rights, were strictly observed throughout the study (Orb et al., 2001).

RESULTS

Challenges Faced by Program Implementers in Delivering Educational

Programs in the College Education Behind Bars

The thematic analysis revealed five major challenges encountered by program implementers in delivering educational programs within the CEBB: institutional support constraints, credential-based eligibility constraints, correctional faculty workload strain, academic resource and instructional flexibility constraints, and custodial security access restrictions.

Table 1 Challenges Faced by Program Implementers in Delivering Educational Programs in the College Education Behind Bars

Major Theme	Core Ideas
Institutional Support Constraints	• Insufficient institutional funding and support • Funding limitations in program implementation • Resource-, time-, and funding-related institutional difficulties
Credential-based Eligibility Constraints	• Conditional enrollment and document completion • Incomplete credentials • Strict eligibility requirements limit enrollees • Incomplete academic requirements with security-based approval processes
Correctional Faculty Workload Strain	• Faculty scheduling difficulties • Logistics-based academic scheduling limitations
Academic Resource and Instructional Flexibility Constraints	• Academic resource gap • Uncertain resource provision • Scarcity of learning materials affecting learner access • Restriction in access to learning resources • Resource-limited knowledge acquisition • Constraints on independent learning opportunities • Regulatory constraints on teaching delivery • Difficulty in discussing sensitive topics
Custodial Security Access Restriction	• Security-governed facility access control

	• Security-regulated instructional access • Controlled access to institutional data • Limited access to institutional data resources • Restricted research access due to confidentiality protocols • Operational delays due to security inspection procedures • Procedural delay in resource access • Security constraints affecting curriculum flexibility • Instructional disruption due to lockdowns • Lockdown-induced instructional disruption • Prohibition of electronic devices with restricted communication access • Security-related maintenance constraints • Immediate program removal due to misconduct
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Institutional Support Constraints

Participants identified inadequate funding, limited institutional support, and shortages in educational resources as major barriers to program implementation. These limitations affected instructional planning, resource acquisition, and the program's overall sustainability. One participant stated:

“There is insufficient funding and institutional support.” (IDI_6)

Another participant emphasized the combined effects of limited resources, time, and funding:

“There are limitations in time, resources, and funding.” (IDI_8)

These responses indicate that institutional limitations directly influence the efficiency and continuity of educational delivery within the correctional setting.

Credential-Based Eligibility Constraints

Participants reported challenges associated with student admission requirements, particularly incomplete academic records and documentation. Although conditional enrollment was permitted in some cases, students remained unable to complete academic requirements without submitting the necessary credentials. One coordinator explained:

“They will also check whether they have completed Senior High School so they can be considered qualified. They will be asked to submit school forms or credentials. If they are unable to provide these documents, they can still enroll and be accepted; however, until such time that they graduate and still have not submitted the required documents, their records will be put on hold.” (IDI_3)

These findings suggest that documentation requirements significantly influence access to and progression within the program.

Correctional Faculty Workload Strain

Faculty members experienced workload-related challenges associated with scheduling conflicts and institutional coordination requirements. Participants noted that balancing teaching responsibilities within and outside the correctional facility often created scheduling difficulties. As one coordinator reported:

“Faculty scheduling conflicts exist.” (IDI_1)

These scheduling issues required continuous adjustments to ensure instructional continuity.

Academic Resource and Instructional Flexibility Constraints

Participants highlighted limited access to learning materials, educational resources, and instructional technologies. These limitations affected students' ability to complete academic tasks and constrained educators' instructional strategies. One teacher stated:

“Students struggle to access information and complete modules due to scarce resources and limited learning materials.” (IDI_6)

Another participant noted:

“Strict regulations hinder effective teaching delivery.” (IDI_7)

The findings indicate that resource limitations and regulatory restrictions affect both teaching effectiveness and student learning experiences.

Custodial Security Access Restriction

Security regulations emerged as a significant challenge affecting educational operations. Participants reported restrictions related to facility access, mobility, communication, and the use of digital technologies. A coordinator explained:

“Security protocols limit access, mobility, and equipment availability.” (IDI_1)

Similarly, a teacher shared:

“Cellphones and laptops are prohibited, and communication is restricted.” (IDI_5)

These restrictions frequently affected instructional delivery and access to educational resources.

Coping Strategies of Program Implementers for Overcoming Challenges

in the Implementation of College Education Behind Bars

The analysis further identified five major coping strategies employed by program implementers: carceral inter-agency education continuity, collaborative document support system, correctional education faculty workload adaptation, correctional learning resource substitution, and operational adaptation in a correctional education setting.

Carceral Inter-Agency Education Continuity

Participants emphasized the importance of regular coordination among educational institutions, correctional authorities, and other stakeholders to maintain program continuity. One coordinator explained:

“We conduct regular joint meetings with Social Entrepreneurship, Technology, and Business Institute (SETBI) and Bureau of Corrections (BuCor) to manage the program and ensure all operations are aligned.” (IDI_1)

These collaborative activities facilitated communication, planning, and problem resolution, thereby strengthening inter-agency cooperation and supporting the sustained implementation of the College Education Behind Bars program.

Collaborative Document Support System

Participants described collaborative efforts among educational institutions, correctional personnel, and family members to help students obtain the required academic documents. One teacher shared:

“SETBI administrators and staff provide assistance in securing the required documents, while some inmates receive additional support from their families in acquiring these records.” (IDI_7)

These support mechanisms helped address documentation-related barriers.

Table 2 Coping Strategies of Program Implementers for Overcoming Challenges in the Implementation of College Education Behind Bars

Major Theme	Core Ideas
Carceral Inter-Agency Education Continuity	- Joint Social Entrepreneurship, Technology, and Business Institute (SETBI)–Bureau of Corrections (BuCor) meetings for program alignment - Continuous coordination through planning and evaluation through the (SETBI)–(BuCor)partnership - Stakeholder meetings for program issue resolution
Collaborative Document Support System	- Institutional-familial support in document acquisition - Partner-supported academic credential processing - Bureau of Corrections (BuCor)-facilitated document processing with familial coordination support - Custodial-familial assistance-seeking under approval protocols
Correctional Education Faculty Workload Adaptation	- Faculty load adjustment for correctional education teaching assignments - Workload management through flexible instructional delivery
Correctional Learning Resource Substitution	- Simulation-based substitution of restricted fieldwork activities - Peer-assisted collaborative learning strategies for resource optimization - Collaborative supplemental instructional resources - Collaborative resource sharing among students - Low-resource interactive pedagogy without technology reliance - Printed modular instructional materials under limited internet access - Hardcopy-based lesson distribution - Lecture-based instruction supported by printed materials under offline conditions
Operational Adaptation in a Correctional Education Setting	- Triangulation-based narrative case study methodology under limited quantitative data access - Continuity of study through a qualitative approach transition - Student experience–based validation of findings - Provision of learning facilities and basic welfare support systems

Correctional Education Faculty Workload Adaptation

Faculty workload challenges were addressed through schedule modifications and adjustments to teaching loads.

A coordinator stated:

“As the coordinator, I reviewed the faculty members' mainstream teaching loads to make necessary adjustments to their schedules for teaching inside the SETBI facility.” (IDI_1)

These adjustments enabled faculty members to accommodate correctional education responsibilities.

Correctional Learning Resource Substitution

Participants employed alternative instructional approaches to compensate for limited access to technology and educational resources. One coordinator reported:

“We use simulated activities to replace actual fieldwork that is not allowed inside the facility.” (IDI_1)

Another teacher explained:

“Our classes rely on lectures and printed handouts because there is no access to online materials.” (IDI_8)

These practices supported instructional continuity despite resource constraints.

Operational Adaptation in a Correctional Education Setting

Participants also adopted broader adaptive practices, including methodological flexibility and institutional support mechanisms. One participant noted:

“When data is insufficient, we shift to a qualitative approach so the study can continue.” (IDI_7)

Another emphasized the provision of learning facilities and welfare support:

“Provision of fully equipped learning spaces (computer lab, classroom) and institutional support for basic student needs.” (IDI_3)

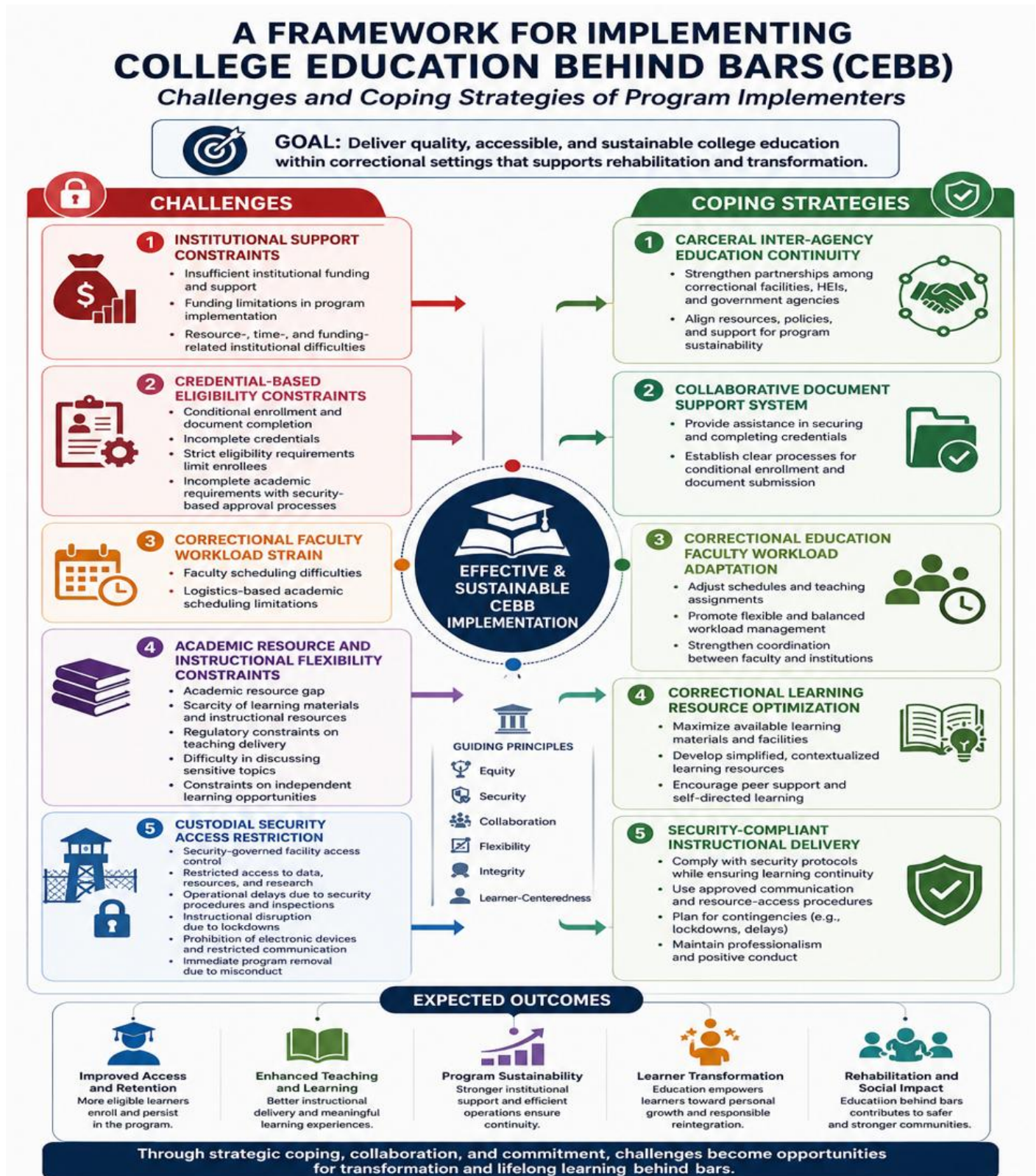
These adaptations contributed to the continued implementation of educational activities within the correctional environment.

Proposed Framework

The framework, *“A Framework for Implementing College Education Behind Bars (CEBB): Challenges and Coping Strategies of Program Implementers,”* explains how correctional education programs can be effectively and sustainably implemented despite multiple institutional and operational barriers. It is based on the experiences of program implementers and highlights the interaction between implementation challenges and adaptive coping strategies that support educational continuity for persons deprived of liberty (PDLs). The left side presents key challenges, including limited institutional support (e.g., funding and resources), credential-based enrollment constraints, faculty workload strain due to dual teaching responsibilities, restricted instructional resources and flexibility, and custodial security limitations that affect mobility, communication, and access to learning tools. Corresponding coping strategies are shown on the right side. These include inter-agency collaboration for program continuity, coordinated systems for securing academic records, workload adaptation for faculty, use of alternative learning resources and low-tech instructional approaches, and operational adjustments within

correctional settings to accommodate institutional constraints. At the center of the framework is *Effective and Sustainable CEBB Implementation*, achieved when these adaptive strategies successfully address identified challenges. This is guided by core principles such as equity, security, collaboration, flexibility, and learner-centeredness. The framework shows that aligning challenges with responsive strategies leads to improved access and retention, enhanced teaching and learning, stronger program sustainability, and better rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes. It emphasizes that even within restrictive correctional environments, strategic adaptation and collaboration can transform barriers into opportunities for lifelong learning and social development.

Fig 1 *Proposed Framework for Implementing CEBB*



DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced by Program Implementers in Delivering Educational

Programs in the College Education Behind Bars Program

The findings of this study reveal that program implementers in CEBB face multifaceted, interrelated challenges that shape the implementation of higher education in correctional facilities. Five major themes emerged from the analysis: institutional support constraints, credential-based eligibility constraints, correctional faculty workload strain, academic resource and instructional flexibility constraints, and custodial security access restrictions. Collectively, these themes demonstrate that prison-based higher education operates within a complex system shaped by institutional limitations, administrative procedures, instructional constraints, and custodial security requirements. Rather than existing as isolated issues, these challenges are structurally interconnected and collectively define the operational realities of correctional education. Despite these constraints, program implementers sustain educational delivery through adaptive strategies, inter-agency collaboration, and sustained professional commitment to ensuring continuity of learning for incarcerated students.

Institutional Support Constraints. The findings indicate that institutional support constraints significantly affect the implementation of CEBB. These constraints are characterized by insufficient funding, limited institutional assistance, time- and resource-related implementation difficulties, and the absence of comprehensive policy frameworks beyond basic operational guidelines. Although programs are continuously implemented, they often operate without the strong structural and financial foundations necessary for long-term sustainability.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that have identified inadequate institutional support as a persistent barrier to correctional education. These findings align with Costelloe (2022), who argued that prison education continues to face significant implementation barriers despite the recognized right to education, highlighting the need for stronger institutional commitment and investment. Likewise, Lollara et al. (2023) reported that correctional education learners often experience insufficient developmental and student support services, indicating persistent institutional limitations that affect educational participation and success. The absence of comprehensive policy frameworks further contributes to inconsistencies in curriculum implementation, staffing, and evaluation processes, as reflected in broader international and Philippine contexts.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with Transformational Leadership Theory, which explains how program implementers respond to institutional limitations through adaptive leadership, collaboration, and sustained coordination (Kouzes & Posner, 1995), thereby ensuring program continuity despite structural constraints.

The findings suggest that sustainability in correctional education requires not only committed implementers but also strengthened institutionalization through formal governance structures, dedicated funding systems, and standardized operational policies. However, as the data were derived primarily from program implementers in a single setting, the findings should be interpreted with caution, as perspectives from policymakers and administrators may provide additional insights into institutional decision-making and resource allocation.

Credential-Based Eligibility Constraints. Another key finding concerns credential-based eligibility constraints, including conditional enrollment procedures, incomplete credential submissions, strict eligibility screening, and security-based approval processes for applicants with incomplete academic records. These procedures reflect the institutional effort to balance educational access with security and administrative accountability.

These findings are consistent with Eizadirad and Chambers (2023), who reported that incarcerated learners often face administrative and systemic barriers that limit access to educational opportunities and educational continuity. Similarly, Lollara et al. (2023) noted that students in correctional education are often from underserved populations whose educational participation is constrained by institutional processes and limited

access to academic support systems. The findings are consistent with Transformational leadership practices emerging as critical in addressing these barriers through flexibility, negotiation, and collaborative problem-solving.

From a policy standpoint, the findings highlight the need for admission systems that balance institutional security with equitable access. Streamlined verification processes, alternative mechanisms for credential recognition, and transitional enrollment pathways may reduce administrative barriers while maintaining institutional integrity.

These findings suggest that access to higher education in correctional settings is shaped by both academic readiness and the ability to navigate complex institutional procedures. However, since the findings are based on implementers' perspectives, they may not fully capture the lived experiences of incarcerated applicants who are directly affected by eligibility decisions.

Correctional Faculty Workload Strain. The study also identified correctional faculty workload strain as a significant challenge, characterized by scheduling difficulties and logistical limitations in delivering instruction within correctional environments. These conditions reflect the complexity of managing academic responsibilities in secure and highly regulated settings.

These findings are consistent with Hopkins and Farley (2022), who reported that correctional educators experience increased workload demands due to institutional restrictions and administrative requirements. Clements and Kinman (2021) further noted that correctional teaching environments require educators to balance academic responsibilities with custodial procedures, contributing to workload pressure and reduced instructional autonomy. Transformational Leadership Theory is reflected in educators' persistence and commitment despite challenging working conditions.

From a policy perspective, these findings underscore the importance of workload management systems, logistical support, and inter-agency coordination to ensure faculty well-being and instructional continuity. Faculty workload in correctional education should be understood as a structural issue arising from the intersection of educational and custodial systems.

However, because these findings are based on qualitative perceptions, they may not fully represent workload intensity across different correctional institutions.

Academic Resource and Instructional Flexibility Constraints. The findings further reveal constraints on academic resources and instructional flexibility, including limited access to learning materials, restricted instructional resources, reduced opportunities for independent learning, and limitations on discussing sensitive academic topics.

These results align with Farley and Pike (2021), who noted that incarcerated learners often face restricted access to educational technologies and materials due to security regulations. Hopkins and Farley (2022) similarly highlighted instructional limitations caused by institutional monitoring and resource scarcity. Transformational leadership practices are evident in educators' adaptation of instructional strategies within institutional boundaries.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for prison-responsive educational systems that ensure access to learning materials while maintaining security requirements. Expanding modular learning systems and strengthening resource allocation may improve instructional quality.

These findings suggest that educational quality in correctional settings is shaped not only by curriculum design but also by institutional conditions governing access and instructional delivery.

Custodial Security Access Restriction. Custodial security access restrictions emerged as a foundational challenge underlying the implementation of correctional education. These include controlled facility access, regulated instructional entry, restricted institutional data access, and limited availability of learning resources.

These findings are consistent with Farley and Hopkins (2021), Appleby (2024), and Berglund et al. (2025), who emphasized that correctional education systems operate under strict security regimes that limit access to digital

technologies, instructional spaces, and academic resources. Montenegro (2021) further noted that institutional controls significantly affect instructional continuity and educational engagement.

Transformational Leadership Theory further explains how implementers sustain program delivery through adaptability and collaboration under restrictive conditions.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for structured access protocols, secure educational resource systems, and coordinated governance mechanisms that balance institutional security with educational continuity.

The findings indicate that educational access in correctional settings is mediated by institutional control systems that regulate movement, information, and instructional delivery. The effectiveness of correctional education, therefore, depends on how well institutions balance security imperatives with educational and rehabilitative objectives. As this study is context-specific, findings should be interpreted in light of institutional variability and sensitivity surrounding security-related disclosures.

Coping Strategies of Program Implementers for Overcoming Challenges

In the Implementation of College Education Behind Bars

The findings reveal that program implementers employ a range of adaptive and collaborative strategies to address the multifaceted challenges associated with delivering college education within correctional facilities. Five interrelated themes emerged from the analysis: carceral inter-agency education continuity, collaborative document support system, correctional education faculty workload adaptation, correctional learning resource substitution, and operational adaptation in a correctional education setting. Collectively, these themes demonstrate that coping in correctional education is not an isolated or ad hoc response but rather a dynamic, system-wide process characterized by institutional coordination, procedural flexibility, pedagogical innovation, and methodological responsiveness. These strategies illustrate how program implementers continuously negotiate structural constraints while ensuring the continuity, integrity, and sustainability of educational delivery within highly regulated custodial environments.

Carceral Inter-Agency Education Continuity. A central coping strategy identified in the study is carceral inter-agency education continuity, which underscores that prison-based higher education is sustained through structured, continuous collaboration among institutional actors. The findings show that this continuity is operationalized through joint SETBI–BuCor meetings for program alignment, ongoing planning and evaluation activities, and regular stakeholder consultations for issue resolution. These practices indicate that program sustainability depends heavily on consistent inter-agency engagement and shared governance mechanisms that enable responsive decision-making and coordinated implementation.

These results are supported by the literature, which emphasizes the importance of institutional partnerships in correctional education governance. Behan and Stark (2023) underscored that prison education programs require sustained cooperation among educational providers, correctional administrators, and stakeholders to ensure continuity and support rehabilitative learning goals. Similarly, Reisdorf and DeCook (2022) noted that collaborative institutional arrangements enhance communication, strengthen problem-solving capacity, and ensure continuity of educational services in restrictive environments. Prior research further suggests that structured inter-agency engagement promotes organizational trust, policy alignment, and more efficient resolution of operational challenges in correctional education systems.

The findings reflect Kouzes and Posner's Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership, particularly the practices of enabling others to act and inspiring a shared vision, as implementers cultivate trust, accountability, and collaborative problem-solving within custodial constraints.

From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the importance of institutionalizing collaborative governance mechanisms within correctional education systems. Formalized planning structures, regular joint evaluation mechanisms, and structured stakeholder consultation processes may strengthen coordination, enhance responsiveness, and improve long-term program sustainability.

The study suggests that correctional education operates through a shared administrative system where educational institutions and correctional agencies jointly manage instructional, operational, and implementation concerns. However, these findings should be interpreted within the study context, as they primarily reflect successful coordination practices and may not fully capture underlying inter-agency tensions or institutional conflicts that may also influence implementation dynamics.

Collaborative Document Support System. Closely linked to inter-agency coordination is the collaborative document support system, which functions as another key coping strategy. The study found that prison-based higher education is facilitated through institutional–familial cooperation in document acquisition, partner-supported credential processing, BuCor-facilitated documentation with family coordination, and custodial–familial assistance under regulated approval protocols.

These findings align with empirical literature highlighting the importance of external support networks in facilitating educational access in correctional settings. Czerniawski (2022) observed that incarcerated learners frequently rely on family members to retrieve academic and civil documents necessary for enrollment, while institutional gatekeeping procedures significantly influence the speed and accessibility of credential verification. Similarly, Reisdorf and DeCook (2022) emphasized that administrative complexity and custodial regulations require multi-actor coordination to sustain educational continuity in prison systems.

The findings are explained through Transformational Leadership Theory, particularly the enabling of others to act, which further explains how program implementers facilitate mechanisms that help learners overcome documentary barriers.

From a policy standpoint, the findings highlight the need to institutionalize streamlined and inclusive document facilitation systems. Formalized family-assisted processing pathways strengthened inter-agency credential verification mechanisms, and standardized document validation procedures may reduce delays and enhance equitable access to higher education.

The study suggests that document processing in correctional education is a distributed and negotiated process involving families, correctional institutions, and academic providers. However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously, as they primarily reflect implementers' perspectives and do not fully capture the lived experiences, burdens, and challenges faced by families engaged in document facilitation.

Correctional Education Faculty Workload Adaptation. Another significant coping strategy is correctional education faculty workload adaptation, which reflects adjustments made to teaching assignments specifically for correctional education delivery. The findings show that workload modifications are implemented to accommodate the additional demands associated with prison-based instruction.

These findings are supported by the literature, which indicates that correctional educators experience heightened administrative, logistical, and scheduling demands. Farley and Hopkins (2021) noted that educators in prison settings require workload redistribution and institutional support to maintain instructional quality under constrained conditions.

This phenomenon is explained through Transformational Leadership Theory, particularly the encouragement of the heart, as reflected in institutional recognition of faculty commitment under demanding conditions.

From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the need for formal workload management systems, clear teaching load allocations, and logistical support structures for correctional educators. Such mechanisms may enhance faculty well-being, reduce burnout, and promote program sustainability.

The study suggests that faculty workload in correctional education is dynamically adjusted in response to institutional constraints. However, the findings are based on self-reported experiences and do not include quantitative comparisons of workload across institutions.

Correctional Learning Resource Substitution. In addition, program implementers employ learning resource substitution strategies to sustain instructional delivery under resource constraints. The study found that teaching

is supported through simulation-based activities, peer-assisted learning, collaborative resource sharing, low-technology pedagogies, printed modules, hardcopy materials, and lecture-based instruction supplemented by offline resources.

These findings are consistent with studies showing that prison education systems rely heavily on low-resource instructional strategies due to limited digital access. Farley and Hopkins (2021) and Berglund et al. (2023) highlighted the widespread use of printed and offline materials, while Reisdorf and DeCook (2022) emphasized the effectiveness of peer-assisted learning in constrained environments.

The findings are explained through Transformational Leadership Theory, particularly by challenging the process and reflecting instructional innovation within constraints.

From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the importance of institutionalizing context-appropriate, low-resource instructional systems, including modular learning, simulation-based instruction, and peer-supported learning strategies.

The study suggests that instructional continuity is sustained through pedagogical innovation and collaboration rather than technological infrastructure. However, the long-term impact of these strategies on learner outcomes remains outside the scope of this study.

Operational Adaptation in a Correctional Education Setting. Finally, coping is also reinforced through broader operational adaptation strategies within the correctional education setting. The findings show that methodological triangulation, limited quantitative data access, continuity through qualitative design adjustments, learner-based validation, and provision of basic learning facilities and welfare support collectively sustain program implementation and research continuity.

These findings align with literature supporting the use of qualitative and triangulated approaches in correctional education research. Berglund et al. (2023) and Farley and Hopkins (2021) noted that narrative and case study methodologies are particularly effective in capturing lived experiences in restricted environments. Learner-centered validation further enhances credibility in contexts with limited institutional data access.

Connecting Transformational Leadership Theory reflects sustained commitment to program continuity and inquiry. From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need for flexible evaluation systems, triangulated assessment frameworks, and sustained welfare support for learners in correctional settings.

The study suggests that adaptation in correctional education extends beyond pedagogy and administration to include research and evaluation processes. However, findings remain context-specific and shaped by institutional constraints and participant subjectivity.

The study shows that the interplay of structural constraints and adaptive coping strategies shapes college education behind bars. While program implementers face institutional, credentialing, workload, resource, and security-related barriers, they sustain program delivery through inter-agency collaboration, document facilitation, workload adjustment, instructional substitution, and operational adaptation. These findings highlight that the continuity of correctional higher education depends on both institutional structures and the adaptive, collaborative efforts of implementers within highly regulated environments. Further studies across multiple sites and stakeholder groups are recommended to strengthen and extend these insights.

Implications for Educational Practice

The findings highlight the need for a more comprehensive and institutionalized policy framework that clearly defines the roles of correctional and educational institutions in prison higher education. Policymakers should consider strengthening funding support, improving admissions and credentialing systems, establishing clear faculty workload guidelines, and developing policies that balance institutional security with educational access and continuity.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies may expand the scope of correctional education research by including the perspectives of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs), conducting comparative studies across correctional institutions, and examining long-term educational and reintegration outcomes. A Participatory Action Research (PAR) design is particularly valuable, where incarcerated learners are actively involved in identifying issues, co-designing research questions, and contributing to the interpretation of findings, thereby ensuring a more inclusive and contextually grounded understanding of correctional higher education programs.

In addition, the use of longitudinal, mixed-methods, and participatory research designs may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness, sustainability, and transformative impact of correctional higher education. Comparative studies across Philippine correctional settings, particularly those under the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) and the Bureau of Corrections (BuCor), may further strengthen claims of transferability by distinguishing context-specific challenges from shared systemic patterns supported by existing literature.

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