

Higher Education in a Women's Correctional Facility in Panama: A Historical-Documentary Case Study of Didactic Adaptation, Gender Equity, and Human Development

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HOW TO CITE:

José Blas Álvaro Preudhomme,
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Yamileth Rufina Wilson Vanegas
(2026). Higher Education in a
Women's Correctional Facility in
Panama: A Historical-
Documentary Case Study of
Didactic Adaptation, Gender
Equity, and Human Development.
International Journal of Special
Education, 41(14s), 1104-1112

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ABSTRACT:

This narrative-integrative review analyzes the historical evolution, didactic conditions, and formative contributions of the higher education program developed by the University of Panama at the Cecilia Orillac de Chiari Women's Rehabilitation Center (CEFERE). The analysis integrates specialized literature on higher education in contexts of confinement, women's prison education, gender and educational rights, together with institutional documents and descriptive enrollment and graduation records. Three questions guide the study: how the program originated and evolved; which institutional and didactic conditions characterized its implementation; and what descriptive evidence exists regarding access, academic continuity, and graduation. The documentary evidence indicates that preliminary interinstitutional coordination began in 2012 and university classes were officially inaugurated on September 2, 2013. Implementation required cooperation among the University of Panama, the Regional University Center of San Miguelito (CRUSAM), the Ministry of Government, and the General Directorate of the Penitentiary System, as well as progressive responses to limitations in infrastructure, enrollment procedures, teacher safety, academic interaction, and administrative coordination. Institutional records report 44 active students and 31 graduates by 2024, including 18 technical-degree and 13 bachelor's-degree graduates; some women continued their studies at CRUSAM after release. The evidence supports conclusions about access, academic continuity, formal credentialing, and human-capacity development, but does not

permit causal claims concerning employment, recidivism, or long-term social reintegration. The article contributes a contextually grounded framework connecting historical development, gender-equitable access, didactic adaptation, professional formation, and human development.

Keywords: Prison Higher Education; Women Deprived of Liberty; Gender Equity; Didactic Adaptation; Academic Continuity; Human Development; Panama.

1. Introduction.

The right to education does not cease when a person enters a correctional institution. Nevertheless, access to higher education in prison remains conditioned by security regimes, institutional coordination, infrastructure, academic offerings, and the capacity of universities to preserve educational quality in a context organized primarily around confinement. These tensions are particularly significant in women's prisons, where educational opportunities have historically been fewer, more traditional, and less professionally diverse than those available to men (Castillo Algarra & Ruiz García, 2007, 2010; Cravero Bailetti, 2014, 2020).

International and Latin American scholarship has generally examined prison education as a human right, an ethical and democratic practice, and a form of social intervention (Echeverría, 2015; Huenchiman et al., 2013; Morales-Maure et al., 2025; Rangel, 2009, 2013; Scarfó, 2002, 2006; Scarfó & Zapata, 2014). However, fewer studies have documented the institutional history and didactic functioning of university programs established specifically inside women's correctional facilities. This gap limits understanding of how higher education can be organized, sustained, and connected to academic continuity and professional formation under conditions of confinement.

In Panama, the University of Panama, through the Regional University Center of San Miguelito (CRUSAM), established a university annex within the Cecilia Orillac de Chiari Women's Rehabilitation Center (CEFERE). The initiative sought to provide public higher education to women whose educational trajectories had been interrupted by social, economic, personal, or

judicial circumstances. The case is relevant because it allows higher education in prison to be examined not as a temporary assistance activity, but as an institutional educational program requiring agreements, financing, teaching personnel, enrollment procedures, infrastructure, academic follow-up, and mechanisms for continuity after release.

Accordingly, the objective of this article is to analyze the historical evolution, didactic conditions, and formative contributions of the higher education program developed by the University of Panama at CEFERE through the examination of specialized literature, institutional documents, and descriptive enrollment and graduation records.

Research Questions

RQ1. How did the university program at CEFERE originate and evolve?

RQ2. Which institutional and didactic conditions have characterized its implementation?

RQ3. What descriptive evidence exists regarding access, academic continuity, and graduation?

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Higher Education in Contexts of Deprivation of Liberty

Higher education in prison is a historically situated practice in which educational rights, university responsibility, institutional security, and social inclusion intersect. Scarfó (2002, 2006) argues that education in prison is a guarantee of human rights and a condition for the conscious exercise of citizenship. Scarfó and Zapata (2014) further emphasize that access to education remains fragile when prison routines, disciplinary

control, and administrative decisions take precedence over pedagogical purposes.

Universities contribute to democratizing access to knowledge by extending formal academic programs to populations excluded from conventional higher education. Huenchiman et al. (2013) understand university intervention in prison as an ethical and democratic responsibility that redefines teaching as a public commitment. Rangel (2009, 2013) likewise identifies a persistent tension in Latin America between punitive models and educational inclusion. From this perspective, a university program inside a prison must be evaluated not only by its existence, but also by its capacity to sustain academic standards, continuity, and institutional recognition.

2.2 Women's Prison Education, Gender, and Rights

Prison education is not gender-neutral. Research from Argentina, Mexico, Spain, and Uruguay shows that women frequently encounter restricted academic offerings, institutional practices shaped by male-centered correctional models, and an overemphasis on manual or vocational activities rather than formal university trajectories (Bové Giménez, 2016; Castillo Algarra & Ruiz García, 2007, 2010; Lara López, 2020).

Cravero Bailetti (2014, 2020) demonstrates that access to university education may require women to move through facilities designed for men, submit to repeated searches, or study in improvised spaces. These conditions reveal that access is simultaneously academic, material, bodily, and institutional. Locating a university annex within a women's correctional center may therefore reduce certain gender-specific barriers, although the quality, safety, and educational meaning of that arrangement must still be examined.

A gender-equity perspective does not imply treating incarcerated women as a homogeneous group. It requires attention to unequal educational histories, caregiving responsibilities, socioeconomic exclusion, nationality, ethnicity,

and other conditions that can affect access, persistence, and future opportunities. In this article, gender equity functions as an analytical principle for examining whether institutional arrangements expand or restrict meaningful access to higher education.

2.3 Didactics, Academic Continuity, and Educational Reintegration

Teaching in prison cannot simply reproduce all features of a conventional university classroom. Schedules, mobility, security procedures, access to materials, communication, classroom infrastructure, and changes in legal status may interrupt the educational process. Didactic adaptation therefore involves flexible planning, contextualized teaching, coordinated assessment, and arrangements that preserve academic continuity without lowering university standards.

Academic continuity is especially important because confinement may be temporary while a degree program extends over several years. A sustainable model must allow students to progress while incarcerated and, when possible, continue at a university campus after release. In this sense, continuity connects didactic organization with institutional procedures, recognition of completed coursework, enrollment management, and student support.

The formative contribution of prison higher education is best described through human development, human-capacity development, professional formation, and opportunities for future employability and social reintegration. These concepts are more precise than the expression human resources because they focus on the development of knowledge, competencies, autonomy, professional identity, and recognized credentials. They do not, by themselves, demonstrate employment or reintegration outcomes; such effects require direct longitudinal measurement.

3. Methodology.

3.1 Design.

This study used a narrative-integrative review embedded in a historical-documentary case study.

The narrative-integrative approach was selected because the available evidence is heterogeneous and includes conceptual studies, qualitative research, regional reports, legal and human-rights analyses, institutional documents, and descriptive administrative records. The purpose was not to estimate an intervention effect or claim exhaustive systematic coverage, but to integrate complementary evidence around a clearly delimited institutional case.

The case was the higher education program implemented by the University of Panama through CRUSAM at CEFERE. The unit of analysis comprised: (a) specialized literature on prison higher education, women's educational rights, gender inequalities, and teaching in confinement; (b) institutional accounts concerning the creation, agreements, financing, and operation of the CEFERE university annex; and (c) aggregated enrollment, continuation, and graduation records.

3.2 Source Selection and Boundaries.

Sources were purposefully retained when they contributed directly to at least one of the three analytical questions: program origin and evolution; institutional and didactic implementation; or evidence of access, continuity, and graduation. Literature focused exclusively on clinical, psychological, psychiatric, or therapeutic interventions was excluded because it did not directly address the educational object of the review.

The review prioritized sources concerning higher education in prison, education as a right, university extension, gender inequality in correctional education, institutional access, didactic constraints, and educational continuity. Institutional evidence was used descriptively and was not treated as proof of causal effectiveness.

3.3 Analytical Procedure.

The evidence was organized in a documentary synthesis matrix with the following fields: source and year; country or institutional context; source type; principal educational issue; contribution to the historical, institutional, didactic, gender-equity, continuity, or human-development

dimension; and relevance to the CEFERE case. The synthesis followed four stages:

1. Identification of the historical and institutional sequence of the CEFERE Program.
2. Thematic integration of literature into the three conceptual nuclei established in this article.
3. Extraction of documented implementation conditions and aggregated indicators of access, continuity, and graduation.
4. Comparison of the CEFERE evidence with the broader literature, explicitly distinguishing documented findings from interpretive implications.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Limits of the Evidence.

The study did not involve interviews, surveys, experiments, or access to identifiable personal information. It relied on published literature, institutional documentation, and aggregated program records. The evidence permits descriptive conclusions about program development, enrollment, continuity, and credentialing, but does not permit causal conclusions about learning gains, employment, recidivism, mental health, or long-term reintegration.

4. Results.

4.1 RQ1: Origin and Historical Evolution of the CEFERE University Program.

Institutional documentation indicates that the first formal approaches between CRUSAM and the penitentiary authorities took place in 2012. These contacts initially concerned training, continuing education, and university social-service activities. Social workers at CEFERE subsequently proposed establishing a university within the correctional facility, drawing on the prior presence of basic and secondary education, vocational training, and rehabilitation programs.

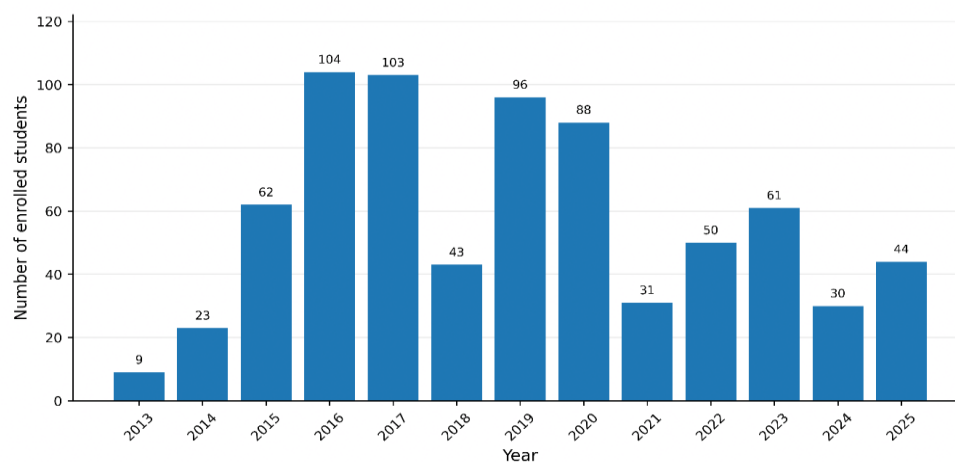
University classes were officially inaugurated on September 2, 2013, in the CEFERE auditorium. The initiative was developed by the University of Panama through CRUSAM and by the Ministry of Government through the General Directorate

of the Penitentiary System. The institutional account also records support from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime for classroom infrastructure, with an approximate investment of USD 80,000.

The university annex was established as a pilot initiative supported by a Framework Cooperation Agreement between the University of Panama and the Ministry of Government and by a specific agreement for the development of higher education in Panamanian correctional institutions. CRUSAM served as the executing

academic unit and principal channel of communication with the Ministry of Government and the Penitentiary System.

The program evolved from an interinstitutional proposal into an operational university annex with annual enrollment, academic personnel, administrative support, and formal graduates. Its historical significance lies in opening a public university pathway inside a women's correctional facility and in creating a mechanism through which women released from CEFERE could continue their studies at CRUSAM.



Source: General Secretariat, University of Panama.

Figure 1. Annual Enrollment in the CEFERE University Annex Program (2013–2025).

Note. The figure reproduces aggregated institutional enrollment data. Annual values describe participation but do not, by themselves, represent unique students, retention rates, or causal program effects.

4.2 RQ2: Institutional and Didactic Conditions of Implementation.

The implementation process was characterized by interinstitutional dependence. The University of Panama financed core academic and administrative components, including teaching personnel, administrative support, enrollment costs, furniture, and maintenance. The Ministry of Government and the Penitentiary System supported classroom maintenance and security-related operations, while international cooperation contributed to initial classroom infrastructure.

The principal documented barriers were insufficient physical space, limited initial investment, lack of prior institutional experience in delivering complete university programs in confinement, enrollment procedures, teacher safety, teacher-student interaction, and joint administrative work. These obstacles were not solved through a single intervention; they were progressively addressed as coordination and trust developed among students, teachers, university authorities, and correctional personnel.

Didactic adaptation was therefore inseparable from institutional organization. Flexible teaching required schedules compatible with correctional routines, controlled access for university staff, coordination of learning materials, continuity of assessment, and communication between academic and penitentiary authorities. The available documents do not provide classroom observations or detailed lesson analyses;

consequently, the evidence supports conclusions about documented didactic conditions rather than direct measurement of teaching quality.

The location of the university annex within a women’s correctional center constitutes a gender-equity condition because it reduces the need for women to travel to male facilities and undergo the forms of displacement and bodily control documented in other countries. Nevertheless, the evidence does not establish that all gender-related barriers have been eliminated. Future empirical research should examine students’ and teachers’ experiences of safety, autonomy, interaction, assessment, and academic recognition.

4.3 RQ3: Evidence of Access, Academic Continuity, and Graduation

The most recent aggregated record included in the source documents reports 44 active students. Enrollment across 2013–2025 shows that the program has operated over more than a decade, although annual participation fluctuated. These variations should be interpreted cautiously because the current records do not specify whether annual counts represent new entrants,

total active enrollment, or repeated participation by the same students.

By 2024, 31 women had completed formal university credentials: 18 technical degrees and 13 bachelor’s degrees. These outcomes demonstrate that the annex produced recognized academic trajectories and was not limited to isolated workshops or non-credit activities.

Academic continuity is also evidenced by reports that some women who obtained their freedom continued their studies at CRUSAM. This transition is particularly relevant because it connects prison-based education to the regular university system and reduces the risk that release itself becomes a new interruption in the student’s educational trajectory.

The available evidence therefore supports conclusions about access, persistence over time at the program level, graduation, formal credentialing, and the possibility of post-release continuation. It does not provide individual-level retention rates, time-to-degree, employment outcomes, or long-term reintegration indicators.

Table 1. Descriptive Evidence of Access, Continuity, and Graduation.

Indicator	Documented value	Interpretive scope
Active students	44	Current aggregated access indicator
Technical-degree graduates	18	Formal credential completion
Bachelor’s-degree graduates	13	Formal credential completion
Total graduates by 2024	31	Documented cumulative completion
Continuation after release	Reported for some students	Evidence of articulation with CRUSAM; no individual longitudinal rate

4. Discussion.

The CEFERE case confirms that prison higher education is not merely the transfer of a university course into a correctional building. It is an interinstitutional arrangement in which educational rights, security procedures, public financing, academic standards, gender equity, and

continuity mechanisms must operate together. This finding is consistent with Latin American literature that describes prison education as a field of tension between inclusion and punishment (Rangel, 2009, 2013; Scarfó & Zapata, 2014).

The answer to the first research question shows that the program emerged through gradual

institutional coordination rather than through an isolated academic decision. The 2012 preliminary contacts, the proposal developed within CEFERE, the 2013 inauguration, the cooperation agreements, and the distribution of responsibilities among institutions formed the organizational basis of the annex. Its persistence over more than a decade suggests institutional continuity, although the available documents do not permit a formal analysis of program sustainability.

Regarding the second question, the evidence demonstrates that didactic adaptation depended on resolving administrative and logistical constraints. Space, security, enrollment, teacher access, interaction, materials, and communication affected the feasibility of teaching. The principal scientific caution is that these conditions were documented institutionally rather than observed directly in classrooms. Thus, the study identifies enabling and constraining conditions but does not evaluate specific pedagogical strategies or learning outcomes.

The gender perspective strengthens the interpretation of the case. Research elsewhere has shown that women may be required to access programs organized around male facilities and may encounter narrower academic offerings (Castillo Algarra & Ruiz García, 2007, 2010; Cravero Bailetti, 2014, 2020). Establishing the annex inside CEFERE represents an institutional response to spatial and access inequalities. However, genuine gender equity also requires investigation of curriculum choice, educational expectations, treatment by authorities, family responsibilities, and post-release opportunities.

The third question is answered through descriptive evidence of enrollment, graduation, and continuation. The 31 formal graduates demonstrate more than symbolic inclusion: the program has generated credentials recognized by the University of Panama. Reports of continuation at CRUSAM after release indicate an important bridge between correctional and conventional higher education. Yet the absence of student-level longitudinal data prevents

estimates of retention, completion probability, time-to-degree, employment, or reintegration.

The concept of human development is therefore preferable to human resources in interpreting the program. The evidence supports the development of educational capabilities, professional knowledge, formal credentials, autonomy, and future possibilities. Professional and employability development may be plausible goals, but employment effects must be measured directly. Similarly, professional formation and social reintegration should be treated as institutional purposes and potential pathways rather than demonstrated causal outcomes.

4.1. Limitations.

First, the study is a narrative-integrative review and historical-documentary case study, not a systematic review or impact evaluation. The source corpus was purposefully organized around the research questions and should not be interpreted as an exhaustive representation of all international literature.

Second, the institutional records are aggregated. They do not provide individual educational trajectories, demographic characteristics, academic performance, reasons for interruption, time-to-degree, or post-release outcomes.

Third, the didactic dimension is reconstructed from institutional conditions and specialized literature rather than from classroom observation, interviews, teaching plans, assessments, or student work.

Fourth, claims of uniqueness in Panama or Central America depend on the institutional documentation reviewed and should be stated as documented institutional characterization unless a comprehensive regional verification is conducted.

Finally, the evidence does not support causal conclusions concerning employability, recidivism, mental health, or long-term social reintegration.

5. Conclusion.

This narrative-integrative review analyzed the historical evolution, institutional and didactic

conditions, and formative contributions of the University of Panama's higher education program at CEFERE. The program originated through interinstitutional coordination initiated in 2012 and was formally inaugurated in 2013. Its implementation required sustained cooperation among CRUSAM, the University of Panama, the Ministry of Government, the General Directorate of the Penitentiary System, and external partners.

The study identifies three principal contributions. Historically, the program established a public university pathway within a women's correctional facility. Institutionally and didactically, it created arrangements for teaching, enrollment, security, administration, and academic continuity under conditions of confinement. Formatively, it generated access to recognized credentials, with 31 graduates by 2024 and reported continuation at CRUSAM by some students after release.

The scientific contribution is a contextually grounded analytical framework that links prison higher education with historical development, gender-equitable access, didactic adaptation, academic continuity, professional formation, and human-capacity development. The available evidence demonstrates access, continuity, and credentialing; it does not demonstrate causal effects on employment or social reintegration.

Future research should incorporate interviews with students, graduates, teachers, administrators, and correctional authorities; analysis of curricula and assessment practices; and longitudinal tracking of retention, graduation, post-release continuation, employment, and reintegration. Such evidence would permit the CEFERE experience to move from institutional documentation toward a fuller evaluation of educational quality and long-term contribution.

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