TITLE: In the First Degree: A Study of Effective Discourse in Postsecondary Prison Education

BIO: Adam Key is a doctoral candidate as well as speech instructor and director of the prison debate program at Lee College's Huntsville Center. Since 2011, he has been teaching speech and communication classes to more than 1,000 incarcerated students in Texas prisons. He is the founder and director of the Huntsville Center debate program, the first debate team inside a Texas prison, that defeated Texas A&M in 2016 and Wiley College's "The Great Debaters" in October 2017. He is also heavily involved in the TED community, having spoken about prison education at TEDxTAMU, hosted the first TEDx event (TEDxLeeCollegeHuntsville) in a Texas prison, and attended TEDGlobal in Tanzania where he was invited on stage to give a response to a talk by a former prisoner. In November, he visited Kenya and Uganda to research prison education programs there.

Numerous studies, on both micro and macro levels, confirm that providing postsecondary education to prisoners works to reduce the rate of recidivism. Understanding that the phenomenon is works, however, does not answer the question as to why prison education is effective. Two of every three prisoners begin their incarceration without a high school diploma. Despite the majority of prisoners departing from the K-12 education system before completion
through expulsion, dropping out, or failing grades, large numbers of prisoners are able to succeed in college classes. I argue that the answer lies within the communication practices occurring within prison classrooms that allow students to be discursively produced as scholars, rather than deviants. Using the method of participatory critical rhetoric, I analyzed prison classroom communication through three distinct, yet related lenses. First, I ethnographically examined my interviews to determine themes. Second, I used critical rhetorical methods to examine the interviews as texts. Finally, I examined the mediated discourses surrounding prisoners and discussed the bureaucratic frustrations in producing a mediated counter-narrative. These distinct parts, collectively, paint a clearer picture of the effective communication practices necessary, inside and outside of prison walls, to educate both current and potential prisoners and provide a better means for re/integration.

The ethnographic analysis revealed a stark difference between student experiences in K-12 and prison classrooms. Their K-12 teachers, adhering to the norms of the education system, communicated apathy and a demand for adherence to values that were not own. There was no space for them to meaningfully communicate their ideas and values within the classroom and their behavior, and even their language, was produced as deviant. In prison classrooms, however, their teachers communicated that their voice and opinion had value, gave them space to communicate freely, and kept them engaged and excited.

Applying a critical rhetorical analysis to the interviews demonstrated two primary discourses circulating through prison classrooms that were absent from the students’ experiences in their K-12 schooling. First, a discourse of individuality was circulated through instructors moderating their own authority, communicating with students on an equal level, and recognizing and celebrating the autonomy of their students. Second, a discourse of care was circulated by
instructors becoming vulnerable by both sharing about themselves and listening to students share their experiences and needs, as well as by their perceived choice of presence within the classroom. This discourse of care acted against the mandatory teacher training that produces students as threats, instead choosing to produce them as humans worthy of a caring relationship. The fusion of these discourses allowed for a fissure into the organizational rhetoric of the prison system, allowing both students and instructors to enact a rhetoric of love.

In order to examine the best means to effectively promote re/integration, I conducted an analysis of dominant discourses about prisoners circulating through popular media and news reports. Using cultivation theory and social learning theory, I argued that the general public is taught a bias against prisoners in much the same way as they are biased against minorities. These biases, spurred by almost universally negative coverage that portrays prisoners and savage and violent, leads to public support for punitive justice. Initially, I had planned to construct a documentary to counter this narrative, but my attempts were thwarted by the prison system which prohibited me from filming interviews with prisoners. Instead, I discussed how the bureaucratic system, by prohibiting positive portrayals of prisoners, insulates itself against public scrutiny and allows the bias and its effects to continue unabated.

Having examined this issue through three distinct lenses, I now collectively interpret my findings. As previously discussed, the conservative backlash against the societal upheaval related to the demand for civil rights and equality led to a rhetoric of standardization. From education to the criminal justice system, expectations of human behavior became standardized and all actions falling outside adherence to these norms became discursively produced as deviance. Even criminological theories, which seek to attempt to understand the mindset of those who commit crimes, participate in the rhetoric of standardization.