

**Evaluation of Arts Education Courses at
Harris County Jail**

provided by the

Houston Museum of
African American Culture

in collaboration with

California Lawyers for the Arts

May 31, 2024

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Introduction

California Lawyers for the Arts (CLA) supported the Houston Museum of African Culture (HMAAC) in launching an arts education program at the Harris County Jail Women’s Empowerment Center in 2023. HMAAC introduced its new art program with an indoor mural that was painted in the visitor's center at the jail. In California, CLA has long collaborated with Dr. Larry Brewster and the William James Association to secure renewed California state funding for prison arts programs through evidence-based demonstration projects. This success provided the impetus to offer similar demonstration projects and thus to expand arts programs in county jails and state prisons in collaboration with arts organizations in Texas, Louisiana and New York. In addition to project support from the National Endowment for the Arts Locals Program, CLA secured funding from the Andy Warhol Foundation and the Art for Justice Fund, a program of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors.

The primary goal of the program in Houston was to empower and inspire incarcerated women at the Harris County Jail, through course offerings in creative writing, poetry, and visual arts. In two groups, the participants engaged the artist faculty in two sessions each week over a six-week period. HMAAC’s CEO, John Guess, Jr., expressed his support for the art program when he said, “Given that we had worked previously with CLA with national success [and] that we had completed a successful mural project with the Harris County Jail earlier this year, along

with the museum’s desire to positively impact the local correctional environment, [partnering on the arts education program] was a no-brainer.” (HMAAC’s website) Harris jail authorities reported that active and enthusiastic participation among the participants was evident. During the duration of the program, participants purposefully and enthusiastically worked on their artistic and literary creations, ending with presentations of their individual work.

Inprint Houston, which is experienced in offering arts education at county jails, collaborated with HMAAC to offer visual arts, creative writing, and poetry instruction in their Harris County Jail program. Project manager and artist, Danielle Finnerman, artist Henry Membreno, and writer Mathew Weitman were the instructors. Their views on the power of arts were best expressed by Ms. Finnerman when she said, “Art is a wonderful way to build confidence in those who create it, and I’m thrilled that through CLA and HMAAC, and in partnership with Inprint, we are able to do our part to make this exciting new Women’s Empowerment Center a rehabilitative life changer for those who are currently incarcerated.” (HMAAC’s website) The program began July 17, 2023; and ended August 22, 2023.

This evaluation project was coordinated by Toyin Moses, CLA Special Projects Manager, and Alma Robinson, CLA Executive Director. The data collected from the surveys was analyzed by CLA consultants Sejal Bapna and Pablo Asencio.

Methodology

This evidence-based evaluation of the arts program was designed and implemented by Dr. Larry Brewster, Professor Emeritus of the University of San Francisco. The initial plan was to base the evaluation on pre- and post-surveys that were administered at the first and the last of the 12 sessions over six weeks. The program began with 31 women, and another 20 joined the

program in the third week, for a total of 51 participants. However, and not surprising, given that turnover for any number of reasons, unrelated to a program, is common with jail populations, only 22 completed the art classes.

Because participant identities were protected, we were unable to match pre-surveys with the completed post-surveys. Consequently, we focused our evaluation on the completed post-surveys only. It is worth noting, however, that correctional officers reported that the participants' positive transformation was evident. They observed, for example, that the women worked cooperatively with one another, and were more expressive and open with their feelings. This is encouraging, considering that the teaching and mentoring approach fostered collaboration and self-expression.

The survey instruments consist of demographic, behavioral and attitudinal questions. The attitudinal scales were adapted from the statistically validated "Life Effectiveness Questionnaire" (LEQ) that measures: Personal Productivity & Time Management, Social Competence & Comfort with Others, Creativity & Artistic Expression, Openness to Change & Adaptability, Emotional Control, Wellbeing & Stability, Active Involvement & Energetic, Self-Belief & Confidence, Leadership & Communication (Neill, et al., 2003). Life effectiveness is essentially "the psychological and behavioral aspects of human functioning which determine a person's effectiveness or proficiency in any given situation" (Neill, et. Al., 1997, 5). The assumption is that the higher a person scores on each of the LEQ scales, the greater her or his personal effectiveness will be, and consequently, is more likely to be successful in life and work.

Each of the dimensions measured can contribute to a happier, more fulfilling and successful life. In particular, making the best use of our time (Time Management) helps us to complete projects and feel satisfied at the end of the day. It is more likely those who are

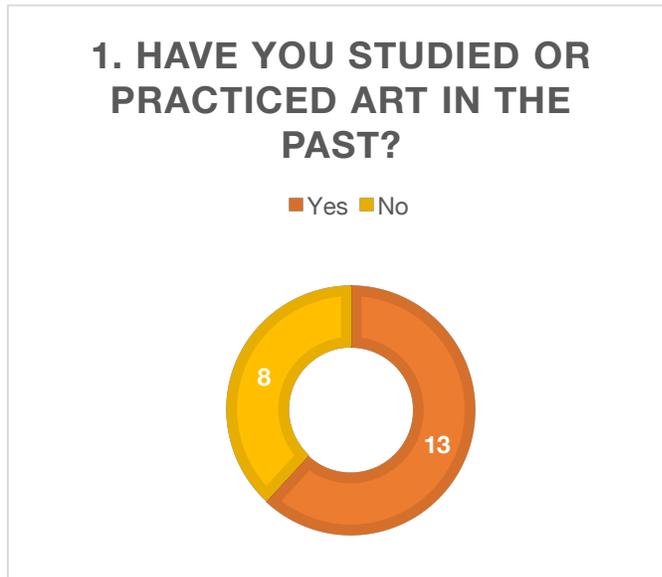
confident and comfortable interacting socially (Social Competence) will form meaningful relationships, and better reintegrate into the community. The drive to accomplish excellence (Active Involvement) is an admirable trait that is essential for those striving to become self-actualized. The ability to adapt to changing circumstances or to adjust one's thinking based on new or changing information (Openness to Change & Adaptability) is particularly important in the fast paced and ever-changing world in which we live. Maintaining control of our emotions in stressful situations (Emotional Wellbeing & Stability) is critical for each of us, and even more so for incarcerated women and men. People tend to be rewarded for taking the initiative or assuming a leadership role when placed in a new or challenging situation (Leadership & Communication). Creativity and Artistic Expression is applicable when evaluating an arts program. Belief in self, knowing you can take on most any challenge or task (Self-Belief & Confidence) is perhaps the most important ingredient for a life lived fully and happily.

The eight attitudinal scales consisted of the following statements in the post-survey:

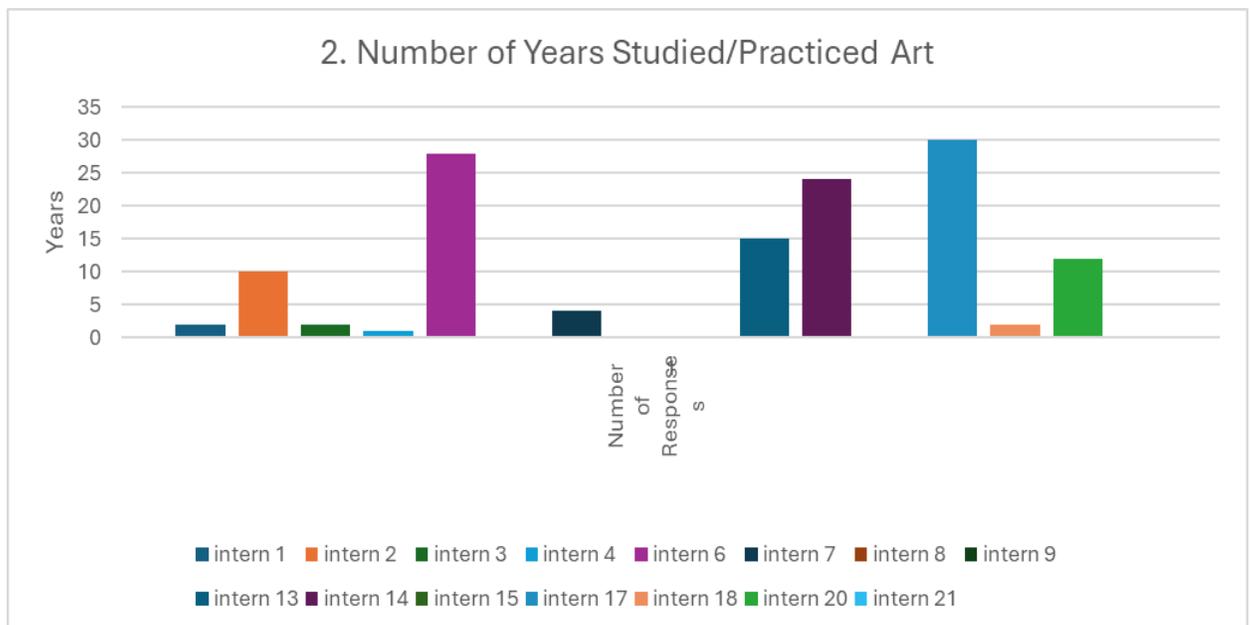
- Active involvement and energetic (Q's 16, 23, 31)
- Personal Productivity & Time Management (Q's 12, 13, 18, 19, 25, 27)
- Comfort with Others & Social Competence (Q's 35, 36)
- Openness to Change & Adaptability (Q's 14, 20, 28)
- Emotional Wellbeing & Stability (Q's 15, 22, 30)
- Creativity & Artistic Expression (Q's 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42)
- Self-Belief & Confidence (Q's 17, 24, 32, 33, 34)
- Leadership & Communication (Q's 21, 26, 29)

Participants' Background

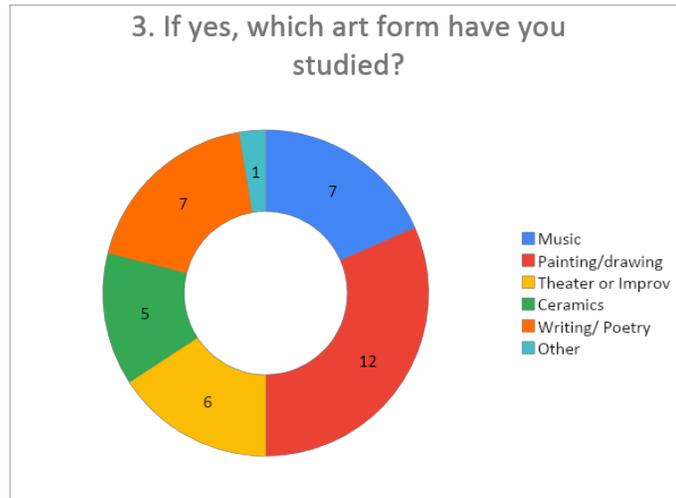
A majority of the participants studied or practiced art in the past (Chart 1).



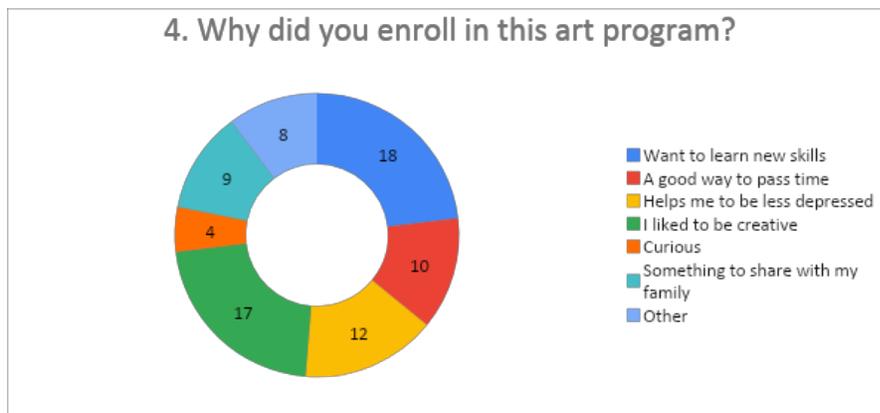
Of the thirteen who studied or practiced art, a few did so for as long as fifteen to thirty years, while most did so for a relatively short period of time (Chart 2).



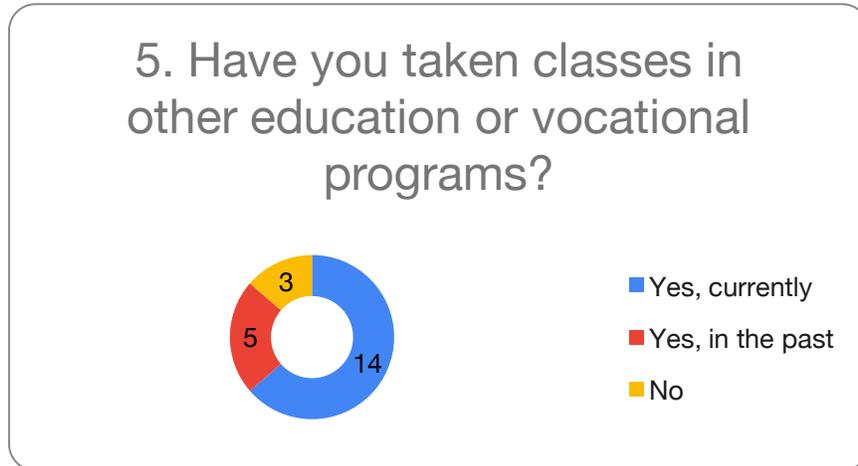
Painting and drawing are the most common forms of art, with music and writing/poetry second most popular. Interestingly, six of the participants have been involved in some form of theater or improv (Chart 3).



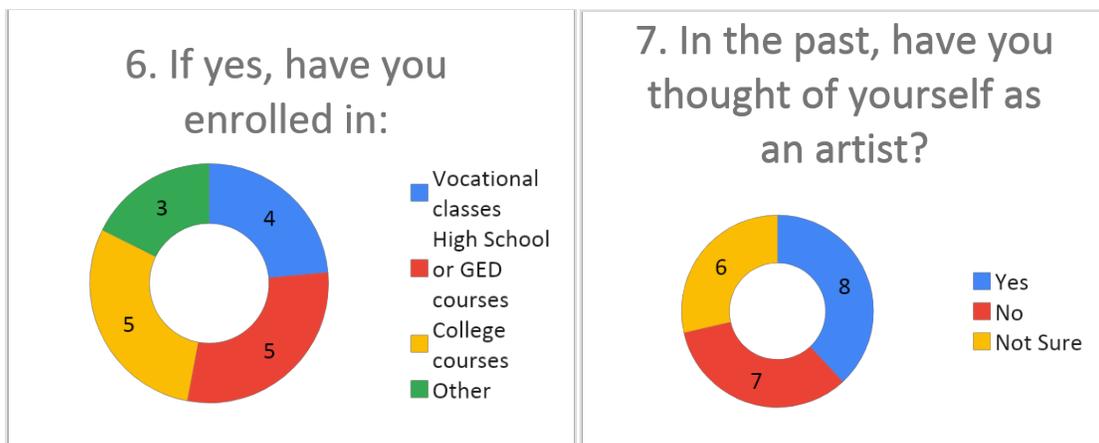
Participants could identify more than one reason for their enrolling in the program. Wanting to learn new skills (N=18) was the most popular reason for enrolling, with “liking to be creative” a close second (N=17). An important reason given by 12 of the participants was to help with their depression (N=12). Also important was that the program gave a 9 of the participants “something to share with my family” (Chart 4).



It is important to note that nearly everyone is currently taking classes in other education or vocational program (N=14), or has taken them in the past (N=5). Only three of the participants have never taken other education or vocational courses (Chart 5).

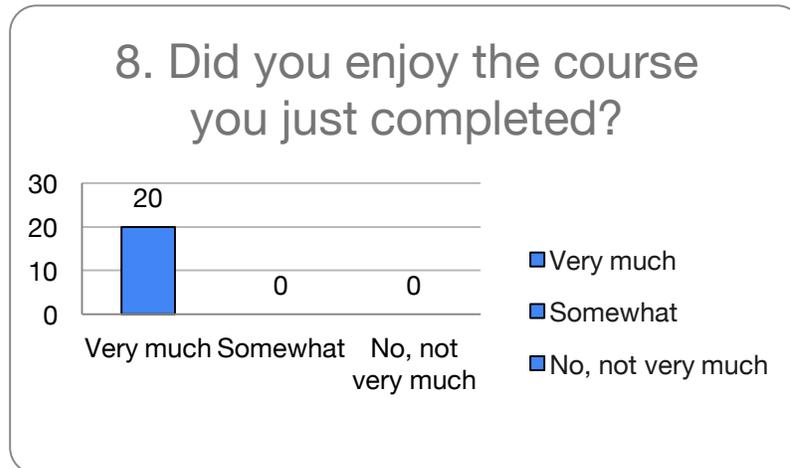


Of those who have taken courses, five either now or in the past have taken high school or GED courses, and another five have taken college courses. Four of the participants have taken vocational classes (Chart 6). Eight of the participants think of themselves as artists, while 7 do not, and another 6 aren't sure (Chart 7).



Findings

Twenty of the twenty-two participants answered “very much” when asked if they enjoyed the course they just completed. Two participants chose not to answer the question (Chart 8).



Nearly everyone learned how to be more creative (N=18) having taken the classes. Fifteen reported that they learned new skills related to their art practice, and very important, fifteen learned the importance of completing what they started. The program also helped twelve participants discover talent they didn't realize before and acquire a feeling of accomplishment.

It is important to note that participants could register more than one response to this question (Chart 9).

9. What, if anything, did you learn from the course you just completed?

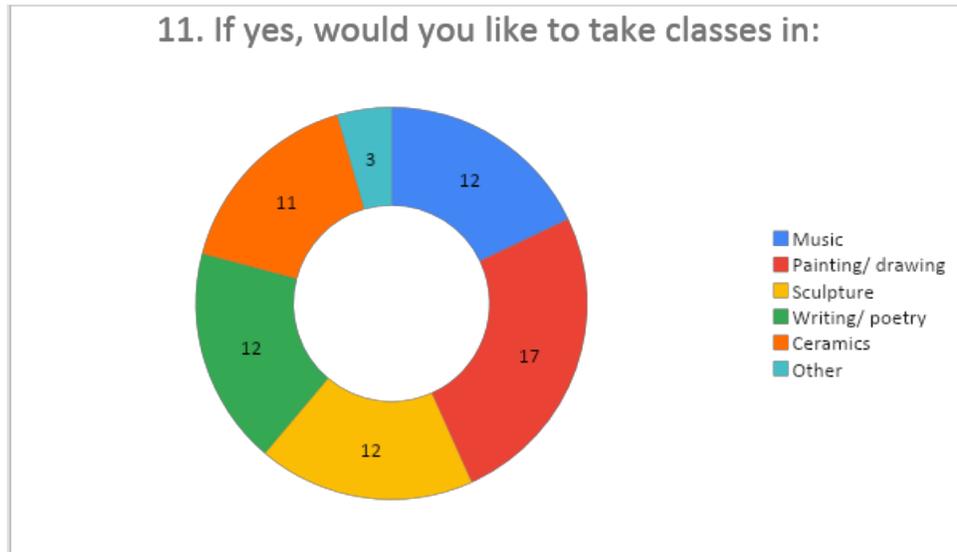


When asked if they would like to take additional art classes, all but two said yes. Two answered that they weren't sure (Chart 10).

10. Would you like to take additional art classes?



Of those who would like to take additional courses, most (N=17) selected painting/drawing, music (N=12), sculpture (N=12), writing/poetry (N=12), ceramics (N=11). In other words, the participants have a wide-ranging interest in many modalities of art (Chart 11).



The positive responses to the attitudinal statements (Q's 12 thru 44) are especially encouraging, and a reminder that the participants are far more than whatever brought them into the justice system. Table 1 shows the responses to each of the statements. The vast majority expressed positive attitudes, with very few disagreeing with any of the statements.

Table #1

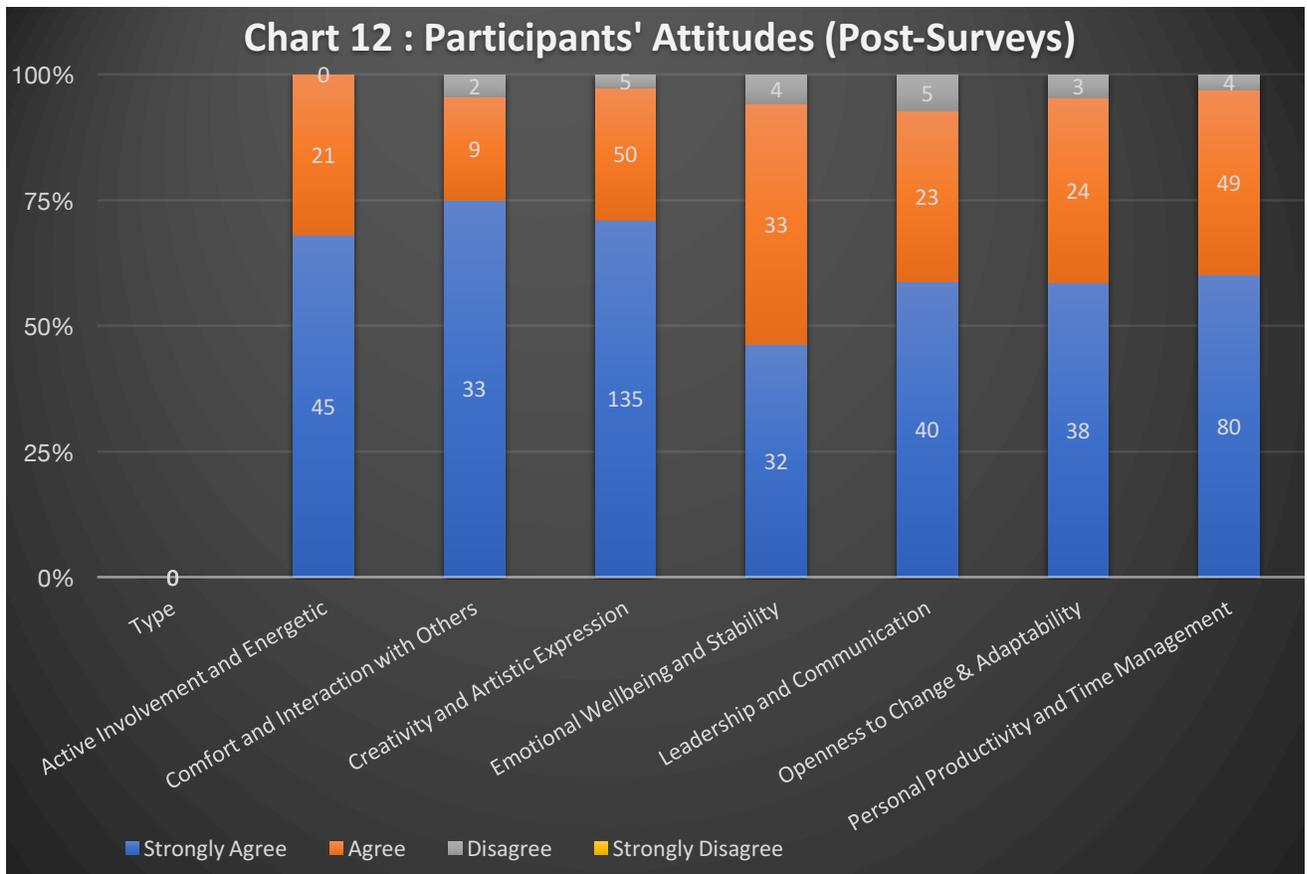
| Questions | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| 12. I plan and use my time efficiently | 13 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| 13. When working on a project, I do my best to get the details right | 16 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| 14. I change my thinking or opinions easily if there is a better idea | 8 | 10 | 3 | 0 |
| 15. I can stay calm in stressful situations | 14 | 8 | 3 | 0 |
| 16. I like to be busy and actively involved in things | 16 | 7 | 0 | 0 |
| 17. I know I have the ability to do anything I want to do | 16 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| 18. I do not waste time | 10 | 10 | 2 | 0 |
| 19. I try to get the best results when I do things | 14 | 8 | 0 | 0 |
| 20. I am open to new ideas | 17 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| 21. I am a good leader when a task needs to be done | 13 | 9 | 0 | 0 |
| 22. I stay calm and overcome anxiety in new or changing situations | 10 | 12 | 0 | 0 |
| 23. I like to be active and energetic | 15 | 7 | 0 | 0 |
| 24. When I apply myself to something I am confident I will succeed | 13 | 8 | 1 | 0 |
| 25. I manage the way I use my time well | 11 | 9 | 2 | 0 |
| 26. I communicate well with people | 14 | 7 | 3 | 0 |
| 27. I try to do the best that I possibly can | 16 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| 28. I am adaptable and flexible in my thinking | 13 | 9 | 0 | 0 |
| 29. As a leader I motivate other people well when tasks need to be done | 13 | 7 | 2 | 0 |
| 30. I stay calm when things go wrong | 8 | 13 | 1 | 0 |
| 31. I like to be an active, 'get into it " person | 14 | 7 | 0 | 0 |
| 32. I believe I can do it | 16 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| 33. I feel that I am a very competent person | 16 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| 34. I don't feel like I'm very creative | 2 | 6 | 4 | 10 |
| 35. I feel comfortable around people | 16 | 5 | 1 | 0 |
| 36. I like working with others | 17 | 4 | 1 | 0 |
| 37. Art helps me express myself | 17 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| 38. This program will help me to explore my creativity | 18 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| 39. Art helped me improve my concentration | 16 | 8 | 1 | 0 |
| 40. Art helps me and my family share our thoughts and feelings with each other | 17 | 9 | 1 | 0 |
| 41. Art is a way for me to connect with other inmates | 16 | 7 | 1 | 0 |
| 42. Art is a way for me to give to my community | 16 | 8 | 2 | 0 |
| 43. This program had a positive effect on me | 18 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| 44. This program gives me hope for a better future | 17 | 5 | 0 | 0 |

Table 2 (and Chart 12) show the attitudinal responses organized by type. In other words, the responses to statements measuring a particular attitudinal type (e.g., Active involvement & Energetic, or Self-belief & Confidence) are totaled for a single numeric measurement. Again, the responses are generally very positive. “Emotional Wellbeing & Stability”, Self-Belief & Confidence”, “Leadership & Communication,” and Creativity & Artistic Expression” are the

dimensions that reflect some measure of self-doubt, but even then, the negative responses are very few.

| TABLE #2 | | | | |
|---|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| Type | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| Active Involvement and Energetic | 45 | 21 | 0 | 0 |
| Comfort and Interaction with Others | 33 | 9 | 2 | 0 |
| Creativity and Artistic Expression | 135 | 50 | 5 | 0 |
| Emotional Wellbeing and Stability | 32 | 33 | 4 | 0 |
| Leadership and Communication | 40 | 23 | 5 | 0 |
| Openness to Change & Adaptability | 38 | 24 | 3 | 0 |
| Personal Productivity and Time Management | 80 | 49 | 4 | 0 |
| Self-Belief and Confidence | 63 | 32 | 5 | 10 |
| Grand Total | 466 | 241 | 28 | 10 |

Most of the participants completed the program feeling very positive about themselves and their ability to manage their time, complete projects, adapt to change, and engage the world actively and with energy (Table 2; Chart 12).



Everyone felt either very strongly (N=18) or strongly (N=4) that the program had a positive effect on them. Equally impressive, 17 strongly agreed that the program gave them hope for a better future, and another 5 agreed (Table 1).

A Final Word

It is common for those incarcerated in jails, for any number of reasons, to leave for reasons not related to a program. The Houston Museum of African Culture (HMAAC) arts education program at the Harris County Jail Women’s Empowerment Center is no exception. As might be expected, only about half of the women who began the program (N=51) were able to complete it (N=22). All twenty-two of the women reported that the art program had a positive effect on them; and all felt that the program gave them hope for a better future.

It was encouraging to learn that most of the participants had positive attitudes and/or feelings about themselves. Most, for example, feel they can manage their time, complete projects once started, adapt to change, and actively engage the world. Some of the participants expressed doubt about their “emotional wellbeing”, self-belief & confidence, leadership & communication skills, and even their creativity & artistic expression. However, those who disagreed with the positive statements that defined these categories were few in number.

Most of the participants enrolled in the program to “learn new skills” and/or because they liked to be creative. It is important to acknowledge that for half of the participants the program helped them with depression. Nearly every participant is either now or at some time in their past, taken classes in other education or vocational programs. The programs ranged from GED/high school to college courses. Eight of the participants think of themselves as artists, while 7 do not. The other 6 aren’t sure.

All but two of the participants enjoyed “very much” the program; the two chose not to answer the question. Nearly every participant learned to be more creative. Fifteen of the 22 participants learned new skills related to their art practice, and those same women learned the importance of completing what they started. It’s always a wonderful surprise when a participant discovers a hidden talent, as was the case for 12 of the participants in this program. Not surprising, all but two of the participants would like to take additional art classes.

For More Information, please contact:

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