

**Program Evaluation:**  
**Credible Messengers Creative Arts Program**

Charlie M. Nguyen

**Author Note**

**Conflict of Interest:**

It should be disclosed that the author is an active participant in the Credible Messengers Creative Arts Program, but for purposes of this evaluation maintains strict boundaries and an impartial point of view. Personal opinion is withheld, and conclusions that are found are based on research-based evidence.

Correspondence concerning this evaluation should be addressed to Charlie M. Nguyen, 331 The City Drive South, Orange, CA 92868.

Email: [Charlienguyen.edu@gmail.com](mailto:Charlienguyen.edu@gmail.com)

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### **Evaluation of the Credible Messengers Creative Arts Program**

#### **I. Introduction**

The purpose of evaluating the Credible Messengers Creative Arts program within Orange County Juvenile Hall is to examine and highlight the impact of the program on participants' well-being, rehabilitation, and behavior; the effectiveness that the program has had on achieving its stated goals; to gauge the satisfaction and/or perception of the participants; and to take into account the perspective of the stakeholders.

This study aims to evaluate both the Art and Creative Writing aspects of the program; identify the bearing that this program has on its participants beyond the scope of superficial curriculum; and assess how this program can be effective in supporting individuals who are incarcerated, post-released, and system impacted.

#### **II. Program Overview**

The Credible Messengers Creative Arts Program is a program that was brought forth by the Underground Scholars Initiative at the University of California, Irvine (UC Irvine), and is spearheaded by Alberto "Berto" Lule and Ryan "Flaco" Rising, two dedicated educators who aim to provide a unique educational experience by way of both academic and personal insight. It is a program designed to introduce art and writing while developing personal skills and influencing human development for its participants. The target population is incarcerated men and women, but in this

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specific case, the Credible Messengers Creative Arts Program was introduced in November of 2022 as a pilot program for Unit Tango at the Orange County Juvenile Hall, which houses males ages eighteen and above.

Art Enrichment by Berto Lule: Lule, an expert in art history and art instruction, brought his passion for creativity and critical thinking to the program. Through a series of art history lessons and hands-on art projects, he engaged participants in exploring the world of visual arts. This approach not only encouraged artistic expression but also enhanced critical thinking skills among the young participants.

Creative Writing with Ryan “Flaco” Rising: Complementing the visual arts component, Rising focused on fostering creative writing skills within the program. Creative writing sessions were held regularly, offering participants the opportunity to explore their thoughts, emotions, and stories through the written word. Rising’s guidance accordingly provided a platform for self-expression and personal growth.

Additionally, the program featured prominent professors such as the renowned sociologist William Robinson and acclaimed author Robert Weide, who shared their expertise and inspired the youth with their knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, every two weeks, the program brought in guest lecturers to expose participants to diverse perspectives and educational opportunities. This also included activities such as yoga, dance, and music therapy classes that provided additional outlets for personal expression and maintenance of well-being. Another notable guest speaker included Lisandra Barrera-Rising, the Transfer

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Coordinator from UC Irvine's Underground Scholars Program. Barrera-Rising offered valuable insight into the UC application process and the Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG) program, opening doors to higher education for the participants.

### **III. Evaluation Methodology**

The methods and tools that were used to collect data was participant observation; qualitative interviews with the participants and stakeholders<sup>1</sup> of the program; surveys that were completed by each of the participants; and archival research that provides supplementary information regarding how art and writing have been beneficial towards both the incarcerated and non-incarcerated person.

### **IV. Evaluation Questions**

In this evaluation, the surveys that were passed out included both binary and ordinal variables. Binary variables accounted for (Yes or No): (1) whether or not the learning objectives were clear and understandable for participants; (2) differentiation within instruction in pertinence to the diverse needs of the students; and (3) was constructive feedback provided to students based on their performance. Ordinal variables measured for: (1) the rating of the overall classroom environment (Excellent – Needs Improvement); (2) effectiveness of teacher managing behavior during a lesson (Very Effective – Ineffective); (3) extent of teacher engagement in a lesson (Highly Engaging – Not Engaging); (4) integration of technology into a lesson

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<sup>1</sup> In this evaluation, stakeholders are defined as the probation staff in charge of the unit who supervise the program, and additional outside parties who took an interest in this programs effectiveness.

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(Highly Effective – Ineffective); (5) teacher’s depth of knowledge in subject matter (Excellent – Needs Improvement); (6) ability of teacher to explain complex concepts and ideas (Very Clear – Not Clear); (7) teachers use of assessments to gauge student learning (Varied and Effective – Ineffective); (8) measurement of teachers communication skills (Excellent – Needs Improvement); (9) teachers commitment to the professional development and improvement of the students (Highly Committed – Not Committed); (10) overall rating of the teachers performance in the lesson (Outstanding – Unsatisfactory). Located in the appendices section of this evaluation are the questionnaires in their unanswered form and an excel spreadsheet detailing the results of the participant survey ( $N=15$ ). Furthermore, additional interviews were conducted with each participant and various stakeholders to complement and provide additional information in regards to the validity of this program. In order to conduct this thoroughly, four measurable criteria were assessed: Program Impact, Program Effectiveness, Participant Satisfaction, and Stakeholder perspectives.

## V. Findings and Analysis

Studies have indicated that art and writing are shown to be positive activities that promote or provide a space for self-reflection; a different avenue to express feelings and emotions in a therapeutic manner; and an endeavor that fosters creativity and critical thought (Susan Dewey et al., 2020). Through my observations, analysis of surveys, and interviews; I have found this to be true in this program. One participant states that the Credible Messengers Creative Arts

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Program has given him a place where he can “go to art and writing to escape the mindset of his past”. This is important because of the specific aphorism that the Orange County Probation Department promotes, “A Safer Orange County Through Positive Change” (ocprobation.ocgov.com). This denotes a particular mantra that indicates a desire to promote and foster rehabilitation, community safety, and a reduction in recidivism. To do so requires a shift from punitive measures to a response that exhibits a transformative step towards the development of youth that are incarcerated or system impacted. Movement within the legislature regarding the juvenile justice system has indicated that the prior assumption that youthful offenders are irredeemable is incorrect and the shift to rehabilitative reform - instead of a punitive system – is not only beneficial to the youth but to society (Jouet, 2019). By providing rehabilitative services such as the Credible Messengers Creative Arts Program, the theory that young minds are still malleable, need to be shielded from negative influences and instead directed with positive reinforcement is valid (Bishop, 2000), and an avenue for that reinforcement is provided.

Analysis of surveys indicates an almost exclusive trend towards the positive impact of the program with 86% and 93% of participants stating that Rising and Lule were highly committed to participant development and improvement.

Furthermore, observation of the teachers’ interactions with the participants has shown a personal investment towards their growth and well-being. One youth states that, “the teachers’ seem to pay more attention because of their shared lived experience”, highlighting the impact that these specific instructors provide by way

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of that experience (Cullen and Gendreau, 2001) and how they teach (Scott, 2017).

Many of these students come from a varying set of backgrounds with a majority of such having experienced some form of trauma (Charak et al., 2019) and a sub-standard level of traditional education (). Knowing such, it is vital that the instructors are able to adhere to the needs and varying educational levels of the students (). Another factor in pertinence to program impact that was relevant in this evaluation was how this program has influenced participant attitude and behavior in a positive light or rehabilitative manner. As stated earlier, the goal of the Credible Messengers Creative Arts Program is to facilitate education, provide a means for expression by way of creative arts, and to promote, foster, and contribute to positive growth and rehabilitation. Beyond the art and writing curriculum brought forth, multiple stakeholders have declared that the overall impact of the program has been positive and, in particular, has promoted inspiration and instilled hope. Stakeholders have also noted how the shared lived experience between the teachers' and the participants has created a sense of solidarity and a distinct "breaking of ice" that allows for greater comfort or openness to the program. Through the development of positive role models in these teachers', participants have been exposed to individuals who have successfully reintegrated back into society and are introduced to skills/passions that the teachers' utilized themselves to transcend from their past.

At a baseline level, this program's stated goals and objectives are to make a significant impact on the art and writing skills of the participants; equip them with

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valuable tools for personal and academic growth; and to effectively promote an environment that fosters rehabilitative development.

Regardless of curriculum or objectives, whether or not a program has any serious validity is based upon the response of and ultimately the satisfaction of its participants. Based upon a number of personal interviews, and analysis of surveys, I have concluded that the general consensus regarding participant satisfaction is positive. Every participant that I interviewed stated that they “look forward” to attending this program on Friday evenings, and many have indicated, in a positive light, that they have not participated in a program like such. This statement showcases the distinctiveness that this program brings and how it distinguishes itself from other rehabilitative programs offered at Juvenile Hall. To provide further empirical evidence of this distinctiveness and how it is distinguished from other programs, I conducted a survey with a random sample of programs that included the Credible Messengers Creative Arts Program to measure how this program is rated in comparison to other programs.



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