



JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

ESTABLISHED 2007

Loyola-Rayburn: Last Year in Review

2025 was quite a year for Loyola-Rayburn!

In **January**, Dr. Bobby Savoie, Dean of the College of Business, and Dr. Caleb Bernacchio, Faculty Director of the Center for Ethics and Economic Justice, came to the prison to meet **students who are pursuing a Business Management specialization as part of the Bachelor of Applied Science degree**. Dr. Savoie kindly donated copies of a book on entrepreneurship to all incarcerated and correctional staff students. Support from the College of Business has always been outstanding; Loyola's Ethics Fellows have contributed to personal finance projects at Rayburn several times, and we look forward to continued collaborations in the coming year.

In **February**, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) conducted a site visit and **approved Loyola's bachelor's degree program at Rayburn**. This visit required considerable support from administrators across the university. We want to extend a special thank you to Uriel Quesada, Loyola's Vice Provost for Institutional Research, Accreditation, and Academic Engagement, for all of his tireless efforts on behalf of the program. We couldn't have done it without you!

In **March**, the **Loyola-Rayburn Student Government Association (Loy-Ray SGA)** **hosted one day of the annual Peace Conference** at the prison. The theme was "Unraveling Polarization." Loyola students from Rayburn presented their original research alongside fellow undergraduates from Loyola and Tulane on topics including religious polarization, Cancer Alley, and media coverage of war and conflict. We are hoping to bring the Peace Conference to Rayburn again this April. **The theme will be "Survival in a Time of Peace and Conflict."** **Students at Rayburn are already working on their papers, and we encourage all students to attend the Peace Conference at Loyola.** Reach out to conference organizers at peacecon@loyno.edu to learn more.



Student presenters and faculty advisors after the Peace Conference at Rayburn. From left to right: Carmen Hershey, John Tentler, Jarriel Dehon, Isabella McCoy, Kalena Myers, Sophia McMahon, Vincent Picou, Benan Grams, Morgan Prevost, Mallory Phillips, Isaac Valarezo, Veronica Handwerger, Justin Nystrom, and Idun Hauge.

March also marked another milestone: for over a year, Laurie Phillips, University Librarian for Information Resources, met JSRI staff behind Monroe Library to load eight shelves at a time into our cars so that we could bring them up to Rayburn. **Slowly but surely, we replaced dozens of rusting shelves in the prison's main library.**

In March, we brought in the last eight shelves needed. Laurie has been an incredible supporter of the program in so many more ways. She has procured and evaluated hundreds of books for Rayburn's library – including a large haul from the Organization of American Historians conference – and traveled to the prison many times to assess the physical holdings there. We appreciate you, Laurie!

In April, the Loy-Ray SGA hosted visitors from the National Conference of Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP), which took place in New Orleans this year. Twenty-five visitors – about half of whom are formerly incarcerated leaders in the field of higher education in prison – came to Rayburn to engage in a reciprocal Q&A and share a meal with students at the prison. This event marked the revival of an old NCHEP tradition of visiting a higher education in prison program in the host location. NCHEP has now grown beyond the point of allowing all attendees to participate in such visits, but we were honored to bring back this important part of the conference in a new form.

In **June**, Kelsey McLaughlin, Loyola-Rayburn's Advisor and Support Coordinator, worked closely with the **Loy-Ray SGA to host a mental health retreat at Rayburn**, including Loyola students as well as participants in the prison's Sober Living program. You can read Kelsey's reflection on the theme of the retreat – your past is your power – [here](#). Dr. Denise Gilstrap gave a talk on trauma, and Kelsey, Ash Bayer, and Hunter Darrouzet offered breakout sessions focusing on art therapy, breath and movement, and spiritual guidance.

Kelsey has worked with Loyola's Student Success Center to offer several workshops this year and is planning more for 2026. We can't say enough about the support from Student Success!

Juneteenth was also a Loyola-studded affair at Rayburn. Anthony Jones, Vice President for Enrollment Management, delivered a powerful speech about Black history and Jolanda Taylor-Magee, Director of Multicultural Affairs, offered a spirited reading of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise." Dr. Jones had all the Loyola-Rayburn students stand and be recognized, assuring them that they are part of the Loyola family. **One student said he had never been so proud to be part of Loyola.** JSRI Advisory Board Members Linette Sabado and Courtney Everett were also in attendance, along with JSRI Twomey Scholar-in-Residence Bill Quigley.



Guests after the Juneteenth event at Rayburn. From left to right: Anthony Jones, Jolanda Taylor-Magee, Bill Quigley, Courtney Everett, and Linette Sabado.

In **September**, Loyola received notification that the US Department of Education approved the university's application to establish the Bachelor of Applied Science program at Rayburn as an official prison education program (PEP). This means that **the university can now access Pell Grants on behalf of incarcerated students**, which constitutes a substantial contribution to the long-term sustainability of the program. **Loyola is the first Louisiana-based four-year institution to achieve this status.**

We are forever grateful to Loyola's dedicated team – Stephanie Bautsch, Tootie Buisson, Cynthia Caire, Thomas Chambers, Emmett Cooper, Shannon Duplantis, Glenda Elhaj, Leonard Kahn, Daniel McBride, Desiree Rodriguez, Alan Schomaker, Nate Straight, and Uriel Quesada – for helping us navigate the challenges of Pell implementation. A big thank you also to Sheila Meiman at the National Association of Student Financial Aid

Administrators for her many hours of technical assistance and to April Bergens and Kyleigh Quiroga from the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA), who travelled to Rayburn to assist all students with FAFSA completion!

In **October**, alums from **California State University-Los Angeles Prison Graduation Initiative** visited incarcerated students in both **Mississippi and Louisiana** as part of a book tour for ***The Ripple Effects of College Prison Programs***. Along with their former program director, Taffany Lim, Sam Brown and Dara Yin shared their experiences regarding the power of higher education in prison. Most alums from Cal State LA's program – the first in-person bachelor's completion program in a California prison – were **once serving life sentences but are now free due to changes in sentencing and parole laws. Their stories gave hope to Loyola students at Rayburn, many of whom are serving long sentences as well.** Sam and Dara were gracious enough to visit Loyola's New Orleans campus as well, offering a powerful experience for all who attended. Alums like Sam and Dara show us what is possible for all students, if they are given the chance. Mary Beth Hughes from the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry (LABI) and Loyola Board Member Toya Barnes-Teamer attended the Rayburn event as well.



Guests after the Ripple Effects of College Prison Programs event at Rayburn. From left to right, back row: Dara Yin, Mary Beth Derrickson, Taffany Lim, and Stephanie Gaskil; front row: Kelsey McLaughlin, Toya Barnes-Teamer, and Sam Brown.

Loyola students at Rayburn also submitted their adaptation of the Characteristics of Jesuit Higher Education: A Guide for Mission Reflection when the Peer Visiting Team came to Loyola as part of the Mission Priority Examen ([MPE](#)) process. Students started adapting the MPE back in 2023 as part of Jarrod Wall's class on program evaluation. They produced an incredibly thoughtful reflection on Jesuit values as they apply to higher education in prison, and we are so proud that their efforts became an integral part of Loyola's MPE.

In **November**, the Loy-Ray SGA hosted the **first day of the Louisiana Board of Regent's second Untapped Talent Summit**, which focuses on **expanding education and employment opportunities for currently and formerly incarcerated people**. Twenty distinguished guests – including Louisiana's Commissioner of Higher Education, Kim Hunter-Reed – visited the prison to engage in a reciprocal Q&A and share a meal with students. During the second day of the Summit in New Orleans, Dr. Hunter-Reed regularly quoted a Loyola student at Rayburn who remarked, "my story is only really relevant as a part of all our stories," a reference to the fact that higher education in prison is about collective impact as much as individual success.

It is our hope that students at Rayburn can continue to engage with Untapped Talent throughout 2026, as the Summit shifts into a strategic planning and implementation phase. Also of note – JSRI student worker Colleen Clark presented alongside Loyola-Rayburn Academic Director Marcus Kondkar at Untapped Talent about their work to map the job market for people with records. Great job, Colleen!

In **December**, Colonel Thomas Mitchell, the first student participating in Loyola's program for correctional staff students, graduated with his Bachelor of Applied Science. Staff from JSRI and City College travelled to Rayburn for a celebration with Colonel Mitchell's family. Thank you to Joy David, Carly Penn Harper, and Elizabeth Henning for making the drive to show your support! Congratulations Colonel Mitchell!!



After Colonel Mitchell's graduation celebration. From left to right: Joy David, Stephanie Gaskill, Carly Penn-Harper, Kelsey McLaughlin, Colonel Thomas Mitchell, Marcus Kondkar, Elizabeth Henning, and Warden Travis Day.

We also took the opportunity to bring the first batch of toys for the Loy-Ray SGA's second annual toy drive for children visiting their parents at Rayburn during the holiday season. A big thank you to everyone who donated – and to the Loyola Student Government

Association for all of your support organizing the initiative! Shout out to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Holy Name of Jesus Church, Ignatius Chapel, and Samara Poche and Team Right Side for your donations! We collected over 480 toys and \$1,500 in online donations!

No year-in-review would be complete without a thank you to the faculty who taught in the program in 2025: Cody Melcher, Craig Hood, Julian Katz, and Kevin McQueeney. It means so much to students that you drive to the prison every week to teach our students at Rayburn. Your dedication is clear and appreciated. This semester, students are taking classes with Beau Guedry, who is teaching Philosophy of the Human Person, and Paul Sawyer, who is teaching Professional Writing. Everyone is looking forward to a great semester.

It's hard to imagine that 2026 could be more eventful than 2025 but, as you can see, we already have so much planned. **We start the year with profound gratitude for everyone who supports this program. It truly takes a village, and we appreciate each and every one of you!**

If you are interested in supporting the Loyola at Rayburn Program, you can [donate online here](#) or reach out to Executive Director Annie Phoenix at alphoeni@loyno.edu.

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