On a late-November afternoon, at the head of a cramped classroom, David Carrillo stood at a small podium and quizzed 17 students on macroeconomic terminology.

For the two-hour class, Carrillo, the adjunct professor teaching for Adams State University, mostly kept his hands in his pockets as he lectured students in green uniforms, some bright and others faded with time. His lecture came rapid-fire, allowing just enough time for students to answer questions or let them ask a question of him. One of the lessons on that day: banking.

“Banks keep track of all of their transactions on their balance sheet, but they use a specific type of accounting tool to keep track of all this. What’s that accounting tool?” Carrillo asked his class.

Like his students at the Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility, Carrillo, 49, also wears green. He holds a position that is extremely rare in prison: He’s an incarcerated professor teaching in a prison bachelor’s degree program.

A new initiative at Adams State — one of the first of its kind in the country — focuses on employing incarcerated people with graduate degrees as college professors, rather than bringing in instructors from the outside. The program offered through the Alamosa-based university gives incarcerated graduates experience and training while helping to alleviate the staff shortages that can hinder prison education programs.

Carrillo knows firsthand the power of education — he was never supposed to get out of prison. But in December, Colorado Gov. Jared Polis granted Carrillo clemency for his role in a 1993 murder. Carrillo will walk free later this month after 29 years thanks in large part to his work to educate himself and find a productive way to do his time.

Carrillo, whose new prison nickname is “Professor,” wants his students to have the same opportunities that will help them restart their lives.
“To be able to help these guys realize that they are capable of doing so much more — that’s a reward right there,” said Carrillo, who earned his MBA from Adams State in 2021.

An idea almost unheard of in prison

The Adams State program began with an unusual proposal from Leigh Burrows, associate director of prison programs for the Colorado Department of Corrections. In 2022, she approached the university and asked: Would they be willing to hire an incarcerated professor to teach in their business bachelor’s program at Colorado Territorial?

Adams State staff jumped at the opportunity, on the condition that the instructor be paid the same as adjunct professors teaching on its main Alamosa campus. The idea — hiring an incarcerated professor to teach incarcerated students and paying him outside wages — is almost unheard of in correctional settings.

“A lot of people thought we were insane,” Burrows said.

Most people in Colorado prisons only make 80 cents a day, so it would take them around 17 years to earn the $3,600 that Carrillo gets for a single class. Higher wages help incarcerated individuals build savings to help cover their basic needs when they are released. Poverty can often be a driver of decisions that land people back in prison.

A second chance after solitary

In 1994, at the age of 20, Carrillo received a life without parole sentence for his complicity in a murder. The year before, he was present when someone was killed. Colorado law at the time considered him just as guilty as the other teenager – his brother – who pulled the trigger.

“I’ve been in and out of the system since I was a kid,” he said. “I’m generational to this.”

Almost a decade later, in 2002, Carrillo found himself in a solitary confinement cell barely the size of a parking space. He had spent years involved in prison gangs. As he sat alone, he decided he needed a change that had to start with him.

“My worldview was very narrow for a very, very long time,” he said.

Although the 20-year-old Carrillo never would have imagined himself at the front of a classroom, the transition from student to professor wasn’t hard. He had already led several self-help programs, and received plenty of support, including classes from Red Rocks Community College to get his adult education certificate.

Adams State hopes to eventually employ more graduates of their own programs in the future, said Hughes, the prison education director. Currently, Hughes said around 100 people in prisons across the country are working towards their MBA through Adams State like Carrillo did.

The 36-credit print-based MBA correspondence program costs $350 per credit for a total of $12,600, plus textbooks. And, there is no state or federal funding to assist with a graduate degree, so students have to pay out of pocket.

Last fall, Adams State received a $150,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation that will be used to hire a program coordinator, develop a training curriculum for the incarcerated instructors, and create a new graduate program in the humanities.

Hughes, who is herself formerly incarcerated, said she was able to attend college for free while she was inside because of a privately funded prison education program in New Jersey. Many incarcerated people don’t have the resources or family support to fund their own education, and she’s hoping to do fundraising to be able to offer more support to their students.

The state also wants to help more incarcerated individuals earn high school equivalency diplomas so they can take college classes like the ones Carrillo teaches. But Colorado is facing an ongoing teacher shortage across its 19 state-run prisons.

As of December, there were 31 vacancies out of 148 teaching positions around the state, Burrows said. Some of those teachers retired, others have quit because they were conscripted to work custody positions when facilities were short on correctional officers, and facilities have faced ongoing recruitment challenges since the pandemic.

So Burrows is also working to build a pipeline to train peer teachers who could help people study for the high school equivalency exam on their own and then go on to college. As a result, “we’ve had a number of individuals get GEDs who would not have gotten them otherwise because of their sentence length,” she said. Traditionally, the more years a person has left to serve, the lower they are on the list to take GED classes.

Burrows said she recently put out an ad on the department’s television system announcing that they are going to be looking for individuals with everything from an associate to master’s degrees to assist with peer tutoring and teaching. It’s generated a lot of interest.

“Now I can’t go into a facility now without having someone come up to me and ask what they need to do,” she said.

When your students are your roommates

Initially, Burrows heard concerns within the corrections department that hiring Carrillo and allowing him to supervise other prisoners could create a power dynamic that allows for exploitation. But that hasn’t turned out to be a problem.
“Back at the cell house, my friends, they still joke with me as always,” Carrillo said. “They’ll still throw potshots.”

Carrillo said he doesn’t mind that his students have access to him 24/7. In fact, there’s one student Carrillo couldn’t get away from even if he wanted to: his cellmate Sean Mueller.

The two have lived together for over 13 years. Even as Mueller struggled with his own education, he watched as Carrillo earned a paralegal certificate, then an associate degree, a bachelor’s and finally his master’s.

Mueller said a short-term mindset, pride, and greed got him into prison. Now, he’s thinking about the long-term in part thanks to Carrillo.

Carrillo’s class will help Mueller get one step closer to an associate degree and his release. Last year, Colorado legislators approved a law that deducts time off a sentence for prisoners who committed a nonviolent offense if they earn a degree.

Mueller will be one of the first in the state to be able to take advantage of the new law after he earns his degree, he said.

Mueller will likely not be the last. Hall, Carrillo’s podmate, said Carrillo’s class is “gaining popularity and momentum.”

Before Carrillo received the news that he’ll parole on Jan. 31, he said he’d like to keep his job teaching at the prison if he ever got out.

“I didn’t expect this,” he said. “Once I was leading guys into this place. Now, I’m doing my best to lead guys out.”

This story was copublished on Jan. 4, 2024 with Chalkbeat Colorado, where Jason Gonzales is the higher education and legislative matters reporter.
Incarcerated people are rarely hired for outside jobs. A teaching gig changed my life.

By Leo Hylton

“Hey Hylton, they want you in receiving. You’re heading out on some sort of trip,” the officer tells me from the door of my cell. “You know where you’re going, I assume?”

It’s April 2022 and I haven’t left the prison gates since 2010. I have no more appeals, no post-conviction review left to apply for. Unless I need to go to the hospital for something, I shouldn’t see the other side of these prison walls for at least another 26 to 28 years—and that’s if I get every day of my good time.

On this beautiful spring day, I head down to the area of the prison where new people enter the system, get their picture taken for their ID, and are given prison-issued clothing and a plastic tote to store their belongings. I meet two men I have never seen before, who are to be my transport team. In short order, I’m stripping down to my birthday suit, having each article of my clothing searched before being handed back to me.

“Try these on and see if you can walk without looking like Frankenstein’s monster,” another officer tells me, as I’m introduced to hobblers: leg restraints that strap on under your pants and lock out if you try to run.

“I’m not running anywhere!” I assure my escorts. “You can count on that. I know how big of a deal this is. I know that the Department of Corrections is taking a chance on me to make this happen.”

My tone is serious, but my mouth won’t stop smiling. Hobblers on my legs, belly chain getting placed around my waist and affixed to the handcuffs on my wrists, the fugitive investigator is chuckling and shaking his head, saying, “You’re just giddy, aren’t you?”

“You better believe it! I get to see my students today!”

Far from a standard trip to court or the hospital, I’m on my way to Colby College to teach class. On campus. In person.

I have the honor and responsibility of teaching 14 young adults. I get to experience this blessed engagement that I want to make possible for the thousands of other graduate and post-graduate level scholars currently incarcerated across the US. We believe I am the first incarcerated person to be hired and paid as an adjunct to teach outside college students.

I get to experience this blessed engagement that I want to make possible for the thousands of other graduate and post-graduate level scholars currently incarcerated across the U.S.

And what powerful students they were! When I close my eyes more than a year later, I can still see the slight widening of Grace’s eyes and the smile that her N95 mask couldn’t hide when I passed her in the hallway before class. A moment later and I can feel the love, trust, and courage of our little classroom community vibrate through my body, carried on the waves of each student’s voice as they shared what it meant to them to have me as their professor, along with anthropologist Catherine Besteman. Before receiving Catherine’s invitation to co-teach the 300-level anthropology course with her, the most I had hoped for was to be a teacher’s assistant. Now I was halfway through my master’s program at George Mason University—and 15 years into a 50-year prison bid.

After committing a violent home invasion at 18 years old, I thought my life was over. I took GED classes in county jail in hopes of showing the judge I wasn’t completely worthless. It turns out she didn’t care that I was awarded my GED on the same day she was handing down a de facto life sentence to a 19-year-old.

“If ever I felt like I was protecting society from a predator, today is that day,” the judge told me. “If I could give you more time than this, I would.”

She was sending me to prison for what could easily be the rest of my life and saying she wished she...
She was intent on making sure we used class time to thoroughly review the course materials on the history of mass incarceration rooted in slavery and the criminalization of Blackness, up to the need for a cultural paradigm shift away from systemic oppression and towards the cultivation of community safety through abolitionist world building (envisioning the world we want to live in and working to create it).

I, on the other hand, wanted to trust that the students completed the reading and jump straight to the “so what?” question that I learned from Robert Bernheim at University of Maine at Augusta during my undergrad years. “So, we are learning about all of these tough topics, so what? What does this mean to you personally, professionally, and academically? What do you want to do with this learning?”

And, outside the classroom I would hold office hours (usually, I would be on zoom, Catherine and the students on campus). Week after week, we would tackle tough topics in the classroom, my heart softening each time a student who had started the class shy would open her mouth to share a dissenting opinion, or another student would open up about something he was struggling to accept or understand.

Then, my heart would turn straight to mush when a student would show up in my office hours and share a personal triumph in her trauma healing journey that our class helped facilitate.

It has been through developing loving, trusting relationships with Catherine and our students that I have fully realized what it means for God to take from me my heart of stone and replace it with one of flesh — soft, tender, and loving (Ezekiel 36:26). Through building community and cultivating healing in an outside classroom, in the same county I committed my crime, my personal transformation has been made complete, where I am no longer fit for prison.

I hope this opportunity for transformative healing will spread across the country. In partnership with Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, we are stepping into remote work here in Maine so that incarcerated people are less of a burden on our families and taxpayers, while finally being able to make meaningful contributions to any fines, fees, restitution, victim compensation, or child support we may owe.

For Colby, I made $6,300 for the semester, the same wage as any visiting instructor on the outside. At the Alliance, I am paid a living wage of $25 per hour which allows me to help support my family and community members, and prepare for my future release. Other colleges, universities, and corrections departments need to follow this precedent for those who share my qualifications.

While prisons exist, they should function to make people not fit for prison—but fit for the community. Creating supportive opportunities for personal, professional, and academic advancement can make this possible. Taking strategic risks, like allowing a long-term prisoner to teach class on a college campus, helps build a strong, safe bridge home to restoration and redemption.

Leo Hylton is a Ph.D. student in peace and conflict resolution at George Mason University. This story was originally published on Jan. 3, 2024.
By Charlotte West

A year after being released from prison, three out of four people are unemployed. But the day after Brittanly Wright, 30, got out in June, she was reporting to work.

Thanks to a program that trains incarcerated women in well-paying trades, she had the skills and connections she needed to start a job at Kiewit, a Seattle construction and engineering firm. Now, six months later, she’s earning $31 per hour working on a light rail expansion project for Sound Transit.

The 16-week state program, called Trades Related Apprenticeship Coaching, or TRAC, helps combat a monumental challenge incarcerated people face when they reenter society: quickly finding jobs with decent wages in fields that will actually employ people with prison records.

Wright, a cement mason apprentice, said that because of TRAC, she has a clear path forward and her finances in check — an enormous improvement over her situation when she emerged from a previous prison sentence a decade ago.

“The last time, I just got out,” she said. “Everything was so much harder: Finding a job was harder, getting my life together was harder, finding a place to live was harder.

All of these things that you would do to reenter society just took a long time.”

Wright and other formerly incarcerated people have an almost five times greater likelihood of being unemployed than other adults, the Prison Policy Initiative estimates. The unemployment rate among formerly incarcerated individuals is also 27%, greater than the highest general unemployment rate during both the Great Depression and the 2008 recession.

Formerly incarcerated people who do find jobs earn only around half of the wages of the average worker, with even greater disparities for Black, Native American and Latino people, according to the Prison Policy Initiative. In some industries, such as health care, people with felonies or specific types of convictions are often banned altogether.

Timing matters, too.

“It’s important that we get the women working right away when they get out,” said Heather Kurtenbach, a formerly incarcerated business agent at Ironworkers Local 86 in Tukwila. Research shows that finding employment soon after release is an essential factor in reducing recidivism.

To help address that need, the ironworkers union changed its rules to allow TRAC graduates from Washington women’s prisons to have an individual safety orientation and evaluation to help get them set up quickly, instead of waiting weeks for a regularly scheduled group evaluation — or taking another, less lucrative job.

TRAC’s goal is to give participants the entry-level skills they need to become apprentices with unions, which can help them find jobs where they can complete the roughly 6,000 hours of paid on-the-job training required to work without supervision. Hundreds of additional hours of required community college instruction also usually leave apprentices only a few credits shy of an associate degree.

Further, the training leads recently incarcerated people toward jobs that earn enough to pay the bills. Ironworker apprentices in Western Washington, for example, start at around $32 per hour plus benefits and progressively increase to a $50 hourly wage at the end of their four-year training. Once they reach journey-level status, they can earn over $100,000 a year.

Kurtenbach discovered the benefits of training in the trades herself. After she was released from prison in 2005, she struggled to find a job. “Nobody would freaking hire me, not even to flip burgers,” she said. “Once you check that box, ‘Yes, I am a felon,’ that pretty much closes the door.”

She was working odd jobs and living with family members near Seattle. One night her brother-in-law came home from work and showed her a check stub from his ironworking job.

“Do you think I could do that?” she asked him. The next day, she went down to the local union in Tukwila and soon got dispatched to her first job.

Kurtenbach has been with the ironworkers ever since, regularly working with TRAC participants. “When I was incarcerated, women like me would come in and talk to us, and...
I never, ever would have imagined that I would be that woman,” she said.

### Barriers to prosperous work

But even in industries that welcome people with prison records, there are sometimes barriers and reminders of the past.

Washington law, for example, requires people be released to the county where they received their first felony conviction, which might not be where their work is located. And while exceptions to that law are common, people might have to turn down jobs unless they have special permission to cross county lines. Some work sites also require background checks.

Other challenges are logistical, such as getting to and from work without a driver’s license or vehicle.

When Aubrey Russell, 34, got out of prison in 2019, she didn’t have a car for her first six months as an apprentice ironworker. Although she had a free bus pass, some of her job sites weren’t on bus routes.

“So I’d take an $80 Lyft there in the morning and an $80 dollar Lyft home at night,” she said.

Ironworking has proved to be a more welcoming industry for Russell than other professions, as she said the pair of associate’s degrees in computer technology she earned in 2015 were “a waste of time” because she hadn’t been able to find work.

“I have a horrible criminal record so I never got hired,” she said of the information technology field. “I never made one penny, and I still have like 20 grand in student loans I’m paying on right now. I should have gone for welding.”

Russell knew she wanted to pursue a career in ironworking from the moment she picked up her first piece of 80-pound rebar. “I felt like I had a purpose,” she said.

After graduating from the TRAC program in 2018, she worked as a teaching assistant until she got out of prison in 2019. Over the next four years, she worked on projects ranging from Seattle-area light rail to Interstate 90. Then, last April, she became a journeyman ironworker, permitted to work without supervision.

“It drives my wife crazy. I’m like, ‘Babe, look!’ anytime I go by anything that I’ve helped build,” Russell said. “It’s cool to be a part of that.”

### Making training relevant

Washington is one of several states — including Colorado, Iowa and Ohio — that have started working with trade unions and other industry partners to create apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs like TRAC to develop pathways from prison to work.

Still, only about one-third of people in state prisons reported having access to any kind of job during their incarceration. And not all jobs programs are equally effective, especially if people are learning new skills in a void.

Training programs that don’t have a direct relationship with employers aren’t as meaningful, said Joshua Johnson, an apprenticeship expert at Jobs for the Future, a national nonprofit focused on education and workforce systems.

“You can send people to a program and give them a certificate all you want, but if they’re not connected to the industry, they’re going to struggle,” said Johnson, who was formerly incarcerated. He began his post-prison career with a construction apprenticeship in Wisconsin before eventually going on to help create apprenticeship programs in that state’s prison system.

In Washington, the TRAC program is designed to simulate the workday of union employees in various industries. While participants aren’t paid, they are setting themselves up for high-wage employment on the outside, said Steven Petermann, who directs the program.

Getting accepted into the program isn’t easy. Participants have to be physically fit enough to dig ditches, haul gravel and carry 80-pound rebar. There’s also a classroom component: The women have to do math homework, learn how to tie knots, practice interview skills and complete financial literacy lessons that include balancing a checkbook.

In the past 10 years, 250 women have graduated from TRAC. Around 80 of the 220 who are no longer incarcerated entered into registered apprenticeships, and many others have used the skills they learned in the program in other fields.

It’s OK if TRAC participants don’t end up pursuing a career in the trades, Petermann said. He intentionally teaches them soft skills — like interview techniques and resume writing — that translate to other fields. Program graduates have a recidivism rate of less than 5%, compared with the general 15% recidivism rate for women in Washington.

Through its community connections, the program also helps with basic needs when the women first get out, lining up housing and transportation, for example. Petermann has also secured grant funding that helps the women cover startup costs with the union, as apprentices are responsible for buying their own tools, belts and boots, and have to pay monthly membership dues.

TRAC has become a model for a similar initiative at Oregon’s only women’s prison, near Portland. Last summer, the first five women graduated from that state’s program, a partnership between the corrections department and the ironworkers, bricklayers and cement masons unions, which offer direct or preferred entry to graduates.

Anna Martin of the Portland-based Ironworkers Local 29, which coor-
dinates Oregon’s pre-apprentice-ship, said the program helps the unions, too, aiding them in meeting their goals for recruiting more women, who are underrepresented in the trades. Martin said many women weren’t aware of trade careers before participating in Oregon’s program, or that completing an apprenticeship could lead to an associate degree.

Wright, the recent TRAC graduate, said she initially joined the program because it offered something productive to do while incarcerated. She quickly picked up a lot of the construction skills, and her placement at the top of her class on some of her tests helped restore her confidence, reminding her how she could apply her skills professionally.

In mid-December, Wright completed her work-release program, officially emerged from state custody and returned to her two children in Island County with thousands of dollars in savings.

Now, she said, “I have a steady career that I enjoy.”

This story was copublished with the Seattle Times on Jan. 14, 2024.

County prosecutor: “There’s a huge principle at play here.”

In 1997, Kimonti Carter received a mandatory life without parole sentence for a shooting that happened just a few months after his 18th birthday. The Washington state Supreme Court ruled in 2021 that such sentences are unconstitutional for 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds. That decision was the basis for a resentencing in July 22 that led to Carter’s release a few weeks later. Now, a county prosecutor is appealing Carter’s new sentence and arguing he should be sent back to prison — potentially for the rest of his life, reported Nina Shapiro for the Seattle Times.

While he was incarcerated, Carter, now 44, helped found B.P.C. T.E.A.C.H., a grassroots education program organized by the Black Prisoners Caucus that offers college classes to people inside, regardless of their sentence.

The county prosecutor, Mary Robnett, argues that the judge lacked the authority to resentence Carter. She said that the Washington state legislature has not provided guidelines to judges on how the statute that Carter was charged under applies to young adults.

“The humanity of Kimonti Carter is not lost on me,” Robnett told the Seattle Times. “But I also believe there’s a huge principle at play here.”

Shapiro noted that prosecutors’ objections to Carter’s resentencing raises common questions: Is there a point to keeping people in prison who have clearly rehabilitated? What about the victims and promises to their families?

“But these are usually questions asked when people are seeking release from prison, not when they’re already out,” she wrote.

Story by Nina Shapiro was published in the Seattle Times on Jan 28, 2024.
This Vietnam vet made prison education his mission

By James “Sneaky” White, as told to Charlotte West

James “Sneaky” White, 80, spent nearly four decades incarcerated in California. His nickname “Sneaky” comes from his days as a helicopter pilot during the Vietnam War. While he was incarcerated, he helped create a college program that has since graduated more than 1,500 men.

In 1997, I was transferred down to Ironwood State Prison, which is in Blythe, Calif. in the desert near the Arizona border.

I was a pretty prolific reader and I read a study from McGill University in Canada, and it showed that those who participate in education programs have far lower recidivism. At that time in California, we were at around a 65% recidivism rate.

I was in pretty good shape with the administration. So I went to the warden and I said, ‘I want to do a college program for veterans.’

The counselor there was Bill Hobbs, who retired from the Air Force and then went to work for Corrections. I told him we want to try and find a college that’ll take on some vets to do correspondence. Bill Hobbs said he knew somebody down at Palo Verde College, the two-year school there in Blythe.

The big issue was funding. At that time, in 2000, there were no Pell Grants that could help cover tuition. The only option was for guys to rely on their G.I. Bill benefits.

Hottoois, who happened to be retired military as well.

The warden had said several times that he would not allow it, but he went on vacation. The chief deputy warden, who was also a veteran, came to me and asked if I still had the paperwork. He said “Let’s do it” because his boss was out of town. We lucked out.

And so I got 53 inmates on one yard who were veterans. One of the neat things about veterans is that at one time or another in their lives they had a mission. They’ve taken on something that was tough and they did it. So higher education is just like that, except it’s not physical. It’s mental and emotional.

Out of the first 53, 52 graduated from the program with associate’s degrees. Over half of them got honors.

What was amazing was the first graduation. It was something to watch these guys talk to their kids or younger brothers or sisters and tell them, ‘Look, if I can go to college, you can do it.’ So it passed on to their kids or their siblings that were on their street.

And I went back to the warden. “Let’s do this for the whole yard.”

I kept track of if the inmates that were in the program got written up for infractions. They didn’t. Truthfully, part of that is because they spent so much time in their cells studying. The other thing we noticed pretty quickly was that the racial barriers were broken down. You would have known gang members, Black, white and Mexican men sit down together and help each other.

There’s a major gang in LA called the Playboys. And while I was in prison, they were one of the more active groups that were causing problems. Anyway, one day, I’m in my office and a guy comes and says, ‘The shot caller wants to talk.’ And I knew who he was, but I didn’t share ice cream with him, I’ll tell you that.

So I go out on the yard and I went up to him and two other guys standing there. And he said, ‘See these two guys here, I want ‘em in college.’

I talked to Bill Hobbes and another captain. At first, they said ‘absolutely not.’ I said I wanted to see what happens if you divert two very active gang members into the program. They said ‘Okay, we’ll try it. You know, but we’re gonna be
I think one of the reasons we were successful is because we had a group of inmates working for me that really bought into the program. We had an education building and the administration gave me one classroom. And so they could come in any time that they were not at work. They can come in, check in and sit down. Along the way, I used inmates like myself, for clerks and tutors, some who already had degrees.

And I had on board a guy, we called him Uncle Mo, who had a degree in English, and he was a stickler. He’d been a school teacher in the LA public schools. I had myself and another guy doing math. I had another guy doing the business courses.

I spent more time in prison in the college program as a cheerleader trying to build these guys up. And they really needed a mentor. They needed to find somebody that’s going to come in and say, “Come on, you can do this man….This is a cakewalk to someone in the military. Nobody’s asking you to do push ups or jump out of a plane.’

This was an inmate-run thing. What usually happens is someone gets off the bus and he goes to his counselor. Even if he says he wants to learn how to weld, the counselor tells him they are going to send him to learn how to paint because there are no open spots in welding. And the guy doesn’t want to learn to paint.

Whereas, I can say, ‘Look you have to take English, or you cannot go through school.’ I could get away with telling an inmate ‘you got to do this.’ If a CDCR counselor tells them they have to do something, immediately, they’re gonna say, ‘Screw you. I’m not doing nothing. You’re not telling me what to do.’

When I started, I mean, it was an upward climb. When I first mentioned it to a couple of staff members, they nearly laughed at me. And the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA) actually picked in our first graduation. We got 52 guys graduating and the CCPOA was out with signs as their families are coming in, “Why does your son in prison get free college and I have to pay for my son’s college?”

The thing is, that first group of guys were all vets. So it was all paid for by the GI Bill. But that shows, you have to get not only the staff, but also the inmates. And that was pretty difficult at times.

Education departments from other prisons in California, politicians, even congressmen visited to see what we were doing and learn how to start a program. The warden would bring them down to my office and say, “This is Mister White. He runs it. Any questions you have, you ask him.”

I kept track of the students. I kept a copy of their transcripts. I kept good records. Some of my early graduates ended up going and getting MBAs. One kid got a master’s in microbiology for UC Davis. What’s amazing is how many guys got that one degree and then went on to get to another one. And I always say this: Education is addictive. My end game was to eventually get it where we could have professors come in and teach right there. Well it came to pass, we had to get the law changed and do some politicking and as an inmate to get the law changed in California. The law stated that a college professor could go to county jail and teach a class, but they could not go to a prison. Anyway, it took three years but we got the change with Senate Bill 1391 in 2014, which allowed face-to-face classes. So at one time we ended up with 600 guys on a yard that had 1200 inmates. It was a college campus — and this was not a minimum security institution. All in all, by the time I left Ironwood in 2017, 1,500 guys had gotten their degrees.

I got a lot of recognition, but I used to tell everybody that they’re the ones that did the work. They’re the ones that changed their lives. All I needed to do was to say, ‘If you want to do this, here’s the opportunity.’

And today, I get a lot of texts from kids — they are still kids to me even though they are in their 30s — they tell me how they’re doing. And a lot of them call me Grandpa. They look at me and they say, ‘You’re the guy that cared about me. You’re the guy that said, ‘you can do it.’”

I like to say I changed the current California prison system two ways. One goes back to 1985 and San Quentin, we had the first incarcerated veterans group and we became statewide. And the other thing, of course, is the college program. Now there are college programs in all 35 prisons in the state.

My sentence was life without the possibility of parole. I did 38.5 years before Governor Brown commuted my sentence, because of three things: my veterans activities, the college program, of course, and I was involved in a dog program, Paws for Life. I’m the first inmate in California to parole with his dog. I walked out of Vacaville with my dog Rosie in January 2020.

This story was originally published on Jan. 25, 2024.
College in prison? In Florida, not so much.

By Ryan M. Moser

Marina Bueno lives at a women’s correctional institution only six miles from the campus of Miami Dade College in Homestead, Florida, but she may never be able to enroll in its classes. Her facility is one of only two women’s prisons in the state and neither offer in-person college classes.

Bueno earned her GED and started her career as a writer behind bars. But a lack of higher education options in Florida prisons limits her opportunities to earn a degree before she is released in 2029.

“I would love to be able to go to college,” she said. “Many people face insurmountable economic and social challenges when they’re released, but a college degree would solve a lot of those problems.”

Aspiring students like Bueno were thrilled when federal financial aid for low-income students returned with a pilot program launched in 2015 under the Obama administration that restored Pell Grants for some incarcerated students for the first time since 1994.

Eligibility for Pell Grants expanded to everyone in prison last summer. But there are currently no new prison education programs inside the Florida Department of Corrections, the state’s largest public agency with a budget of $3.3 billion, which oversees the third largest prison system in the United States.

Higher education opportunities in Florida’s prisons are hard to come by. Today, only around 326 students are enrolled in college programs in Florida prisons, according to data provided by colleges. That’s only a tiny fraction of the more than 80,000 people incarcerated in the state. Ten sites offer college programs, including one reentry center and a privately run prison. The Florida Department of Corrections oversees 128 correctional facilities.

Despite multiple requests, the Florida Department of Corrections did not comment on whether it has plans to seek college applications to expand its higher education offerings. Neither did it provide data on total enrollment across the system.

Bueno said that the women at her prison were excited by the possibility of enrolling in school, but so far there are no signs that college is coming to their institution anytime soon. Although Miami Dade College already runs programming at a men’s facility in Miami, the women’s prison is not an approved instructional site for Pell-eligible programs. Colleges must seek approval from the federal Education Department for every facility where they would like to teach if they use Pell Grants.

“It seems hypocritical to live in a place that is designed to change behavior, but not be able to get an education,” Bueno said. “People may feel like it’s a waste of time to let prisoners go to college, but educational programs have a positive effect on an individual, and that continues when they return to their community.”

A lack of opportunity, not desire

Incarcerated individuals who participate in postsecondary education are almost half as likely to return to prison as those who do not; moreover, prisons with college programs tend to have less violence and safer conditions for everybody, according to the Vera Institute, an independent research and policy organization focusing on criminal justice.

And studies show that many incarcerated people would enroll in college if it was offered. Nearly 70% of incarcerated people said they want to continue their education after high school, according to a 2019 report by New America, a liberal policy think tank.

“I’ve been trying to get a transfer to one of the few Florida prisons that have colleges,” said James Stein, an incarcerated resident at Dade Correctional Institution, the men’s prison in Homestead. “But even if I make it there, the prison doesn’t want me to be in education because I’m serving a life sentence.”

Stein is serving a life sentence without parole, making him ineligible to attend college inside. The corrections department requires a resident to have less than 10 years on their sentence to participate in most programs.

The lack of education in Florida prisons extends beyond college. A 2019 investigation by the Sarasota Herald-Tribune found that 1 in 3 people incarcerated in Florida reads below a sixth grade level. And 2 in 3 lack a high school diploma or GED — the main requirement for participation in college programs.

Currently, around 156 incarcerated students attend in-person, credit-bearing college classes through Miami Dade College, Florida Gateway College and Palm Beach State College; another 170 use state-issued electronic tablets to take classes through Ashland University, a controversial private Christian college based in Ohio. In total, the Florida Department of Corrections has less than 0.5% of its incarcerated residents enrolled in college.

In comparison, Texas has about 1.3% of its prison population enrolled in higher education, according to the state corrections agency. Meanwhile, a spokesperson from California corrections said that 13.5% of its incarcerated population are enrolled in higher education. These are the only two states...
that have larger prison populations than Florida. In Maine, which has the country’s smallest incarcerated population, the state corrections department reports that 9.8% of residents are enrolled in higher education as of 2023.

None of the 12 institutions in the Florida state university system currently offer courses for credit to incarcerated students. The University of Central Florida in Orlando has taught over 50 courses to over 750 incarcerated men and women since 2017, but students don’t earn college credits that they can apply toward a degree, said professor Keri Watson, who directs the prison program. The program does not receive federal financial aid.

Without more state institutions willing to teach inside, some faculty worry there will be only an expansion of tablet-based education, which they find to be a subpar form of instruction.

The challenges of operating inside

Only three of Florida’s 28 state colleges — Florida’s version of community college — offer degree-granting programs inside. Creating a new college program inside is difficult and expensive, and community colleges often have limited resources.

Challenges include staff shortages, lack of classroom space, slow adoption of technology, security lockdowns and enrollment restrictions due to sentences. Specific students also face challenges because of defaulted student loans or state residency issues that prevent them from receiving in-state tuition.

Making things harder, colleges must redesign how they do things to operate inside correctional facilities, including financial aid processes, admissions applications, and the management of classrooms that often don’t have internet access. Research also shows there are often costs not covered by Pell Grants, which means prison education programs must sometimes supplement their budgets. And recruiting teachers is a huge challenge; the corrections department requires anyone who goes inside to complete a mandatory 40-hour training on prison policy.

While colleges like Miami Dade pay faculty for instruction time, the weeklong prison training must be done on their personal time, which discourages potential faculty members, said Samantha Carlo, co-director of Miami Dade’s program at Everglades Correctional Institution in Miami.

Everglades benefits from its proximity to the city and Miami Dade College, but many Florida prisons are located in rural areas far from higher education institutions. Instructors are not usually compensated for their drive time or gas.

In addition, there may not be a lot of political will to create new prison education programs as initiatives related to diversity, equity and inclusion come under attack in Florida.

Stephanie Etter, vice provost of academic services and learning resources for Broward College in Fort Lauderdale, wrote in an email that her institution is “focused on other college priorities and are not actively engaged in planning a prison education program.”

For now, students are limited to existing in-person programs. Miami Dade currently enrolls 66 students, according to Carlo.

Since 2017, Florida Gateway has graduated 155 students from its program at Columbia Correctional Institution. There are 60 continuing students enrolled for the spring term. So far, the college has no plans to expand the program, according to an email from the college’s communications department.

Palm Beach has provided courses since fall 2022. This summer, 30 students are scheduled to complete associate degrees in the college’s landscape and horticulture management and hospitality and tourism management programs.

Becky A. Mercer, associate dean at Palm Beach, wrote in an email that the college has no firm plans to teach in more prisons, but discussions about expanding the program are underway.

Ashland University offers its private, online education program at six facilities in the state. Jim Cox, assistant vice president of correctional education, said in an email that the institution is currently waiting for approval from the Florida corrections department and the federal education department to continue its Pell-funded programs.

Former Republican state Sen. Jeff Brandes, who founded the Florida Policy Project think tank after he left office in 2022, said that all options should be on the table when it comes to expanding education in prison. “The goal for prisons is to improve public safety,” he said. “When you give people a way to get an education inside, it’s a better outcome for when they go home.”

The responsibility rests with the corrections department as well as the colleges and lawmakers, he said.

“You can’t expect the universities to do it all, and state legislators haven’t made higher ed in prison a priority because they ignore what goes on inside,” said Brandes, who sponsored several prison education bills during his time in office. “I go to some prisons where there’s 1,500 residents and no education programming. ... That’s [because of a] lack of funding and will from the Florida Department of Corrections.”

Ryan M. Moser is a formerly incarcerated journalist and award-winning author whose work has been published over 200 times in literary journals and in media outlets. This story was copublished with Prison Journalism Project and Miami New Times on Jan. 30, 2024.
Johnny Le’Dell Pippins was already accepted into a Ph.D. program in criminology at the University of Iowa when he got out of prison last year. In fact, his admission to the program helped convince Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker to commute the 30-year prison sentence Pippins was serving for murder.

Pippins had already earned a bachelor's degree and then a master's while he was incarcerated. He spent more than a decade preparing for the day when he would step out of the prison gates.

Returning home can be especially difficult for people who have spent decades behind bars. They may have lost touch with friends or family. After a lifetime disconnected from society, they have to immediately get to work finding a place to live and locking down a job. Formerly incarcerated people take an average of more than six months to find their first job after release, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, a think tank opposed to mass incarceration.

In contrast, Pippins had a solid re-entry plan: He had a support network; he owned a house with his wife, Tracy; and he had been accepted to University of Iowa’s doctoral program in criminology with full funding and a job as a graduate teaching assistant lined up when classes started in the fall.

Still, Pippins, who goes by “Dell,” has struggled. Although he earned two degrees, he had never set foot on a college campus as a student until he visited the University of Iowa for the first time in the summer of 2023.

Even now as a full-time student, his past feels ever present, such as when his classmates and students continually ask him about life inside. Sometimes he feels like an imposter, made worse by the high expectations he set for himself, he said. And he’s an outlier in other ways, starting his Ph.D. at 54, an age by which many faculty have published books and achieved tenure.

An overwhelming fresh start

In 1996, Pippins unintentionally killed someone during a spree of drug-related robberies that led to prison sentences in both Illinois and Iowa. He started his college education behind bars in 2010, when, after his mother died, he was able to use his inheritance to pay for classes.

In July 2020, while he was finishing his master’s, Pippins submitted a clemency application to Pritzker, asking the governor to commute his sentence in order to continue his education. He waited through the pandemic and an election year before receiving word in May 2023 that Pritzker was using his executive power to let Pippins out of prison in time to start at the University of Iowa in the fall.

While he was inside, Pippins said he read about the challenges people have adjusting to society after long-term incarceration. He never wanted to become “institutionalized,” where people function better inside. He did everything he could to maintain some semblance of normalcy: He watched the news, held a steady job in the prison’s education department and maintained strong relationships with family members.

“You’re gonna be hard pressed to find someone that is as prepared as I am,” he said on a call from prison in April 2023 after receiving news of his clemency.

Pippins and his wife, Tracy, got married in 2007.

“‘He always said that he thought he was just going to slide right back in when he got out. He was motivated and had these things he wanted to get done,’ said Tracy Pippins, a retired nurse. ‘But I don’t think that you can really underestimate how long-term incarceration affects people.”

After he got out, Pippins had one summer to catch up on life before diving into his Ph.D. program. He had to get a driver's license, sign up for health insurance, buy a new wardrobe and visit doctors and dentists after three decades of prison health care.
“The dentist got inside my mouth and was like, ‘What the hell? Have you ever had any dental care?’” he said.

There were lots of little things that had changed. He was overwhelmed, for example, by the choice of streaming services when he just wanted to watch basketball. There were the big things, too, like meeting his 4-month-old granddaughter and walking his daughter down the aisle after 27 years apart.

When he started classes in August, he was especially eager to connect with his peers after so many years of going it alone. His classmate Joanna Frazier was the first one he told about his time in prison. He said the fact that it didn’t seem to faze her made him feel welcome in his first-year cohort.

Frazier said she knew about Pippins’s incarceration history before he told her, but most people would have no idea about his background.

“When Dell first came to the program, he was actually really quiet. At the same time, when he speaks, it’s usually because he has something that he feels is worth saying,” she said.

Pippins was surprised the Ph.D. program was so unstructured compared with his undergraduate experience. While he has come to enjoy it, he said he initially struggled with not having someone lay out exactly what he was expected to do.

**Reminders of the past**

Along the way, Pippins has been confronted with reminders of his past in unexpected places.

A few weeks after he was released, he went to the student health center to get a blood test to show proof of a vaccine required by the university. He was told the prison doctor had to be notified about and sign off on any care he received.

Pippins said the health center staff asked him to step into a waiting area and they closed a security door. Then they made a phone call, but he wasn’t sure to whom. He was worried the call was to campus security.

“Am I about to freakin’ get killed? They think I’m going to escape,” he said. “I put my phone and anything that looks like it could be a weapon down.”

The staff eventually figured it out, but in the moment, he said, “I was spooked.”

A spokesperson from the University of Iowa wrote in an email that student health records contain no information about an individual’s incarceration history. The university can’t comment specifically on an individual’s medical history, but the official said most new patients have internal holds on their patient records that require a call to a campus records administrator.

That feeling of not really belonging has crept up in other ways. Pippins is not only one of the few Black men on a campus that is around 75% white, but also the only student he knows who is formerly incarcerated. It has sometimes been a challenge for him to sit through lectures on race and crime that seem in stark contrast to his lived experience.

He received unexpectedly low grades from one professor. When he went to office hours, the professor told him he needed to focus on the theories they were reading in class.

“We’re writing about criminology, and you want to talk theoretical?” Pippins remembered thinking. “You want to talk about stuff that you learned in the ivory tower. But bro, I’ve been standing under the prison tower for 27 years!”

Pippins was heated when he talked about it, and he ended up dropping the class. But as he reflected back, he’s come to understand that as a scholar he needs to have a grounding in the theory.

It has also reinforced that his time in prison gives him a perspective that many of his classmates and students tell him they value.

“I can’t really imagine how different it must be to sit in on discussions that talk about incarceration from such a distance and almost in a speculative tone,” Frazier said. “He has insights that so many of us, particularly in academia, will never be able to have.”

And it’s in his peers that Pippins has finally found the intellectual community he sought after so many years of studying by himself in his cell.

“You know where the hell I’m from? I’m from the Southwest Side of Chicago. And I acted like it for a long time — at least what I thought that was supposed to be,” he said. “Now, I just finished my first semester of a Ph.D. And I’m home.”

*This story was copublished with WBEZ Chicago on Feb. 19, 2024.*

**Reader Response**

“Thank you for showing an interest in the broken communities we came from. On behalf of all students I thank you for showing an interest in the power of higher education programs in prisons.”

— Shane Moffat, Massachusetts
News and views
A snapshot of prison education across the country.

A federal grant has allowed Minnesota to offer incarcerated people training to become peer support specialists — a position focused on helping others by drawing on one's own personal experience with addiction and recovery — at correctional facilities across the state, reports the Star Tribune. The certification allows them to work with their peers inside prison and qualifies them to pursue careers in peer recovery support once they are released. (Jan 18, 2024)

California is continuing to expand its four-year degree programs offered inside prisons across the state. Cal Poly Humboldt’s bachelor’s in communication at Pelican Bay State Prison was the first prison education program in the nation to be approved by the federal Education Department to use Pell Grants since eligibility for the federal financial aid was restored for incarcerated students last summer. The first cohort started in January with 16 students. Around 25 incarcerated students at the Norco California Rehabilitation Center will be also able to earn a bachelor’s in education, society, and human development from University of California Riverside beginning in fall 2024.

A new law in Illinois will require the state to publish public data on enrollment, demographics, and waitlists for higher education programs in its prisons, reports IPM News. The act went into effect Jan 1. (Jan 10, 2024)

The Daily Collegian reports that Penn State will become the second university in Pennsylvania to provide incarcerated people with the opportunity to earn their bachelor’s degrees. (Jan 14, 2024)

A recent report from the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition highlights the continued problems that prison staff shortages create for the state’s incarcerated population, reports Colorado Newsline. The corrections department regularly diverts program staff to work security shifts when there aren’t enough correctional officers. Almost 90 percent of incarcerated people who responded to a survey said staff like teachers and case managers are frequently or very frequently reassigned to a correctional officer post in their prisons. (Dec 11, 2023)

A new report from the Southern Poverty Law Center focused on Alabama’s juvenile justice system found that the state, which as of 2021 had the eighth highest youth incarceration rate in the country, overemphasizes incarceration, even though youth crime rates have declined for decades. Incarcerating a young person in Alabama for one year in a public facility ($161,694) is more expensive than the annual cost to educate that child in Alabama public schools ($12,092), fund community-based programs ($20,075), and pay for attendance at the University of Alabama and Auburn University combined ($54,672). (February 2024)

Freedom Reads, the National Book Foundation and the Center for Justice Innovation launched the Inside literary prize, the first major US book award to be judged exclusively by incarcerated people. The winner will be announced in June 2024, according to The Guardian. (Dec 11, 2023)

Do you have a child who is graduating from college or is already in college?

If so, please encourage them to apply for a scholarship from ScholarCHIPS, an organization that provides college dollars, mentoring, technology and more! To learn more please visit www.scholarchipsfund.org. The application deadline is April 15, 2024. Please note these scholarships are for the children of incarcerated people.
You asked. We answered.

College Inside answers your questions about higher education.

Why do I need a transcript?

Transcripts, whether from high school or college, provide verification of your academic record. Your high school transcript can provide proof of graduation. If you are applying to a college program, they will ask you for transcripts from any other institution you attended.

How do I get a copy of my high school transcript?

You’ll need to contact the high school you attended and be ready to provide the year you graduated. Some high schools will have a transcript request form on their websites. If you are unable to access the internet, request a copy by writing to your school’s counseling office or registrar.

Some high schools and states use electronic services such as Parchment.com that may be able to send you your transcript for a fee. Those services can often send electronic transcripts via email to third parties like your corrections department or a college you are applying to. If you are sending it to a college, look for the address of the admissions office.

How do I obtain copies of my college transcripts?

If you are able to access the internet, you should be able to print an unofficial transcript from your student account. This transcript is free. An unofficial transcript is all you will probably need if you just want to check your grades or know what classes you’ve taken.

In other cases you will need an official transcript, which is a print out of your grades and classes provided in a sealed envelope with the registrar’s signature stamped across the seal. If you are accepted into a college program or are applying for a scholarship program, they will usually ask you to send an official transcript directly from any colleges you previously attended. This is also required when you are transferring credits from one college to another.

Most colleges allow you to order official copies of transcripts online or by mail. Some colleges allow students to request a certain number of official transcripts for free, but you may have to pay as much as $20. Many colleges allow you to order official transcripts online through the National Student Clearinghouse (https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/students/).

You may need to write to the registrar of the college that you attended and ask for a transcript request form. You will need to know your student ID or Social Security number, your dates of attendance, and the address where you would like it sent. Some colleges will put a hold on your transcript if you have an unpaid balance on your student account.

transcript

/tran·script/ (noun)

a detailed record of classes, grades, dates attended, majors, and overall grade point average

pro tip

A transcript is no longer considered official if it’s removed from the sealed envelope.

What do you want to know about higher education?

We’ll be regularly publishing questions from our readers in our print issues. Send your questions to charlotte@opencampusmedia.org or via mail to Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062.