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Inmate education improves post-prison life

By JEFF VICTOR jeffv@laramieboomerang.com Aug 12, 2017



John Baldwin instructs Casiana Legarreta, who is participating in Wyoming Pathways from Prison. The Wyoming Women's Center in Lu is the first of the state's five adult prisons to benefit from the program.

A new program is bringing higher education to those behind bars, giving Wyoming's incarcerated population a shot at a better life.

Wyoming Pathways from Prison is a collaboration between the state's Department of Corrections, the University of Wyoming and some community colleges, with the aim of better preparing inmates for life after

prison.

“We attempt to provide various levels of educational opportunities to inmates and those can be from developmental up through for-credit college courses,” said Alec Muthig, a co-coordinator of the project.

Receiving education while incarcerated improves an inmate’s chances of reintegrating into society, finding a job and avoiding future convictions, said Betty Abbott, correctional education program manager for the Wyoming Department of Corrections.

“Some of them have learning disabilities,” Abbott said. “Some have had — well, actually, I should say most of them — have had not very positive educational experiences. So, they need a lot of support to get them through and help them get their high school equivalency, which they’re required to get.”

Incarcerated people who participate in prison education programs are 43 percent less likely to recidivate than those who do not participate, according to a meta-analysis conducted by the RAND corporation. The same study found taxpayers save \$5 for every \$1 spent on postsecondary education in correctional facilities — though Pathways from Prison is supported by donations.

Other research has found prison education increased employment opportunities, meaningful civic engagement and intergenerational educational achievement for those who participated.

“Anecdotally, when you talk with inmates and people who have left prison, they usually tell you that preparing themselves for a job is the best thing that could possibly happen, because once they get out, they’re required to get a job,” Abbott said.

Abbott has worked to increase the educational opportunities for inmates since taking the job with the Department of Corrections in 2002, but Pathways from Prison is relatively new.

“It’s been about one full year ... of coursework that we’ve been providing so we’re very young,” Muthig said. “And it’s amazing what we’ve done in one year through a small collaborative project.”

In the first year of its existence, Pathways from Prison brought educational opportunities to two of Wyoming’s five adult prisons, will soon arrive at a third prison and has plans to eventually reach all five.

Muthig runs the university side of the program with Susan Dewey, a UW associate professor, Katy Brock, a doctoral student in the College of Education, and Rhett Epler, an American Studies graduate student.

The program came to the Wyoming Women’s Center in Lusk first, where incarcerated women were invited to

write memoirs with the assistance of 10 UW students and two UW faculty — Dewey and Professor Bonnie Zare.

The memoirs were collected and published online in a special edition of *Wagadu*, a women's and gender studies magazine. UW plans to publish the collection in print, as well.

The program also trained some incarcerated women to be tutors for other inmates and provided other classes through Spring 2017 on topics such as women in society, social work and women's empowerment.

The program cannot serve everyone, however. Inmates must go through an application and approval process just to be considered for the courses and the number who actually enroll is further restricted by a cap on class size.

“The inmates are very hungry to learn and — at least the inmates that we've worked with — are wanting to use this to better themselves and to prepare themselves to be successful when they're released,” Muthig said.

The program branched out to its second prison — the Wyoming Honor Conservation Camp and Boot Camp in Newcastle — when Muthig teamed up with Robert Colter, a UW philosophy instructor, to develop a stoicism camp for inmates.

Colter has offered a stoicism camp to UW students for a few years, but he and Muthig adapted it for a prison environment.

Stoicism is an ancient Greek philosophy that argues there is no point worrying about things we cannot change and we should focus on what we can change, with the aim of living a better life, more at peace in nature.

This philosophy can be very helpful for incarcerated people, Colter said.

“The stoic idea is to advocate for an idea of acceptance of those things (we cannot change), accepting them for what they are,” he said. “The past is the past, right? Whatever happened to get any of us — including the inmates — in the situation we're in, we can't change that. But what we can focus on is what we are doing right now.”

Roughly 30 inmates were able to participate in the stoicism camp.

“It was very positive, very powerful,” Muthig said. “And some of them said that this material — because it got

to the philosophical foundations — was more effective, or seemed more effective than some anger management therapy that they had attended.”

The program accomplished a lot throughout the past year, and its efforts were recognized when it received the Austin MacCormick Award earlier this month.

“This award is probably one of the premier awards for correctional education,” Abbott said.

Pathways from Prison is popular with inmates and — at no cost to the taxpayer — receives support in the form of grants and donations. But Abbott said the program champions a cause that is not always popular.

“It’s hard to sell inmate education,” she said. “People just don’t necessarily think of that as something positive, although all the research tells you that it absolutely is.”