

PATHWAYS FROM PRISON

A partnership between UW and the Wyoming Department of Corrections brings new educational programming and new hope to the state's inmates.

By Micaela Myers

The statistics are impressive: Inmates who participate in correctional education programs have a whopping 43 percent lower odds of returning to prison. What's more, they have a 13 percent higher chance of employment after release. That's according to a 2013 RAND Corp. report, the largest meta-analysis of correctional education studies to date.

In Wyoming, like most states, funding for prison education programs is tight. Current programming includes adult basic education, which is mandatory for inmates without a high school diploma, as well as college credit courses in computer applications. Wyoming inmates can also earn a certificate in aquaculture and learn how to operate a forklift.

However, a team of University of Wyoming professors saw a need for greater college-credit offerings. Despite limited funding, Gender & Women's Studies Program faculty members Cathy Connolly, Susan Dewey and Bonnie Zare, along with Rosemary Bratton of the Wyoming Women's Business Center and UW American studies graduate student Rhett Epler, were determined to create a successful partnership with

the Wyoming Department of Corrections (DOC) to deliver more educational content, starting with the Wyoming Women's Center in Lusk.

Meeting Needs

Calling the project Wyoming Pathways from Prison, the team began its work in 2015, conducting in-depth interviews with 40 incarcerated women in Lusk and 28 women on probation to determine the challenges to community reintegration faced by the women. The needs assessment resulted in 12 evidence-based recommendations. The group went on to establish a relationship with Correctional Education Programs Manager Betty Abbott to build a long-term higher education in prison program.

"I really appreciate that they're willing to put forward the effort and their time and invest in this. It's an investment in the community," Abbott says. "Typically, prison inmates are out of sight, out of mind. Funding is very limited. When you look at the research that's been done, the higher the level of your education, the lower the level of recidivism, so you want them to get as much education as they can."

All courses will be taught for credit through Eastern



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—Associate Professor Susan Dewey



From left to right: UW students Cassandra Hunter and Britney Welch, Professors Bonnie Zare and Susan Dewey, and students Heather Baker and Julia Dohan.
PHOTO BY LORNA BARTON

Wyoming College, a point that was important to the UW team as well as Abbott. “Having that opportunity, you begin to believe that you can be successful,” Abbott says.

Telling Their Stories

The first class kicked off last spring—a memoir writing class led by Dewey, Zare and a team of UW students. “In keeping with broader prison writing initiatives nationwide, we wanted to give the women an opportunity to tell their stories but also to deal with some critical thinking issues and self-presentation issues,” Dewey says. “I think we did a lot of therapeutic work while we were there, too.”

Seventeen inmates enrolled in the course, along with 10 UW students. In addition, Epler and several students from the English master’s and MFA programs offered remote editing assistance. The inmates and UW students often worked as partners.

“The body of work they produced was mind blowing,” Epler says. “It was so rich and varied.”

“They wrote about being on the run, giving birth in prison—you name it. It was powerful,” Dewey says.

The peer-reviewed open-access feminist journal *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies* is devoting a special issue, “Telling My Story,” to this pioneering course and will publish selected pieces this spring by the women as well as UW students, faculty, DOC staff and community partners.

For many of the women, the work was therapeutic. A number of the women also expressed hope their stories will help others. All the inmates who participated earned college credit and gave the course high evaluation ratings. Here are some of the comments made by inmate participants after the course:

“I always thought I wasn’t intelligent enough. Growing up in the hood, I think a lot of kids think that. I’ve learned that I am more intelligent than I thought.”

“Being able to pair up with someone from the outside, we’re able to see that we’re people too.”

“Writing it in a creative way helped me talk about it. The more I read it, the lighter it became.”

“To me, you have a story that might help someone. If I can help just one person from coming here, or coming back, then that’s all I want.”

Going Forward

While the memoir class was taught largely in person, future classes will likely be taught using Skype and distance technology. For example, College of Education graduate student Katy Brock led a peer tutoring class in the fall via distance technology.

“We need women to be tutors in the facility to help women who are at lower level,” Abbott says of Brock’s class. “And it gives them an opportunity to learn skills so that when they get out, if they have children or friends, they can help tutor them and help them move forward.”

The Pathways from Prison team plans on repeating the memoir writing class as well as recruiting others to teach a variety of classes. Anyone with a master’s degree or higher can receive training from Dewey and qualify to teach a for-credit course. In addition to ongoing classes at the Women’s Center, they hope to expand to the men’s facilities as well.

“This is an excellent opportunity for both undergraduate and graduate students to get teaching experience in cooperation with the Department of Corrections, and I am happy to continue supervising students and helping faculty and staff in this work,” Dewey says.

The Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research helps the team with the education initiatives and the ongoing effort to connect faculty to the prison. UW researchers also co-organized the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison in Nashville, Tenn., this past November.

Back at UW, Epler has created a new Pathways from Prison registered student organization. Higher education can be discriminatory to those with records, he explains. “Its goal is to provide support to students to help them navigate the ins and outs of higher education.”

The Pathways from Prison project has the potential to help break the prison cycle, Epler says: “It’s a terrible cycle people get caught in. I think it’s very hard for people when they get out, because a lot of times they don’t have the resources or anything to approach this world. If they can get out and stay out, it’s better for society, it’s better for them, and it’s better for their family.”