

PHOTO BY MICHAELA DOYLE



In Sept. 2023, band members erupt with cheers after learning they would be performing in the 2025 Rose Parade in Pasadena, Calif.

Been a Cowboy' — it gives me chills just talking about it again! It was the best of memories," he says.

### A Rose-Filled Reveal

The journey to march in the Rose Parade has been long anticipated by many. Carver originally found out during the fall of 2023 that the band had been selected to perform and wanted to tell the members in a creative way.

One afternoon in late September, more than 200 members of Western Thunder filed into the band room in the Buchanan Center for the Performing Arts on campus, which was filled with red roses.

Staff members passed out the flowers, and many students laughed with confusion, wondering what was going on. When Carver announced that WTMB was marching in the Rose Parade in 2025, the room erupted with cheers.

"When I got the phone call from the president of the Tournament of Roses inviting us to the parade,

I knew I wanted the announcement to be special," he says. "It was a bit of a gamble to buy 200 red roses, but I don't think anyone had a clue what was going on. I love a good surprise, so it was great to see their faces when we played the official welcome video from the president."

### A Band for Everyone

WTMB is open to all students on campus regardless of academic major and does not require past experience in a high school marching program. Each year, there are several students who participate even though it is their first marching band experience.

The University of Wyoming Bands began in 1913 as a ROTC unit and remained as a part of the campus military science area until after World War II. The University Bands then became part of the Department of Music with the leadership of Professors Edgar Lewis and Charles Seltenrich and served



Western Thunder Marching Band Director Band Joe Carver

as entertainment for college athletics rather than military ceremonial needs.

Before being called the Western Thunder Marching Band, it was known as the Cowboy Marching Band. Over the years, the band has

appeared at both Denver Broncos and San Diego Chargers football games.

Carver says that marching band has provided him with many incredible experiences and that he's a better person because of it.

"From the feeling of powerful performances to the social connections that I have made which have lasted to this day, being a part of a college marching band changed my life," he says. "I'm passionate about providing the same experiences for my students — it's why I love being a teacher."

For more information about the band, visit [www.uwyo.edu/marchingband](http://www.uwyo.edu/marchingband).

# FREEDOM | THROUGH | LEARNING

*Through the Wyoming Pathways from Prison program, A&S faculty bring college-level arts and humanities courses to incarcerated students, proving that education — and creativity — are for everyone.*

**By Michaela Doyle**

Access to education and the arts is for everyone. That idea is at the heart of the Wyoming Pathways from Prison (WPPF) program, the University of Wyoming's prison education program.

WPPF is a collaboration between UW and the Wyoming Department of Corrections that seeks to provide high-quality, for-credit college courses to incarcerated women and men at no cost through support from Pell Grants.

The ultimate goal of the program is to transform lives, both within and outside prison walls, by creating opportunities for skill-building, personal growth and self-reflection.

Unfortunately, most incarcerated individuals face a high likelihood of returning to prison after release. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, nearly 80 percent are rearrested within five years. But access to

higher education can change that trajectory. Research consistently shows that the more education a person receives — especially college degrees — the less likely they are to return to prison.

"For every \$1 spent on education in prison, it saves taxpayers \$4 to \$5 in costs associated with recidivism," says Rob Colter, who leads the WPPF program and also serves as head of the UW Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies.

Colter became involved in the program about eight years ago by teaching a philosophy class. He modeled his class after his Stoic Camp, which is a weeklong retreat in Centennial that combines the study of ancient stoic texts with outdoor activities such as hiking and sunrise meditations. Participants explore what it means to live intentionally and return with a deeper sense of philosophical calm and purpose.



Matthew Greenberg (left), an assistant professor of theater and dance at UW, and Rob Colter (right), who leads the WPPF program and also serves as head of the UW Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, stand outside of the Wyoming Medium Correctional Institution in Torrington.



"I would modify it for this context and bring students from campus with me, and we'd do a weeklong intensive workshop," he says. "The first course was at the Wyoming Honor Conservation Camp in Newcastle, which is a minimum-security facility, so the students could do conservation work in the community as part of the experience."

Shortly after, WPPF began offering some for-credit courses through agreements that the Wyoming Department of Corrections had with community colleges in the state, and the program began to blossom.

#### WPPF Flourishes

The program has been part of UW for nearly a decade and started by offering inmates enrichment courses.

In fall 2021, Colter learned about the Second Chance Pell Experiment, an initiative meant to expand access to federal Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals enrolled in participating programs. He applied and proposed that UW would launch a bachelor's degree in general studies for two separate cohorts — one at the Wyoming Women's Center in Lusk and another Wyoming Medium Correctional Facility for men in Torrington.

"I found out in June of 2022 that UW had been accepted to the program and that we needed to start in August," he says. "Between June and August, we had to get faculty officially lined up. We had to do admissions and financial aid eligibility. It was a great scramble, but there were a lot of people who bought in and helped make it happen."

The first cohort — 20 women — began the degree program that fall, followed a year later by a cohort of 23 men. The women are expected to graduate in spring 2026, and though the exact details of the commencement are not certain yet, the celebration will be as close to a traditional graduation ceremony as possible.

"Ninety-six percent of the people incarcerated in the Wyoming Department of Corrections are going to get out," Colter says. "Do we want them out better than when they went in? They're going to come out and be our neighbors, and we want to give them the tools to be successful, positive influences on their community."

#### A&S Courses

As part of the program, incarcerated students can enroll in a variety of courses offered through the College of Arts and Sciences, taught by A&S faculty in-person or on Zoom.

While a general studies degree is often seen as limited to core subjects, incarcerated students have the opportunity to explore their creativity through courses in acting, Spanish, music and more.

For Matthew Greenberg, an assistant professor of theater and dance at UW, the experience of teaching Introduction to Acting for the past two years in the program was an opportunity to teach in a new environment and learn from nontraditional students.

In order to teach for the WPPF program, he had to ensure that all musicals, class activities and any other course materials were approved by the Wyoming Department of Corrections.

"I found the students to be very kind and had an open mind with me and the work that we were doing," Greenberg says. "There were some really brilliant performances in the class based on their lived experiences."

One of the first things Greenberg does in his class is have the students play a game called "The Sun Shines On." This game is played in a circle (often seated with one fewer chair than players). A facilitator, or the person in the center, calls out "The sun shines on..." followed by a characteristic (e.g., "anyone wearing glasses"). Everyone matching the description must quickly stand and find a new seat, while the center person tries to sit. The person left without a chair then becomes the next caller. The game continues until time runs out or everyone has had a turn.

"It always starts pretty surface level, but then it gets more serious — for example, 'anyone who's lost someone,' 'anyone who is a person of faith.' At the end of that

exercise, the students realize that outside of the classroom, even if they have separate cliques, they are more alike than they originally thought, and they build a sense of trust with each other," Greenberg says.

For the main assignment of the semester, Greenberg asks that students write a personal monologue to someone living or dead and perform it in front of the class.

"A lot of times, it's pretty cathartic for the students. Sometimes they're speaking to family members who are no longer present, victims, children or parents," he says.

The students then have to perform someone else's monologue, and Greenberg often finds that the students root for each other and work hard to honor one another's stories and experiences.

"The greatest actors are the best storytellers, and these students have stories to tell," he says. "I think providing them with an opportunity to learn how to be better storytellers and reclaim their voices is something that is profound."

Chelsea Escalante, an associate professor of Spanish at UW, taught an eight-week Spanish course at the Wyoming Women's Center in Lusk during the first part of the spring 2025 semester.

She taught 11 women and was impressed by their motivation throughout the entirety of the course.

"The students have full-time jobs inside of the prison, so class is something they look forward to," Escalante says.

Although she is not currently teaching a course, Escalante says that her students truly touched her heart, and she thinks about them often.

"On our last day of class, it was my birthday," she says.

"They gave me a birthday card, and everyone signed it, and some of them even wrote in Spanish. It was just really moving to feel like I had made a connection with them."

Irene Checa-Garcia, an associate professor of Spanish at UW, says the students are very motivated and GPA conscious.

"It's just pure learning and the possibilities of rehabilitation while they are in prison," she says.

Much like Greenberg's acting class, all materials had to be pre-approved for the Spanish courses. Delays in approval could sometimes lead to challenges distributing the course materials, but the students were patient.

#### Former Inmates' Experience

Some inmates enroll in the bachelor's program, while others opt to just take one or two classes.

Alumnus Tommy Rivera, of Cheyenne, took Colter's course on stoicism, which encourages students to experiment with living in a philosophical way and to explore what it means to live intentionally.

He recalls Colter teaching the principles of stoicism and helping the students understand what they do and don't have control over.

"Those are principles that I already learned and lived in real time throughout my experience being incarcerated because when you're locked up, you have no control over anything," Rivera says.

While incarcerated, Rivera learned to weld through a community college program and initially planned to pursue it as a career, but after apprenticing with a friend, he discovered a passion for tattooing and now works as a tattoo artist in Cheyenne.

The welding program was extremely competitive since there were limited spots, he explains.

"I found that many incarcerated men, when they do get into these programs, it actually builds their self-esteem to achieve something," he says. "It kind of changes the trajectory of their life."

Rivera believes that even for those serving life sentences, access to education fosters personal growth, helping individuals become more positive, constructive members of the prison community.

For WPPF alumna Darla Rouse, of Casper, the opportunity to take a wide variety of college courses, including acting, geology and psychology, was exciting.

Reflecting on her experience in Greenberg's acting course, she explained that many of the women were skeptical at first.

"My sister is a theater teacher, so I was all about it," Rouse says. "I think there's power in numbers, and even power in encouragement, and it gave us the courage to stand up and participate."

Although many of the students hadn't been in a school setting for many years, she noted that the instructors did a good job of tailoring the courses to the students' needs.

For those who might be considering taking college courses while incarcerated, Rouse advises them to "go for it."

"It really is your best chance of being successful," she says. "A real education, especially while you're still incarcerated, is your best chance at opening the world to you."

To learn more about WPPF, visit [uwo.edu/wppf](http://uwo.edu/wppf).

