

Inmates learn the meaning of hope

A Chemeketa college program offers prison inmates a fresh opportunity for education and rehabilitation

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Nick Saffran, 26, was never much interested in school as a child. He dropped out of high school when he was 16 and didn't get his GED until years later.

Now after being incarcerated for five years for first-degree robbery, Saffran's perspective has changed. The Oregon State Penitentiary inmate sees education as extremely important: It's a chance at rehabilitation.

"I feel like education is everything to me," Saffran said, sitting inside a small room in the state's only maximum-security prison. "I really do not ever want to come back here."

Saffran is among the first students to participate in a new program of Chemeketa Community College called College Inside. The program offers inmates in the Oregon State Penitentiary and the Oregon State Correctional Institute the opportunity to take college courses and work toward an associate's degree.

It marks the first time since 1993, when federal grants were cut, that Chemeketa has offered a college program inside any of the 13 state prisons, said Nancy Green, the director of Chemeketa's corrections education department. Very few other state-funded colleges offer classes in Oregon prisons.

Through College Inside, more than 55 men are taking evening classes this fall.

"I truly believe that people can change and are sorry for what they've done," Green said. "They want a different future from their past. This is a way for them to get knowledge and skills to get themselves a job to support themselves and their families."

The program got off the ground this fall after a donor was moved by a television segment about a college program inside a New York prison and contacted Chemeketa. He eventually offered to help pay for the education of about 45 inmates for a year.



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Sam McKeever, 24, talks with a fellow student in a writing class offered at the Oregon State Penitentiary through Chemeketa Community College's College Inside program.

Continuity in question

Chemeketa officials hope to continue offering College Inside next year, but that will depend on funding. The donor hasn't decided yet if he wants to support it next year. To donate toward the program, call John Hawkins at (503) 399-7711.

Thanks to the funding, inmates only pay \$25 per class plus the cost of books. That's a lot, however, given that most make \$20 to \$85 a month, Green said. Several inmates are paying full tuition because they don't meet the requirements for the scholarships.

Those requirements include having a high school diploma or GED, being within five years of release and having a clean bill of conduct for 18 months. They can't have any other college degrees.

The inmates also must continue in the program from term to term and have a 3.0 grade point average by the end of the year to keep getting funding. Each has to go through the college enrollment process, from application to registration.

The idea, Green said, is to give the inmates the college experience. That extends into the classroom where Chemeketa professors lead classes of up to 25 students.

"It's the same teachers, the same textbooks, same curriculum, same expectations," Green said.

This term, four classes are being offered: psychology, writing, geography and psychology. Unlike courses taken by inmates through Chemeketa's Inside Out program at the Oregon State Penitentiary, the classes are for college credit and are transferable to any Oregon university or community college.

Sam McKeever, 24, a College Inside student and educational tutor at Oregon State Penitentiary, said if inmates like him start college in prison, they have more incentive to finish up after their release.

"It opens your mind to learning opportunities," said McKeever, who has been incarcerated for almost five years for armed robbery. "It gives you something positive to strive for. ... You start to see your goals as obtainable."

Nicole Brown, administrator for work force development at the Oregon Department of Correction's transitional service division, said the College Inside program helps fill a vacuum in educational programming beyond the GED level for inmates who are most motivated.

"We want these inmates, if they can, to provide a living or family-wage job, so they can support themselves and be taxpaying citizens," she said. "This effort really lends itself to that, to improving the outcomes for these individuals in the community."

A 2005 study by the Oregon Department of Corrections found that education programs reduce recidivism by 15 percent, Green said, and every dollar spent on education saves the state \$2.50 in reincarceration costs.

College Inside student James Anderson, 28, said an education is critical to an inmate's reintegration into society.

"I don't want to be a criminal," he said. "I know an education is a door out of this life."

Anderson, a convicted murderer, has been locked up for more than 11 years. During that time, he has gotten his GED and taken two classes at the Oregon State Penitentiary through other programs, earning A's in both.

With a newfound self-confidence, Anderson is taking psychology and writing through College Inside.

"I just like knowing you're accomplishing something," he said. "It feels good. (The program) allows you to see outside these four walls. You feel like a real person again. You see what you can become."

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