



Southside Virginia Community College's Campus Within Walls students (front row) celebrate graduation in June 2015.

## Unlocking education

By Tabitha Whissemore

Last July, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) announced the Second Chance Pell Pilot program, which would allow incarcerated Americans to receive Pell grants to pursue a college education. Pell grant eligibility for state and federal prisoners ended in 1994, leading to hundreds of education programs being cut. The goal of the new program is to help prisoners “get jobs, support their families and turn their lives around,” according to ED.

A \$2-million, 18-month pilot program in California has four community colleges and prisons working toward that same goal. Inmates can take face-to-face courses that lead to a certificate or degree. The emphasis is on career technical education skills that can lead directly to employment.

The idea is that “if you educate people and help them get jobs, they will not go back to prison,” says Tom O’Neil, dean of social and behavioral sciences and corporate and community education at Antelope Valley College (AVC). Folsom Lake College (FLC), Lassen Community College and Chaffey College also are participating in the program.

### BUILDING A PROGRAM

AVC is working with California State Prison to provide for-credit business

courses. Classes began in January for the men in the maximum security prison. Two computer labs were built at the prison, allowing the college to educate about 30 people at a time. Adjunct faculty are teaching.

This isn’t AVC’s first interaction with the prison. The college teaches a five-week transition program that helps inmates get “re-accustomed to the world outside,” explains O’Neil. In the year since the program started, about 250 prisoners have graduated, and about 30 have been released. That experience has helped AVC develop a good relationship with the prison.

For FLC, part of the Los Rios Community College District, working with prisons is a new experience.

“We are all pioneers entering uncharted territory together,” says Kim Harrell, dean of workforce development, kinesiology, health and athletics.

The college started courses at Folsom Women’s Prison and Mule Creek Prison. The certificate programs are adapted to each prison’s needs. At the women’s prison, most inmates are released in less than three years. The small business entrepreneurship certificate is a shorter program designed to get them on their feet quickly, says

Harrell. All credits will transfer to the college if inmates want to continue on to a degree after being released.

At Mule Creek Prison, there was a strong interest in a human services certificate program, with a drug and alcohol counseling component. Prisoners at Mule Creek typically have longer sentences and may be able to complete a full degree program. Though some of the inmates have taken correspondence courses, they are “craving feedback and dialogue” that can only be found with face-to-face instruction, according to Harrell.

Students have been hand-picked based on good behavior and whether they have a high school diploma or GED. They get the same orientation and advising as students attending at FLC’s campus receive.

### LOST IN TRANSLATION

FLC staff is excited about the program. Faculty believe it’s another opportunity to make a difference, Harrell says.

“And student attendance may be better than usual,” she jokes.

But putting face-to-face instruction inside prison walls hasn’t been without its challenges.

There are four different “bureaucracies” involved in the state program, explains O’Neil: the California Community College Chancellor’s Office, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, the prisons and the colleges.

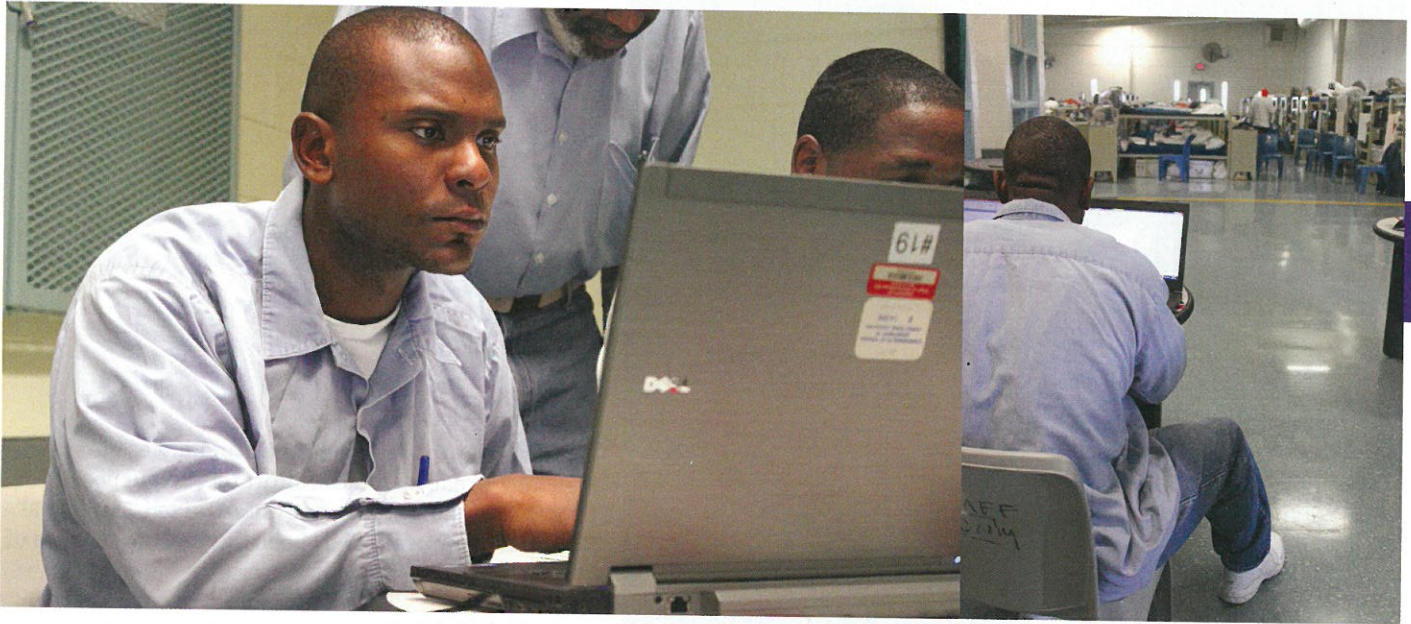
“We don’t all speak the same language,” O’Neil says.

Technology also has been an issue. Access to the Internet isn’t possible, which can make teaching—and building a computer lab—a challenge.

“The colleges are having to adjust existing curriculum to meet the low-tech world of inmates’ classrooms,” says BJ Snowden, project director for the inmate education program.

Fortunately, the relationship with the CDCR has been “flexible and collaborative,” Snowden says. Electronic readers have been allowed, and AVC’s





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A Campus Within Walls student studies in his dormitory.

in-prison computer lab will have internal Intranet accessibility.

And then there's the issue of money. Participating inmates can receive California Community Colleges Board of Governors (BOG) Fee Waivers to take courses, but book costs aren't covered by the waivers.

"The Pell grant would be an outstanding opportunity to reach out to more students," says Snowden.

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS

If the California pilot program is successful, it will be duplicated across the state.

"If this works, this will be a radical change for prisoners in the state of California," says O'Neil. "You're going to be changing people's lives, and they're going to be able to support themselves and their families."

Few concerns have been voiced, says Snowden. Instead of people asking why prisoners are being educated, they're asking "what more can you do?"

"I like that kind of concern," Snowden says.

There's evidence to support educating inmates. A 2013 RAND Corporation study found that correctional education participants were 43 percent less likely to return to prison within three years than those who didn't participate in education programs. And for every dollar invested in these programs, \$4 to

\$5 are saved on three-year re-incarceration costs, RAND estimates.

The California colleges aren't the only institutions educating inmates. Southside Virginia Community College's (SVCC) Campus Within Walls (CWW) program offers associate degrees and IT certificates

says Anne Hayes, dean of institutional effectiveness and special projects at SVCC, and coordinator of CWW.

"It's a reset button. For men and women who are incarcerated, a lot of times their lives have gotten out of control," Hayes says. "When we have

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TOM O'NEIL, Antelope Valley College

at Lunenburg Correctional Center in Victoria, Virginia. In collaboration with the center and the Virginia Department of Corrections, the program creates a college learning community model embedded within the prison.

The CWW students don't just take classes together—they share a dorm that provides them with privileges not granted to the general population. Ninety men are housed in the dorm. Seven are program graduates who act as teaching assistants. The men can check out laptops, they have a quiet space for studying, and they're able to mentor and encourage each other.

Since the program began in 2009, CWW has served 221 people, and 82 have graduated with certificates or an associate degree. The 39 students participating this academic year are "hungry to learn,"

graduations, and the men walk across stage and they've earned certificates and degrees, and in the audience, some parents and spouses are openly weeping, it really hits home how much of a reset button this is."

Though SVCC isn't able to waive tuition, a grant has funded some scholarships and students can receive discounts based on how many classes they take.

Hayes' advice to the California pilot colleges is to engage the students' enthusiasm and to allow for student leadership. With CWW, teaching assistantships provide outlets for that energy and give the students a sense of empowerment.

"When we're educating them, we create a fantastic ripple effect," says Hayes. "If each one teaches one, it starts catching and spreading." ■