

Virginia Tech holds training session for the Appalachian Prison Book Project

11 students and faculty attended the first training session for the Appalachian Prison Book Project at Virginia Tech on Oct. 27.

“I think the real advantage for starting it in the university is that it’s an opportunity for students to learn,” said Brian Britt, professor in the department of religion and culture at Virginia Tech. “Ultimately, my hope is that it will serve the students and the students’ desire to serve the Commonwealth, which is what the university is famous for – ‘Ut Prosim’.”

Organized by Britt, the meeting took place in-person on Zoom with the co-president of the Appalachian Prison Book Project, Judy Panagakos. Out of a database of 30 interested individuals, 11 attended the event, including three students.

“My major is humanities for public service, so I thought it would be a really good opportunity to see what a job in the future could look like,” said Madison Metcalf, freshman at Virginia Tech. “I am really interested in making sure everyone can have equal education opportunities.”

Panagakos shared her experience with the organization that provides new or used books to inmates in prisons across West Virginia, Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, Tennessee and Kentucky.

The project started in 2004 at West Virginia University and later became a nonprofit organization.

The Appalachian Prison Book Project receives 100 letters a week, and coordinators recently sent out the project’s 50,000th book in July 2021.

“Besides the book distribution – which is what we are here tonight to talk about and train you on – we also run book clubs for men and women who are incarcerated,” Panagakos said.

“We offer higher education courses in prisons and, for those, there is a larger international program called the Inside-Out program that trains college professors and graduate students on how to deliver courses in a prison setting.”

Panagakos detailed the process of wrapping the books to mail to the prisons. The program features a three-step process which includes letter opening, matching books and logging books prior to mailing them.

Letter opening is a careful process, according to Panagakos, because letters sometimes include artwork. The return address on the envelope is necessary to mail the book back to the right inmate.

After opening a letter, the volunteer then highlights the incarcerated person’s genre or book request.

“We try to match to what the person wants on a best-efforts basis,” Panagakos noted. “We very often do not have the exact thing that the person wants.”

Attached to the matched book is a half-sheet; this paper serves as an invoice indicating that it is the prisoner’s book to keep and includes a list of genres for the prisoner to choose from in the future. The volunteer wrapping the book can add a personalized note. Participants passed the half-sheet around the meeting room as an example.

Panagakos demonstrated how to fill out the “Books Mailed Log” on a Google Form as the final step of the procedure.

Volunteers made plans at the session to meet two or three additional times before the end of the semester for wrapping parties. Each party needs five or six volunteers to complete the three-step process.

In the meantime, the project asks those at Virginia Tech to search for romance, horror fiction and specialty books such as computer programming, automotive repair, adult coloring books and books in Spanish. Britt suggested that the group host a book drive to collect books for the project.

“The quality of the books is important,” Panagakos said. “You should be sending in paperback books versus hardback. Nothing should have any water stains. That could lead to drugs being incorporated into the material. They will reject, mail back or simply destroy the book instead of giving it to the person.”

Individuals can donate books in new or used condition. The Appalachian Prison Book Project also accepts monetary donations that fund the cost of shipping-related expenses and wrapping supplies.

Participants stayed after the meeting to ask questions, discuss ideas and plan the next step for the Appalachian Prison Book Project at Virginia Tech.

A representative from Blacksburg Books, a shop located in downtown Blacksburg, also attended the meeting. The representative offered its support for the Appalachian Prison Book Project by keeping an eye out for highly requested books.

“This kind of work doesn’t make a major intervention in the structure of our system, but it does respond to a human need and desire,” Britt concluded.

More information about volunteering with the Appalachian Prison Book Project can be found on the website appalachianprisonbookproject.org.