



News Release

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Lipscomb University partners with Tennessee Prison for Women for unique learning experience

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (Jan. 25, 2007) – When they first selected Lipscomb University as their future alma mater, it’s a sure bet the students in Preston Shipp’s judicial process class weren’t envisioning themselves attending classes in a prison.

But that’s just what 15 Lipscomb students are doing this semester, as part of a new program that allows inmates at the Tennessee Prison for Women (TPFW) to take courses along with Lipscomb students and earn college credit, a unique benefit in the local area.

“It makes world of difference when you walk into that prison,” said Adam Stunkle, 22, of Virginia, after attending the first class on Jan. 10. “This is not education contained within the four walls of a classroom.

“This makes all the theories practical,” said Stunkle, who is a Bible major and history minor considering attending law school. “To me, this is what education is supposed to be.”

That enthusiastic attitude made it easy for both Lipscomb Professor Richard Goode, who developed the program, and corrections officials to recruit students for the inaugural class. He believes the mix of students and specifically designed coursework will provide not only academic but also character-building benefits for both students at the prison and students from campus.

“One of the things that tends to happen in our criminal justice system is that the inmates become dehumanized,” said Goode, chair of the history, politics and philosophy department at Lipscomb. “We never see the inmates, so we develop certain perceptions about them, most of which are false. When we all get in a room together, it humanizes the situation.

“The campus students begin to realize we aren’t all that different, and the women at the prison are eager for human contact and interesting conversation. With multiple perspectives, we are all challenged,” said Goode.

That certainly proved the case in the first class, said Stunkle, who was surprised to learn that the TPFW students were just as nervous about the class as the campus students were. “When we all got together in a circle, talking about why we wanted to take the class and how nervous we all were, they were really honest and friendly,” he said.

The inaugural class had only 15 spots for inmates at the prison but more than 100 women expressed interest in the class at the initial information meeting, said Connie Seabrooks, principal at TPFW.

In order to sit for the entrance test to take the course, TPFW students were required to have passed the General Educational Development (GED) test, to have a clean behavioral record and to have at least two years left on their sentence, since it will take that long for students to move through the six courses to be offered.

In the end, 55 women sat for the entrance exam to vie for the 15 spots, Seabrooks said.

Future topics for the six courses held over six semesters will include an ethics course, literature of prisoners, and the modern history of politics and reconciliation, Goode said. Despite the fact that they won't have a complete degree, inmates who take all the courses will end up with 18 hours of standard liberal arts credits they can transfer to a university, better self-confidence, expanded life experience and good study habits, he noted.

"I believe that all education programs, whether it be GED prep, vocational programs or post-secondary education, encourage an individual to reach his/her potential, assist with employment opportunities upon release and help break the cycle of recidivism," said Sharmilla Patel, director of education for the Tennessee Department of Correction. "This program at Lipscomb University gives the incarcerated a second chance toward becoming productive citizens."

And for the Lipscomb undergraduates who are joining the inmates in their studies, they get a chance to expand their experience of the world through discussion and interaction with people who have very different life experiences.

Preston Shipp, Lipscomb adjunct professor and instructor of the class, said he hopes to encourage growth in all the students through lots of conversation about criminal justice issues. Questions students will ponder include: What are the goals of the American justice system? Are we meeting those goals? Could there be better ways to achieve justice? What is justice?

The Lipscomb program was sparked by a previously successful program at Vanderbilt, where a group of adjunct professors, including Goode, came up with the idea and implemented it through the divinity school. But the graduate courses offered at Riverbend Prison did not count for college credit for the inmates, and Goode left believing that what the corrections system really needed was an undergraduate course that actually counted for credit.

Other education courses at the prison provide vocational training such as cosmetology and culinary arts, high school level courses for GED prep or adult basic education, but the Lipscomb program is the only one currently offering college credit to corrections inmates.

The TPFW inmates will be enrolled as Lipscomb students. They are even assigned Lipscomb ID numbers, Goode noted. At the first meeting, some of the women made a point to find out Lipscomb's colors (purple and gold) and mascot (Bison).

But actual enrollment means actual tuition.

So in addition to working out logistics and developing curriculum, Goode's main job over the past few months has been raising money for scholarships. University officials agreed to allow inmates to attend a three-hour class and receive books for \$450, a considerable savings from

standard tuition. Scholarship money is still needed as the plan is for inmates to continue taking courses in perpetuity.

“This is an important effort in assisting inmates in the challenging transition back into society,” said George M. Little, Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Correction. “It's estimated 97% of all inmates will eventually be released from prison. The Department of Correction greatly values Lipscomb University for helping to give the inmates another insight into what it means to successfully function in society.”