

# A History of College Classes for Incarcerated Students in Wisconsin

Nearly a century ago, an article in the November 19, 1922 issue of the *Wisconsin State Journal* declared, "Education is one of the most compelling forces in the life of prisoners by which they hope to obtain their ultimate liberty."

The article announced that the University of Wisconsin was the first in the nation to extend the advantages of college courses to prisoners. The idea was started in 1917 when the Extension Division of the University of Wisconsin created a class in gas engines at the prison. Several gas engines and an instructor were sent to the Wisconsin State Prison in Waupun, but the experiment failed because the prison employed a "Silent System" and the prisoners were not allowed to talk. The course was discontinued.

The experiment did arouse interest for study among the prisoners and Warden Henry Towns conceived the idea of allowing study by correspondence with a University representative traveling to the prison every two weeks.

The courses expanded to include engineering, business law, accounting, auto repair, English and Spanish. One student was even studying music. By 1922, there were 75 men at the Wisconsin State Prison who were earning no more than six cents a day and were spending it to get an education.

At about the same time, Penn State University and the University of Nebraska attempted to offer classes at their prisons, but they were unsuccessful. UW's classes were successful because it had the oldest and largest university extension system. UW not only offered courses for Waupun inmates, but also prisoners at Fort Leavenworth federal prison and state prisons in Colorado and Virginia.

In October 1937, the Committee on Education of the American Prison Association which was the predecessor of today's Correctional Education Association published its first newsletter. The newsletter described the education programs in several states' prisons including the programs at the Wisconsin State Reformatory in Green Bay (now Green Bay Correctional Institution) and the Wisconsin State Prison in Waupun.

In the newsletter, the Wisconsin State Reformatory description stated, "A liberal use is made of University of Wisconsin extension correspondence courses for more capable and better educated inmates" and "Of 487 inmates, about 65% are in attendance in school classes or are enrolled in university correspondence study courses."

The Wisconsin State Prison description stated, "Prior to the fall of 1932 the educational program in the institution was centered about courses offered by the University of Wisconsin . . . These courses grew in popularity until a record of 450 courses was attained during one year . . . The number enrolled has decreased somewhat since the establishment of the full-time school, but more than 70 men are taking university courses."

Over the decades, UW correspondence courses continued to be available to inmates in state institutions. The number of students enrolled varied from time to time due to the cost of the courses and federal and state funding that was available. Enrollment in correspondence courses was also affected by the expansion of DOC education programs and Wisconsin Technical College System courses that gave the inmates educational alternatives.

The documentation of early classes taught by university staff within Wisconsin institutions is spotty, but by the 1970's, the "Golden Age" of college classes in prisons was about to begin. The "Golden Age" was a result of a cooperative effort between DOC and UW-Extension administrations and the availability of tuition funding through Pell Grant legislation. The "Golden Age" ran from approximately 1971 to 1994 when Pell Grant eligibility for inmates ended.

During these 20+ years, three major programs enrolled thousands of inmates and awarded hundreds of degrees. They are:

### **UW-Green Bay University Without Walls Program at Green Bay Correctional Institution**

UW-Green Bay offered its first on-site class for inmates at the Wisconsin State Reformatory in the summer of 1971. In January 1973, The Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities awarded a \$15,000 grant to begin planning for a University Without Walls program at the Reformatory. UWGB quickly moved to expand the number of course offerings and students enrolled at the Reformatory.

A milestone was reached in 1975 when among the UWGB class of 330 spring graduates were three inmates of the Wisconsin State Reformatory. Ronald Burrell, Ted Cydzik and Roger Glass were the first persons in the state correctional system to complete college work while incarcerated. They earned degrees in Urban Analysis through the University Without Walls program.

In 1980, a study release program was added for a limited number of minimum-security inmates. Over the next 20+ years more than 1000 inmates participated in university credit classes with over 100 inmates earning a university degree.

UWGB administrator Robert Skorczewski was responsible for coordinating the program from 1976 until its end in the 1990s. Bob conducted program evaluation, assisted in the publication of research, gave numerous lectures, and co-produced a public television program about “The Campus Inside.”

A follow-up study of 103 inmates who graduated from UWGB between 1980 and 1991 while incarcerated at GBCI revealed that only 8% returned to prison.

### **UW-Baraboo/UW-Stevens Point Program at Federal Correctional Institution-Oxford**

Beginning with five freshmen level classes offered by UW-Baraboo in the fall of 1975, the FCI-Oxford college program grew to 25 freshman-sophomore level classes offered by UW-Baraboo and 4 junior-senior classes offered by UW-Stevens Point per semester. By 1993, approximately 140-170 men were enrolled in Associate Degree classes and 35 were enrolled in B.S. classes. About 75% of the participants in the program were enrolled as full-time students.

By March 1994, over 250 Associate Degrees had been awarded and over 2000 FCI-Oxford inmates had taken classes — making it the premier college program in the federal correctional system. This amounted to 1/4 of all college degrees awarded in the federal system.

After inmate eligibility for Pell Grants was eliminated in 1994, the program was reduced in size but continued on a smaller scale until it was ended in 2008 when the Federal Bureau of Prisons redirected the focus of their post-secondary educational offerings to pursue vocational, job-ready education instead of the liberal arts mission of UW-Baraboo.

### **Post-Secondary Re-Entry Education Program (PREP)**

Beginning in 1981, the Post-Secondary Re-Entry Education Program (PREP) offered inmates at Kettle Moraine, and Taycheedah and Correctional institutions an opportunity to pursue a liberal arts college education while incarcerated. In 1986 the program was expanded to Waupun Correctional Institution. In 1993, the KMCI component of the program moved to Fox Lake Correctional Institution.

PREP was designed to lead to an Associate of Arts or Science degree upon completion of 60 credits. All classes offered in the institutions were transferable to any University of Wisconsin campus.

In addition, PREP provided reentry workshops, transfer advisement and release planning. Special transfer considerations were made for inmates who attained minimum-security status so they could continue their education on study release.

PREP enhanced its course offerings with an annual Arts and Humanities series which brought plays, concerts, performances, and lectures into the institutions.

PREP ended with its final graduation ceremony at Waupun Correctional Institution in May 1995. Over the almost 15 years, over 4000 men and women participated in college classes, with 163 earning degrees.

### **Post Pell Grant Classes**

The elimination of inmate eligibility for Pell Grants in 1994 brought an end to large scale college programs in Wisconsin institutions. As other resources became available, a few college classes were offered in DOC institutions periodically.

In 2005 and 2006, UW-Oshkosh staff Stephen Richards, Chris Rose and Susan Reed offered an "Inviting Convicts to College" class at three medium-security institutions.

In 2019, UW-Oshkosh professor Carmen Heider taught an "Inside-Out Prison Exchange" course at Taycheedah Correctional Institution. In this class, ten "inside" (currently incarcerated) students learned alongside ten "outside" (not incarcerated) students.

### **The Economics of Pell Grants**

A seminal part of post-secondary correctional efforts in Wisconsin and at the federal level had been the availability of Pell Grants to incarcerated men and women. The Pell Grants allowed them access to not only college courses, but in many cases, vocational training.

Although providing access to education and training through Pell Grants comprised less than 1% of total annual Pell expenditures, the eligibility of incarcerated individuals was banned in the sweeping Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act passed by Congress and signed by President Clinton in 1994.

Every major study of education and recidivism rates has shown that those who received higher education in prison had ten to forty percent lower recidivism rates. In the November/December 1993 issue of the CEA-Wisconsin Newsletter, Robert Davidson who supervised the UW-Baraboo program wrote, "If prison programs improve the national recidivism rate by as little as two percent, they will have paid for the cost of Pell. At FCI-Oxford, if, because of their participation in the UW-Baraboo/Stevens Point program, just four of the one hundred and fifty inmates currently enrolled in the program do not return to prison following their release, the program will have saved society two to three times the annual amount of Pell monies utilized by the program."

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education reopened the door slightly when President Obama signed an Executive Order creating the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative.

Because the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative was a “pilot project,” it could be enacted by Executive Order without Congressional legislation.

Through the Second Chance Initiative, 65 colleges — most of them community colleges — that provide training and education at nearby prisons can have their students apply for Pell Grants. Those colleges serve about 12,000 prisoners annually, a sliver of the more than 1.5 million people who are currently incarcerated. While there's no official expiration date on experimental pilots, the Department of Education data shows they typically last about three to five years.

In Congress, there's renewed interest in giving adults behind bars better access to higher education. The Restoring Education and Learning Act, known as the REAL Act, a bipartisan bill in Congress would allow incarcerated people to use federal Pell Grants to pay for higher education, including college classes and workforce training. Congress would need to pass legislation like the REAL Act in order to take Second Chance Pell out of the pilot phase and reverse a more than two-decade ban on inmates using Pell Grants.

### **Add to History**

**If you have information or documents that relate to the “History of College Classes for Incarcerated Students in Wisconsin”, send them to [jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com](mailto:jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com) and your contributions may be added to this “History” that is posted on our website.**