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More Inmates Graduate the Prison-to-College Pipeline Program

PEARL – About 50 more inmates, including 42 women at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility and seven men at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman, are the latest graduates of a program that allows inmates to earn credits toward a college education.

The Prison-to-College Pipeline program is one of several the Mississippi Department of Corrections has to help inmates both during and after incarceration. It comes from a partnership the department has with the University of Mississippi, Millsaps College, Mississippi College, Jackson State University, and the Mississippi Humanities Council.

Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said partnerships like these are important in helping MDOC provide meaningful rehabilitation. "We are currently looking at how we can expand upon partnerships such as these," she said.

CMCF Inmate Nikki Holland credits the Pipeline program with giving her an opportunity for success when she pursues plans to open an upholstery business after her release.

"Being incarcerated does not define who we are," Holland said. "Through this program, I already have a college transcript that I can take with me to continue my education."

Holland, 45, who is serving nine years for possession of a controlled substance and prescription forgery in Harrison County, said she has learned the value of

responsibility for her life, and enjoyed the interaction with instructors who challenged them.

"The state looks at us in wanting us to do better and they are giving us the tools to make that happen," Holland said. "We are anxious to do whatever it takes for an education. We are eager to learn and want to do better."

Participating inmate students must have a high school diploma or GED diploma. They help to design the courses, based on their interest.

The women in the most recent graduation earned a cumulative nine hours in credit through coursework in American History, Professional Communication, and American Literature.

Dr. Otis Pickett and Dr. Patrick Alexander started the program at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman in 2014, with 17 male student inmates initially graduating.

With the graduation on Aug. 17, 68 men have completed a course through the program. Of those, 20 have earned English credits from Ole Miss, and several have earned history credits from Mississippi College.

The program expanded to CMCF in 2016 starting with 18 female student inmates. With the latest graduation on Aug. 10, a total of 71 females have completed the program.

Pickett said the program exceeded his expectations in its first three years having served more than 100 inmates between the two prisons.

"To have the opportunity to address a social justice issue through my profession and as part of my teaching role is a unique opportunity, and one that I am incredibly proud of," Pickett said. "We wanted to do something about recidivism. We've been able to display that incarcerated individuals are not only deserving of an opportunity for a college education, they are among the best students we have taught."

Dr. Stephanie Rolph, an American History professor from Millsaps College, said during the ceremony that the experience changed the lives of the instructors as much as the students.

“The students came to class prepared and were happy to see us. We spent some important time together and we learned a lot,” Rolph said. “We see you, we respect you and when we walk out of here, we will be thinking of you.”

Dr. Robert Luckett, an American History professor from Jackson State who team-taught with Rolph, echoed Rolph in praising the students for their efforts. “You were the best students I ever taught. I will talk about this class to others who will listen, and I will remember you beyond these walls.”

Inmate Aretha Haggins, 48, said she will remember the program for what it did for her. She encourages other inmates to participate.

“It was a wonderful experience. (Instructor) Dr. (Mignon) Kucia helped me to improve my communication skills and how to speak professionally in front of others,” said Haggins, who is serving eight years for shoplifting in Rankin County. “I’m looking forward to enrolling at Jackson State University after I leave and move on with my life.”

Carol Andersen, assistant director for program for the Mississippi Humanities Council, said the Humanities appreciates being a part of the program and has been impressed with how MDOC “has been open and allowed courses to be offered.”

“The Council was amazed with the work done at Parchman because this was not a typical program. We came to feel that we should take it to a broader scale,” Andersen said. “Humanities are for everyone, and we take that belief seriously.”

Andersen said the program is a win-win for the inmates and society. “For the inmates, it sustains their communication skills, and if they are released, it will help them re-integrate into society through their transition. It also helps them in reflection upon their past and current situations,” she said.

Pickett said he is looking forward to reaching more inmates inside the prisons. “I am thankful for Parchman and Central Mississippi Correctional Facility who have allowed us to come in, offer courses and to teach students,” Pickett said. “My greatest thanks go to the students whose hard work in the most difficult of conditions proves what the human spirit is capable of.”

