

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Office of Communications
Phone: (601) 359-5608, 359-5689 or 359-5289
E-mail: MDOCOfficeofCommunications@mdoc.state.ms.us

Prison-to-College Pipeline Program credited with offering unforgettable education behind bars

JACKSON – Cimetrio Davis studied and worked as hard as any student to excel in a college course taught last summer by two professors, one from the University of Mississippi and the other from Mississippi College.

So did Donna Lockett for her class, also taught by an MC professor.

But unlike many college students, neither Davis nor Lockett could go online, visit their instructors during office hours, or use a research library.

That’s because the two completed their courses while incarcerated.

Davis, incarcerated at the Mississippi State Penitentiary (MSP) at Parchman, and Lockett, incarcerated at Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF), are among dozens of men and women who are earning college credit thanks to the Prison-to-College Pipeline program co-founded and co-directed by Dr. Patrick Alexander, associate professor of English and African American Studies at Ole Miss, and Dr. Otis Pickett, assistant professor of history at MC.

The Prison-to-College Pipeline Program is in its fifth year in the Mississippi prison system and continues to get high marks from incarcerated students and strong support from prison officials. To date, more than 150 incarcerated students have graduated courses at the two prisons where the program is offered.

The program’s newest class is currently in progress at MSP. “Key Questions in African History” began on August 22, with 13 incarcerated students. The class is taught by Dr. Zachary Kagan Guthrie and Ph.D. student Jemar Tisby from Ole Miss.

“The Mississippi Department of Corrections appreciates the level of commitment and fervor with which Dr. Alexander and Dr. Pickett continue to exhibit with this program,” Corrections Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said. “I share their desire that those in our custody are deserving of an opportunity for a college education.”

Prison-to-College Pipeline participants must have a high school diploma or GED. With the support of the program’s professors, they help to design the courses, based on their interests. They are required to write essays both in and out of class during the 10-week summer courses or 15-week fall courses, and they receive credit for completing their coursework from Ole Miss and/or MC.

The men who were enrolled in the summer course at MSP focused on American history, African American literature, and academic writing, while the women at CMCF completed summer coursework in American history, public speaking, English composition, and American literature.

“I am overjoyed to see the level of commitment made by our Pre-release participants completing the Prison-to-College Pipeline curriculum,” said Mirinda Frison, MSP Pre-release director. “This program gives them hope and a sense of accomplishment. Our students are able to be taught by college professors and leave with college hours, an opportunity they never thought they would receive. This opportunity is indeed putting our returning citizens on a path for greatness. Providing access to higher education allows access to better paying jobs upon release, which will in turn help in reducing the recidivism rate.”

Program graduates have told prison officials how much the program has meant to them. “Motivational,” “enlightening,” “incredible,” “educational” and “rewarding” are some of the words the students have used to describe their classes.”

Davis, 28, and Lockett, 53, vouch for what the program has meant for the incarcerated students. Both said completing their respective courses has given them a sense of accomplishment.

“It made me feel better about myself,” said Lockett, who took public speaking. “I got a lot out of it because I put a lot into it. I spent a lot of weekends (studying) vs. not watching television, not watching videos or whatever.”

Lockett was one of 56 women to graduate on Aug. 8 at CMCF. Davis was one of 17 men to do likewise on Aug.16 at the Parchman.

“Initially, I thought it was going to be like pipefitting for construction jobs where they make a decent amount of money, but it was nothing like that,” Davis said. “Once I got in it, and saw it was literature and United States history, I was more inclined to take it. I thought, okay, this is educational and not vocational. When I saw that we had Ph.D. instructors who really knew what they were doing and talking about that was even more compelling.”

Davis said the class has been his best prison experience and has helped him to deal with his anxiety and depression. “The whole time I had a desire to excel despite what I was suffering mentally,” he said.

He had attended college before coming to prison in 2015. But he said he learned things in the Prison-to-College Pipeline course that he did not know. “I learned that the fight for equality, the fight for civil rights went beyond Martin Luther King and people like that that they taught us about in high school,” Davis said. “They did not teach us about Fannie Lou Hamer and Ida B. Wells. I didn’t know the extent or depth of lynch law and how deeply rooted it was in our government.”

Davis’ class, “Mississippi: Then and Now,” linked the state’s history and literature and was taught by Alexander and Pickett over 10 weeks. On graduation day, he and six other students presented papers based on what they had studied.

Edward Berdine, another student in the summer course at MSP, said the class was a special experience that he won’t ever forget.

“It was an awesome feeling to take the class, complete it and graduate like that,” Berdine, 36, said. “I was so glad to get college level credits and learn about Mississippi history. My favorite part was all about the Civil War and learning different outlooks on it. Before I came here, I didn’t know the whole story.”

Like Davis, Berdine said he planned to tell others about what he learned. “I highly recommend it to all of the other guys,” said Berdine, who has since been released.

Jeremy Hicks, 23, said the coursework reminded him of his life before prison and re-ignited interest in furthering his education.

“They picked the best teachers possible,” Hicks said. “They were so uplifting in spirit. They made me feel that I am capable of being more than an inmate. I was really inspired by the whole experience. I learned a lot about things that I didn’t know anything about. I really felt that I was back in the college environment.”

Hicks said he planned to continue pursuing a college education once he was released. “I would go back to engineering but I may also study history because of this course,” he said.

The Prison-to-College Pipeline Program is one of many programs the MDOC supports to help incarcerated individuals both during and after incarceration. In addition to Ole Miss and MC, partnering colleges include Millsaps College, Jackson State University, Mississippi Valley State University, and Copiah-Lincoln Community College. The University of Mississippi’s College of Liberal Arts and the Mississippi Humanities Council provide funding for the program.

Alexander and Pickett started the program at Parchman in summer 2014. It expanded to CMCF in 2016.

Pickett said, “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.”

Both professors say the program has exceeded their expectations. At each graduation, they share their enthusiasm with the graduates, telling them how proud they are of their accomplishments. Their refrain is: “You are students, you are teachers, you are scholars, and you are capable.”

“The teaching team is so honored to have another opportunity to teach you and to work with you,” Pickett wrote in his letter read to the graduates at CMCF in August. “We are so proud of all the hard work you have done now for the last three years, starting when we had our first class on Southern Women’s History. Today, we graduate four more college classes with some students having earned upwards of 15 hours toward a college degree over the last three years.”

Pickett’s message was similar at MSP’s seventh class graduation a week later.

“You have so much to offer this world. Now you have a depth of rich knowledge in the history of literary background in the state of Mississippi,” Pickett said. “I ask you, as one day you will move outside these walls and even as you move within these walls, will you pass on and share what you have learned? This is not the end. This is just the beginning. I want to encourage you that you have a story to tell. That you are all writers and the world needs to hear your stories. Promise me that you will continue to read, write, edit and revise your own work.”

Plenty of the students say after graduation that they are ready to accept that challenge. Cindy Carroll, who completed the English composition course offered at CMCF, is one of them. She credits the course with improving her verbal and written skills.

“This program has opened doors for me that I thought were never possible,” said Carroll, who obtained her GED while incarcerated. “My hope is this will help allow me to do more in life after my release and finding a good job.”