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15 state inmates at Auburn prison graduate with college degrees

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By Dave Tobin / The Post-Standard



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Cornell faculty and administrators applaud graduates of the Cornell Prison Education Program on Tuesday at Auburn Correctional Facility. Two-year degrees in liberal arts, humanities and social sciences were given to 15 inmates. It was the first graduation at the prison since 1995.

Auburn, NY -- With bagpipe music, caps, gowns, and the pomp and circumstance of a traditional college commencement, 15 men incarcerated in Auburn Correctional Facility graduated from college while behind bars Tuesday.

They were the first prisoners in New York to earn a SUNY degree since the state and federal governments ended tuition programs beginning in 1995. The men received their associate's degrees from Cayuga Community College.

The men's education came about through the Cornell Prison Education Program – a collaboration between Cornell University and Cayuga Community College, funded by the Sunshine Lady Foundation and Cornell's Office of Land Grant Affairs.

One graduate, Jacob Russell, spoke about the challenges students overcame to graduate. Some entered prison without a high school diploma. At least one succeeded while battling cancer, he said.

Russell noted that students in the prison work without computers or Internet access and teachers teach without computers and PowerPoint. "The walls around this place simply confine us," Russell said. "They do not define us."

Cornell faculty have been teaching at the Auburn prison for decades — sometimes tutoring or offering courses without credit.

In 2008, Cornell and CCC began offering the degree program. CPEP enrolls roughly 120 men held at Auburn and the Cayuga Correctional Facility in Moravia, offering them free college courses taught by Cornell faculty

and graduate students. Prisoners earn Cornell credits while they pursue an associate's degree awarded by CCC.

In the past four years, the prison education program at Cornell has expanded to include as many as 17 classes each term. Class offerings have included genetics, poetry, African American literature, biology and medical anthropology.

Brian Fischer, commissioner of the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, told graduates they were setting an example throughout the state prison system, that would help lead the way for restoring college-level programs at all state prisons.

"Studies show recidivism rates for students with high school and especially college education are far lower than for those without," he said. "Education really is the key to their success in the community."

Contact Dave Tobin at dtobin@syracuse.com or 470-3277.

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