

Inmates earn GEDs, college credit at Albion

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ALBION — They wore flowing maroon gowns, and collected certificates for their educational achievements. It was an emotional graduation ceremony, with lots of whoops, tears and congratulations.

This wasn't your typical June graduation exercise. The students walked down the center of the chapel at the Albion Correctional Facility. Some of the new graduates acknowledged that bad choices landed them in prison. But now they are determined to chart a new course.

By earning a General Equivalency Diploma or college credits, the women in the facility have dramatically increased their chances to stay out of trouble when they leave the facility, prison officials said.

“Without education, they don't have a chance,” said William Powers, superintendent of the facility. “But with a GED, they have a fighting chance.”

Powers was one of the speakers during the graduation ceremony inside the prison's chapel. He commended 39 students for earning their GED, and another 37 students for completing college credits through a partnership with Medaille College.

None of the students dropped out of the GED program, a 100 percent success rate, Powers said.

The women appreciate the chance for education, and they won't waste that opportunity, Powers said.

The facility has partnered with Medaille the past four years to offer college credits. That program is funded through a federal Department of Justice grant.

One student, 24-year-old Sophia Santos, is the first at the prison to earn an associate's degree behind bars. Santos thanked her teachers, and commended the other inmates in the classes. They spurred each other to study, and keep learning, Santos said.

“With dedication and hard work, we can change our directions,” she said.

Santos completed 60 college credits since January 2009. The Long Island native is serving a 3- to 9-year sentence after being charged with drunk driving and vehicular manslaughter in November 2007.

She wants to become a drug and alcohol abuse counselor, or perhaps work in another field in human services. When she is released she would like to enroll in college to earn her bachelor's degree.

“When I go home I’ll be able to be of use to the community,” she said about her degree.

Santos was the only student to wear a gold-colored robe. She was lauded for her 3.8 grade point average. Her fellow inmates gave her a standing ovation, and wildly cheered her when she accepted her diploma.

From the podium, Santos praised the students for persevering and overcoming “insurmountable hardships.”

Michael Wolf serves as site coordinator for Medaille. He comes to Albion on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings. Medaille offered students 30 different courses, including business, human resources, a range of general education courses, and training to become alcohol and substance abuse counselors.

“They leave with skills and they are employable,” Wolf said before the ceremony. “They pay taxes. They’re not a burden to the state.”

In the four years at Albion, Medaille has worked with 225 women inmates who completed 2,862 college credits.

“It’s a testament to all of you that you’ve done the job you’ve done,” Wolf said from the podium.

The four-year grant from the Department of Justice soon expires, and the Albion facility is hunting for funding to continue the college experience.

“It’s about programming and making them a better person so they don’t come back here,” said Powers, superintendent of the medium-security facility with about 900 inmates.