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Bard Prison Initiative To Hold Largest Commencement In Its History On January 26 At Eastern NY Correctional Facility

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By Mel Fabrikant Monday, January 21, 2013, 11:50 AM EST

The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) will hold its 10th commencement on January 26 at the Eastern NY Correctional Facility in Napanoch, New York. BPI will award A.A. and B.A. degrees to 60 students, BPI's largest graduating class. The students include 56 men and four women earning 47 A.A. degrees and 13 B.A. degrees in social studies, literature and the humanities, and mathematics. The students' Senior Projects covered a range of topics, including chaos theory in math and ideas of democracy in antebellum literature. The commencement speaker will be Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts III, pastor of the nationally renowned Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City and president of the State University of New York (SUNY) College at Old Westbury.

"This month, the Bard Prison Initiative will graduate the largest number of incarcerated Bard students, women and men, in the program's history," said Max Kenner '01, BPI founder and executive director. "The breadth, rigor, and quality of these students' work mirrors the caliber of intellectual life on Bard's main campus. BPI alumni/ae go on to thrive in graduate school and careers in public service and the private sector—but most important, as parents, neighbors, and members of their communities."

Founded in 1999, the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) provides incarcerated men and women in five New York State prisons the opportunity to earn a Bard College degree while serving their sentences. The academic standards and workload are rigorous, based on an unusual mix of attention to developmental skills and ambitious college study. The rate of post-release employment among the program's participants is high and recidivism is stunningly low. By challenging incarcerated men and women with a liberal education, BPI works to redefine the relationship between educational opportunity and criminal justice.

As the largest program of its kind in the United States, BPI enrolls nearly 250 incarcerated men and women across a full spectrum of academic disciplines, and offers approximately 55 courses each semester at five New York State prisons: the maximum-security Green Haven, Coxsackie, and Eastern New York, and the medium-security Woodbourne and Bayview Correctional Facilities. Bayview, located in Manhattan, is one of the five state prisons for women in New York. Following the January 2013 commencement, Bard will have granted 250 degrees to BPI participants and educated more than 500 students.

Recently, BPI has been responding to students' demands for serious collegiate math education. BPI currently offers courses ranging from mandatory not-for-credit workshops in algebraic literacy to advanced course work for students pursuing a B.A. with a major in math. Since the inception of BPI's math program less than three years ago, 43 students have moved from basic algebra up through Calculus I. At this month's commencement, three BPI students will receive B.A. degrees in mathematics; eight students will start their B.A. studies in mathematics this spring.

BPI was founded in 1999 by Max Kenner '01, then a Bard undergraduate, who set out to engage Bard in the effort to restore meaningful education to the prison system. At the start, Kenner organized other Bard students to volunteer as tutors in local prisons. In 2001, BPI outgrew its role as a student organization and became an academic program of the College. In 2005, BPI awarded the first Bard College degrees to incarcerated candidates.

For more than 20 years, college-in-prison programs slashed rates of reincarceration from 60 percent to less than 15 percent. They were the most cost-effective form of public correctional spending. Despite these facts, funding for prison colleges was eliminated in 1995, at the peak of the "tough-on-crime" frenzy in American electoral politics. BPI is one of only a handful of existing programs of its kind left in the United States.

BPI has expanded its reach nationally. The Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison was created in 2009 to support innovative college-in-prison programs throughout the country. Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Grinnell College in Iowa, and Goucher College in Maryland have established programs, and the consortium, housed at Bard, is launching a partnership with Holy Cross College and the University of Notre Dame in Indiana this spring. Plans are underway to expand in two more states this year.

BPI is one of a number of projects at Bard College that seek to strengthen the importance of the liberal arts in public life. These include high school early colleges in the New York City and Newark, New Jersey, public school systems; a collegiate academy for young people in New Orleans; an honors college at Al-Quds University in the West Bank; and liberal arts colleges in St. Petersburg, Russia, and Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Graduates of the BPI program have consistently succeeded after release from prison. Some have chosen to work in human service organizations, serving people with AIDS, or become professional counselors for residents in city-based alternatives to incarceration. Several alumni/ae have worked their way up into management positions in an innovative, for-profit electronics recycling company. Other graduates have continued their educations, earning scholarships and working toward additional academic and professional degrees at top universities, including Columbia, NYU, CUNY, and the Yale Divinity School. As former President Bill Clinton observed in his book Giving, BPI "is a good investment in a safer, more productive society."



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