

The Post Athens - OU offers educational opportunity, degrees for students in prison (NY College program)

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Sean Bearden graduated with an associate's degree from Ohio University without stepping foot in Athens or outside of Collins Correctional Facility in New York.

Bearden is one of many students throughout the country who has taken OU courses through OHIO Correctional Education while in prison.

After getting charged with attempted assault at 19, he said he spent time in prison from 2005 to 2011 and started in OU's program in 2007 in Collins Correctional Facility.

"When I was incarcerated, I at first kind of avoided the idea of taking courses," Bearden said. "I didn't want to invest time in something that may not be accredited. ... My mother had found out about Ohio's program. So obviously Ohio was an accredited school, so it seemed like the best alternative."

He said he currently studies physics through a Ph.D. program at the University of California, San Diego, though he plans to transfer to Columbia University where he will receive the degree. After release from prison, Bearden attended the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he earned a bachelor's degree.

"The courses shaped me to go out and (pursue) my bachelor's and working on my Ph.D.," Bearden said. "People who may be in a similar situation in terms of, 'Is it worthwhile?' I'd definitely say, 'Yes it's worthwhile.' "

He added that if he had not taken courses from OU's correctional education program that fulfilled many of his general education requirements, he still would be studying as an undergraduate.

OHIO Correctional Education is a print-based program through eLearning OHIO, which also includes online courses, that offers four associate degree options, two bachelor degree options and legal studies certificates, according to an informational packet about the program.

Ohio residents in the program pay \$340 per credit hour and non-residents pay \$343 per credit hour, according to the packet.

Donna Burgraff, an associate professor of education who teaches in-person at OU's Chillicothe campus, online and print-based classes, said when she teaches incarcerated students they communicate through the mail because of the lack of technology access. For example, she will send teaching materials to the student, and the student will send back the completion of the assignment to be graded.

“It just takes me back to nostalgic times, and I just figure out a way to make it work,” Burgraff said. “Students still have to do the same amount of work. They still have to do the same rigor. There is no difference in that whatsoever. It’s just a different delivery.”

She added that the students she has taught who are in prison have been some of her best students.

“They’re great writers. They’re very conscientious,” Burgraff said. “For instance, I had a student who got a B on a lesson and wanted to re-do it ... to get an A. I’m like, ‘A B’s a really good grade and in the end, you’re probably gonna get an A in the course. I’m not really sure you should.’ But it was more kind of like, ‘That’s not good enough. I would love to re-do it to get a better grade.’ ”

She added that OHIO Correctional Education is a “great” program.

“I’m all about education making a difference in our lives because it has absolutely made a difference in mine,” Burgraff said. “Most of these incarcerated students, in fact I would assume all of them, are gonna get out one day. So why not come out and have a bachelor’s degree and make their employment options so much better. But even if they’re not coming out one day ... you never go wrong with trying to intellectually stimulate someone.”

Nicole Kaufman, an assistant professor of sociology and anthropology, has completed research on prisoner reentry into society.

“It’s incredibly frustrating because of all the setbacks that people have,” Kaufman said. “There is a very large amount of discrimination against people with records in the labor market and the housing market (as well). But also people who spend time in prison generally have lower educational completion and have fewer skills to begin with and shorter legitimate work histories.”

Bearden added that while in prison, he didn’t know how people in academia would react to his background.

“I didn’t know if that was constantly going to be an issue, and it’s not like you can really ask around and see if other people have had a similar experience ‘cause it’s not common thing,” he said. “So there was an idea in the back of my head that it might all be for nothing, but I mean it ended up working out.”

Kaufman said from the research she has seen, there are “big payoffs” from and “a great amount of need” for correctional education programs in prisons.

William Willan, the executive dean for Regional Higher Education, said it is not common for universities to offer correctional educational programs. Boston University, Cornell

University and Wesleyan University in Connecticut are a few other colleges that offer those programs.

“It's not something everyone does, and the fact that Ohio University makes that opportunity available, I think is something we should be proud of,” Willan said.

He said he has met with students who have gone through the program and have then come to Athens for commencement.

“They have just been absolutely, I guess, transformed, as a way of putting it, by the program,” Willan said. “Having achieved that education, they're trying to put it to use in ways that will benefit other prisoners often and to try to set an example of reformed lives.”