

AP: NYU starts associate's degree program at New York state prison with Ford Foundation grant

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ALBANY, New York — New York University has enrolled 36 inmates in English classes at Wallkill Correctional Facility in the Hudson Valley.

Their first courses are "Literary Analysis and the Politics of Interpretation" and "Critical Perspectives on Justice through Creative Writing." They take one or the other.

Backed by a \$500,000 Ford Foundation grant, NYU's new program began this semester and can lead to an associate's degree.

According to the university, credits earned at the medium-security prison in liberal arts, or future introductory courses from its professional schools, can apply later in continuing studies at NYU or transferred to other colleges.

"By expanding access to a university education to incarcerated students, the NYU Prison Education Program aims to help redress inequities that result from the fact that the United States incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world — over two million — the great majority of whom are poor, African-American, and Latino," said Nikhil Pal Singh, professor in NYU's Department of Social and Cultural Analysis and faculty director of the program.

Douglas Ward, program officer at the Ford Foundation on Higher Education for Social Justice, said supporting quality higher education in prisons helps break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

New York operates 54 prisons that hold almost 53,000 inmates, down from the historic high of 71,538 in 1999. That decline came partly from sentencing changes in Rockefeller-era drug laws that allowed treatment and diversion programs for some drug crimes.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo last year proposed funding college programs at 10 prisons, saying it would cut recidivism and crime and ultimately save money. He dropped it because of legislators' opposition to spending state money for prisoners when other families are struggling to pay for education.

The state corrections department partners with two-dozen colleges, including Cornell and Bard, to offer privately funded degree programs at 21 prisons. From 2006 through

2013 they awarded 324 certificates, 566 associate's degrees, 236 bachelor's degrees and 103 master's degrees.