



# HIGHER EDUCATION

## College opportunities in high-security prisons

BY INDIA DUKE, ODRC PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

**E**very year, millions of people across the country enroll in degree-granting colleges to further their education, hoping to land their dream jobs or create better opportunities for themselves post-graduation.

The same applies to many men and women in Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction’s (ODRC) prisons. The state has established relationships with local colleges to bring higher education to every prison, including high-security facilities.

Education in Ohio’s prison system is a concept introduced previously and can be traced back to 1884 when a night school was established at the Ohio Penitentiary. Nearly 100 years later, colleges and universities worked together to bring higher education within the prison walls in 1975. The most significant push for

education opportunities in Ohio’s prisons came in 1976 with the development of the Ohio Central School System (OCSS), which opened the doors for high school equivalency diploma programs, achievement and employability certificate programs to reduce barriers, and much more.

“Those earlier programs made way for the programming we have

today. It changed how we do education within this industry, but our goal has always been the same; to give people the best opportunity to succeed when released,” said OCSS Superintendent Jennifer Sanders.

Over the years, research has shown that education has a rehabilitative benefit and gives the people behind these walls an opportunity for a better life when they leave.<sup>1</sup> According to research presented by the Vera Institute of Justice, formerly incarcerated workers tend to have lower levels of education and less formal work experience leading to fewer employment opportunities. In some cases, this puts the population back into communities and possible situations that could result in criminogenic behavior.

In 1994 the Pell Grant was removed from the law, eliminating financial aid for incarcerated populations nationwide. During that time, Ohio continued to offer college opportunities despite the changes.

“Corrections is a people business. People and programming rehabilitate people, razor ribbon wire and other security measures do not,” said ODRC Director Annette Chambers-Smith. “Education is one of the most effective ways to reduce recidivism. It’s a necessity in corrections, not a privilege.” →



Jennifer Sanders, OCSS Superintendent

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Education is a tool to move people from one path to another through learning a skill, trade, or earning a degree. Post-secondary education in prisons has been proven to have numerous benefits for the incarcerated population outside of reducing recidivism rates.

The Urban Institute Justice Policy Center conducted a study finding that incarcerated adults have a renewed sense of purpose, a new interest in continuing further education, improved employment prospects, being able to set an excellent example in the community post-release, as well as creating a safer prison environment.<sup>2</sup>

“People in prison who enroll in education programs generally have improved or good behavior. It’s not hard to get into college while incarcerated; it’s hard to stay in,” said Sanders. “You have to show up and adhere to the rules of the program.”

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**— Jennifer Sanders, OCSS Superintendent**

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## **‘One more step’**

In Ohio, college courses of some level, whether taught in a classroom or through Google Chromebooks at their own pace, are available to the incarcerated population at all four high-security facilities, including three men’s facilities, Toledo Correctional Institution (ToCI), Southern Ohio Correctional Facility (SOCF), and Ohio State Penitentiary (OSP), and Dayton Correctional Institution (DCI), a women’s prison in housing some level 3 and level 4 incarcerated women.

With this addition, college and other educational opportunities are available in all 28 prisons across Ohio, no matter the security level.

“People generally think of options like college, any form of education or programming as a privilege and not what it really is, which is rehabilitation. So, if you think

about education as rehabilitation, it makes sense to put it in high security,” said Sanders.

Sanders worked with area colleges close to the prisons to bring in educators to assist ODRC teaching staff in implementing the college courses, including Ashland University, Sinclair Community College, Kent State University, Franklin University, North Central State Community College, and Marion Technical College, offering advanced job training in the form of associate and bachelor’s degrees.

“It honestly wasn’t a hard lift because we have a director who firmly believes in the research that shows that higher education or post-secondary education counts,” said Sanders. “I had no issues finding partners who were willing to do it because people believe in it. When people believe in something, they’ll do it.”



*Matt Denman,  
Deputy Warden  
of Special  
Services at ToCI*

Matt Denman, deputy warden of special services at ToCI, played a leading role in education at the high-security prison. He started as a GED teacher in 2013 and taught the population for six years helping over 100 incarcerated men graduate with their high school diplomas.

Before teaching the men anything, Denman took the time to understand the students and their backgrounds. Learning this information would be pivotal in shaping how he taught them and guiding their learning experience. From that information, he knew their aspirations and how he could mold their education.

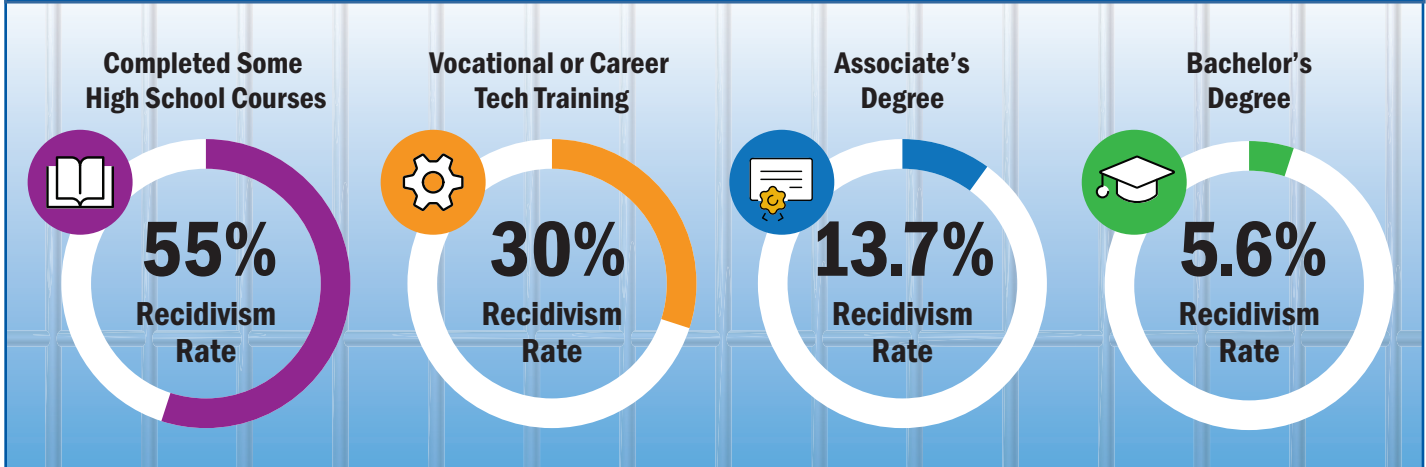
Denman said teachers who work with people in prisons are far more than just teachers; they’re often life coaches.

“We’d talk about job opportunities when they are released and how the things they were learning in the classroom were related to jobs they may get,” he said. “Many of my students were fathers, so they would talk to their kids about what they’re learning in school and how what we were doing related to that so that they could share those moments and experiences with their children.”

The men and women in Ohio’s high-security prisons are generally the state’s most at-risk population for



## Recidivism Rates of Formerly Incarcerated Individuals



\* Source: Emory University research.<sup>3</sup>

reoffending. Returning them to society without the proper foundation to make better choices could almost guarantee their return to criminogenic behaviors.

Research conducted by Emory University found that formerly incarcerated individuals who complete some high school courses have recidivism rates of around 55%.<sup>3</sup> The same study revealed that incarcerated adults with vocational or career tech training decrease the likelihood of recidivating to approximately 30%, an associate degree brings the rate down to 13.7%, and a bachelor's degree reduces it to 5.6%.

"When you look at anyone who's done any post-secondary education at all, not meaning that you completed a degree and became a bachelor's degree holder, but even if you just enroll in college classes or career tech program, all of those are one more step towards that, and the recidivism rates fall through the floor," said Denman.

OCSS has served and continues to assist thousands of incarcerated adults during the 2022 fiscal year, with 816 students earning high school equivalency certifications, 1,175 students receiving career technical education certifications, and, most of all, 3,209 students earning advanced job training certifications or degrees.

ToCI offers college courses through Ashland University, offering associate degrees in general studies with a concentration in business and a bachelor of arts in applied

communication, with minors available in business administration, business management, religion, sociology, or Christian ministries.

Benjamin, an incarcerated adult at ToCI, said he didn't think anything he did in prison would matter because being a felon would minimize his opportunities post-release.

"Now I look back, and I wish that I would've gone after my education since day one," he said. "I thought college was over for me, but I learned in here that you can still go to school or college, and they hire felons out there now."

Incarcerated adult Sharrod also took advantage of the education opportunities available during his time at ToCI.

"Not in my wildest dreams did I think that I would be in college right now. I have taken full advantage of this opportunity and want to do something different with myself," Sharrod said.

Before coming to prison, Sharrod was already a licensed barber. In prison, he has earned business certificates and provides haircuts for the incarcerated population. His original release plan was to work in a barbershop and cut hair, but opportunities inside the prison opened his eyes to new possibilities.

"Why work for somebody else when you can get the education and the skills to run a business, and you can just open up your own," he said. "I'm learning how to properly run a business so I can open my own when I get home."





## Success is not without challenges

While securing partnerships wasn't an issue for OCSS, internal challenges presented issues with setting up the courses. In addition to security and the need for restricted movement in the prison, scheduling was also an issue for the staff and the population.

"If education is scheduling someone who has to be in class for an hour and a half for five days a week, but recovery services need the same student for two and a half hours a day, five days a week, in addition to recreation time, we quickly run into a bottleneck where we can't get people into a program because they're already in another program," said Denman.

A solution to this problem came with the implementation of hybrid-style learning through Google Chromebooks and Google Classroom features.

The hybrid schedule offers two hours in the classroom and three or more hours on the Chromebook to work at their own pace to continue their learning. While the students can work on different education programs from Chromebooks, the college program at ToCI is entirely online.

This provides the population with the opportunity to participate in multiple programs without having to sacrifice one for the other.



Linda Meeks,  
Education  
Specialist  
at ToCI

Education Specialist Linda Meeks gets the population at ToCI acquainted with Chromebooks and has had a long career working with the incarcerated population. During her time, she's noticed factors outside of prison that may impact students' performance, creating another challenge.

"When something is going on at home, they shut down here," she said. "We try to instill in them that they will have to keep going even

if something is happening outside of here, and that can't prevent them from going to school."

Meeks said it's vital to continuously support incarcerated adults throughout their education journey to help build confidence and resilience.

"It's the first successful event some of them have had in school since they were young children," Meeks said.



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"It gives them hope and encouragement, which helps eliminate negative thinking and reinforces the idea that they don't have to return to the environment from which they came."

## Celebrate victories, big or small

The women at DCI also have the opportunity to take in-person college classes to get advanced job training and college degrees through Sinclair Community College.

Prior to coming to prison, Shelby went to school for nursing and has always had an interest in helping people and taking care of others.

Currently, she's taking three classes this term toward earning an associate degree in community and public services. She has taken about 20 other courses during her time in prison.

She was first introduced to the program shortly after going through reception.

"When I first got to Marysville (female reception center), the staff figured out if you have a degree or need a high school diploma. If you do, they give you the TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) test, and based on that score, they'll tell you that you can apply for school or direct you to the appropriate program," she said.

She has plans to be a counselor when she's released to continue helping others. Shelby said the opportunity to enroll in college while incarcerated has given her the purpose and motivation to make the most of the time she has.

"When you can make something good out of the bad, it really sticks with you. I just never thought that I would actually have the opportunity to better myself in

this environment, and there really are many opportunities,” Shelby said. “The women enrolled in these courses are taking real college classes, which is why we have to celebrate all victories, big or small.”

Other women in the prison who have graduated stay around to help other students who may feel unsupported or overwhelmed.

Joy graduated in 2022 from Sinclair Community College completing her associate degree, and now works assisting the teaching staff at the prison. She’s developed a closeness with the other incarcerated women making them comfortable to come to her for support.

“We lift each other up and keep each other going when we feel like we don’t want to. We’re a support system,” Joy said.

Joy said she got involved in the program to set an example for her children.

“I keep going for my daughters, and I just want to show them something different,” she said.

## Closing

Ohio is focused on changing the perception of education as only being a privilege for those who can afford it and have access to it.

“Our department returns around 18,000 people a year to communities when they are released from prison. People need to look at college as an investment. It is an investment in the human capital of Ohio,” Sanders said.

A large portion of the state’s incarcerated population will return to society someday. The incarcerated

population as a whole needs educational opportunities that can propel their lives forward after being granted a second chance. Those living in Ohio’s high-security facilities need those same opportunities just as much.

Education opportunities in Ohio will continue to grow and foster possibilities for the incarcerated men and women who need them.

“In Ohio, we have more jobs than we have people to fill them. I believe the people we release are a large part of the solution to Ohio’s employee shortage,” said ODRC Director Annette Chambers-Smith. “We have crafted our educational opportunities around Ohio’s in-demand jobs so our people will be welcomed into employment upon release.”

## ENDNOTES

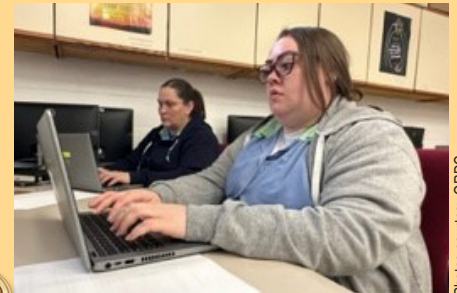
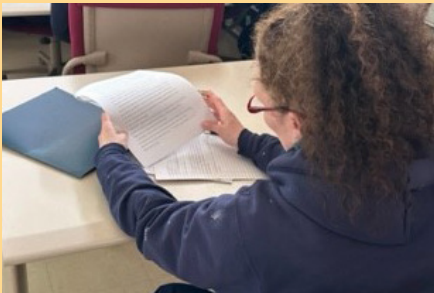
<sup>1</sup> Oxford, Patrick, et al. “Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison.” <https://www.vera.org>, Jan. 2019, [www.vera.org/downloads/publications/investing-in-futures.pdf](https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/investing-in-futures.pdf). Accessed 21 Mar. 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Winterfield, L., Coggeshall, M., Burke-Storer, M., Correa, V., & Tidd, S. (2009). The effects of post-secondary correctional education: Final report. Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center. Washington, DC.

<sup>3</sup> Zoukis, Christopher. *College for Convicts: The Case for Higher Education in American Prisons*. McFarland, 2014.



India Duke, a Cleveland, OH native and former reporter, is part of the communications team for the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. She obtained a bachelor’s degree in multiplatform journalism with a minor in sociology focused on criminology from Bowling Green State University and a master’s degree in journalism from Columbia University.



Photos courtesy ODRC

ORDC’s educational efforts take many forms.

