

Centralia College to Provide Education to Inmates

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Centralia College

The sun shines briefly on students walking in front of the Walton Science Center on the Centralia College campus.

Centralia College has been selected to participate in the new Second Chance Pell Pilot Program that will expand access to financial aid for incarcerated individuals.

It is one of three colleges in the state and 67 nationwide selected by the U.S. Department of Education for the program, which will allow eligible incarcerated adults to receive Pell grants and pursue postsecondary education, according to a press release. The goal is help the individuals get jobs and support their families when they are released.

Centralia College is partnering with Cedar Creek Corrections Center in Littlerock to provide Pell grants to 12 incarcerated individuals per quarter starting in the spring of 2017.

Information provided by Sen. Patty Murray's office said the Department of Justice funded a 2013 study from the RAND Corporation, which found incarcerated individuals who participate in correctional education are 43 percent less likely to return to prison within three years than prisoners who did not participate in any correctional education programs.

"The goal is to increase access to high-quality educational opportunities and help these individuals successfully transition out of prison and back into the classroom or workforce," said Leah Kennebeck, deputy press secretary for Murray, in an email to The Chronicle.

The program will allow the inmates to earn 45 of the core general education credits needed for an associate degree.

"These 12 inmates per quarter will be able to complete their first year of an associate degree before their release," Jacquie Armstrong, director of Corrections Education at Centralia College, said. "These courses were chosen because they are universally required for an associate or bachelor's degree and can be transferred anywhere in the state. It gives them a great head start to further education or job training, and puts them on a path to success after their release."

Eligible inmates must already have a high school diploma or equivalent, and will be chosen on several factors, including a demonstrated interest in higher education.

The college already partners with the corrections center to provide basic education for adults, GED preparation class and testing, basic computer and college readiness classes. It also provides programs in building trades, such as drywall, roofing, siding and horticulture.

"This is about giving people who have paid their debts to society a meaningful second chance," Murray said in a prepared statement to The Chronicle.

Murray strongly supports Pell grants, in part because they are what allowed her to attend college herself, said Kennebeck.

Murray added that the pilot program will help give individuals the opportunity to turn their lives around by entering higher education and pursuing a job to support themselves in an effort to avoid going back into the criminal justice system.

"Centralia College will be a great partner in this pilot project that will help create safer communities, reduce the impact of mass incarceration on families and ultimately help save taxpayer money," Murray said. "I am glad to continue working with them and the Department of Education to increase access to education to those who are often overlooked in our society."

Nationwide, 67 colleges and universities will partner with 141 federal and state penal institutions to enroll about 12,000 incarcerated students in educational and training programs. Through the pilot program, the institutions are able to provide federal Pell grants to qualified students who are incarcerated and are likely to be released within five years of enrolling in coursework, stated a press release.

The United States currently has the highest incarceration rate in the world with approximately 2.2 million people in prisons and jails.

"Access to high quality education is vital to ensuring that justice-involved individuals have an opportunity to reclaim their lives and restore their futures," Attorney General Loretta Lynch said in a release. "Through this partnership with the Department of Education and institutions of higher learning around the country, this program will help give deserving incarcerated individuals the skills to live lives of purpose and contribute to society upon their release. The

Department of Justice will continue to pursue additional efforts to reduce recidivism, promote opportunity, and give justice-involved individuals a meaningful second chance.”