

Prison Education Program Transforms Women's Lives

People frequently ask, "Why offer the liberal arts in a prison?"

Since January 2007, a few dozen women incarcerated at the [Tennessee Prison for Women](#) have used the liberal arts to imagine better lives for themselves and their families.

Each semester, they enroll in one of three courses in the [Lipscomb Initiative for Education](#) (LIFE) program.

These are traditional courses from the university's curriculum, relocated from the Green Hills campus to the women's prison in west Nashville.

Traditional [Lipscomb University](#) students frequently enroll in the course with their peers.

Although class sessions may meet behind rolls of razor wire, and some of the students wear state-issued uniforms, everyone is a degree-seeking Lipscomb student.

The first group of 15 LIFE students began with a class in criminal justice, taught by a state prosecutor. Last December, eight students received their associate of arts degrees.

In addition to earning 63 hours of college credit, the LIFE students also stretched their boundaries by producing and staging a play and publishing [Chiaroscuro](#), an annual creative arts journal.

Does it really work? Do the liberal arts really have the power to inspire a re-envisioning of our lives? Students in the LIFE program may be among the most credible spokespersons.

“‘Stupid.’ ‘Will never amount to anything.’ ‘Forever incompetent.’ That’s what I always believed about myself. These words played over and over in my mind, like a recording, telling me daily what a waste of space I was,” Michelle M said. “Then I was accepted into the LIFE program, and slowly those old recordings were erased. Now words like ‘smart,’ ‘competent,’ ‘alive,’ ‘worthy’ and ‘love’ replace those long-held negative beliefs.”

Erika P. shared: “I used to not care! I did not care about getting in trouble. I gave no thought to the ways I thought. I neither cared about the words that came out of my mouth, nor who I hurt with those words.”

“I didn’t care about my future, my education or the obstacles ahead, at least until I met a community of people who held me accountable for my attitude, actions and behaviors,” Erika said. “They showed me that I was not only hurting myself, but also the community around me. I used to not care until I enrolled in Lipscomb University.”

Another inmate student, Barbi B., said, “I now look forward to the many changes and challenges that are coming in my life. That is not something that I could have said seven years ago. I am now confident in my abilities and I look forward to the challenges that come with gaining success outside these walls.”

She said, “No experience could better prepare me to re-enter society, and for that reason LIFE affects everyone. Each person who interacts with a LIFE graduate will reap the benefits of this experience. They will meet a well-rounded woman with the ability and willingness to influence, in a positive way, her family, friends and community members.”

Upon release, several LIFE students have taken courses on campus. Not only have they developed a thirst for education, but they also report finding a community where they are welcome.


Lipscomb’s faculty and traditional students also gain a transformative experience.

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The prosecutor who taught the first LIFE course, for instance, changed jobs, choosing a different area of law after coming face to face with the women he was helping to put in prison. He is now involved in several restorative justice efforts.

What does it mean to engage in Christian higher education?

Perhaps it involves the transformation of how we see, and liberation of our imaginations.

 *Richard Goode, professor of history at Lipscomb University, coordinates Lipscomb Initiative for Education (LIFE) programs. This column is an adaptation of an article that first appeared in the university's Arts & Science Magazine.*

Editor's note: EthicsDaily.com's newest documentary, "[Through the Door](#)," shares stories about the positive impact of faith-based prison ministries, including at the Tennessee Prison for Women. To learn more, click [here](#). To order "Through the Door," click [here](#).