Established in August 1997, the College Program focuses on the links between educational opportunities and imprisoned women’s attempts to reenter society successfully. The program, housed within the Federal Prison Camp at Phoenix, was established by Dr. Peg Bortner, Director of the Center for Urban Inquiry, and is currently headed by Academic Professional Dr. Jolan Hsieh. They make the 80-mile round-trip visit to the prison each week to provide tutoring, mentoring, proctoring of exams, and liaison services for women pursuing AA degrees through distance learning courses at Rio Salado College and for those who transfer to Arizona State University to pursue four-year degrees. There are 45 to 50 students currently enrolled in college courses through the program. Course costs are paid by the prisoners’ families and friends; a limited number of scholarships, funded by community groups, have been available over the two past years. The program also includes a lending library of textbooks and literature.

A commitment to future possibilities for imprisoned women is central to the program. Inherent in the advocacy of educational opportunities is a rejection of portraits of imprisoned women as having unchangeable identities and destined for “lives of crime.” The program also challenges stereotypic images of imprisoned women as lacking academic and intellectual ability or interest. Many women’s lives have been marked by years of minimal opportunity for education, repeated messages of their failure as students, and early departure from school due to pregnancy and family responsibilities. These combine to create a widespread lack of self-regard and confidence, and the need for one-on-one tutoring, refresher courses, and encouragement.

The College Program embraces a vision of the complex personhood of imprisoned women, including their potential as human beings who are capable and, given structural encouragement, desirous of changing their and their children’s life chances within society. A poignant example of the program’s goals comes from an older student’s essay for her first philosophy course. Addressing the relationships between mind, body and the self, she provided a translation of Sartre’s notion of the never ossified, always evolving self. As Sartre says, “We got to keep on keeping on with the unfinished self to the end.” Belief in the unfinished self and a desire to provide a material and structural support for change are the basis for this educational partnership.

Drastic cuts in funding for education within prisons make it imperative that citizens become involved as educational advocates and providers. The program’s anticipated products are simultaneously straightforward and incalculable. We expect imprisoned women to complete college courses, to work toward two- and four-year degrees, and to prepare for their return to society and their families. These tangible, “practical” results are of great importance in this program, but the possibilities for other, far-reaching outcomes, however unknowable, are also crucial. The transformative powers of being treated with dignity and respect, as one whose potential is honored and nurtured, are of enormous consequence too, are the curative and life-restoring possibilities of education in its truest sense.
Please make checks payable to the ASU Foundation or give us your credit card information. Funds will be deposited with an account at the ASU Foundation (30-A-MPDN0002), a separate nonprofit organization that exists to support ASU.

Please support prison education and become a friend of the College Program—Education for Imprisoned Women!! Your payment may be considered a charitable contribution.

The College Program Impact:
Quotes from Students

“The college courses that I have taken, as well as the courses that other women here have taken, are a big help in increasing our self-esteem and self-worth. This opportunity gives us hope for a better crime-free future and gives us greater marketability upon our release.”

“I feel with these outstanding individuals’ help and the funding needed for this program, I can continue to educate myself and build marketable skills to return to society and be productive. This opportunity gives me another chance to prove my ability to succeed.”

“This program has provided me with opportunities that will help me overcome otherwise impossible situations by assisting me in having a productive and successful future.”

“Without the volunteer program, there would be no one to offer hope to us that we can change our behaviors and break the destructive patterns that led us to criminal associates and/or activities.”

“I have no one to blame but myself for being in the situation I’m in, but thanks to wonderful people with philanthropic hearts, as well as the invaluable assistance from the Arizona State University volunteers, I may yet be able to achieve my goal, as will other women who follow.”

“[The volunteers’] dedicated work and constant words of encouragement help many women, including myself, find the courage and self-esteem to charter the waters of taking college classes.”

Van Gogh (1853—1890)

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