

Vance-Granville Community College operates in several state prisons across North Carolina, as well as in the Butner Federal Correctional Complex in Butner, N.C., shown here. Vocational programs offered include welding and commercial driver's license training.



# Community Colleges and Workforce Training in the Criminal Justice System

Programs within and beyond prison walls provide opportunities for a new beginning

By Matthew Wells

**D**arrin Casper was ready to start fresh. “I was just tired of doing the things I was doing. I needed to do something different because I kept winding up in the same place,” says Casper, who was released in April 2024 after serving four and a half years in prison in North Carolina. “My family members have always been there for me, and I just needed to make the change.”

Casper’s aunt had been looking for local programs that could help him with the transition and eventually discovered the Craven-Pamlico Re-entry Council. Operated by Craven Community College, the council provides a range of services to formerly incarcerated individuals in Craven and Pamlico counties in eastern North Carolina, including housing and transportation assistance, skill

development, and job placement. Casper, who now works as a heating and air systems installer with the Coastal Carolina Disaster Resiliency Agency, credits the council with helping him manage his reentry.

“You have to make up in your mind that you’re ready,” he says. “But if you have people there to support you like the Craven-Pamlico Council, it makes it a lot easier.”

The adverse effects of incarceration can span generations. People who have served time in prison have lower employment and high school graduation rates, as do their dependents. Lower education levels have also been linked to an increased likelihood of being arrested and incarcerated, meaning those dependents are also more likely to spend time behind bars. At the same time, people exposed to the criminal justice system – both the incarcerated

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individuals and their families – are more likely to isolate themselves from others, spending less time participating in civic and social life.

That isolation can translate into an absence of personal and professional networks and a lack of confidence, making successful reintegration difficult. These individuals also face the stigma that comes with being convicted of a crime and sentenced to prison. Potential employers may not be willing to take a chance on hiring someone with such a background. A recent experimental study at the University of California, Berkeley found evidence for this stigma: College-educated men with criminal records received callbacks for a job opportunity half as often as those without a criminal record.

Criminal justice reformers have long advocated for policies and programs that might remove these kinds of barriers, allowing former prisoners the opportunity to find fulfilling work while contributing to the overall economic well-being of their communities. Community colleges, with their focus on local workforce training programs and a deep knowledge of their regions' employment needs of, are well situated to play a central role in those efforts. In the Fifth District, community colleges offer a variety of programs, some working within a state's prison system and others serving individuals like Casper who have recently been released. Both types of programs offer a combination of education, training and skill certification, and employment assistance.

## PREPPING FOR A NEW BEGINNING

Each year, about 10,000 people enter Virginia's labor force upon their release from the state's prison system. That's roughly the same number of people who graduate from George Mason University, the state's largest public post-secondary institution. To have a chance at successful reentry, these new labor force participants must have the necessary education and training. Community colleges like Southside Virginia Community College based in Emporia, Va., and Vance-Granville Community College in Henderson, N.C., offer programs for incarcerated individuals, giving them a chance to compete upon their release. Started in 1985, Southside's Campus Within Walls program currently operates in five correctional facilities in Virginia and offers associate degrees in general studies and business management, as well as vocational training in HVAC, solar panel installation and maintenance, and electricity. Vance-Granville operates in several state prisons across North Carolina, as well as the federal prison in Butner, N.C., near the Virginia border. The college offers several vocational programs, such as welding and what is commonly known as CDL, or commercial driver's license training.

Behind-the-wheel training is difficult in prison facilities for a host of reasons, but Vance-Granville makes sure that CDL students have completed all the classroom-based work they need while incarcerated and are lined up with on-the-road training soon after their release. Jerry Edmonds, the college's vice president of workforce and

community engagement, notes that during a typical Vance-Granville academic year upward of 20 incarcerated students receive a completion certificate for the written portion of the CDL course. These students are then better equipped to enter the workforce or enroll in the full Vance-Granville CDL program upon their release from incarceration.

Of the program's job fairs, "the students are saying, 'Wow, I really like what that truck organization had to say.' And those organizations can say, 'Hey, that student asked a great question,' and then ask the instructor about how they're doing," notes Edmonds.

Security concerns are one of the primary challenges confronting the community college administrators overseeing these programs. What is allowed in terms of instruction materials and technology can vary from facility to facility, and even within facilities. According to Angela Simmons, Vance-Granville's dean of workforce readiness, health, and public safety, one portion of the federal prison in Butner has a full welding operation, while in another portion with a higher level of security, she is working to bring in a robotics simulator that can mimic welding without any threat to security. Similarly, for the hands-on lab portion of its courses, Southside uses a mobile training unit at its campuses that is a tiny shed shaped like a house, with electrical wiring, a heat pump, and solar panels on the top. Amanda Cox, coordinator of Campus Within Walls, says Virginia's Department of Corrections has worked closely with her to ensure students at multiple facilities would have access to this training prior to their release.

These programs can face additional logistical hurdles. Classes can be canceled because of incidents beyond students' control elsewhere in the prison. Inmates, particularly in state prisons, can be transferred at any moment to a new facility outside of the community college's service area, meaning work can be lost or courses left incomplete. Additionally, space to conduct classes or study can be scarce, making it difficult to scale programs.

Prisons also typically do not give inmates internet access, and while instructors can work around that limitation, it can complicate students' efforts to file their Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) and receive funding to pay for classes. When done online, the process takes a matter of days. Paper filings, which inmates typically use, can take six to eight weeks. This can cause significant delays for the programs themselves. Cox, however, notes that, again, the Department of Corrections has been working with her to find a way forward so that classes can begin on time and keep up with the college's calendar.

These programs rely on a mix of full-time community college professors and adjunct instructors hired through job postings or word of mouth. At Campus Within Walls, Cox provides instructors who are new to the program with a 10-page manual full of what they need to know – from what they should wear, to expectations regarding fraternization, to whether plastic or metal paper clips are allowed.



## FINDING YOUR FOOTING ON THE OUTSIDE

To assist in an individual's reentry into society, correctional facilities might offer counselors in the months leading up to their release, helping them find housing, employment, substance abuse counseling (if applicable), and other assistance. In the Fifth District and beyond, inmates might also receive a reentry resource packet, with information about benefits eligibility and links to additional resources and services, such as a local reentry council. Many of these reentry councils operate at the county or regional level and are run by various nonprofit organizations or the local community college, such as Craven Community College in the case of Craven and Pamlico counties.

Established in 2011 as a Department of Justice program, the Craven-Pamlico Re-entry Council has been funded by the North Carolina Department of Adult Corrections since 2017. It operates on a \$225,000 annual budget and currently has over 200 active clients with 18 to 20 new individuals starting each month. Angela Wilson, the council's coordinator at Craven Community College, says the "intention is for the individual to find out about us while they're still incarcerated, so they have a path to us when they get out. But because jails and prisons are short staffed, they don't always get that information, and they find out mostly through their probation officers once they're on the outside."

The Craven-Pamlico Re-entry Council and similar programs offer a full range of support services for individuals who have been released from the criminal justice system. Perhaps its hallmark offering is a free, intensive two-week Job Readiness Boot Camp, where participants learn basic computer skills (such as word processing and internet and email use), gain some economic literacy (such as learning how to open a bank account), identify potential career paths, craft a resume, and practice interviewing for jobs. Darrin Casper participated in the boot camp, and he notes that everything from brushing up on computer skills and learning how to use a cell phone to participating in practice interviews was invaluable, likening the experience to time with a life coach.

"Everything was designed to get you back out there," he says. "I was able to be around other people in my situation who were just as determined as I was to do something right and get back on the right track."

Boot camp participants also get connected with NCWorks, the state's career center and job board. Toward the end of the two weeks, the boot camp arranges worksite visits for participants to meet with hiring managers for in-demand jobs, such as forklift operator or truck driver. While the boot camp originated at Craven, it is now available statewide at all 58 of North Carolina's community colleges.

Whether an individual wants to enroll in school or enter the workforce, the boot camp is also an opportunity for individuals to gain familiarity with everyday social interactions and to develop coping skills. Life in prison operates along a different set of social norms and "if you

take someone who has been incarcerated for 10, 15, or 20 years, you just can't bring them into a workplace or classroom and expect that they're going to know how to function overnight," says Edmonds of Vance-Granville Community College.

Beyond the boot camp, the Craven-Pamlico Re-entry Council also has a part-time job placement specialist, Bonita Simmons, whose commitment extends well beyond lining up employment. She also ensures newly released individuals have stable housing (she started My Sister's House, a group home for women in the program) and can secure basic needs like food, clothing, and child care. Participants are also registered as Craven Community College students, allowing them to earn continuing education credits and have their participation noted on their transcripts. Those continuing education courses can include CDL classes, forklift certification, and HVAC training, all of which are paid for by the council. The CDL and forklift classes are the most popular, as they are closest thing to a direct pipeline to employment thanks to the high demand. Forklift operators can make anywhere from \$17 to \$30 an hour, while CDL drivers can earn between \$40,000 and \$76,000 annually.

These initiatives require the participation of the local community, which means the council's outreach to businesses is a high priority. Simmons, the job placement specialist, also does the lion's share of that work, helping eliminate stigma and assisting employers in understanding the value these job applicants bring to the workplace. A crucial selling point is that the council uses a federal bonding program that protects employers from any responsibility should a participant engage in any unlawful actions while on the job.

## EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

The direct costs of incarceration are high. With almost 2 million people currently behind bars in the United States, the Prison Policy Initiative estimates that after accounting for housing, health care, policing, and other expenses, the total annual system cost comes out to at least \$182 billion. A 2023 report by the Vera Institute of Justice, a criminal justice reform advocacy organization, found that participating in prison-based college education could reduce recidivism rates by 66 percent, and a 2019 Vera report estimated that increasing education access could collectively save states over \$365 million annually.

Other studies also support the effectiveness of educational investments for those serving time behind bars. A 2020 study by Rebecca Silbert, now of the University of California, Berkeley, and Debbie Mukamal of Stanford University looked at how inmates throughout California's correctional facilities performed in their coursework relative to their nonincarcerated counterparts across the state community college system. They found that incarcerated students taking the same courses as those on campus earned a higher proportion of As, and a higher proportion passed those courses with a grade of C or better. The

study also looked at formerly incarcerated students taking courses on campus and found that the median semester grade for those students was higher than the median grade for the whole student body. The authors of the study argued the results “reinforce research demonstrating the strength and potential of this new generation of students and justify increased public and private support for college programs.”

Recent research has also found evidence that these programs reduce recidivism and increase the likelihood of post-release employment. In a 2023 article in the *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, economists Ben Stickle and Steven Sprick Schuster of Middle Tennessee State University found that vocational training like that offered by community colleges yields the largest returns, with a \$3.05 total benefit for every dollar spent per student. When looking at the effects of these programs on keeping people from reoffending and returning to prison, Stickle and Sprick Schuster found that vocational education reduces recidivism by 4.17 percent, while college education does so by 12.74 percent. Further, in-facility programs decrease recidivism by between 16 percent and 19 percent and increase post-release employment by 3.1 percentage points and quarterly wages by \$141.

Beyond the benefits accruing to these individuals looking to start anew, community college-led education and workforce training programs can also benefit local and regional businesses and economies. Terri Erwin, the director of the Virginia Consensus for Higher Education in Prison, argues that this population is important to economic growth.

“The business community is starting to really tune in to the idea that we simply can’t afford to miss this population in terms of workforce contribution,” she says.

Community colleges see themselves as an integral part of that effort, creating wins for individuals, employers, and larger communities. Craven Community College, for example, takes pride in what it sees as a reputation for making good things happen for the community.

“We’re stable. We’ve been here 60 years. All the doors are always going to be open,” says Gery Boucher, Craven’s vice president for development. “We’re not just coming and going like some nonprofits. A lot of people entrust the college to make things work within the community. Community members – county managers, the sheriff,

residents — all have a vested interest. That’s the power of the community college. It’s local.”

## OBSTACLES TO OVERCOME

Despite indications of success, administrators of these programs highlight some hurdles. Cox of Campus Within Walls notes that colleges can have difficulty tracking participants’ progress once they are no longer incarcerated unless they choose to continue their education at Southside.

Additionally, these programs rely on a diverse range of funding sources that are not always consistent or guaranteed. In North Carolina, community colleges like Vance-Granville receive a set amount of funding from the state annually, and then the colleges work with the correctional institutions to develop a course schedule based off that amount. This can lead to fluid program offerings that change regularly. Additional funding for job placement services can come through other state and federal government grants, and private philanthropy also plays a role.

Perhaps most crucially, many inmates seeking to continue their education while in prison receive a significant portion, if not all, of their funding through the Pell Grant program, which provides Department of Education grants for low-income students. The 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act barred incarcerated individuals from receiving Pell Grants, but a pilot project begun in 2015, Second Chance Pell, made these grants available on a limited basis, including to Southside’s Campus Within Walls students. In 2023, the federal government announced full Pell eligibility would be restored to incarcerated individuals enrolled in an approved prison education program, but it will not be available for all inmates until 2026. For programs like Southside’s Campus Within Walls and the ones at Vance-Granville, as well as any postsecondary institution offering instruction within prison walls, the Pell program is crucial to their survival.

When asked how things might have been different if he didn’t connect with the Craven-Pamlico Re-entry Council, Casper says, “I can’t imagine what I would have been doing. I’m sure I would have been lost because with the background that I have, jobs would have been extremely hard to find.” **EF**

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