

Inmates at the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility receive their college degrees

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More than 180 inmates receive degrees or educational certificates

"ISU was the first college provider starting in the fall of 1994 with 12 students. The number of graduates [at the correctional facility] has grown since, now with 186 graduates for 2006/2007. That is also up from 150 for 2005/2006."

Karen Richards,
Supervisor of education "

By Howard Greninger

The Tribune-Star

Carlisle - John E. Wallace Jr. knows he has many more years to serve in a state prison, yet has taken steps to improve himself, as one of 122 graduates to go through a graduation ceremony Thursday in the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility.

The correctional facility had 182 people this year receive educational certificates or degrees.

Wallace Jr., 32, received a bachelor's degree in business management from Grace College.

It took 4 1/2 years to complete his degree. He received his degree in December, taking part Thursday in the once-a-year graduation ceremony.

"At first it was tough, not being in school for a long time," he said, adding the last time he was in a formal school setting was in ninth grade. He earned a GED in prison before starting college studies in 2001.

"Growing up, I didn't think I was the school type, so that is why I dropped out in the ninth grade. Then another fellow inmate said I should try to go to college.

"It has been a struggle. I had to eat, sleep and drink it, but it has all paid off and is well worth it," he said.

Wallace said he wants to be a substance-abuse counselor after serving his prison sentence. He plans to take a college course to obtain a substance-abuse counselor certification.

He also is a graduate of, and now a mentor for, the facility's PLUS, which stands for Purposeful Living Unit Served, a 16-month rehabilitation program that also performs community service. An example of a PLUS project is making quilts for families of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan for the state of Indiana as well as fundraising for The Villages, a foster care organization.

"I have been locked up 10 years and have stayed out of trouble, trying to prove myself that I want another chance out there and be a productive citizen. I have never been a productive citizen, always been a taker instead of a giver. Now I have learned different skills that have helped and aided me to be a giver instead of a taker," Wallace said.

"I appreciate this prison with everything they have offered and given us. The prison is starting to be more rehabilitative instead of just warehousing us, sticking us in a cell and say 'see you in another 25 years,'" he said.

Wallace was 23 when he was sentenced in Clay County to serve a 65-year prison sentence for murder. Wallace admitted suffocating and stabbing a 53-year-old Brazil woman, Marilyn Jo Ann Cooper.

His mother, Cathy Tarwater, 49, of Brazil, attended the graduation ceremony on Thursday.

"It is a great accomplishment for him. He has got in him what I didn't realize he had in him. He has learned a lot and wants to keep learning and get all the experience that he can get out of college degrees and everything he can try to accomplish while he is here," she said.

"Instead of wasting his time, he is using his time. I am really proud of him," Tarwater said. "I think he overcame whatever downfalls he had and is trying to show everybody what he truly is."

Stephen F. Mooney, 41, will be released Aug. 1 after serving two years for dealing in cocaine. He received a vocational certificate in computer graphics from Vincennes University. He plans to use the knowledge to help advertise a business he plans to start with his father, Lawrence Mooney, in Oaktown.

The business is a lawn-care service business. "I think this program has helped me a lot. It was hard because I had not used my brain since I was troubled with drugs. It took me nine months to complete. It's a satisfying feeling," Mooney said.

The correctional facility, which began educational programs in 1992, has been staging graduation ceremonies since 1993. About 21 percent of the prison population is involved in academic programs, said Jack Hendrix, assistant superintendent of re-entry.

"That's about 450 people in academic programs," Hendrix said. Indiana State University has the largest number taking courses, with about 150 students.

Hendrix said the facility in the past two years has received increased resources from the state, resulting in a 19 percent increase in the number of graduates.

Karen Richards, supervisor of education, said "ISU was the first college provider starting in the fall of 1994 with 12 students. The number of graduates [at the correctional facility] has grown since, now with 186 graduates for 2006/2007. That is also up from 150 for 2005/2006."

Those figures include high-school GED graduates who took courses through Vincennes University. This year, that program had 79 graduates, and Vincennes also had 43 graduates with vocational degrees; ISU had 35 graduates with an associate of arts degree and six with bachelor of science degrees; while Grace College had 13 associate of arts degrees and 10 bachelor of science degrees.

Rich Larsen, spokesman for the correctional facility, said GED and vocational education programs are funded by the state at a cost of about \$900,000 a year. People seeking college degrees must pay for their studies and can apply for grants from the state, he said.

Since 1992, there have been 1,197 GED certificates awarded; 152 vocational certificates; 344 associate's degrees; and 101 bachelor's degrees at the correctional facility.

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About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.