

St. Louis County Jail offers inmates college courses to help them earn a degree

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Andrea Henderson / St. Louis Public Radio

Students at St. Louis County Jail listen to history professor Jamie Christy discuss how to accurately analyze a historical document. The students say the courses are rigorous but keep them motivated.

St. Louis County jail detainees who have a high school diploma can now take college credit courses through St. Louis Community College.

Inmates can take up to two classes a semester and earn three credits for each eight-week session. Students can transfer their credit hours to any higher education institution in Missouri.

This program can help inmates successfully assimilate back into the community after they are released and help keep them from committing crimes, St Louis County Jail Director Scott Anders said.

“In terms of finding employment, education level is very important as well,” Anders said. “Also, people that are fully employed are much less likely to commit offenses.”

The jail offers college preparatory classes and GED courses, but this is its first time it has offered inmates a chance to earn college credits toward a degree.

Jail officials have considered giving inmates an opportunity to participate in the community college’s Progress Attained through College Education program for a few years. Anders noticed that fewer than half of the county jail’s inmates had a high school diploma and none had a college degree. He said that showed him the jail needed to establish a program to help inmates receive a college degree.

“The goal is not for them just to complete the classes here, it’s for them to continue on with their education when they’re released,” Anders said.

Program officials asked inmates if they were interested in signing up to take college courses. After the college determined which inmates did not have a high school diploma, already have college credits or were set to be released, it found that only 13 inmates were eligible to take the first semester courses — History 101 and Reading 100. Students attend classes for three hours a day, four days a week.

Next semester, the students will take either a communications or math course.

During a recent history class at the jail, Jovotiney Powell sat at the back of class taking copious notes on how to analyze a primary source document. He has been in county jail for nearly three years. He is awaiting trial on charges of second-degree murder, armed criminal action and unlawful possession of a firearm.

Powell, 31, said he typically signs up for all educational programs the jail offers, but he was especially interested in taking college courses because he believes it can add value to his life.

“I’ve been learning ... just little things that probably might not seem interesting to certain other people, and it contradicts what I have learned when I was younger,” Powell said. “So, I mean, it’s new to me. I’m open to the information more than I was before.”

He plans to continue taking classes to earn an associate degree. He wants to be an example for those who do not have hope.

“I really want to be that role model, that leading force for people that are in the streets and that think that life is bleak,” Powell said. “It’s most definitely opportunities out here for people that get in trouble.”



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