



Wisconsin Department of Corrections

Governor Tony Evers | Secretary Jared Hoy

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UW System awards first bachelor's degrees to incarcerated students in more than 50 years

Workforce Innovation Grant fuels economy and second chances

MADISON, Wis. – Cristobal Guerrero-Kresovich's world is expanding. He's currently working a job in the community and making plans for a brighter future.

“I'm looking forward to turning in my blue collar for a white collar,” Guerrero-Kresovich said. “When I go to the job board and it says ‘bachelor's degree required,’ I know in 60 days I'll be able to apply for those positions.”

Guerrero-Kresovich is one of the first incarcerated individuals to earn a UW bachelor's degree through the Prison Education Initiative, a UW-Madison project that builds partnerships between the Universities of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC).

“I would say education is the best rehabilitation there is,” said Guerrero-Kresovich, who now resides at Thompson Correctional Center. “It trumps anything that anyone could do inside the prison system.”

The Prison Education Initiative was launched in 2022 with a \$5.7 million Workforce Innovation Grant. The grants were created by Governor Tony Evers as part of an historic \$128 million effort to prepare Wisconsin workers for the economy of the future. The grants were administered by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) and the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD).

“Wisconsin believes in second chances,” said Gov. Evers. “Investing in education in correctional facilities is a common-sense strategy to meet our economy's need for skilled workers and to help individuals gain the skills needed to succeed in our communities. But growing beyond one's past

mistakes doesn't happen by accident. This accomplishment is a testament to the hard work these students have done to overcome obstacles and work toward a better life for themselves and their families."

Since launching in 2022, the initiative has helped more than 200 students earn associate's degrees or other UW credentials designed to increase post-release employment opportunities, reduce recidivism and build stronger communities across Wisconsin.

The bachelor's degrees celebrated during graduation ceremonies this week at Oakhill Correctional Institution and Stanley Correctional Institution are the first that any UW has awarded to incarcerated individuals since 1975.

"Education can have a powerful impact on lives," DOC Secretary Jared Hoy said. "That's especially true in a prison environment. These students aren't just preparing for a career. They are learning how to contribute positively to society. The average incarceration in Wisconsin is less than three years. These individuals will quickly have the opportunity to put their education to work and help move Wisconsin forward."

The Prison Education Initiative began by supporting UW-Madison courses at Oakhill Correctional Institution. Today, UW-Eau Claire, UW-Green Bay, UW-Madison, UW-Milwaukee and UW-Stout offer courses at 11 DOC facilities across the state.

UW-Green Bay is awarding 15 current or former Oakhill Correctional residents bachelor's degrees with eight additional students earning associate's degrees this week. At Stanley Correctional Institution, eight students will earn bachelor's degrees from UW-Eau Claire and six from UW-Stout.

UW programs for incarcerated learners are offered primarily face to face inside the prisons and focus on skill development in communication, management and leadership.

UW-Green Bay offers a bachelor's degree program at Oakhill, Redgranite and Kettle Moraine Correctional Institutions, an associate degree program at Oakhill, Oshkosh and Taycheedah Correctional Institutions, and college jumpstart courses at Green Bay Correctional Institution.

UW-Eau Claire and UW-Stout offer bachelor's degree programs at Stanley Correctional Institution.

UW-Madison delivers college jumpstart courses through its Odyssey Beyond Bars program at Oakhill, Racine, Columbia, Waupun and Taycheedah Correctional Institutions, and horticulture courses through the Division of Extension at Sturtevant Transitional Facility.

UW-Milwaukee delivers courses at Racine Correctional Institution.

"These students have demonstrated remarkable resilience and dedication in pursuing their degrees and other credentials," said UW-Madison Provost John Zumbrennen. "The Prison Education Initiative is built on the understanding that higher education is a powerful catalyst for change. When we invest in the intellectual growth of incarcerated learners, we aren't just

supporting their personal success — we are strengthening our communities and building a positive future for all of Wisconsin."

The Prison Education Initiative is one of 27 Workforce Innovation Grants jointly administered by WEDC and DWD. The grants support innovative solutions to the state's workforce needs. The Prison Education Initiative is additionally supported by Ascendium Education Philanthropy, the Oscar Rennebohm Foundation, the Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment, and individual donors.

"The Prison Education Initiative is helping graduates find career paths that can open new opportunities in their lives," said John W. Miller, secretary and CEO of WEDC. "It's also opening up a whole new talent pool of qualified workers for businesses across our state."

Beyond the Prison Education Initiative efforts, DWD has long supported and aided DOC's efforts to support residents as they reenter the community and the workforce. The department helps to coordinate services in 17 job labs at DOC facilities and two at Probation and Parole offices in the community.

"Prison education systems and job training programs in correctional facilities are transformational for people reentering our communities after incarceration – not only reducing recidivism but also strengthening families and our state," said DWD Secretary Amy Pechacek. "We're proud to partner with WEDC and DOC on efforts like the Prison Education Initiative and DWD's correctional job labs to prepare Wisconsinites who are incarcerated to find and keep a job upon release."