

Econo-College

North Carolina inmates get a chance for a college education

by Gloria Sajgo
Asst. Features Editor

Seven inmates from the Orange County correctional unit near Hillsborough are commuting to the UNC campus for classes under a new program, Econo-College.

Econo-College, in cooperation with Vocational Rehabilitation and North Carolina Department of Correction, is financing the opportunity for inmates to take college courses while serving sentences.

The program is an outgrowth of the 2-year-old Outreach Program developed by UNC's Extension Division to offer correspondence courses to inmates.

While Outreach is funded by outside foundations and matching funds from UNC and the N.C. Department of Corrections, Econo-College is federally funded. Last September, UNC received a \$87,730 grant from Title I the Higher Education Act of 1965 to start the 18-month program.

Aside from study-release projects, Econo-College also offers college-level correspondence courses and a psychology course taught at the prison.

To be eligible for Econo-College, a prospective student must have an honor

grade status for acceptable behavior in a minimum security unit, a high school diploma (or equivalent) and at least six months remaining before being eligible for release or parole.

The staff and advisers of the N.C. Department of Correction select inmates for the program on the basis of whether college-level study is likely to increase the applicant's chances for successful re-entry into the community.

Inmates receive a grade and three college credits for each course successfully completed. John Latshaw, Outreach Program coordinator, explained that these credits would increase an inmate's chances for future employment or for college entry after parole or release.

"I don't know of any other place where an inmate can come to prison without a high school diploma and end up with a college degree," student-inmate Lonnie McLeod said of the program.

Most inmates feel they have been received favorably by regular UNC students. "The first statement I made in my classes was that I was an inmate, and I was openly accepted," McLeod said.

"In the past," he added, "the only thing society offered an inmate was punishment. Now society is offering us a chance to have a feeling of belonging."

Another student from the unit, William "Snake" Cogdell, said, "My identity is no secret. People are very friendly and helpful. Coming to UNC has been nothing near to the devastating experience I had anticipated."

But one inmate explained his main purpose at UNC was to study, not to socialize. "Nobody is aware of my identity," he said. "I keep to myself — there's a lot of difference between free people and inmates."

"Take the language they use. When one inmate talks with another one, he uses what



Staff photography by Warnock-Lozano Industries

Student inmates relax between classes

we call chain gang language."

Econo-College has introduced the inmates to new occupational opportunities. For example, McLeod said he plans to major in sociology. "I want to stay in North Carolina and get a job as a prison counselor."

"I believe that the key word in prisons should be redirection not rehabilitation. Rehabilitation means to restore back to the way it was; that is the last thing we need. We came into prison because we couldn't meet society's demands."

One inmate who prefers to be unnamed said he is majoring in chemistry. "After I get off Conditional Release, I plan to go Canada to obtain citizenship and work as a chemist," he said. "I couldn't find a job here as a chemist, because there is too much discrimination against people who have a record."

Econo-College seems to have both positive and negative potential, Roy Eve,

McLeod's sociology teacher, said. Eve explained the program can help the inmates become disinstitutionalized.

"People who have lived in institutions tend to lose their sense of identity," he said. "Often when they are released they want to go back because they had no responsibilities there."

Eve said the inmates on study-release are often resented by inmates who never leave the unit. "They see him (the inmate on study-release) as a 'kiss-ass' because he is not following the inmate code," he said. "He is associating with those outside. But an inmate must realize he has other friends outside (the prison)."

Eve said he believes that if an inmate succeeds in study-release his self image will improve. "When a person has an education, the social structure opens up, and he has the opportunity to reach those goals society considers important," he said.

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