



Saving grace:

Mississippi inmate first to earn associate of arts degree in prison

Shannon Hinton was a bundle of nerves as she walked into a room of her peers, instructors and other well-wishers. The 46-year-old started college just out of high school, but marriage and a family got in the way and she stopped taking courses.

Then in 2019, Hinton, of Hattiesburg, was convicted of a crime that landed her in Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women (MCIW), where she is serving 15 years without parole. For Hinton, the worst part about being behind bars is missing her teenage son and daughter. Her saving grace: the opportunity to earn the degree she gave up on more than two decades ago.

On July 29, Hinton, a graduation class of one, donned a Hinds Community College cap and gown adorned with a yellow sash and an honors cord, becoming the first person to earn an associate of arts degree while incarcerated in a Mississippi prison. Her black and white striped prison-issue pants peeking out from under the dark gray gown, Hinton graduated magna cum laude and became a member of Phi Theta Kappa honor society.

Graduation attendees cheered loudly for Hinton, giving her a standing ovation after Hinds President Dr. Stephen Vacik handed her a diploma.

“I knew I wanted to finish what I started,” a tearful Hinton said after the ceremony. She had promised her now-deceased parents she would complete her education. “It’s what has kept me going.”

Dr. Vacik said the formerly incarcerated often return to society with no job opportunities. The Prison Education College Program provides inmates with the education they need for a strong future after they serve their time.

“I think that’s our job – to help people find their better life,” said Dr. Vacik, who also supported higher education in prisons while working in Kansas and Kentucky. “Every time, I’ve continued to see the benefits. This is one graduate, but she is the first of what I hope are going to be many.”

In 2021, Hinds began offering for-credit courses in Mississippi prisons with financial support from the Mississippi Humanities Council (MHC) via a Mellon Foundation grant. MHC paid for Hinds instructors and books for in-prison courses and Hinds provided free tuition to inmates. This academic year, however, MHC will no longer be able to offset the cost of books and teachers. Hinds is working with Woodward Hines Education Foundation and the Mississippi Community College Board to identify funding for the 2025-2026 school year, according to Dr. Thomas Ware, Hinds CC Vice President of Instruction – Academic, Transfer & Health Sciences.



During the 2024-2025 academic year, nine Hinds faculty members taught 363 credit hours to about 35 incarcerated men and women. The students' cumulative GPA for the year was 3.66 on a 4.0 scale. For the fall semester, 45 incarcerated students – men and women on the Central Mississippi Correctional Institute (CMCI) campus where MCIW is located – are enrolled in for-credit classes. Five inmates are expected to earn associate degrees from Hinds in the spring.

Mississippi Department of Corrections Commissioner Burl Cain said fewer inmates will return to prison after release because of the educational opportunities.

“So many people in prison missed their educational opportunities, and for them to truly rehabilitate, the community colleges are helping to bridge that gap with prisoners,” Cain said. “Therefore, they will be more successful when released, having taken advantage of these educational opportunities.”

Carla Falkner, prison program coordinator for MHC, said many inmate students have never had a positive education experience. When they discover they can learn, it can be life changing, Falkner said.

“How do students do in prison?” Falkner said. “Our instructors repeatedly tell us what a joy they are to teach. They read the material. They go the extra mile. They are so determined and involved and engaged. I’ve heard over and over from teachers who say, ‘This is my favorite class to teach.’”

Hinds Psychology Instructor Dr. LaShonda McDonald-Graham, who taught Hinton and attended the graduation, has taught at the women’s prison for three semesters. She called her students an inspiration. They are motivated to learn, she said.

“They say I inspire them, but they inspire me. They have gone through so much in life. This opportunity for them is testament to God’s grace,” Dr. Graham said.

In Graham’s psychology class, Hinton was quiet but resilient and persistent in reaching her academic goals, Dr. Graham said. She is a mother figure to the other women, Dr. Graham said.

“When she spoke, they listened,” Dr. Graham said. “She has a very sweet spirit and is a straight A student.”

Hinton’s classmates are proud of their friend.

“It’s huge because she is the first to receive an academic degree on this soil,” said Tasha Shelby, 50, who has been incarcerated since 2000.

Shelby, on track to earn an associate of arts degree from Hinds in 2026, is serving a life sentence for capital murder. She did not graduate from high school but earned her adult equivalency diploma while in prison. Before Hinton’s graduation ceremony, Hinton, Shelby and 12 other women inmates received certificates for completion of Hinds’ quantitative reasoning course.

Torri Sanders, 47, said she and others can’t wait to follow in Hinton’s footsteps. Society “counts you out” when you are incarcerated, she said. Sanders is serving life for a murder conviction and has been in prison 23 years.

“I would like to be a history major and a public speaker. I already teach a reentry program in the prison,” Sanders said.

Education is key to closing the revolving prison door, she said. While her first parole hearing won’t occur until she’s been locked up for 42 years, she is passionate about bettering herself and those around her.

“With education there is power,” Sanders said.

Mississippi has an incarceration rate of 1,020 per 100,000 people (including prisons, jails, immigration detention and juvenile justice facilities) and locks up a higher percentage of its people than any independent democratic country on earth, according to Prison Policy Initiative. Mississippi’s rate also dwarfs the U.S. incarceration rate of 614 per 100,000 people.

~ Continued on next page.



Alumni Updates

~ *Saving Grace continued.*

According to a World Population Review report, the three-year recidivism rate in Mississippi is approximately 36.8 percent and Mississippi's five-year recidivism rate is more than double the three-year rate, reaching 77 percent.

Providing inmates with higher education is a well-supported method to reduce recidivism. Many incarcerated individuals lack basic literacy, a high school diploma or equivalent, and the occupational skills necessary to secure a job. Moreover, having a felony conviction can be a significant barrier to finding employment after prison. One proven strategy for enhancing successful reentry is to provide education to inmates while incarcerated, so they have knowledge, training and skills to support a successful return to society.

Dr. Vacik said Hinds may consider expanding its current offerings to the prisons to include career-tech programming, so inmates get the training needed to obtain available, high paying jobs when they are released.

Hinds is in the process of obtaining approval from state and federal authorities for Mississippi inmates to participate in the federal Pell Grant program, which could kick off in fall 2026, Dr. Ware said. The program could drive an expansion of prison higher education offerings, Dr. Vacik said. The grants would cover all college costs for incarcerated students who qualify.

Hinton now has her eye on completing a bachelor's degree in business administration.

Dr. Vacik said Hinton told him getting her degree was hard, but she persevered and did not let opportunity pass her by, he said.

"She could have just said, 'you know what? I'm just going to sit here and wait my time out,'" Dr. Vacik said. "For the unemployed mother of three who doesn't know what to do, she's an example for her. I know how much this means to her and it will be an example to others that they can overcome difficulties. Are you ready for a better life? It awaits you."

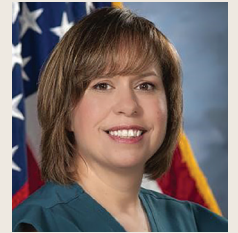
Retired Army National Guard Col. **Robert "Bart" Bartran** is heading up a new program at Jones College called JC CORP or Counterdrug Operational Resources Program, which offers advanced training for Jones College's Criminal Justice majors. He was previously Director of the Regional Counterdrug Training Academy in Meridian. After graduating from West Jones High School, Bartran began studying criminal justice at JCJC and earned his associate degree from Hinds.



BRADFORD

Keller Bradford (2015) is the pitching coach for Liberty Flames in Lynchburg, Va., as of June 2025. He was previously the assistant coach at the University of Southern Mississippi after working at Hinds for two years. While a Hinds student, he was a pitcher for the baseball team.

Stacy Glenn (2003), a native of the Mississippi Delta, was appointed as Deputy Associate Director for Patient Care Services at the G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery VA Medical Center in January 2025. Prior to this, she served as Associate Nurse Executive of Perioperative Service, providing strategic oversight for various critical areas within the Perioperative Department, including Pre-Op, Ambulatory Surgery Unit, Operating Room, Post Anesthesia Care Unit, GU Procedure Lab, GI Procedure Lab and Interventional Radiology. She earned her Associate Degree in Nursing at Hinds and a Master of Nursing in Health Care Administration at the University of Mississippi Medical Center School of Nursing in 2018.



GLENN

Warren County Deputy Sheriff **Dusty Keyes** was named Officer of the Year by the Kiwanis Club. Keyes currently serves as a K-9 handler and investigator within the Sheriff's Office.



RIVES

Hinds alumnus and retired Delta State University basketball coach **Steve Rives** (1970) was inducted into the Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame in July. At Hinds, he lettered in basketball for two years and was inducted into the Hinds Sport Hall of Fame in 1996.

IN MEMORIAM

Charles Nourrcier (1955) passed away on May 25. He was the quarterback for the 1954 football team that won the Jr. Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif., against El Camino Junior College before a crowd of 61,000. The team also won the state championship and the National Junior College football title. He played both offense and defense and earned All-State Honorable Mention honors at Hinds before continuing as a defensive player at McNeese State University. He was inducted into the Hinds Community College Sports Hall of Fame in 2000.



NOURRCIER

Willis W. "Bill" Dungan (1953) of Madison passed away on June 10. A long-time resident of Philadelphia, Dungan was active at Hinds Junior College in Student Council, Choral Club, Eagle annual staff, the Lendon Players and was a cheerleader.



DUNGAN