



SIENA HEIGHTS UNIVERSITY

Commencement Address • August 3, 2023 The Cooper Street Correctional Facility

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guest, faculty members of Jackson college and Siena Heights University, Warden Floyd, and all officials of the Michigan Department of Corrections - I thank you all on behalf of the student population for coming and welcome you to this ceremony and celebration of **TRANSFORMATION**.

While formulating this speech I considered many approaches. I thought of using humor, I thought of metaphors and analogies - and then I received a JPay from Mr. Gornick reminding me that I only have five minutes - which made me think that I didn't have time for all that thinking. Because anyone who's instructed me or had me as a classmate, knows that once I get going, I can turn an elevator pitch into a seminar.

The theme of my talk this morning is **TRANSFORMATION**. And I want to begin elaborating on this theme by defining the word **CHRYSALIS**. For those of you who don't know, chrysalis is the most important stage or state of change for a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. In other words, for part of a caterpillar's life it lives in a very low state; crawling around in the dirt, unable to reach any significant heights. But the caterpillar, in its low condition, has incredible potential. Potential the caterpillar itself may not be aware of.

Like the caterpillar, all of us, in some way, have been blessed with talent and potential. Over my many years in prison I have met men who are surely geniuses, or near geniuses. Just recently, at the facilities Juneteenth concert, one of our fellow students recited the entire biblical book of James from memory! And not in any dry, boring way either. His performance was lively and engaging. My point being, there are people here who should have become doctors, engineers, astronauts, artists, professors - or even wardens.

Instead, we've ended up as something much less than our potential. Whatever the reason for our past failures: lack of education, childhood trauma, poverty - many of us were very underdeveloped, and like the caterpillar - unable to fly. To all of you today, this program, and even our time in the Michigan Department of Corrections - is **OUR CHRYSALIS**. It can be the important stage in our personal transformations.

This is our chance to become who we really are or who we should be.

The time we've had to think, along with the education we've received from Jackson College and Siena Heights University, gives us the figurative wings to literally fly - morally, intellectually, socially - and economically. Can't forget economics. That dollar can give you wings too.

A great thinker once said, "Everything of value comes with a degree of difficulty." And change can be extremely difficult. And difficulty is discouraging. Because of this, some of us, will, or have, squandered this chrysalis moment. I won't say much about that - outcomes tell those stories.

But for those of us who **Have Not** and **Will Not** let this opportunity pass, the ones who have accepted the challenges of growth, and the difficulties of development, I say to us all - **TAKE FLIGHT!**

Fly as high as your ability and imaginations will take you. Show the world that they were wrong about you - and most of all, **YOU WERE WRONG ABOUT YOURSELF**.

Thank You!

Dear Siena Heights family,

Having the opportunity to further my education means the world to me. I know this is only the beginning and it will take hard work with dedication. I am ready on all levels for all the trials and tribulations that is coming. I will not take this opportunity for granted, especially because I prayed for this before it happened. This is a second chance at life for me and my family as well, because I am the foundation. I learned so much and I will not let my SHU family down. I am a lifelong learner now and I see the world through a different lens now. I am going to finish strong with my DBA degree. On the other hand, before I get to that step, I do not know what to expect as far as being a returning citizen with felonies on my record. I do not know what is next, or what SHU will offer me as far as getting into a career. I have not worked with computers in ten years this can be a disadvantage to me. I do pray there will be many resources to help me from my Siena Heights family, such as finding a job, resumes, grants, scholarships, workshops, and other opportunities as well. In addition, the Siena Heights mission statement, means the world to me because it is the same mission I already live by. I am a Christian who now put God first in every area of my life. Therefore, living by the mission statement is natural for me. I plan to use my education by being a successful entrepreneur to create opportunities for the other people where it does not exist otherwise. Also, I plan to follow the SHU mission as a returning citizen by opening the doors for the next generation. I will continue to help many people as I can by me being the perfect role model to follow. This is leading by example to carry out the mission of Siena Heights University.

Thank you,

Curtis F.

Dear Siena Heights Family:

Thank you for making this opportunity possible. As a current student who will be a returning citizen real soon, this opportunity is a blessing. There are so many great aspects and tools as it relates to the blessings, the total experience, and what they mean to me. The program itself, the mission of the university, and how I will be able to apply both are examples.

You would never be able to understand the life-changing power of the program you are offering. My options and perspectives were once very limited and dim. I am now more fortified because of the skills obtained, and more confident within my future successes.

My future looks bright from my new perspective. This opportunity has awakened a life-long learning attitude. I will never stop, slowing down only after I have at least my D.B.A. I will be able to use my education to obtain gainful employment, and eventually as a forensic accountant. I will also be able to use it to establish and properly run my own businesses. Thanks to Siena Heights I can make this a part of my mission.

What is a mission though if it is not for the benefit of not just the drafter(s), but also those who are within contact? It is a true honor to be part of an academic organization with the mission like Siena Heights. It was no mistake that I am part of this. Of all the possibilities, I am within my own perspectives. I am the recipient of my own beliefs within assisting others to be more competent, purposeful, and ethical, and it feels great! I could not have selected a better fit even within a much broader pool.

And, it will soon be my turn to fulfill the shared mission. It is a future manifestation to aid others with similar situations. I will educate through free seminars for the youth, and for young adults in a HBCU. It is the mission to assist as many young people as possible before they are sitting in the position I was once in. Thanks to Siena Heights, I am not in that position any longer. I have a story to tell, and Siena Heights is providing the credentials to get me a seat at the table, and the tools to remain there

Finally, the blessing of this opportunity has no value. How can one put a value on life. This opportunity is providing new life for me and my family. It is through this opportunity that I will be able to not only pursue a more meaningful life but, I will have the credentials and tools to obtain and retain it. It will also allow me to pay it forward to as many as I can with the hopes of igniting similar change.

Sincerely,
Eddie W.

Dear Siena Heights University family members,

I would like to take this time to thank you for this opportunity that has been so freely given to me, what it means to me, and how I'm going to use my education going forward.

First, I would like to tell you a little about myself and how I got here. In 2015 I chose a lifestyle of easy money that came from the sale of drugs. Subsequently, this poor decision landed me in prison.

Although I have never considered academics to be my strong suit, in 2018 the opportunity to attend Jackson College presented itself. I fought through many challenges and difficulties, and eventually earned my Associate's in Arts, General Studies, and Applied Science - Business Administration. When I received my invitation to attend the Siena Heights Rising Education Program I knew right away this was a once in a lifetime opportunity that could bring meaningful change to my life.

Through my studies, along with help and support from the Siena faculty, I now realize that I want to continue my education and go on to pursue my Master's degree, after I graduate with my Bachelors of Business Administration degree from SHU. I would like to go on to use my degrees in organizational management and eventually go on to start my own company building economical homes, with a focus on sustainability, for those that are less fortunate.

Again, I would like to thank you for providing me with this life changing opportunity. I would also like to thank the Siena Heights staff for their help in assisting me in achieving my academic goals.

Sincerely,

John K.

Dear Siena colleagues,

I would like to take this moment to express my sincere gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the REP program.

The Siena Heights mission encompasses values that will be essential to achieving a sustainable future. Through understanding the purpose of the mission, I have gained an unmatched clarity and openness towards life. Education has provided the necessary tools to ensure that I am a purposeful, competent, and ethical citizen in the future.

This opportunity represents a significant turning point in the sense that I was able to embrace education. The stars had to align so that I could participate in this program. Being granted the opportunity to complete a Bachelor of Business Administration while incarcerated is truly once in a lifetime. The REP program has literally been a game changer, unlocking the door to unlimited potential.

This opportunity has nurtured an invaluable perspective and I plan to pursue graduate studies at the University of Michigan. The ultimate gift is that a seed has been planted that will foster a life of learning. I seek a healthy, prosperous, and ethical career; and I plan to apply what I have learned into all aspects of my life moving forward.

Thank you for the chance of a lifetime.

Sincerely,
Ryan S.

Dear Siena Heights Family,

My name is Michael W. and I have been blessed to be a part of the first cohort for the bachelor's degree program here at the Cooper Street facility. I wanted to take this opportunity to let you know just how thankful I am, not just for being chosen for this program, but for the experience as well.

There is no other way to say it; this opportunity has been life changing for me. Getting an associate's degree is one thing, but a bachelor's opens up so many more opportunities for my success as a returning citizen. Thanks to Siena Heights and those working behind the curtain to make all of this possible, I have the tools at my disposal to ensure that I am making ethical and more equitable life choices that benefit more than myself, but those around me as well. I have immense appreciation for the support team that is in place because they are on the ground level with us and dealing with the barriers that exist when bringing a beneficial program inside prison fences. The dedication to the continuing education program for guys like myself, means so much to us, especially in an environment that does not necessarily foster growth.

I hope to remain a true testimony to the success of the Siena Heights program and its vital importance it has in the lives of the men it has touched. Again, I am forever grateful for being a part of this opportunity and I look forward to working with Siena Heights in the future.

Sincerely,

Michael W.

Dear Siena Heights Family,

I want to thank you all for your hard work and dedication toward establishing the REP program here at JCS.

I can't express the depth of gratitude I feel for the opportunity to continue my educational journey. Having this chance to learn and grow, for the possibility to make an even greater positive impact on society upon my release is more than I could ever have expected. During the brief span I've attended classes with this institution, I have learned the importance of creating a mindset of lifelong learning from your insightful, purposeful, and well directed staff.

Being an individual much older than the average student, at 64 years of age, I've felt nothing but encouragement and support from the entirety of your staff. Knowing that Siena Heights University will be there to support me with the many services it offers to its graduates is of great comfort. It is my belief that what you offer individuals like me, will benefit society many years to come. I can think of no better way to repay your generosity than by doing all I can to support all those less fortunate than myself.

I want to commend you for the high standards and ideals you've set, and for the great lengths you've shown to exhibit the conduct that lives up to those standards.

I will gladly, and proudly proclaim my connection with Siena Heights University until the breath to do so is extinguished from my lungs.

Sincerely,

Brian M.

Dear Siena Heights Family,

I want to start by thanking every individual who spends or offers time and dedication to this program. I remember when former director of Jackson College Corrections Education Program Mr. Bobby Beauchamp first approached me about the bachelor's program with Siena Heights and said that there was a lot of candidates to choose from and did, I want to put my name in the hat to be a part of the first cohort. I was so excited I immediately responded with a yes. Though I was unsure if I would be chosen, I sat for almost two years with no word and nearly gave up. Then I remember being called to the officer's desk and receiving a letter asking me if I still wanted to participate. I filled the application out so fast that I forgot to check that I was a U.S. citizen and even sign my name, and as you can see by this letter, I made it and I'm thankful for the opportunity to be a part of the first cohort. This program to me means a game changer, opportunity, and hope for the future, after getting my associate's degree being able to further my education has giving me a clear understanding about what I want to do when I return to society. Which is to own my own business in the hospitality industry, further my education, and provide help to a community I once helped destroy. I want to target the youth by creating an after-school program where diversity, equality, and inclusion is institutionalized. I want to offer tutoring and sports training that will be a learning environment as well keeping youth out of trouble. I have already been able to inspire a young person through my pursuit of higher education which is my son this program has help me to continue to be an example for him. I recently became a GED tutor to help others, to possibly receive some of the same opportunities that I've been given. Siena Heights mission to me means helping others and after meeting staff members its apparent and very genuine to the point that I'm almost tearing up as I conclude this letter. I have been a part of so many programs over the years and never experienced so much support and dedication to the point that it reminds me of love, something I have not felt in a long time from anyone outside my immediate family. I been giving hope in humanity of accepting me for mistakes I have made in the past. I cannot wait to one day visit campus and meet more members of the Siena family. Special thanks to those behind the scenes working to help also thank you Mr. Gornick and Ms. Gudowski, and a very special thanks to champion educator Mr. Vroman. Thank you to all Siena Heights family for your time and dedication to the program. It is an honor to be a part of the first cohort.

Sincerely,
Mr. Marquis J.



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EDUCATION

Siena Heights University begins Rising Education Program with Michigan prisons



David Panian

The Daily Telegram

Published 4:00 a.m. ET Feb. 17, 2022

ADRIAN — Siena Heights University is now offering a bachelor's degree completion program to Michigan prisoners.

The Rising Education Program (REP) will allow prisoners who have completed their associate degree through Jackson College to continue their education and obtain a bachelor's degree. The program's first students are expected to begin classes in February, a news release from SHU said.

The partnership between SHU and the Michigan Department of Corrections is possible thanks to the federal Second Chance Pell program, the release said.

The Second Chance Pell program started in 2015. It provides Pell Grants, a federal financial aid program for students in higher education, to state and federal prisoners. It was expanded in 2020 to include more schools, including SHU, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

"Siena has a longstanding relationship with Jackson College currently," Jim Gornick, SHU's associate director of REP, said in the release. "We thought it would be a great opportunity to have those prisoners who were in the Jackson College program working towards their associate's degree to continue on and potentially earn their bachelor's degree in business administration."

Gornick has a long career in prisoner education, the release said. Before arriving in the spring of 2021 to start and build SHU's program, he served for many years in the Michigan correctional system as a school principal. He was at corrections facilities in Jackson, Ionia, Saginaw and Lapeer, helping prisoners complete either their high school diplomas or GEDs.

“About two-thirds of prisoners had a high school diploma or GED prior to arriving at the prison,” Gornick said. “We were servicing about a third of the population. Of that population, only about 6% or so had a postsecondary degree. We knew that we were able to offer that GED credential and some vocational training to a smaller subset of prisoners, but we knew there was a much larger percentage of prisoners that potentially had an interest in furthering their education.”

In 2015, Jackson College was one of three state community colleges to begin teaching courses for prisoners, offering an associate degree in general business. Working with JC, Gornick said REP will offer the bachelor’s degree in business administration to prisoners at Cooper Street Correctional Facility in Jackson to start.

“We are fortunate to have a longstanding partnership with Jackson College already,” he said. “And also we are really hoping that we can work closely with the MDOC.”

“We’re very excited to welcome Siena Heights University as a partner as we continue to expand post-secondary access within the MDOC,” corrections department spokesman Chris Gautz said in an email.

“The expansion of Pell and the opportunity it brings with post-secondary education to the incarcerated population builds upon the already strong foundation we have built in the MDOC where we have placed a high value on education programs for those we supervise,” Gautz said.

Gornick said he will lean on his experience in corrections education to build the program. Classes will be conducted in person at the correctional facility, and will be taught by both SHU and JC faculty. The hope is to have an initial group of about 20 students who will move through the program together.

“We feel it’s really important and there is a lot of value in having them be together, working through these courses together,” Gornick said. “Hopefully they will start together and finish together and celebrate some of their accomplishments together. Oftentimes prisoners are solitary and stay by themselves. It’s really important in their growth and development to be able to share ideas with one another and feel OK to be able to explore questions.”

He said building a good relationship with the MDOC will be key. As another way to build that relationship, Siena Heights will offer tuition discounts to all MDOC employees who want to complete their degrees with SHU.

Another benefit will be incorporating Siena Heights' mission into the program, the release said.

"It gives the instructors the opportunity to talk about the soft skills and the personal growth and development of these prisoners above and beyond the reading and math and other coursework they are expected to complete," Gornick said. "It gives them other ways of looking at solving problems instead of what they have done in the past."

Gornick said the enrollment goal is to have 130 REP students in the program. Eventually, the goal is to expand the REP around the state to other correctional facilities.

He has seen the positive results of prisoners who advance in their education, the release said.

"When Siena Heights came along and decided they wanted to consider partnering (with the MDOC), I saw the excitement in a lot of our prisoners who wanted to continue on and eventually earn a bachelor's degree," Gornick said. "It's always satisfying for me to see a prisoner who really grows and develops as a student and ends up graduating. Just to see that confidence they have gained, not to mention the family members who come to graduation ceremonies. This program gives me the opportunity to continue working with the prisoner population."

Gornick said there is overwhelming evidence that prisoners who earn a degree or learn a skilled trade while in prison are much more likely to succeed once they return to society.

"There is a positive correlation between the reduction of the unemployment rate ... and they are less apt to return to prison," he said. "Every dollar we are spending as a state, we are going to gain back \$3, \$4 or \$5 just by that person not returning and being a law-abiding, tax-paying citizen. It does pay for itself."



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Shonda Hamilton, '19



"Sienna Heights University goes above and beyond to provide the best education possible for residential and online learning. As a student in both the undergraduate and graduate online programs, the amazing support I received allowed me to be successful, not only in the coursework, but also in my ability to grow and develop, both personally and professionally. At every step of the way, Sienna Heights is there for you to create your successful history in higher education."

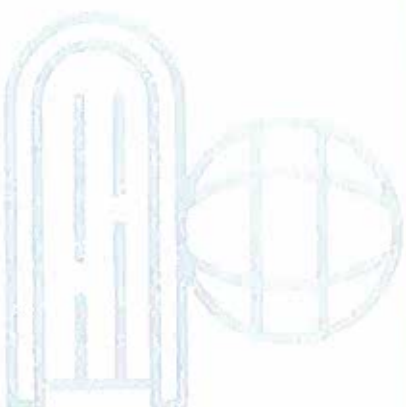
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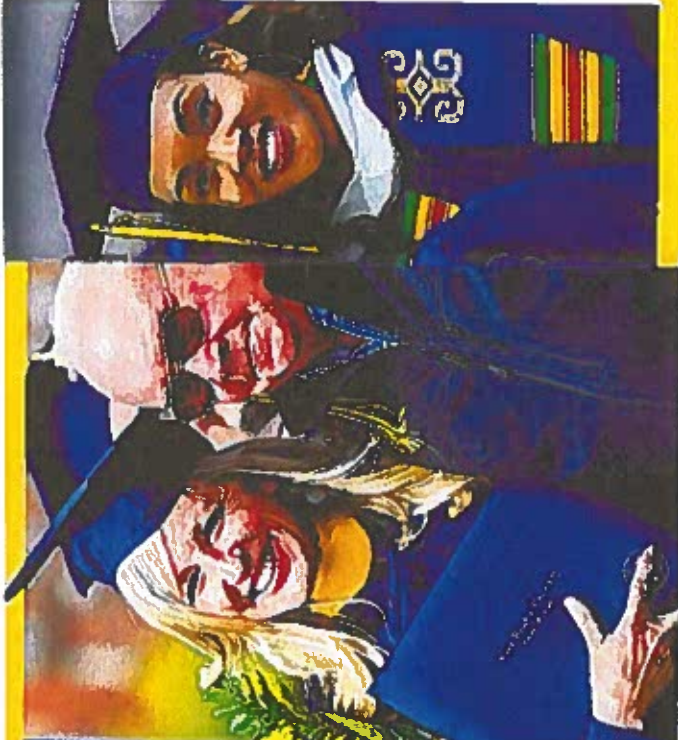
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Our Mission Statement

The mission of Siena Heights University is to provide quality education and leadership by the Catholic University tradition and sponsored by the Augustinian Sisters. It is to assist people to become more competent, purposeful, and ethical through a teaching and learning environment which respects the dignity of all.