

Satellite classroom available to inmates

By Sean McCarthy
Staff Reporter

A new nationwide satellite system allows students across the country to take classes they might not have been able to take before.

But those students are not sitting in the classrooms of universities; they are sitting in the nation's prisons.

The Correctional Training Network has been broadcasting for four days. Program founder Mark Davis said the educational programs were aimed at reducing recidivism, or the rate of reincarceration for prisoners after their release.

Nebraska Educational Telecommunications joined with the Virginia Correctional Training Network to bring the series of live instructor-based classes to inmates. Through a studio at NET, an instructor from Southeast Community College broadcasts a course to institutions across the country.

Davis said 75 percent of people released from prison were reincarcerated within five years. The majority of those received no education while incarcerated, he said.

When inmates are offered the chance for education, the recidivism rate is much less, he said. Among those taking college-level courses in prison, only 20 percent are reincarcerated, he said.

Davis said he hoped his program could provide better opportunities to inmates — and to the states that jail them.

"It is far cheaper to educate someone than it is to reeducate someone," Davis said. "The small investment in educating inmates makes education an affordable alternative to incarceration."

And the public cost of giving an inmate the tools to get a college degree is far lower than the societal cost of ignoring the situation, he said.

"Do you want to give them the tools to work with you?" Davis asked. "Or would you rather see them sell-

ing drugs on your street corner?"

A total of 543 inmates across the country are participating in the program, Davis said. The Nebraska State Penitentiary is not currently participating in the CTN program, he said, but has indicated interest in subscribing.

Davis, a former parole officer, originally named his organization Correctional Educational Consultants. He began offering educational programs in correctional institutions by having instructors teach inside the institutions.

Davis changed the name to the Correctional Training Network once he had the ability to use satellite technology, he said. Institutions that carry the CTN program include Texas, Kentucky, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

Davis said his group has now become the nation's largest provider of college programming in correctional institutions.

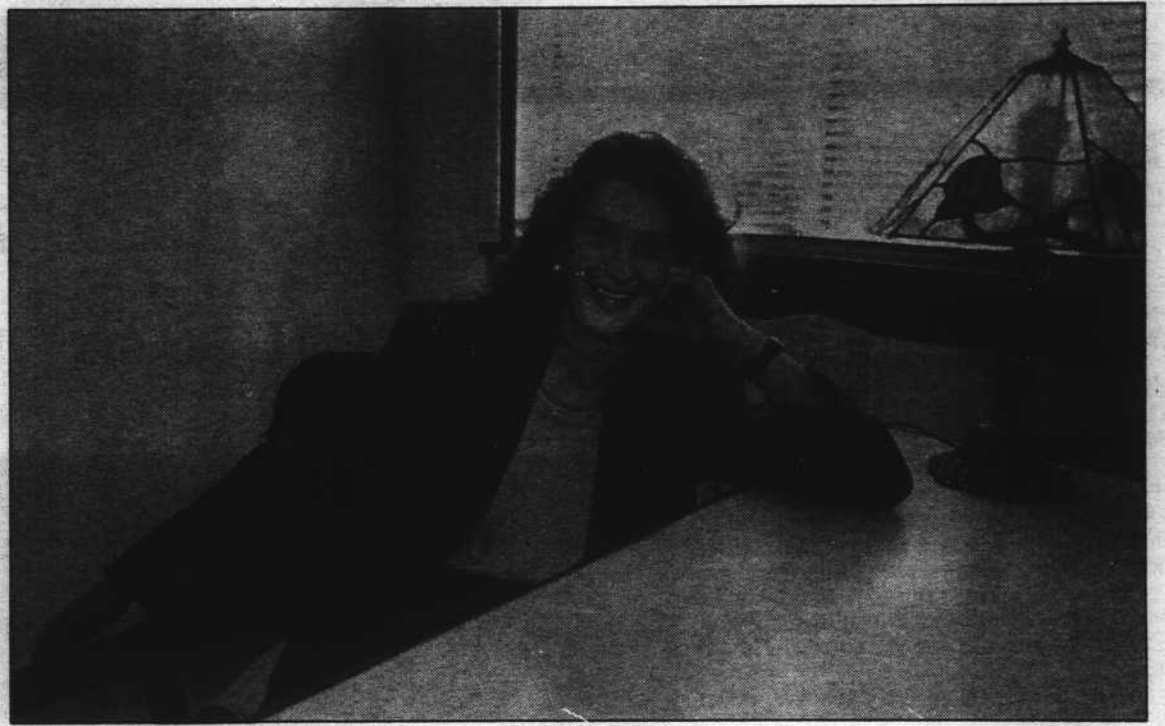
Davis said he was attracted to NET because of the expertise of people and groups working on it, such as the Friends of Public Broadcasting.

"It's the best that I've seen," he said.

Classes being taught to inmates include general equivalency development, advanced occupational training, life skills, literacy programs and drug and alcohol educational courses. SCC is offering college credit courses where students can earn associates, applied science degrees and business administration degrees.

Inmates enrolling in the classes have to agree to special provisions, Davis said. To take the class, they must do the assigned work and attend every class, he said.

To get a feeling for what classes inmates wanted to take, CTN surveyed more than 5,000 inmates. Eighty percent of those surveyed indicated they wanted business-related classes so they could improve their chance of employment, Davis said.



Tanna Kinnaman/DN

English professor Moira Ferguson talks about her trip to the Women's Conference in Beijing.

Ferguson

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broaden their horizons by telling them about her experiences in Beijing.

"Going to China helped me to broaden my own way of thinking," she said. "I would like to relay that idea."

"Part of the honor of being a delegate to the fourth World Conference on Women is sharing that experience as widely as possible with others."

Ferguson, who returned recently after 10 days in Beijing, was a featured speaker at the women's conference.

The conference, which ends today, has established a set of guidelines that governments all over the world could follow when dealing with women's issues. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke at

the conference.

Ferguson said she received an invitation to be a cultural delegate because she was a member of the Feminist Press publications board.

Ferguson said she had great hope for the conference's results.

"I hope it is going to alter national policies all over the world," she said.

Ferguson also said she hoped the conference would change the structure of many governments.

At the conference, Ferguson spoke about two Midwestern authors — one from Nebraska — who had ties to China. She said she was fascinated to find that few Americans and Nebraskans knew of Anna Louise Strong, who was born in Friend, and Agnes Smedley, who was born in Osgood, Mo.

Both were buried in Beijing.

In China, children are taught about the two American writers beginning in grade school. Ferguson said the limousine driver

and the translator her group traveled with both knew the authors.

According to some media reports from the conference, some delegates misinterpreted the accommodations as being a cover-up for the Chinese government's less than exemplary record on gender issues.

"I had no sense that things were being altered for us," she said. "They were certainly being generous hosts."

Do Ferguson's experiences and insights make her a role model? When asked, she blushed, himmed, hawed and stammered through an answer.

"This is a hard question for me," Ferguson said. "I would like to think, with my writing and my service to the university and to the community ... I would like to think of myself as a role model for contemporary men and women," she said.

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