
From: Office of the President <noreply@m.uidaho.edu>
Sent: Friday, July 24, 2026 6:01 AM
To:
Subject: U of I degrees offer hope for the incarcerated

Letter from the President



Office of the President, president@uidaho.edu
July 24, 2026

Dear Vandals,

Each spring inside the P1FCU Kibbie Dome, we see thousands of beaming smiles and eyes welled up with proud tears at commencement. In early May, that same scene played out on a smaller scale at the Idaho Correctional Facility in Orofino.

The University of Idaho welcomed five graduates into the Vandal alumni family from the Prison Education Initiative (PEI). The intimate graduation ceremony included family, friends, fellow incarcerated individuals and a small team of employees from the U of I.

“The ceremony was meaningful to the graduates and it was profoundly meaningful to me,” said Annette Folwell, associate

dean for undergraduate studies and a professor in the College of Letters, Arts and Social Sciences, who teaches PEI courses. “The students (in PEI) always influence me and you can see them progress and develop self-confidence. They belong in higher education. I can’t stress enough how much their success is a part of our success.”

Professor Omi Hodwitz founded PEI in 2021 shortly after the federal government granted access to Pell Grants for students in prisons. Beyond touching moments like graduation, the program is inspiring change within the prison population. Statistics from the Department of Justice show that prison education programs can reduce reoffending rates by nearly half. U of I’s students attest to the powerful impact of pursuing their academic goals.

“Opportunities like PEI come along so seldom for incarcerated individuals,” one graduate in Orofino said. “I feel truly fortunate to be in a position that has allowed me to continue my college education through the University of Idaho, some 30 years after obtaining my associate degree.”

U of I’s traditional students partner with incarcerated students through Inside Out, a class where “outside” students work on extracurricular projects with “inside” peers. The interaction provides insights for both groups and the experience often influences their career paths, whether they’re headed toward careers in criminal justice, communication or education.

“It’s really eye-opening for our students to work alongside individuals in the prison,” said Blaine Eckles, dean of students at the U of I. “They see the lived experience and it really changes their perspective. But they also see how care and compassion can be transformative for people. It inspires them to go on and help others and that’s one of the strengths of what we do at the University of Idaho.”

Hodwitz said strong support from the Idaho Department of Corrections helped the program reach a peak of about 90 students last year, up from around 35 just two years ago.

Along with the five graduates from Orofino in May, one student graduated from the PEI program at the Pocatello Women's Correctional Center last December. They earned degrees in general studies, communication and organizational sciences.

"For folks in the criminal justice system, the deck is statistically stacked against them," Hodwitz said. "They don't have the same opportunities as other students — they may have family disruption, poverty, discrimination, drug dependency — and advanced education is just not part of their lexicon. To see students graduate in Orofino, it's monumental. We say that higher education transforms lives and for these students that's even more amplified."

The U of I continues to adapt the education model to improve outcomes for students, no matter where they study. We're proud of our PEI Vandals, who are overcoming personal obstacles and taking responsibility to better themselves and better our communities across Idaho.

Go Vandals!

C. Scott Green
President



Snapshots

U of I students gain diplomacy skills at Model UN

U of I students honed their negotiation and public speaking abilities by participating in a Model United Nations conference, where they represented various nations to debate global issues. This immersive experience helped them develop diplomacy skills while engaging with complex international policy challenges alongside peers from other institutions.

[Learn more.](#)

Powering Idaho's future with clean, local energy

Researchers at the U of I are advancing Idaho's energy independence by developing innovative technologies for clean, locally sourced power generation. These initiatives aim to reduce reliance on external energy grids while fostering a sustainable economic future for the state through homegrown renewable solutions.

[Learn more.](#)

Students gain semiconductor training through VR tools

The U of I has launched an immersive virtual reality program designed to provide students with hands-on training in semiconductor manufacturing without the need for expensive lab equipment. This educational tool allows learners to safely

practice complex fabrication processes, preparing them for high-demand careers in the growing microchip industry.

[Learn more.](#)

Did
you?
know

U of I professors Leontina Hormel and Christopher Marx both received Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program awards for the 2026-27 academic year.



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