

# Tufts celebrates first class of incarcerated graduates at MCI-Concord

Graduates of the Tufts Prison Initiative earned a diploma in Civic Studies this week, the culmination of a five-year bachelor's degree completed while students were incarcerated in state prison.

By **Ivy Scott** Globe Staff, Updated January 28, 2024, 44 minutes ago



Kentel Weaver shared a moment with Hilary Binda, the founder and executive director of the Tufts University Prison Initiative, before the start of their class. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

*This story was produced by the Globe's [Money, Power, and Inequality](#) team, which covers the racial wealth gap in Greater Boston. You can sign up for the newsletter [here](#).*


CONCORD — Behind the barbed wire and brick walls of the Massachusetts Correctional Institution, 10 inmates sat inside the gymnasium Tuesday in caps, gowns, and bright blue stoles, beaming at family and friends gathered for their graduation from Tufts University.

Before collecting a diploma and flipping a tassel, each graduate — part of the [Tufts University Prison Initiative's](#) inaugural bachelor's degree class — stood up on the wooden stage and shared a few words of gratitude with the teary-eyed crowd.

The initiative “helped me break a dysfunctional mentality forged by prison,” said [Juan, a first-cohort student](#), in his graduation speech. “Now, I will certainly be an asset instead of a burden to my family and community. Thank you ... for providing society's greatest tool to the disenfranchised: education.”

While three of the 13 students have since been released from prison, the remainder of the cohort, who began classes together in 2019, recently became Tufts' first group of graduates to earn a bachelor's degree inside the state prison through a program designed to not only educate, but rehabilitate. Two additional cohorts of the roughly five-year program, each with 18 students, are ongoing.

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“Graduates, it is an honor to witness and celebrate your extraordinary accomplishments.... Thank you for creating the light on the hill,” said Caroline Genco, Tufts University provost, to rousing applause. “I’m sure there were periods of time where you weren’t sure you’d make it to this point, but here you are.”

The application process is rigorous. It included diagnostic exams in literary analysis and math, a letter of intention, and interviews with faculty. But it is open to all prospective students who have completed a high school education or equivalent, regardless of sentence length.

While applicants must meet a high bar to get in, program founder and executive director Hilary Binda said class discussions make room for students to discuss both the personal challenges and racial or socio-economic barriers they faced growing up, as well as how education can serve as a powerful tool for populations historically over-represented in the justice system. Of the 10 graduates at Tuesday’s ceremony, five were Black, three were Latino (including two Afro-Latino students), and one was Cambodian.

To complete their degree in civic studies, students had to take classes ranging from The Bible as Literature to gender studies, memoir writing, and biology and genetics courses. Classes, according to Binda, are taught in a circle, rather than with desks arranged in rows, to create a feeling of openness among students and facilitate group discussion.

“It’s really a way of doing higher ed. differently,” she said, adding that her goal was to create a learning environment where students could “connect with one another and support the kind of growth and change that they are working toward.”

Binda said she was motivated by her time as a high school teacher in Rhode Island, where many of her students “were cycling in and out of” the justice system. After completing her doctorate and getting a job at Tufts, Binda realized she had the opportunity to bring the educational resources available on campus inside the prison walls.



Kentel Weaver (right) showed a video to a fellow classmate and David Delvalle (left) before the start of class. Delvalle and Weaver are enrolled in the Tufts Prison Initiative, a program that allows inmates to obtain a bachelors from Tufts. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

“I had been volunteering in the DOC for quite a few years doing book discussion groups... and it was clear to me that these are people who should be getting credit for the kind of work that they’re doing [to educate themselves],” she said.

After spending a few years doing research and watching the [Boston University prison education program](#), Binda launched her first Tufts class at a medium security prison in Shirley in 2017, adding classes at Concord and the Souza maximum security prison in 2018. It became a full-fledged degree program at Concord the following year.

In addition to the courses offered inside the prison walls, students who are released from prison before degree completion have the opportunity to continue their education on the Tufts campus in Medford. As part of the prison initiative, Binda also runs a continuing education program called MyTERN, which helps people leaving prison readjust to life at

home while gaining the skills they need to go back to school and work or further their education.

David Delvalle, 30, was one such student when he was released from Concord in 2022 after serving over a decade for armed assault. Growing up “poor and Puerto Rican in the city of Lowell,” in a family where incarceration and addiction were the norm, higher education didn’t feel like an option for Delvalle for much of his life, he said. But after completing MyTERN last year, Delvalle became the first formerly incarcerated student in the program to walk the Tufts campus as an undergraduate.

“It was the most surreal thing in the world,” said Delvalle, who is set to graduate in the spring of 2025. When he was first released, Delvalle was living in Baldwinville near Worcester, still wearing an ankle monitor, but “commuting two hours each way just to get to one class at Tufts.”

“My parole officer literally laughed in my face when I told him I was going to take a train to Tufts from where I lived,” Delvalle recalled. “But I didn’t want to let down all the people that invested their time into me.... Even though I was serving a 10-and-a-half-year sentence, they didn’t dehumanize me. They went out of their way to teach me.”



David Delvalle walked through the Tufts Bookstore after picking up a used copy of the Associated Press Stylebook for a journalism class. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Delvalle now works as a program manager at Haley House Soup Kitchen in Boston and lives in a South End apartment with his daughter, with plans to go to law school after completing his bachelors at Tufts.

“I had to make something out of myself, just to show those people that their time and effort and energy wasn’t wasted on me,” he said. “Because if I pan out, maybe that’ll give hope for them to go help the next person.”

Alongside Delvalle, Kentel Weaver and Nathaniel Miksch also started the Tufts program while incarcerated at Concord, but have since been released and are adapting to life on the outside.

“I come from a background where I haven’t seen a product of a good college education, so I’d never seen a need for it... I thought it was a place that I didn’t feel like I belonged,” said Weaver, 36, who was sentenced to life in prison for [shooting another teenager](#)

while in a gang at 16. Weaver is finishing up the MyTERN program while working at a restaurant in Sudbury, and said the idea of going back to school in the fall is daunting but exciting, now that he views college as a place where he can not only learn, but also contribute his own ideas.

The sentiment of newfound belonging was echoed by Miksch, 48, who is working as assistant director of the STEP Rox recovery center in Roxbury and will join MyTERN in a few months before starting back at Tufts next autumn. Miksch, who dropped out of his North Carolina high school at 17 and ran away from home after coming out as gay, said the biggest surprise of the program was the support and community he found among other inmates.

“As the lone gay voice in that class, they really took care of me in there. They saw me, they heard me, they respected me, and we respected each other,” he said. “I’ve watched every man in that program transform, and I’m just so proud of every one of them.”

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## 1 Comment



**NANDOROCK**

1/28/24 - 6:31PM

Terrific program...would like to see it offered to female inmates as well..Wishing best of luck to all to these students who have had the courage to take this huge step forward in hopes of changing the course of their lives. I hope they all succeed!

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