

Donald Roden: Professor Founded a Prison-to-College Program That Provides a Second Chance

The Mountainview Project at Rutgers has produced national scholars.

BY ROBIN LALLY

Most people wouldn't consider setting foot in a prison, much less volunteering to teach incarcerated men and women the skills they need to succeed upon release.

Not Donald Roden.

Roden has dedicated the past decade to demonstrating that people behind bars deserve second chances and that educating them pays off. His mission started in 2005, when the

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Rutgers University–New Brunswick associate professor, a scholar of Japanese history, founded the Mountainview Project, a prison-to-college program. Roden believed that motivated students—even if they came from behind prison walls—should have the opportunities in life that only an education can provide. He knew some would thrive. Others might not.

Roden's tenacity has been instrumental in expanding New Jersey's prison education system, now offered to thousands serving sentences today, as well as to former prisoners like Walter Fortson and Ben Chin; both became

part of the Mountainview Project at Rutgers, eventually earned undergraduate and graduate degrees from the university, and were selected as national Truman Scholars for their "exceptional leadership potential."

"If Don Roden hadn't been there in the beginning with the Mountainview Project, none of the students would have come into the program in the first three years and that would have pushed the entire program back considerably," says Chris Agans, the program's director. The Mountainview Project is now part of the New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prison Consortium program (NJ-STEP), which began offering college courses to the state's incarcerated in 2012. Located at Rutgers University–Newark, NJ-STEP now oversees the Mountainview prison-to-college youth prison programs offered at Rutgers University–Newark, Rutgers University–New Brunswick, and Rutgers University–Camden.

Roden "had no money, no staff, and was basically doing everything himself. But he just kept on going," Agans says.

The 71-year-old Roden began visiting the Mountainview Youth Correctional Facility in Annandale, New Jersey, in 2002, after the death



Donald Roden founded the Mountainview Project at Rutgers because he believes that incarcerated men and women should be given the opportunity to pursue higher education.

of his mother. She had volunteered at a literacy program teaching reading at halfway houses and community centers and he wanted to do something to honor her memory.

Mountainview was close to both his home in Hillsborough, New Jersey, and to Rutgers–New Brunswick. For the first year, he tutored inmates who were taking courses through a Union County Community College program. But Roden wanted to offer these prisoners more.

“I don’t know if I could spend a night in one of these facilities without being a nervous wreck—that’s why I find our students so inspirational,” he says. “I knew at the time that something else was needed, because I saw that they weren’t continuing with their education when they got out. We needed a bridge to connect them.”

With the support of the Rutgers history department, fellow faculty members, and deans, Roden forged ahead. He talked to halfway house employees, prison advocates, and the New Jersey Department of Corrections.

Once the program got under way, he spent countless hours at the Mountainview facility telling inmates he thought they had the potential to do well academically and that they could go to Rutgers when they were released. Even though some looked at him like he was “a crazy old guy” because they couldn’t imagine that college would be possible, Roden didn’t let up, Agans says.

“I believe that the public has a moral responsibility when it comes to criminal justice and education,” Roden says. “I knew those who were incarcerated deserved the opportunity of an education and was glad that I got the support from Rutgers.”

Studies have backed what Roden has been touting: prison education prevents recidivism and saves taxpayers money in the long run. In 2013, the RAND Corporation found that formerly incarcerated men and women who participate in education programs have a 43 percent lower rate of recidivism. A new five-year study, Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary

As an undergraduate, Mountainview Project and Rutgers alumnus Walter Fortson would become an honors student, receive the School of Arts and Sciences Academic Excellence Award, and be named a Truman Scholar in 2012.



Mountainview Project and Rutgers alumnus Ben Chin overcame addiction to succeed academically. He was named a Truman Scholar in 2013 and Luce Scholar in 2014.



Education, will look at the prison education system in New Jersey, including the prison program Roden started more than 10 years ago.

Since its inception, Mountainview has enrolled 110 former inmates. Twenty-five have earned bachelor's degrees, five have received master's degrees, and 49 are current students. The program's graduates have an overall 3.1 grade point average, with one former inmate having attained a perfect 4.0.

Most important, only 5.3 percent of those admitted to Rutgers through the Mountainview program have been convicted again, a recidivism rate significantly below that of nonparticipants.

"Ideally we would like everyone to graduate, but even those who don't we try to keep in

touch with because we know that the experience has been a positive one," says Roden. "In almost every case, those who didn't continue still have the hope of completing their degree."

Terrell Blount first met Roden at a halfway house in Newark following his release from prison after a five-year sentence for robbery.

"Don is the one who made my going to Rutgers happen," says Blount, a 2013 graduate who works as an admissions and transition counselor at NJ-STEP. "I never doubted myself once I started at Rutgers, always had a positive attitude, and always believed in Don and what he said because he is so sincere. You knew that whenever you called or needed him, he would be there."

Roden knows how to motivate people, says Jason Bell, who served more than a decade in prison and is now the director of Project Rebound at San Francisco State University, which is among the first programs in the United States to integrate the formerly incarcerated into college.

"Every Mountainview student that has met him has nothing but love for the man because he didn't have to do all of this," says Bell, who has known Roden since the Mountainview program began. "He did not come out of prison. His academic background is not connected to prison reform. He is just intrinsically connected to human nature. It's all heart with him."