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**Intro:** Welcome to the Let’s Talk Government Podcast. A podcast that is provided for you by the department of government at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Located in Minnesota in the United States. I am your host Dr. Pat Nelson, the chairperson of the department of criminal justice. I want to thank you for joining us as we explore different topics related to government. Some may be surprising and some may not, so please enjoy.

**Dr. Nelson:** Welcome to Episode 32 of The Let's Talk Government Podcast, Scholars serving time program. I am joined by Dr. Vicki Hunter from the department of sociology at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Welcome to the show Dr. Hunter. And you are the program director, would you like to just kind of give us a brief overview of what scholars serving time is?

**Dr. Hunter:** Sure. Thanks for asking me to be part of this. Yeah, so the scholars serving time program is relatively new, just started in January of this year. And it is a, an AA degree program that MSU Mankato offers in three different prisons in Minnesota and that's Faribault, Shakopee, and Waseca. And basically it's, you know, I think when people think AA degree, they tend to think, you know kind of general community college degree. And this is actually somewhat of a special AA degree, meaning that we really put a lot of emphasis on making sure that the courses that are offered are highly rigorous and they are always face to face. So there are no online classes. And there's-- We asked professors to really do their best to make the courses Very dialogue heavy so that there's-- because I have found that incarcerated students have a lot to say. And the great thing is that they do the readings. And that's not to say that students on campus don't but I think most of us that teach on campus know that sometimes they don't. Whereas with the, you know, the incarcerated students they do tend to do the readings and so they come to class with lots to say, lots of questions so. So yeah, I guess you know you could say we kind of use more of the structure the way honors courses are taught. Not in the sense that students that come into the program are required to have kind of higher or advanced abilities prior to, but just really in the ways that the courses are taught with high expectations, lots of dialogue.

**Dr. Nelson:** So that almost sounds like the dream classroom. A professor is someone that really engaging dialogue. So do you have professors from MSU Mankato a go to the facilities to teach in person or do you use like adjunct professors?

**Dr. Hunter:** Nope**.** We-- well, we actually have had an adjunct professor teach a class, but it was because she was deemed to be the best person in that department to teach the class. And I think generally speaking, you know full time faculty are the ones that tend to be you know the ones that teach-- you know that really get a lot of experience with particular classes so they tend to be the, you know, the better ones to teach them. But in this case it was just a little different but primarily yes we use full time faculty. We do provide replacements for them you know when they teach in the program. So departments are compensated for that. But yeah we generally use full time faculty and yes they go to the facilities and have unbelievably amazing experiences. That's, you know people who have taught in the program, faculty who have taught

in the program without an exception, have said that it was one of the most transformative teaching experiences they've had. One is because of the students, like I said. The students are just so motivated. I think some of this could be explained by the fact that, on average, they tend to be older. I'd say on average, they're probably 30 years old but they can range anywhere from 19 years old up to I don't know, there's a student in my class now who I think mentioned he's in his 60s. So, you know there's a wide range of ages which, and also I think many of them have had colorful experiences in their past that helped to provide-- that help for them to be able to get their heads around I think some of the concepts that we talk about in class because they actually have experiences where they can say, ah, you know I get that. Where a lot of times they think traditional students, you know maybe that's not, maybe they haven't had the same breath of experience and maybe some of the, I don't know, dynamic experiences-- I hate I don't want to say negative things about it, but you know what I mean.

**Dr. Nelson:** Right. So, how does a student get into the program? Do you just take everybody or is there a process?

**Dr. Hunter:** No, you know we're limited in how many we can take. And we also want to maintain the rigor and the integrity of the program. So, you know we use, impart we use the regular university admissions process. So all of that you know criteria will be the same for students coming on campus as it would for someone in the SST program. But in addition to that we ask them to write entrance essays. We give them prompts and they can pick one of the prompts to write their essay and then the advisory board for the scholar serving time program reviews the essays and ranks them and then we kind of select students in that way.

**Dr. Nelson:** So, just out of curiosity, do you have more applicants than you have space in the program right now?

**Dr. Hunter:** Oh yes. Yes, for sure. But we always make sure that like, for those students who maybe didn't make it in the first round, we always you know encourage them to apply the next round. Because you know sometimes we do try to select students who are going to be there you know for at least a couple of semesters. In fact, the core group of students we have at each place are ones who are going to make it all the way through to get their degrees. However, you know we do always try to-- we do let students know that they should try again if they didn't get in the first time. And you know, I hope that encourages them to, you know, kind of revise their essays or write new essays that maybe are more compelling and so on.

**Dr. Nelson:** So do these courses, so let's say that somebody is in the program and they're able to get released and they don't have their associates degree completed. So can they take these courses with them or is it only specific to the program?

**Dr. Hunter:** Oh no these are course-- these courses that we're offering are the same courses that we're offering on campus. You know, they're primarily general education requirements so the 100 and 200 level classes. And yeah they will transfer, definitely transfer, to any Minn State University or College for sure and likely to transfer to pretty much any college or university. In fact I've had people be released already that were, it was unexpected. Because of COVID they've been releasing people under, it's called the CARES Act, which basically releases people that maybe have health conditions that make them vulnerable to, you know if they were to get COVID, so. In one of those cases already I, you know, helped the person kind of fill out their FAFSA and her admission application before she left and she is actually starting a BA at Minnesota State Mankato, one of our online offerings because she lives in Alabama. But she is going to be starting in January in one of our BA programs. And that's part of my role as the program director, is to help facilitate those kinds of academic transitions.

**Dr. Nelson:** That's great so you don't just like, oh you're being released figure it out on your own. You help them with that transition, which can be scary no matter how old you are.

**Dr. Hunter:** Oh yeah, exactly.

**Dr. Nelson:** So Dr. Hunter I know that your research area kind of links into this program we research about reentry experiences. So how did this program come to be? I mean where did the idea start and what did it take to get it going?

**Dr. Hunter:** Yeah, well you know I've always been interested, since even as a graduate student before I got my PhD, I've always been interested in women's experiences of getting out of prison, particularly experiences of mothers. And I think that stems from my own experience of incarceration very long ago more than 30 years ago. It wasn't a long time but long enough that I understand that position, you know, what it's like to be in that position. And someone while I was incarcerated, the Education Director, encouraged me to go to apply to college. She thought I was really great. And evidently she was right, I guess I am, here I am.

**Dr. Nelson:** Yes you are.

**Dr. Hunter:** But anyway she encouraged me and I literally started college within two weeks of getting out of prison and stayed in college until I got my PhD, which was like 11 years.

**Dr. Nelson:** Wow.

**Dr. Hunter:** So, yeah. So that was kind of I guess what got me interested in the topic of both women's reentry but also just the impact of education because for me, getting a high-- getting a college education really just helped me to develop a very different picture of who I was and who I could be in the future. So it would never have dawned on me prior to that to go to college. I just, I guess I just never saw that as something that was within my reach so, yeah. So my hope is really, that this program has a similar impact, maybe not PhD pathway because that's just not for everybody, but I hope it has a similarly impactful effect on you know students in the program, men and women alike. I hope that they-- I hope that it really transforms them. And I think it could also have transformative implications for their families and communities. I know it has for my family and I guess my community since my community now is this university in part.

**Dr. Nelson:** Right, yeah. Well, and to be such a good role model I mean if their children see that they're working on their associates degree, even while they're serving time, that can be inspirational for them to continue their education as well.

**Dr. Hunter:** Yes, that's absolutely true. You know on the first day of classes I bring in, because they’re not allowed to have a lot of things, but we have these—at the university we have these cardboard like, they look like little flags but they're just made out of cardboard that say-- have the logo and the Minnesota State Mankato logo. And I brought those in and put them in their packets that they got on their first day of classes and immediately they were like can you give us more of these so we can send them home to our families, I want my kids to see this that I'm a college student. So it's just, you can just tell how much it means to them and how much they believe it's going to mean to their family members. Sometimes it's their parents, sometimes kids, you know partners so, yeah.

**Dr. Nelson:** So how-- so if they got their associates degree or even just started working on the coursework, how could this help someone integrate back into the community and society when they're released? What do you see the benefits being there?

**Dr. Hunter:** Yeah, well I mean I think probably the ones that are the most obvious have to do with employee ability. I mean I think having a degree we have lots of research that shows that having a college degree, or even having some college versus a high school degree, increases the likelihood that someone is going to be able to you know be gainfully employed. So there's that obvious thing. But I think to me what is more, what has a more long-term effect is really just that personal transformation that being able to like really internalize the notion that I can do hard things and succeed at them. Like I can do things that are really difficult like statistics and understanding and applying theory. And I can do those things that I maybe thought previously would not be something I could do, so I think that's super important. And when we talk about-- when people talk about reentry experiences I think oftentimes what they mean is a person getting out of prison, getting a job, and supporting themselves, maybe supporting their families. But to me, you know for someone to be truly integrated into the community, experiences like higher education really helped support true integration because it gives them the tools, the vocabulary, the under kind of the breath of understanding of how the world works, so that they can be, in a meaningful way, be civically engaged like active participants, active citizens that participate in their communities. So that they can get involved in activism

or, you know understanding who they want to vote for like really understanding issues in a way that helps them, you know, to be able to participate in a meaningful way not that's fulfilling for them.

**Dr. Nelson:** So I'm going to kind of circle back to the program again. How did you decide where you wanted to offer the programs and were there any barriers to getting the program started in those three facilities?

**Dr. Hunter:** Oh my goodness that is such a big question.

**Dr. Nelson:** Ha-ha I'm sorry.

**Dr. Hunter:** That's okay. And I'll try to keep it brief. So back in 2015 I worked with a former dean, her name was Kim Greer, and she and I were both incredibly passionate about this. And I won't go into the details of the different funding streams, but we applied and thought that we were going to have, be able to you know get these funding streams to start this program in 2015, in 2017, again in 2017 and then, finally, recently, we were able to-- not we, I because she's actually moved on to California state now. But so yeah I guess when you ask how did I decide which facilities, I kind of didn't decide, the funding streams did.

**Dr. Nelson:** Oh, okay.

**Dr. Hunter:** So, you know like the federal government put out a solicitation for a program at Waseca, so I jumped on that and applied and was able to get that. But after, like I mentioned, some of the disappointments that we experienced earlier on. I did, I heard back very quickly actually, from the federal government about the Waseca program which was back in October, and had to get that up and running literally within like two months.

**Dr. Nelson:** Wow.

**Dr. Hunter:** Yeah to find professors to teach and--

**Dr. Nelson:** Oh, just a second here we're going to just pause for just a second. Yeah we’re back we just had a little technical issue. So you had two months to get the professors and get the running up?

**Dr. Hunter:** Yes and that was a monumental lift but it happened. And I think sometimes when you’re so excited about having something you wanted, you know you wanted so badly, it didn’t feel like that heavy of a lift but it was. Then within a few weeks of that program starting, I got a call from the Minnesota DOC asking if I’d be willing to start a program like that at Faribault and Shakopee and I said absolutely, sign us up. And so yes, I wrote up that contract and yeah that occurred too so there we are at three prisons.

**Dr. Nelson:** So did all three prisons start last January or was it Waseca first and then the other two in the fall?

**Dr. Hunter:** Yep Waseca started first in the spring semester. Faribault was supposed to-- Faribault and Shakopee were supposed to start in the fall, but we actually ended up offering two summer courses at Faribault to kind of get them started so, yeah.

**Dr. Nelson:** So I know that you had a prior relationship with Shakopee with a class that you and the former dean, Kim Greer created. I know it's a different class and not part of the program but it's so interesting. Can we just talk about that class for a little about what it was?

**Dr. Hunter:** Yeah, absolutely and you know as the COVID restrictions go away, hopefully we hope they do at some point, we plan to actually offer that course as part of this program, as part of the scholar serving time program but right now they're just not letting a lot of people in so we're lucky to be able to get our professors in to teach the classes. But anyway, yeah so that's called-- the title of the course was, “Identity Work in Women's Reentry,” and it was a course that used social psychological theories to help provide kind of framework for understanding the research on women's experiences of reentering communities from prison. So that was the title of the course but probably what makes the course special is that it had a combined classroom of incarcerated students and students from Minnesota State Mankato campus. So we would bring 15 students from the campus to the prison each week during that semester and hold class at the prison together and it was just, it was an amazing experience.

It was amazing every year that I taught it with Kim of course, and then eventually with Laura Harrison. She and I taught it together to after Kim, excuse me, after Kim left for a different position. But, you know students, one of the things that the outside students used to say a lot was, that they had no idea how much they had in common with incarcerated people. And the incarcerated students by the end of the semester would say, we had no idea how much they had in common with just every day, college students you know and they had a vision of college students as being kind of, you know sheltered snobs who were horn rimmed glasses and you know they had these very kind of stereotypical visions of college students. And college students kind of had a sense of incarcerated people as being kind of scary and, you know, dangerous, and both groups, very quickly learned that they had their humanity in common. And in fact many of them had a lot of other experiences in common.

Dr. Nelson: Well that’s such good community building I mean we are more alike than we are different and that's a good way to find that out.

**Dr. Hunter:** Right, yeah.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well I imagine your scholars serving time program also does the same thing of making it so college professors or university professors are not so scary and that we can have good dialogue there too. Because I know we have, you and I both have experienced this where students come in and they think we're very different than we actually are and just people too so that must be very interesting for them.

**Dr. Hunter:** Yes, yes I definitely think that is the case with them. They are, like I've said before, they are much more talkative than students on campus tend to be, like on campus you know you really don't-- it's kind of like pulling teeth sometimes to get a real conversation going. Not in these classrooms. I mean the one thing I would say is they don't seem to be as intimidated by college professors in the prison classrooms, they're very respectful I don't mean it like that, but they don't hesitate to participate in the conversation. They're excited to do that actually and to have the, you know, to them they see it as just a college professor come there to teach them a class. To them that just, you know, feels like a huge opportunity and they're excited to be in the classroom.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well this is such a wonderful program. How about if we kind of wrap up with, what are your hopes for the future of the program?

**Dr. Hunter:** Oh, well, I guess I will be honest in saying that I really hope that we're able to establish a BA program at, at least some of the facilities that have the numbers to support it. I mean I guess we have to think about sustainability too but I'm sure for certain Faribault I think could support it, they have-- and probably Waseca. I'm not sure about Shakopee, I would love to offer a program there, but whether or not you know they would have enough eligible people to support it would be something we'd have to work through. But yeah I just, and I guess I look forward to a time when I can actually share more stories about students who have been through the program and the things they do with their education, whether that be kind of moving straight into some type of job or moving on to more education and just doing wonderful things with their lives. So I look forward to that too because you know just you always want to have something that you can, something tangible, that you can kind of say like see this is what this program has contributed to.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well I am sure in the near future you're going to have somebody come to you and say what you did to the education director. Thank you Dr. Hunter you help change my life.

**Dr. Hunter:** I hope so, I hope that happens. I mean yeah for their sake. Although I would love the kudos but.

**Dr. Nelson:** But you’re right for them it’s a good thing and that’s kind of what we do and I’m glad that you’re able to do that there. Well thank you for joining me. And you know as things keep progressing I will probably bring you back in to ask how things are going and what you see and some success stories too.

**Dr. Hunter:** Yes that would be wonderful.

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