

Theological Libraries in Prison

Prison Theological Libraries: NCFMP Library Services

by Jason Fowler

In the fall of 2017, the College at Southeastern welcomed a new group of thirty freshmen, all of whom were very non-traditional students. These students are part of the North Carolina Field Minister Program (NCFMP), a cooperative effort between Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS), the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (NCDPS), and Coach Joe Gibbs's "Game Plan for Life" nonprofit organization.¹ The purpose of the program is to offer a fully accredited, four-year bachelor's degree program to long-term offenders in the state of North Carolina. All of those involved in providing this program realize that education can be a powerful force for social change. Their hope for the program is to bring about positive change in the lives of prisoners and their families throughout the state as graduates of the program serve the needs of their fellow offenders.

The Library at Southeastern has been involved with this program from its earliest stages. Our library staff supports the program in a variety of ways. We offer reference and instruction sessions at points during the year. We answer student questions within our course management system. We provide limited scanning of requested materials to support the curriculum. We order, process, and catalog all books and textbooks for the program, although we hope to transition some of the processing and cataloging work to teaching assistants at the prison in the future.

Students in the program each have access to a laptop provided by NCDPS, and through the laptop they can access an online catalog (Koha) and a course management system (Moodle). Both of these systems are hosted by SEBTS and supported by our SEBTS IT staff, and they are only accessible to students, professors, library and writing center personnel, and NCDPS staff.

Physical space for the library inside the prison is limited somewhat at present, but plans are in the works for building a permanent facility to support the program in the future. Students have access to approximately 1,500 physical books (not including textbooks), and we are adding more books weekly. In the past few months, we have received a generous grant from an educational foundation to specifically support our library acquisitions for the program.

Our library staff worked in close conjunction with NCDPS IT staff to secure limited access to online resources. Beginning this fall, students will have access to electronic collections like *ATLASerials*[®] and EBSCO eBooks, and we anticipate adding other offerings from JSTOR, Credo, and Oxford in the near future. Students within prisons do not typically have this type of access. To be able to provide it, we have been diligent to search for and disable any database features that are useful in normal academic library settings but might be a security hole in a prison. I cannot overstate how supportive and adaptable the NCDPS staff — and especially their IT staff — has been in helping us achieve the goal of safely providing maximum access to resources in a medium-custody prison.

¹ "Game Plan for Life," <https://www.gameplanforlife.com/>.