New College Students and Professor Use Innovative Puppetry Program to Prepare Inmates for Workforce Reintegration

SARASOTA, FL, UNITED STATES, September 9, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In a highly unconventional and deeply effective approach to prison rehabilitation, Dr. Tyler Fisher and his undergraduate students at New College of Florida are utilizing purpose-built puppetry to teach vital job interview skills to incarcerated individuals.





Funded by a Community Impact Grant from United Arts of Central Florida, Dr. Fisher is collaborating with the bilingual performing arts non-profit Open Scene to bring the program, "The Art of Interviewing: Voice, Vision, Vocation," to the Osceola County Corrections Department. Having recently concluded a highly successful series of puppetry workshops in English and Spanish with both male and female inmates, Dr. Fisher and his team are focusing the program this summer specifically on female inmates and the unique challenges they face during reentry.

The New College Difference: Real-World Undergraduate Impact

This initiative highlights exactly what sets New College of Florida apart from

peer institutions: providing undergraduates with hands-on, real-world experience that goes far beyond traditional classroom theory.

New College students Jones Hogsed and Alicia Byrne serve as integral co-creators of the project. Rather than simply observing, they are gaining high-level professional experience by contributing directly to the program's daily execution.

"What truly distinguishes New College is that our undergraduates are doing the kind of hands-on, community-impacting work usually reserved for graduate students or full-time professionals," said Dr. Fisher. "Jones and Alicia are not just assisting; they are actively building a curriculum and facilitating a program that gives incarcerated individuals a real second chance."

Byrne, who is pursuing an English and Creative Writing concentration, has leveraged her academic focus to directly shape the curriculum by:

- Drafting Custom Practice Scripts: Writing engaging interview scripts for the initial practice sessions.

- Creating Distinct Scenarios: Developing three playful, tiered scripts for the puppets to perform—ranging from a deliberately "disastrous" interview to a solid, adequate interview, and an off-the-charts superlative interview.

Serious Fun: The Psychology of Carceral Puppetry

Working alongside Open Scene and co-teacher Leah Basaria, Dr. Fisher and the students designed specific puppet-building materials that are safe and effective for a carceral environment.

The custom-designed puppets function as highly specialized therapeutic and educational tools:

- Safe Construction: Crafted strictly from soft foam and felt.

- Meaningful Self-Representation: Featuring interchangeable appendages and facial features that inmates assemble themselves.

- Neutral Design: Intentionally designed as anthropomorphic (human-like) figures in non-human colors to avoid any racial connotations.

Envisioning the Future: Puppet Personas and Career Goals

Going beyond physical assembly, the puppets act as distinct, forward-looking personas for the incarcerated students. Each puppet is given a unique name and a specific job aspiration envisioned by the student, allowing them to visualize their future success. Real examples created

during the workshops include:

- Sheree, aspiring Dog Kennel Owner

- Pepito, Jr., Camionero (Truck Driver)

- Waffles, Asphalt Foreman

- Little One, Clothing Retailer

- Sir Charles Legend, Restaurateur

During a four-week workshop series, the inmates use these custom personas to practice mock job interviews.

"The puppet acts as an empowering extension of the self," Fisher explained. "It equips these individuals to overcome the shame, inhibitions, and self-consciousness that often accompany job interviews after incarceration. If a critique is given during the mock interview, it is directed at the puppet, not the person. That critical distance relieves the pressure and is completely transformative for their confidence and agency."

From Inmates to Artists: The Upcoming Public Exhibition

The profound impact of this scalable program will soon be shared with the broader community. Beginning in September 2026, the puppets created by the inmates will be exhibited at the Hart Memorial Central Library, the principal library of the Osceola Library System.

"As these individuals prepare to reenter society, we want the public to see them as artful makers, creators, and performers," Fisher noted. "This exhibition is a positive display of their self-portraits in puppetry. It serves as a creative, humanizing alternative to a traditional mugshot."

About New College of Florida

Founded in 1960, New College of Florida is the state’s designated public honors college. Recognized nationally for its academic excellence, rigorous inquiry, and commitment to free expression, New College offers more than 50 undergraduate majors, graduate programs in Applied Data Science, Marine Mammal Science, and a new Master's program in Educational Leadership, and a growing NAIA athletics program.

Aligning with the Fulcrum Career Center Mission

This hands-on initiative aligns perfectly with the mission of the Fulcrum Career Center at New College of Florida. The center empowers students to connect their liberal arts education with

meaningful careers through intentional professional development, personalized coaching, internships, mentorship, and experiential learning. By partnering with employers, alumni, and faculty, the Career Center helps students build the skills, experiences, and professional networks needed for success after graduation, preparing them to lead lives of purpose and make meaningful contributions to their communities.

James Miller
New College of Florida
+1 850-445-0773
email us here
Visit us on social media:
Instagram

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