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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

EIU TAKES CLASSES TO TAYLORVILLE PRISON

CHARLESTON -- From an Eastern Illinois University distance learning classroom equipped with special cameras, microphones, monitors and an elaborate control center with a keyboard that looks like a SuperNintendo, Michael Burns is able to deliver his lectures to inmates at Taylorville Correctional Center, more than 60 miles away.

Burns, a member of the teaching staff of the Taylorville Correctional Center, has been assigned to Eastern by the Illinois Department of Corrections (DOC) to teach G.E.D. classes to more than 20 Taylorville inmates.

The courses originate in Eastern's new distance learning classroom in Coleman Hall and are delivered to a remote classroom site at the Taylorville prison through a fiber optic network that permits complete audio/video interactivity between the students and teacher. State-of-the-art equipment allows Burns to incorporate drawings, transparencies, videos and computer graphics in his instruc-

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tional materials.

Eastern's distance learning classroom will also be used to deliver a variety of off-campus credit and contract courses, to provide in-service programs for elementary and secondary teachers and to assure student teachers of adequate multicultural training.

"Distance learning technology provides a means of educating inmates while providing educational services prisons need," said John Beabout, project director and general manager of WEIU-TV. "We hope this pilot distance-learning project will lead to additional cooperative ventures between Eastern and the DOC."

Funding for the project was made available with a \$190,000 Higher Education Cooperation Act (HECA) grant through the Illinois Prairie Higher Education Consortium of which EIU is a member.

A \$95,000 HECA grant awarded to Eastern in November will fund a second remote classroom site at Shelbyville High School.

Eastern's partnership with the DOC and the Taylorville minimum security prison was formed over a year ago when the university and Consolidated Communications tested the distance learning technology to deliver adult literacy classes to Taylorville inmates as part of a successful two-week pilot program.

Burns, a former Chicago public school teacher who does freelance work in television production, finds it exciting and challenging to be a part of the first distance learning prison program in Illinois.

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"Distance learning has great potential for bringing education to classrooms at remote sites. It does present its challenges, though," said Burns.

"It's like choreography. You have to have all your steps coordinated. You have to be able to manipulate the keyboard that controls all the electronic equipment at the same time you display your overhead and maintain eye contact with the students in the satellite classroom. There is also the challenge of keeping your classes interesting," said Burns, who relies heavily on visual aids.

Burns' classes are scheduled for three hours daily, Monday through Friday, for 10 weeks.

"The inmates' response has been good to what for most is their first interactive video experience," said Burns, adding that the inmates are asked to give regular written evaluations of the program.

"I'm essentially writing the book as I go along as to what works and what doesn't," Burns commented.

While Burns assigns work to the inmates, it is graded by Taylorville G.E.D. instructor Sandra Asmussen. She is also responsible for enrollment interviews, pre- and post-testing and preparing statistical data and evaluations for the pilot program.

"I do not look upon my students as criminals, but rather as individuals who need and want additional education," Burns explained.

And studies show that prisoners who participate in education programs have a much lower rate of returning to prison than those who do not, Burns said.