

Students in Brian Hamilton's

entrepreneurship class face a bigger challenge than a lack of funding: They are serving time in prison for crimes such as robbery and drug dealing. Hamilton, co-founder and CEO of Sageworks, a financial software company in Raleigh, North Carolina, taught inmates when he was in graduate school two decades ago. He took it up again in 2007, when a friend committed suicide in jail. Since then, he has held his one-day course, Inmates to Entrepreneurs, at 20 state prisons in North Carolina, visiting one each month. Students, who learn about sales, marketing, and customer service, are recommended by prison officials and usually have fewer than six months left to serve. "There's not a big support group for these guys," Hamilton says. "It makes me grateful for what I have."

Start-up 101

Hamilton advises students to focus on service businesses with low overhead.

Distinguished alumni

In the past three years, nearly 1,000 inmates have attended Hamilton's entrepreneurship class. Alumni have gone on to found a landscaping service, a T-shirt company, and other businesses.

What's next

Hamilton is establishing a mentorship program to connect ex-prisoners with entrepreneurs in North Carolina and Virginia. "I can teach them basic things about starting a business, but they need somebody they can call on throughout the challenges in their lives," he says.

"As a citizen, I want these guys to have the life skills they need so they won't commit more crimes."