Tawanda McCants, left, and Antoinette Thistle take part in the graduation ceremony through the Safe And Sound Return Entrepreneurship Training Institute. The ceremony took place at the Varsity Club inside Matthews Arena.

**Tapping their entrepreneurial instinct**

Program that helps once imprisoned women re-enter the workforce holds graduation event

**BY KARA SHEMIN**

“I believe there is joy in the air,” said William Tiga Tita, lecturer in entrepreneurship and innovation in the College of Business Administration at Northeastern University.

Tita, speaking at a ceremony in Matthews Arena, was referring to the pride felt by the newest graduates of the Safe and Sound Return Entrepreneurship Training Institute, a program that helps previously incarcerated women with a history of drug possession and other infractions re-enter the workforce or start their own business by training them to use computers and create their own business plan.

The program was developed by Northeastern’s Institute on Urban Health Research (IUHR) and the College of Business Administration, in partnership with the Boston Public Health Commission’s Bureau of Addictions Prevention, Treatment and Recovery Support Services.

“We try to get our participants to seek out and explore their entrepreneurial DNA,” Tita said. “We have challenged the women to convert the problems and pain around them into opportunities by tapping into their natural entrepreneurial instincts.”

During the ceremony, graduates showed PowerPoint presentations summarizing their future goals and business plans. They also earned certificates for completing the program that can translate into college credit at community colleges.

Program alumnus Tawanda McCants graduated from the program in July 2010 after successfully completing the Entrepreneurship Training program and the companion substance abuse treatment.

A teary-eyed McCants shared her inspiring story with the graduates. “This program has opened doors for me,” she said. “It gave me the courage to sign up for my GED classes last September, enroll in school and start a business.”

Today, McCants makes gift baskets filled with scented oils, jar candles and pillows that she sews and stuffs. She sells them for $15 to $25 each at school and to friends.

“I want to grow the business and one day own my own little store,” McCants said.

Hortensia Amaro, director of the Institute on Urban Health Research, applauded the graduate’s efforts. “To see that some women have started small business ventures so soon after graduating is well beyond our expectations.”

The program runs four times a year with about 10 to 12 women in each 10-week class. In addition to computer skills, they are taught to write a résumé and develop a business. They also receive community reentry and comprehensive substance-abuse treatment services through the Boston Public Health Commission’s addictions treatment programs.

The program is halfway through its three-year, $1.2 million federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration grant awarded to Amaro, principal investigator. Graduate students in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities’ Masters of Public Administration program are engaged in developing a business plan as part of their capstone projects. The business plan being developed by the students will assist the program in identifying strategies and potential funders for the project’s sustainability and expansion. Other graduate students from the Bouve College of Health Sciences and the College of Criminal Justice are also involved in the project as part of the evaluation team.

“This is really entrepreneurship 101. Now, we’re focusing on how to institutionalize this program and develop it further to include a more advanced phase of entrepreneurship training,” Amaro said.