

OSU students attend class inside Oregon State Penitentiary

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

A group of Oregon State University students taking a Public Policy course with men in the state's only maximum-security prison are among the first on the West Coast to participate in The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, a national program based at Temple University in Philadelphia. OSU's Michelle Inderbitzin, an assistant professor in sociology, received an L.L. Stewart Faculty Development Award in 2005 to receive training in The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Her goal was to teach a class inside a prison that would include OSU students as well as incarcerated students. This term is her first time teaching this particular class, which is a special topics course on Crime, Justice and Public Policy. The class includes 12 senior-level undergraduates and three graduate students from OSU, and 15 men in the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem. This makes Inderbitzin the first on the West Coast to teach a class in a maximum-security men's prison through the Inside-Out program. Inderbitzin's expertise is in criminology, particularly juvenile justice issues. "It has been truly amazing so far," Inderbitzin said. "The experience has far surpassed my expectations." Portland State University and University of Oregon are also participating in Inside-Out, which the Oregon Department of Corrections, after a two-year planning process, approved to be piloted in two penitentiaries during the 2006-07 academic year. A life-sentenced man named Paul provided the program's inspiration when, in 1994, he met Lori Pompa, Inside-Out's founder and director, as she was leading a group of her students on a tour of a Pennsylvania prison. Paul suggested that she try bringing students into prison for an entire semester. Three years later, she was able to do just that, and since that time a total of approximately 2,000 college and incarcerated students have participated in the program. To date, 104 faculty members from 80 colleges and universities in 31 states have been trained, and facilities in 11 states have hosted courses. Agreeing to allow college students into a prison classroom was a challenge for the Oregon Department of Corrections. However, Inside-Out's track record, the fact that it is offered at no cost to correctional facilities, and the importance of education in helping incarcerated men and women change their lives persuaded Corrections' decision-makers that the program was worthwhile. Every Wednesday night, the class of OSU students - the "outside" portion of the program - travel to Salem. They attend class with the incarcerated students in a classroom, supervised by correctional officers. Everyone uses first names and the men who are incarcerated are not asked why they are in prison, Inderbitzin said. Men with sexual offenses on their records are not allowed in the class. Many of the "inside" students are serving long sentences. While the inside students do not get academic credit for the class, the participants say they are finding the experience worthwhile. Inderbitzin said many preconceived notions and assumptions have been tossed out. "I think it is difficult to think of a prisoner as a monster after being in a room with them and really talking to them for an extended period of time," she said. "And the inmates have been happy that the OSU students don't look down at them. "They seem eager to share their thoughts and engage in the class on a really deep level." Inside-Out courses are structured as a collaborative learning process. Both "inside" and "outside" students form teams and work on group projects, with little time spent on lectures. Classes are interactive, with discussions on the criminal justice system and the issues involved in incarceration. For their final project, the students are usually asked to provide realistic solutions to some of the problems within the system. Miranda is a senior studying behavioral science at OSU. She said the class has been a life-transforming experience for her. "This class has changed my mind about the criminal justice system, and my view of prisoners," Miranda said, adding that she feels totally safe because of the controls that have been set up within the prison - including the first names-only policy. "I am learning about the criminal justice system and how it's not perfect and needs improvement. We discuss how society views its citizens by the way prisoners are handled, and hearing from life experiences from the inside students is extremely beneficial." Inderbitzin said the class will be offered again in the summer. She is hoping to offer it every summer, providing funding comes through. For more information on The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, go to www.temple.edu/inside-out/ Inderbitzin also has a blog documenting the Inside-Out experience, as well as discussions on issues surrounding criminology. It is at: <http://publiccriminology.blogspot.com/>

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