Inside-Out

University of Dayton

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Inside-Out

In the visiting room at the Warren Correctional Institution, a small group of students sat quietly in a circle, reflecting on the word written in large black ink on the board.

“Empowerment,” said professor Jamie Longazel. “When you hear that word, what do you think?”

“Unity,” one student responded.

“Responsibility,” the next said.

By many measures, the Crime and Inequality course is like any other offered at the University of Dayton. Except in this classroom, almost half the students can't leave the premises.

It's part of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, which brings together “outside” students from universities and “inside” students from correctional institutions. Founded in 1997 at Temple University in Pennsylvania, the program has expanded to more than 150 colleges. The University of Dayton is participating for the first time this semester.

Every Tuesday, 11 undergraduates drive 40 minutes south to the prison, pass the barbed wire fences, sign in with an armed guard and walk through a metal detector. They take their seats among the nine inside students for discussions, activities and group work.

“We are not concerned with questions of whether someone ‘deserves’ to be in prison,” explains Longazel. “Rather, Inside-Out pushes UD students to see people in prison as people. It challenges them to confront everything they have been taught to assume about people in prison. It is no coincidence, that after a few weeks, the class forms bonds unlike those in any other classroom setting. Students will never forget this experience.”
The goal is for inside and outside students to benefit by studying crime, justice and related social issues together as peers. The inside students don’t talk about why they’re behind bars and the outside students don’t ask. And, as per Inside-Out policy, everyone goes by their first name only.

“Coming in, I didn't know what to expect,” said Marlon, 35, who has earned his GED and completed a paralegal career training program while incarcerated. “But I will say that the material was so on point... Everybody is willing to come in and give us a chance, and we gave them a chance. The topics make us see what we all have in common. It's always the highlight of the week.”

Tim, 51, who has an associate degree in art history, said the class “makes me feel like I'm not inside the prison walls. That I'm actually a student at UD.”

University of Dayton senior Keyy, who is majoring in criminal justice, enrolled in the class to better understand what a jail is like — both because her father is incarcerated in Texas and because she wants to work in the justice system counseling youth.

She said the major lesson she's learned is that “what you think about someone is not always true.”

“These guys are very intelligent and they are deep thinkers,” she said of the inside students. “They just made mistakes, but we all do.”

Staff from the prison involved in Inside-Out have noted the inside students have maintained model behavior due to their desire to fully participate and complete the program, said Greg Craft, of Warren Correctional.

Longazel said it is obvious the class has overcome any initial discomfort they felt, and each student — whether inside or outside — has taken something different from the readings and interactions.

“For decades, our culture has emphasized being ‘tough on crime,’” said Longazel, co-author of the book The Pains of Mass Imprisonment. “But what does that mean? I think our class has realized that confronting our own assumptions and biases on the path toward transformation is much ‘tougher' than ignoring just how difficult issues of crime and punishment actually are.”

The class will meet for the last time on April 19.

More information on Inside-Out is available online at insideoutcenter.org.

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