

Students benefit from prison classroom exchange

Program promotes collaboration between students and inmates

By Jayne Omaye | News reporter

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University students can go far beyond the classroom setting through the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, a course where students take collaborative classes with prisoners at Oregon State Penitentiary.

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program was developed at Temple University in Philadelphia in 1997. The program's purpose is to provide a unique learning experience for college students, called "outside students," to interact with "inside students" in prison. Criminal justice and related social issues were the main focuses of those classes.

English Professor Steven Shankman introduced the program to the University in Spring 2007. The class has been offered every spring term since 2007 through the Robert D. Clark Honors College. One class, "Literature and Ethics: Levinas and Vassily Grossman's Life and Fate" will also be offered through the Inside-Out program this spring.

Students who participated in Inside-Out traveled to the penitentiary in Salem once a week to discuss issues on literature and ethics, and attended classes in the penitentiary's educational department in a regular classroom setting.

The prisoners range in age from college-age to those in their 70s. In class, all students, inside and out, discuss their readings and essays they wrote.

Junior Madeline Bailey, who participated in the program in Spring 2009, felt that the experience was very eye-opening and humbling. Bailey felt that unlike some classes at college campuses, in this one, students made an effort to get to know each other and form positive relationships.

"Barriers society builds are always imaged," Bailey said. "The learning experience was very genuine."

In addition to Shankman's course, a spring film class, "Ethics and Aesthetics in Film," will open up to all undergraduates. The class will be taught by William Cadbury, a former University professor.

Cadbury's film class will take place at the Oregon State Correctional Institution in Salem. Inside and outside students will interact while watching nine films and discussing their significance to criminal justice issues.

"Each group of students benefits by developing an understanding of the very different circumstances of the other, yet of our common humanity," Cadbury said. "It seems to be the universal agreement among those who take these courses that they come out changed, for the better, but also it turns out to be a particularly stimulating environment for encouraging learning about the subject matter — in this case, what rich insights films can give into important issues of social justice and personal concern."

Shankman said he chose to teach the class through the Honors College because of the small class sizes it offers and the funding it provided the program. Inside-Out class enrollments average 20 to 30 students, about the same as regular Honors College classes.

An ice breaker on the first day of class made an impact on Bailey.

"While talking to one of the men in our class during a discussion exercise, we were asked to share our favorite place in the world," she said. "Without hesitating, he shared with me that his favorite place in the world was exactly where he was because he strived to be fully present in every moment."

Shankman said the program is very meaningful to students to gain life experiences and to break barriers within society.

"The essence of education is to go beyond who you are at the moment, to move outside your comfort zone and to recognize your responsibility to others," he said, "broadening your horizons and becoming aware of how you can make a difference in the world. This class seems to have that effect on people."

jomaye@dailyemerald.com

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