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Oregon's College Inside Program educating inmates | Crime

Submitted by [Steven Foreman](#), Multimedia Journalist
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The Oregon State Penitentiary sits about a mile west of I-5 in Salem, Oregon. Guard towers and a three-story high cement wall with concertina wire surround the brick building. On the south side, ducks swim in a creek. The creek flows into a city park with baseball fields just to the East. To the north, nurses and physicians fix people up at the hospital. To the west, politicians hustle to work at the state capital. Wind pushes the fall leaves into the street as it begins to rain. Movement surrounds the prisoners. They are locked in a time capsule in the middle of a bustling city. They sit in their cells paying with time for the crimes they committed.

Programs educating prisoners go by many different names: College Behind Bars, Correctional Education, and College Inside, but they all share a common result, lower recidivism rates. Recidivism is a relapse into a previous behavior. The government sends criminals to jail for two reasons, public safety and correctional treatment. Prisoners who wait to be released show higher recidivism when they get out than those who are taught something while they are in. By educating Oregon inmates, these programs change the prisoners' thoughts rather than just punishing them for their misbehavior. Correctional education sets roots for the inmates to create new lives for themselves.

For the last three years, prisoners in the state of Oregon have been able to take college courses. Before this, it was difficult for a prisoner to enroll in college courses. In 1993, the government made prisoners ineligible to receive the Pell Grant for tuition assistance. For over a decade, prisoners in Oregon were locked up physically and mentally. Without the financial assistance, most inmates could not afford tuition. The college inside program, provided through Chemeketa Community College in Salem, gives inmates the opportunity to earn an Associate of the Arts.

An anonymous donor primarily supports College Inside and agreed to fund the program for the next two years. The donor saw an episode of 60 Minutes about an educational program in a maximum-security prison in New York and wanted to start one in Oregon. He or she contacted Nancy Green, who was working with corrections and teaching. The donor asked for a budget to start the Inside Out Program. Nancy reacted to this request by estimating the cost for 20 prisoners at four different correctional facilities. Two days later she gave the donor the estimate. The donor said that he or she could make it happen. Now program manager, Nancy oversees the College Inside Program at Chemeketa Community College by arranging classes between the teachers and the

inmates. She got involved in correctional education by watching people who worked for the Oregon corrections, while teaching at Chemeketa. Once the donation was made, the Department of Corrections and Chemeketa Community College have been supportive of her efforts. When offered the job as program manager, she said, "I thought, 'that sounds like a really interesting job,' and so when a position opened for an education manager, I applied for that." After just a few minutes with Nancy and her enthusiasm for College Inside radiates as she watches a DVD of inmates being interviewed about education. "They say it best," she says as she prepares to be interviewed in her Chemeketa office.

Nancy sits upright, smiles, takes a deep breath, and begins to explain the benefits behind the program and how thankful she is for the money the program has received. She said, "The College Inside Program started with one donor, and Chemeketa staff are now donating to the program. We recently received a grant from the federal government for youth offenders, and so we've been able to add some students that fit under that criteria." For an inmate to enroll in classes, they must have less than five years left on their sentence, a high school diploma or equivalency, 18 months of clear conduct, and maintain a 3.0 grade point average.

With her is Jeanine Hohn, a public relations employee from the penitentiary. Jeanine joins the interview in case Nancy needs a specific statistic or can't answer a certain question; however, Nancy breezes through the questions with sincerity. College Inside is something she so strongly believes in; she talks about the prisoners as if they are kids of her own. Jeanine didn't speak about the program; however, a friendly hug at the start and end of the meeting expressed the relationship between her and Nancy and the strong connection between Chemeketa Community College and the Oregon State Penitentiary.

Nancy said, "What we know is everyday when you are involved in education or a job, you're less likely to go back to prison." Once the prisoners have served their time for their misdeeds, Nancy wants to see them succeed outside the prison walls. One of the toughest situations for a felon is finding a job when they get out. Nancy believes that a college degree is an essential credential for their success. She said, "They have so many things that they can do, and do well, if someone will just give them a chance." She knows the prisoners well and wants them to succeed. She explains that College Inside gives them hope for starting a new future when they get out, instead of relapsing into a previous behavior. She realizes that prisoners are as individualized as any other citizen, which is why the program offers as wide variety of classes as they can. They have automotive and other trade skill classes along with linguistics, ethics, art, and history. According to Oregon.gov, the College Inside Program in Oregon assisted over 100 inmates in earning over 2,000 college credits. A U.S. Department of Education study showed that for every dollar spent on education, two dollars were saved on prison costs, and by attending class during incarceration, inmates were 29% less likely to be reincarcerated. The College Inside program aims to keep people from going back to prison. The cost to keep someone in prison is far more than to give somebody an education.

Chemeketa Community College is the primary institution providing college courses to inmates; however, the University of Oregon and Oregon State University also offer a

few classes through the Inside Out Program. The Inside Out Program takes students from the universities to the Oregon State Penitentiary and Oregon State Correctional Institution to participate in classes with the inmates. The program originated at Temple University in 1997. According to their website at insideoutcenter.org, the program was based on the hypothesis that incarcerated men and women and college students might mutually benefit from studying crime, justice, and related social issues together as peers. There are currently 7,500 students enrolled across the country, and the program has plans to expand to all 50 states by 2012. Professor Steven Shankman, of the University of Oregon, teaches ethics in the Inside Out Program to 15 prisoners and 15 outside college students.

Three people wait to talk to professor Shankman during his office hours. His secretary's phone rings frequently. Alison Kavanagh sits in the waiting room to discuss her thesis paper with Shankman. She is a senior at the University of Oregon studying political science. She participated in the Inside Out Program and came away with a better understanding of Oregon's prisoners. As she talks about the class she smiles and fondly looks back at the memories. She mentioned that she had to get special permission to enroll in the class, including a background check. Once a week the University of Oregon students would ride in a school van to the penitentiary. On the first day of class, the students from the outside sat in every other chair in a circle. Once the inmates entered the classroom they had to sit dispersed with the outside students. She felt a little awkward at first, but quickly realized that the prisoners shared her desire for education. Professor Shankman had just returned from Harvard where he participated in a series of lectures. In the past three years professor Shankman has taught three college courses through the Inside Out Program. He interviews university students and inmates before allowing them into the class. He shares Nancy's enthusiasm for higher education in Oregon prisons. He said:

"The more people know about prisons, the more people go inside, the more likely it is that people will change their views on incarceration, which is a bit of a scandal in the United States. Bit of a scandal, it is a scandal right now. The idea of the inside out program is to break down the barrier, the prison wall."

He does his part by interviewing all the students, inmates and campus students, and teaches a literary class on ethics. He expressed skepticism and dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system in the United States. He said, "The people just don't think about people behind prison, and it's a big part of American culture. The statistics are pretty devastating that the United States has five percent of the worlds population and 25 percent of the worlds prison population." These statistics motivate him to teach and participate in the Inside Out Program, which is a portion of College Inside. The students at the University of Oregon who participated in the Inside Out Program produced a magazine publication documenting their experience along with the experiences of the inmates. The inmates expressed a deep appreciation for every part of the program from learning new things, the readings, the class work, and being able to interact with people living outside the prison walls. The students from the university seemed to all learn something new about life in prison and erased their preconceived misconceptions.

Professor Shankman said, “Since most people who are incarcerated are going to come back out, you don’t want them to go back in again. Education is the great inoculation against coming back in. The more education that the inmates get, the less likely they will repeat offences, the more the public saves on incarceration and the safer the communities are.” Nancy and Professor Shankman could both be described as idealists. They see the bigger picture of how this long-term charitable effort positively affects the world around them.

Nancy said, “If there’s anyone who would love to teach inside, who has a master’s degree and the right credentials in the different subjects that are needed, I’d love to hear from them. We also then of course could use funding for textbooks or tuition, all of those pieces. We’re very blessed with what we have, but we are touching just a small portion of the population.” She encourages people to get involved with the program if they can. Running out of money to use for tuition assistance is a constant worry for Nancy, the inmates, Chemeketa Community College and Oregon Corrections. In the last year, the program graduated its first students. Nancy said, “We’ve been very fortunate. We’ve had funding now for four years, and so now we’re seeing the graduates.” Upon graduation the inmates created a video expressing what they thought of the program. The inmates praise Nancy for all of her contributions that were truly life changing for them. They also express their gratitude to the anonymous donor and all the subsidiary donors. The program will provide at least two more years of tuition assistance for the inmates.

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