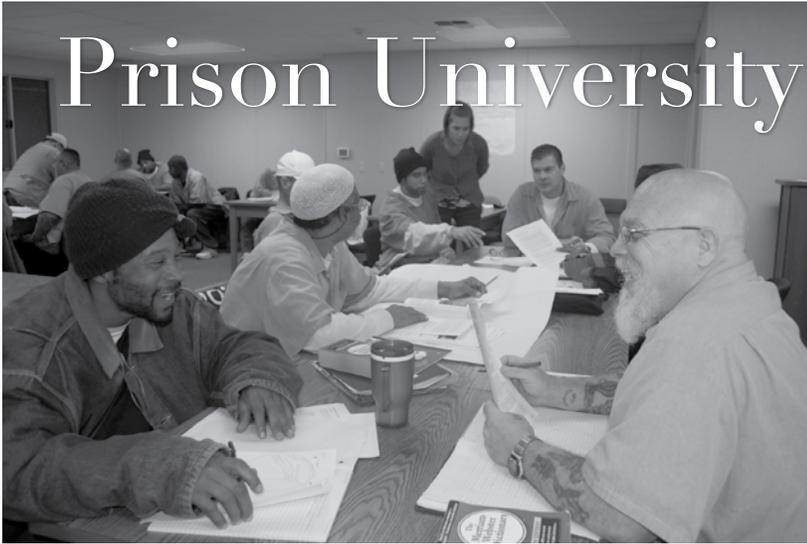


Prison University Project



A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

December 2010, Vol. 5, No. 2

From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

In early October I attended an extraordinary symposium at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, "Higher Education in Prison: Strategies for Action." The conference was hosted by the Education Justice Project, which was founded by Rebecca Ginsburg, Professor of Landscape Architecture at UIUC, and a San Quentin volunteer alum. The gathering included amazing people running higher education programs around the country. The Prison Studies Project at Harvard, directed by Kaia Stern, is now at work on a directory that will soon make accessible information about those and other programs nationwide.

Being at that conference served as a compelling reminder of just how few prison higher education programs exist anywhere in the U.S., particularly anywhere close to our size, and how much good we stand to do for the people running those programs, and the hundreds and thousands of people incarcerated across the country, if we continue to expand and succeed in our work. All of this gave even deeper meaning to the significant strides we've been making in our quest to serve more students at San Quentin, and to our current plans to further expand our work.

Among the most significant strides: the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has agreed to keep the San Quentin education building open for our use on the weekends; as a result, we have been able to add three additional classes this fall. We are also now being allowed to run limited afternoon classes during the week, making it possible to offer Spanish language – and we're planning other classes during that time as well. In order not to exceed our own organizational capacity, we will continue to take advantage of these opportunities in stages – gradually tackling Sunday afternoons and Saturdays over the coming year.

To take full advantage of this moment of opportunity, we have now embarked on a campaign to increase our organizational capacity. This past month, we have created two new positions, a Development Consultant and a Program Assistant, and are overjoyed to have hired Sara Leedom and West Hays – both, for now, on a part-time basis. (See their bios on page two.) The next steps in our capacity-building effort will be to launch the full program evaluation, and further refine the instructional models and teacher training systems for our college preparatory courses, Math 50 and English 99.

By defining and promoting college readiness, training our teachers and staff, maintaining relationships with prison administrators and staff, creating partnerships with academic institutions, and devising strategies for building financial sustainability – we are already generating precious resources that others can and do use to create new programs and expand existing ones.

But beyond all of this work, perhaps our greatest potential contribution from the standpoint of advocacy will be the Program Evaluation, which will measure the impact of participation in the College Program on students' educational attainment, post-release outcomes (including employment, income, and mental health), rates of recidivism, as well as on the educational achievements and other indicators of well-being for participants' children.

This project will amass vital data for incarcerated people, program founders, academic administrators, corrections officials, policymakers, and others who seek to garner support for similar programs. Given how few college programs anywhere in the country have the number of participants, years in existence, range of courses, or financial resources to conduct rigorous quantitative and qualitative evaluation of their work, it is essential that we step up and lead in this arena as well.

In short, 2011 is shaping up to be a year of unprecedented challenge and opportunity, and we are deeply grateful for your continued support.

With warm regards, Jody Lewen



OpenLine has arrived!

The 2010 edition of OpenLine, the Journal of Student Writing, is now available. To receive a free copy, please send your mailing address to:
info@prisonuniversityproject.org
or
Prison University Project
Post Office Box 492
San Quentin, CA 94964

The Wonders of Comparative Religion – A Student’s Perspective

I entered this semester at Patten University as a man of faith. One of the classes I enrolled in was Comparative Religions. This class has been awesome in helping me to understand not just my own religion and beliefs, but the beliefs of others as well. More than simply teaching me about different religions though, this class has been instrumental in changing me as a person. It has shown me that I was wearing the blinders of bigotry. I always thought that my religion was the “one true” religion, and I never wanted to talk about other religions. However, through the study of comparative religions I have learned tolerance. There is no “one true” religion; everybody is entitled to believe what they want.

This class was wondrous in solidifying my beliefs, while at the same time making me appreciate and value my fellow men because of their differences. Thank you for the opportunity to take this class and become a better person. The lessons I learned will stay with me for the rest of my life.

— Michael Anthony

Critiquing Tolerance – A Teacher’s Perspective

Introduction to Comparative Religions is just that -- an introduction to Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Native American religious traditions, as well as to the academic discipline of Religion. I began teaching this class at San Quentin in the last week of August, a time when American political discourse had become almost hysterical over the proposal to build an Islamic center two blocks from Ground Zero. This may seem like it would be the perfect moment to teach religion, to promote tolerance and unity and a fellowship of all believers. “All religions are one,” William Blake says, and scholars of comparative religion have long followed his lead.

But despite this time of heightened tempers and fiery arguments and pleas for understanding, our class began not with an appeal to unity but with a critique of tolerance. We opened our discussion not with the famous comparativist Huston Smith, but with Stephen Prothero’s *God is Not One*, a book that argues the discourse of tolerance is a dangerous illusion that glosses over real and important differences.

The critique of tolerance is never a simple position, and Prothero’s work provoked strong reactions among the class. Some students took instantly to Prothero’s argument. Others remained skeptical. In discussing the reading, one student suggested that “tolerance” is a privilege accorded to people in positions of power. “Tolerance” is also a handy way to dismiss difference and to assume everyone else is just like us. But calling a mosque a church or putting a menorah on the Christmas tree doesn’t really do much for an empathetic appreciation of difference.

A critical attitude toward tolerance doesn’t mean a rejection of discussion or a refusal to understand others. Critique isn’t merely criticism, but a critical reevaluation of our attitudes. Instead, the critique of tolerance is about understanding and appreciating difference, and acknowledging unspoken privilege, in religion, in the classroom, and in life generally. If you sit in our Introduction to Comparative Religions class, you won’t walk away with a clear answer on building an Islamic Center near Ground Zero, or with a list of five basic principles all religions share. Instead, Comparative Religions is a place for critical thinking and critique, and no value, not even the much-vaunted ideal of tolerance, is beyond questioning.

— Rhiannon Graybill

Rhiannon Graybill is a PhD student in Near Eastern Studies at UC Berkeley currently working on a dissertation about masculinity and embodiment in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible.



Living in the Shadow of Executions

David Cowan

When I arrived at San Quentin I remember thinking, “I really didn’t want to end up here.” What bothered me was that I didn’t want to be locked in a place where people’s executions would be carefully planned and carried out somewhat regularly. I didn’t know how I would cope with it.

During executions I try to pay attention to the atmosphere. I listen to staff remarks and look for facial expressions or body language that would indicate gloating, pleasure, disappointment or indifference. I believe that I see all of that, but mostly conscious restraint from showing anything at all. I try to get a feel for what’s happening with the prisoners also.

Execution time affects different people differently. On the Mainline, questions arise about what the “program” or daily schedule will be. So, on the surface it can appear that the mainliners do not care – and some don’t – but I also hear conversations arise about the event.

Opinions expressed in conversations vary as much as in the outside community. Prison culture influences some opinions. Crimes are ordered into a different type of hierarchy than in the outside community that makes a person worthy of death on one side of the spectrum and respect on the other.

I am one who gets uncomfortable as the time for an execution approaches and quiet during the event itself. Innumerable thoughts run through my mind. I think about the ethical and legal questions, knowing that law and ethics are not synonymous. I try to search for a rational use for killing someone. If justice is supposed to be a product of reason and a desire for peace, can killing produce justice?

I get frustrated with the fact that I don’t have the answers just as I am frustrated with the system that doesn’t seem to have them either. I think about the victims. I wish that it could at least heal them of their pain. Would they be better served if the of-

fender was to spend his or her life in honor of them instead of killed as a reminder of the state’s monopoly on violence yet in the name of the victims? How much of how I feel is influenced by my own guilt about killing someone?

I think some people are like me whereas the execution hits a little too close to home. Not only is it unsettling as a life is ceremoniously being snuffed out close to where you are, but the closeness also rests in the knowledge that the only difference between where some of us are and the victim of the execution is one sentence out of the mouths of jurors or a judge.

Whether anyone is pro or anti death penalty, whether they explore the politics or ethics, whether they are fearful, angry, or indifferent, when it is all said and done the thought arises without the discussion ever following, “Should I feel ashamed that deep down I’m glad it is not me?”

In September, the execution of Albert Brown was repeatedly scheduled and then halted; a brief chronology of that legal struggle follows. The most recent CDCR press release states, “The state is confident it will ultimately prevail on this issue.”

On **August 30**, Albert Brown is scheduled to be executed at San Quentin on Sept. 29, 2010 in spite of a five-year-long moratorium on executions that had originated with the courts’ concerns about the constitutionality of execution procedures in CA.

On **August 31**, a judge in Marin County affirms that the moratorium is still in place, and says the execution cannot proceed.

On **September 20**, the court of appeals says that the moratorium on executions is lifted, and the execution should proceed.

On **September 24**, federal district Judge Fogel says execution can proceed but as a “compromise,” Albert Brown must be able to choose between a three-drug lethal injection or a one-drug injection. (He refuses.)

On **September 25**, Attorney General announces that CDCR’s limited supply of lethal injection drugs will expire on October 1. AG files writ asking court to take extraordinary measures to resolve any possible appeal of Sept 20 ruling within two hour window of time on Sept. 30.

On **September 27**, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger moves the execution to **Sept. 30** at 9pm to give courts more time to consider appeals of Sept 20 ruling. The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals reverses Judge Fogel’s order, saying his “compromise” was inappropriate and the expiration of the drug was not a sufficient reason to move forward.

On **September 28**, Judge Fogel orders a stay of execution, agreeing with the 9th Circuit that he needs more time to review the new procedures.

On **September 29**, CA Supreme Court refuses to speed up the review process and says the execution cannot proceed on **Sept 30**, and CDCR issues a stand down order.

STAFF AND ALUMNI NEWS

Exciting News: Recent Additions to PUP Staff

West Hays, Program Assistant. West will work both at the office, overseeing an array of administrative tasks, and on-site at the prison during classes, where he will help provide support to teachers, students, and staff. West joins the Prison University Project from UC Berkeley, where as an undergraduate he oversaw the school's Teach in Prison program, which supports San Quentin's efforts to provide high school diplomas to its mainline population in addition to supplying mechanical engineering instructors who teach courses in computer-aided design (CAD) inside the prison's machine shop. West also designed and instructed a student-run college credit course on prison policy and education for the university's Goldman School of Public Policy, in addition to running his own weekly poetry and drama class inside San Quentin. His four years of experience inside San Quentin will provide opportunities for expanded weekend classes and additional support for our program's growing list of phenomenal volunteer instructors. West received his AA degree from City College of San Francisco and his BA in English from UC Berkeley.



Sara Leedom, Development Consultant. Sara will be working with PUP's staff, board, and donors to ensure the organization has full financial resources to support our students, teachers, and our organizational health. Sara comes to us from the Level Playing Field Institute, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that supports low-income students of color to succeed in high school and access college. Prior to LPFI, Sara was Associate Director of Fund Development at the Corporation for Supportive Housing, working to raise grant and loan funds for permanent affordable housing with supportive services for homeless populations, including the development of a \$30M loan fund in Los Angeles. She was previously Development Director for Clare Housing, Minnesota's first community development agency for low income people with HIV/AIDS, where she raised \$6.7M in capital funding for the development of 30 units of affordable housing. Sara received her B.A. in English, with concentrations in linguistics and African literature from Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, VA.



On November 6, Board Member Jane Kahn hosted a fundraising house party for the Prison University Project. About 60 people attended, including several former students, shown in photo: John Dannenberg, Noel Valdivia, Sr., Leonard Rubio, Leonard Neal, Harrison Seuga, and Royal Huey.

This fall semester we are offering: English 99A (two sections), English 99B, English 101A (Reading and Composition), English 101B (Critical Thinking, Reading and Writing), Math 50, Algebra, Geometry, Pre-Calculus, Calculus (Independent Study), Neuroscience, Comparative Religions, Ancient History (Mesoamerica), American Government, Communications, Spanish 101, and Spanish 201.

Who We Are and What We Do

The mission of the Prison University Project is to provide excellent higher education to people incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison, and to stimulate public awareness and meaningful dialogue about higher education and criminal justice in California and across the United States.

The College Program at San Quentin provides approximately 17 courses each semester in the humanities, social sciences, math, and science leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses in math and English, to nearly 300 students. The program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland. All instructors work as volunteers. The Prison University Project receives no state or federal funding and relies entirely on donations from individuals and foundations.

Major expenses include textbooks and school supplies, publications, education and outreach activities (including conferences), office rent and utilities, and three full-time staff salaries. PUP's annual cash budget is under \$500,000, but when the value of all volunteer teaching hours (and other pro bono labor) is included, PUP's annual budget exceeds \$1 million.