

# Prison University Project

Emile Deweaver shares a draft of his Prison Renaissance Manifesto with PUP On-Site Program Coordinator Simon Woodard. Prison Renaissance is a group of artists who are coming together to change the culture of criminal justice that produces incarceration in America. Their goal is to break down the carceral state through artistic expression.



photos by Eddie Herena

A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

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## Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

The last year has seen a tremendous surge in potential opportunities to expand access to higher education within the California prison system. Not only are private funders increasingly recognizing the value of such programs, but a diverse array of people within state and federal government is now working to provide public financial support. As thrilled as I am in principle by the idea of public funding for prison higher education, I also have some concerns.

In 2014, the passage of SB1391 authorized the California Community Colleges to receive apportionment funding for courses offered inside correctional facilities. Shortly thereafter, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office awarded pilot program grants to four Community Colleges, and formed a consulting agreement with the Prison University Project, for technical assistance and training for those schools. [They are: Lassen Community College (High Desert State Prison), Antelope Valley College (Lancaster State Prison), Folsom Lake College (Folsom Women's Facility), and Chaffey College (California Institution for Women)].

Around the same time, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation awarded a grant to the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, to seed the creation of new college programs at Corcoran State Prison and SATF, to be operated by the College of the Sequoias, with PUP serving as advisor.

For the last several months we have thus been hard at work, transforming the foundational knowledge that underlies the College Program at San Quentin into more formally "exportable" tools and resources that can be shared. In August we held a three-day training for new program staff, on topics including program and curriculum development; faculty recruitment, supervision and training; student advising; and prison-related logistics.

It has been a joy to get to know the bright, dedicated people who are now working on these new programs. It would also be difficult to overstate their potential, given the demand: the Prison University Project gets several letters a week from people at other prisons around California who are trying to transfer to San Quentin to participate in the College Program. Those letters convey not just widespread desire for educational opportunity, but desperation.

And yet as much as these new developments make me deeply hopeful, I have been equally distressed to learn about some of the obstacles that those seeking to create quality programs will face. Even during our recent training, I noticed a pattern: I would present a practice that we at PUP consider essential, and the participants would explain some regulation, resource deficit, or political issue within the Community College system that would make that practice difficult. Start with college prep classes! Recruit the most highly qualified faculty! Provide

extensive training and supervision to teachers! Be sure to provide a curriculum that prepares students to transfer to the California State University and University of California systems! Who knew that any of these practices would present such challenges?

Another system-wide threat to the quality of new programs is the absence of any binding mechanism for quality control. Because the California Community College system is completely decentralized, the Chancellor's Office can make recommendations, or offer resources to the colleges, but it does not control any aspect of the design or operation of programs, including mode of delivery.

Of course the problem of quality control troubles the entire field of higher education; yet students whose resources and options are limited are always the most vulnerable. In the prison context, where prisoners are expected to be grateful for anything not mandated by law, and oversight is virtually non-existent, the risks are especially great.

These challenges will most likely only become more pressing in the future. This summer, the US Department of Education announced the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program, an Experimental Sites Initiative that will allow selected prison post-secondary education programs to receive Pell grants for eligible students on a pilot basis. (PUP did not apply to become an experimental site, but we are providing input on selection criteria to USDOE, as well as technical assistance to applicants.)

This Initiative is a clear expression of the federal government's desire to promote educational opportunity inside the prison system. And yet while the U.S. Department of Education now monitors a handful of statistical indicators in order to rein in the most predatory for-profit schools – for example, students' rates of degree completion, job placement, debt load or loan default – it has so far failed to devise strategies to protect students who are receiving scandalously low quality degrees, including from non-profit institutions.

Thus, in the field of prison higher education, the responsibility for both setting standards and drawing attention to the risks is falling to the very few relatively large, quality programs around the country, who are now scrambling to educate media, funders, and policy makers on these pressing issues. For now, all we can do is make the case by example – by operating quality programs, and documenting their impact – and craft the strongest possible arguments in favor of excellence, and against mediocrity and exploitation.

Ultimately, to safeguard integrity and excellence in any profession, nothing can substitute for an intellectually vigorous, ethically committed, politically and economically empowered community of practitioners and advocates. For the time being, however, as we work to make this the reality within the world of prison higher education, it falls to every one of us to play a supersized part.

With warm regards,  
Jody Lewen

# Underground Scholars at UC Berkeley

## *An Interview with David Maldonado*



David Maldonado

**PUP: What is Underground Scholars, and how did it come into being?**

**DM:** USI is a group of formerly incarcerated students and students directly impacted by the Prison Industrial Complex. It formed out of a reading group consisting of two of our founding members, Danny Murillo and Steven Czifra, who both did significant time in the SHU [solitary confinement]; a group of professors; and other members. The group began to meet regularly and formed a student group. That group became what is now the Underground Scholars Initiative.

**PUP: What are some of the greatest challenges faced by formerly incarcerated students at UCB?**

**DM:** It can be a process to divulge your past to people, obviously, because of the stigmas involved. Too many people form their views based on reality TV shows. Look, some of the most brilliant people are inside. When given an opportunity, we shine in academia or in the workforce. The sensationalistic TV and the skewed newscasts are what fuel the “tough on crime” and “culture of fear” stupidity that got us here in the first place. People need opportunities. What we do is only one small piece of that. There needs to be change at every level.

**PUP: What advice do you have for incarcerated students?**

**DM:** I would advise students to be strategic and deliberate in their journey to higher education, into elite universities, and even graduate school. When I got out I had a \$40 bike and the bus pass that came with my community college student ID. I rented a small room and worked while I went to school. Being strategic starts with building a network with mentors and good people around you. Being deliberate means studying hard. It's not easy, but it's possible with help. I participated in Project Rebound as a community college student, and then transferred to UC Berkeley as an undergrad, became involved with the Underground Scholars Initiative, and am now in grad school. I could not have done it without good people helping me.

**PUP: Would you share a bit about yourself?**

**DM:** My story is very typical. I think it's important to understand that I am not exceptional. I grew up struggling with ideas around hyper-masculinity. I also suffered from alcohol and substance abuse. I became normalized to those conditions, including violence. In trying to prove I was “down,” I ending up making bad choices. But those choices were limited by my interactions with educational institutions, which were extremely segregated, and by interactions with law enforcement, which were often based on race.

The idea that people like me are not going to be “productive citizens” starts at an institutional level long before anyone gets locked up. When privileged people make mistakes, they're viewed as just youthful mistakes. When the oppressed make those mistakes they are labeled “monsters.” Hyper-masculinity and violence grow out of coping with those pressures.

Sobriety was a key first step to my journey but so was community. Having other formerly incarcerated individuals lead the way for me created opportunity and instilled beliefs in me that proved invaluable. I realize that I am in a privileged position now but I still struggle with that mask. I continue to work on my character defects but am extremely fortunate to be surrounded by this community of social justice warriors who understand where I've come from and where I'm going.

**PUP: What can the community do to support your work?**

**DM:** We hope people will refer people to us. And we need funding. We also need educators and institutions to start listening to the voices of the formerly incarcerated. We hope that those leading the work in critical prison studies or those faculty wanting to help the movement, for example, by mentoring students, will contact us. We further ask that those making admissions decisions at both the undergraduate and graduate school level understand the importance of admitting formerly incarcerated students. Real knowledge has to be grounded in both theory and applied knowledge. Basically, higher education needs our voices.

*The Underground Scholars Initiative can be reached at:*

Underground Scholars Initiative  
2400 Bancroft Way #7  
Berkeley, Ca. 94704  
510-643-2226  
undergroundscholars@berkeley.edu



Carlos Meza, Calixto Racimo, Antonio Genovesi, Tim Nash, and Mark Tedeschi, listening to a lecture in U.S. History.

## A Man — by Jeff Long

There once was a man who got a chance to attend a college, and he took it, not realizing the gravity of everything he would learn. Because of this man's upbringing, he was full of emotional strife, often lashing out at unsuspecting people, which ended up including college staff, teachers and volunteers. Years went by, and the only thing that saved this man's butt, again and again, was the gracious nature of the people who ran the school. And that made it work.

What was wrong with these people, to be so kindly to such a man, a man who treated them so, a man who by his own measure had no value? Of course the man knew the treachery of people in positions of power, first taught to him by his own mother and father, reinforced by life. So he waited for what he knew was coming. It always comes, and if it didn't the man would provoke it to come. It had to come, this is where the man was most comfortable. The man knew his place, knew his worth. But it never came.

Meanwhile, the man started sessions with a shrink, which really messed the man up, at least for a while. One of the first things of significance the man learned was that he had an endless amount of tears. He could not cry enough. He would talk of his mother and he would cry. He would talk of his grandfather and he would cry. He would talk of his sister and he would cry. He would talk of how the people at the school treated him as if he was someone, and he would cry. But most of all he cried for himself, for all the pain of a little boy, for a life he never had, for the in-

justice of what was done. And he cried out in anger at himself, for living a lifetime of the crap that he was taught as a child.

It took some time, and slowly the man's awareness began to expand. The clearer he saw himself the clearer he could see others, as real people. No longer did the man need strife to feel comfortable. He found that the way the people at the school treated him was not full of hidden treachery. Soon the man got comfortable being someone likable, as someone of value and worth, as a human being.

The man still cried a lot, but he now found himself laughing, really laughing at times, from deep in the belly. That was surprising, for most of his life he didn't laugh, at all. Once a staff member at the school heard him "giggle" one day, and told his friend to do that again, whatever it was, to make him laugh again, because she had never heard it before.

The past few years have been a lifetime, but without the graciousness of a lot of people I would not be who and what I am today. When a woman at the school once told me, "you're a good man," it blew me away. The impact of those words, the validation that they carried, so contradictory to my self image. Even as I struggle to change, maybe for the rest of my life, I have to take what my mentors have taught, and continue the tradition. Which is how and why you are reading these words.

Peace



Al Jazeera America filming a segment about the Prison University Project at San Quentin in September. In 2015 PUP and/or its students have been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Atlantic*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *NPR*, *Univision*, *KALW*, *This American Life*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Huffington Post*, *Inside Philanthropy*, and *Inside Bay Area*.



# Prison University Project

PO Box 492  
San Quentin, CA 94964

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## 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 meaningful public dialogue about higher education access and criminal justice in California and across the United States.

We provide approximately 20 courses each semester leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses, to over 330 students. All instructors work as volunteers; most are faculty or graduate students from UC Berkeley, Stanford, San Francisco State, USF, and other local colleges and universities. We receive no state or federal funding and rely entirely on donations from individuals and foundations. The program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland.

### FALL SEMESTER 2015 OFFERINGS

English 99A (two sections) • English 99B (two sections) [both college prep English] • Math 50A • Math 50B • Elementary Algebra [all three college prep Math] • Intermediate Algebra • Pre-Calculus II • Reading and Composition (two sections) • Critical Thinking • Critical Reading, Writing and Research • Communications • Spanish 102 • Art History • US History • American Government • Ethics

## Comings and Goings

**Leonard Rubio, Executive Assistant**, left PUP in October to accept a position with East Bay Municipal Utilities District in Oakland. **Amanda Howell, Program Associate**, left in August to pursue a master's degree in urban and regional planning at Portland State University. We wish them both well and expect them to stay in very close touch!

**The good news...** we've also gained some wonderful new staff people in the last several months:

**Amy Jamgochian, Academic Program Director.** Amy completed her Ph.D. in Rhetoric at UC Berkeley and taught there for almost 15 years, first as a graduate student and then as a lecturer. Her early research was on 19th century novels, ethics, and queer theory; more recent interests include hermeneutics, David Foster Wallace, Emmanuel Levinas, and pedagogical theory. As a lecturer in the Berkeley Rhetoric Department, she ran the pedagogy seminar and also mentored graduate students. Over time she became interested in radical pedagogy and classroom dynamics, which led to research on grading practices and learning styles and to developing more teaching resources and structures for mentorship. She is excited to continue her work in promoting teaching excellence at PUP.

**Neil Terpkosh, Math Program Coordinator.** Prior to joining PUP, Neil taught 8th grade math at KIPP SF Bay Academy in San Francisco. Before that, he taught math at Helms Middle School in Richmond, his Teach for America placement school, and participated in the

Emerging Leaders Program with New Leaders for New Schools. He also worked as an instructional coach at Helms, facilitating staff professional development. He is an advocate for constructivist learning theory and is eager to further infuse student-centered pedagogical practices into the math classrooms at PUP. Neil holds a BA in Economics from the University of Kansas.

**Heather Hart, Program Administrator.** Heather has dedicated her career to providing community services and advocating for social change through the nonprofit sector. She spent several years managing AmeriCorps programs dedicated to increasing access to education and mental health services for youth in Bay Area communities, and has extensive experience in mobilizing and managing volunteers. Before joining the Prison University Project, she volunteered at San Quentin through the California Re-entry Program. She holds a BA from UC Berkeley in Interdisciplinary Studies with a focus on law and social change.

**Lenny Barnett, Office Manager.** Lenny attended a small women's college in Georgia, where she majored in Psychology. Before coming to PUP, she worked at the YMCA of San Francisco, including a recent stint as the Programs Administrative Coordinator at the Mission Y. She has also interned at the Campaign for Female Education, a girls' education nonprofit, and Kiva Microfunds, a microfinance website. She is currently working on her master's degree in Human Rights Education at USF.



Amy Jamgochian, Neil Terpkosh, and Heather Hart