



Photos by Phillip Carter

Prison University Project

A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

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From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

For many years, I have tried to understand the feelings of people who object to the very idea of providing higher education to people in prison. It has always struck me how often such feelings are framed in terms of a belief about what people in prison do or don't deserve. Even people who soften considerably when they hear anecdotes about individual students and the impact of education on their lives, often continue to express a lingering sense of wariness – as if there were something unnatural or even sacrilegious about providing such opportunities to people who are incarcerated.

What does it mean to deserve higher education? Does it mean that one is worthy? Or entitled? Does deservingness correspond to how good one is? Are we born deserving of, and entitled to, higher education? How exactly does one become undeserving? And who decides who is good and deserving, or bad and undeserving? Are all people either good or bad? What does it mean to be a bad person? Are all bad people in prison? Are all people in prison bad? Why are so many people so confident that anyone who is in prison does not deserve higher education?

But the biggest mystery of all is why any discussion about providing education would be framed as a question of deservingness. A society that systematically denies education to its members – whatever the pretext – is a society in the process of destroying itself. And this debate is also tragic on another level: it reflects the extent to which we have lost sight of what education actually is.

A world in which everyone had access to high quality education, pre-school through college, would no doubt be much closer to the one in which each of us wants to live. Access to higher education is good not only for individuals; it is good for the society as a whole. Sharing in historical, literary, scientific, and philosophical knowledge, questions, and ideas; acquiring theoretical concepts and terms through which to analyze and interpret ourselves and the world; and gaining knowledge about formal institutions of government and law – all of these enable us to grow as human beings, enrich our communities, and help solve critical problems, wherever we are.

In other words, at the very least, it is illogical to withhold education from any human being, given that our collective interests would be best served by facilitating access for everyone. And yet those

who object to prison higher education seem to be guided by a different premise: that a world in which everyone has access to high quality education is simply not a possibility. Rather, in their minds, education is *by definition* a scarce commodity that reaps enormous benefits and advantages for the lucky few. If you accept this premise, then providing access to higher education to people in prison does indeed appear to reward those who have committed a crime, by essentially giving them an advantage in a bitterly competitive race.

Nevermind the fact that only a small fraction of people incarcerated in California ever see the inside of a classroom, much less attend college while in prison; viewed from this narrow and hopeless perspective, the critics are right. Our current social reality is that access to education overwhelmingly determines job prospects, economic security, access to medical care, physical health, the ability to care for one's children, and scores of other critical life factors. Both the lack of educational opportunity and the resulting economic instability leave millions of Americans feeling marginalized, vulnerable, and angry. Perhaps it's not surprising that these existential implications have become all that most people think about when they think about higher education.

If universal access to higher education were a reality, how many people would oppose providing education to people in prison? In fact, what would prisons be like? Would there even be prisons, as we know them today? And if we did not live in a culture that urged us to accept limited opportunity as if it were a fact of nature, would we still create irrational ideologies of punishment and deservingness that justify the infliction of suffering and the systematic neglect of basic human needs?

Our potential as a society will be determined by our capacity to think rationally and independently, with an absolute commitment to the health and safety of every individual. We will either focus our energy on healing and helping those in need – *even those we fear* – or we will continue to pour our precious resources into systematically destroying them, and thereby ourselves.

With warm regards,
Jody Lewen

Mass Incarceration and the Lessons from Cairo

Reflections on Michelle Alexander's The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness

You see things and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were and I say, 'Why not?'

— George Bernard Shaw, Irish playwright

By Stephen Yair Liebb, Student

The protest movement in Egypt led by young people and women who have been denied a voice and opportunity in shaping their country's future illuminates a way for this country to uproot entrenched policies that have resulted in the mass incarceration of young African-American men.

America has installed a "racial caste system" through laws, policies and customs that has produced mass incarceration and legal discrimination against young African-American men. The role of the criminal justice system in creating and perpetuating a racial hierarchy in the United States is carefully delineated by civil rights lawyer Michelle Alexander in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The book is currently being discussed in a seminar at San Quentin led by Stanford Law Students.

The stigmatization of blacks through legalized discrimination in housing, employment, voting and education is a consequence of mass arrests of black men, the primary target of the Federal government's "War on Drugs." Michelle Alexander argues that the U.S. Supreme Court has eviscerated civil rights protections and largely immunized police actions from meaningful judicial review. Law enforcement agencies are able to conduct mass searches and arrests in black neighborhoods without concern that their actions will be declared unconstitutional. Individuals subjected to these

questionable searches and arrests face long prison sentences and decide to plead guilty.

The War on Drugs, while ostensibly directed at drugs, unfairly and disproportionately targets and affects poor, urban black men. Michelle Alexander points out that those military style police actions that are used in black neighborhoods are not conducted at college fraternities where drugs are known to be consumed.

The identification of "blackness and crime, especially drug crime," has produced a subordinate status for blacks in America. Denied access to political power and economic opportunity, their plight resembles that of the Arab youth suppressed under dictatorships.

The future of civil and human rights advocacy, according to Michelle Alexander, is one that requires a major social movement to "dismantle the new caste system." A movement is required to "confront squarely the critical role of race in the basic structure of our society" and to "cultivate an ethic of genuine care, compassion, and concern for every human being – of every class, race, and nationality within our nation's borders." Legal action to redress such discriminatory criminal justice practices is limited by Supreme Court rulings.

The revolutions in the Middle East provide seeds of hope for a similar movement in this country. Young Arab women dreamt of forcing a dictator out of power through protest in a country where protests were illegal and met with brutal suppression. Those enslaved by a racialized caste system and consigned to a secondary status in this country can dream of a human rights movement that aspires to true justice.



photo by Phillip Carter

Spring Course Offerings:

English 99A (two sections) ■ English 99B
English 101A, Reading and Composition
English 101B, Critical Thinking Reading & Writing
English 204, Interdisciplinary Reading, Writing, & Research
Asian American Theater ■ Sociology
US History, 1865-Present ■ Russian and Soviet history
Introduction to Biology with lab ■ Spanish 102
Spanish Conversation ■ Philosophy
Interdisciplinary Workshop in Criminal Justice
Math 50 ■ Algebra ■ Geometry ■ Statistics
Pre-Calculus with Analytical Geometry ■ Calculus
Assorted one-on-one tutorials in advanced math

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 20 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 to five full-time staff salaries. PUP's annual cash budget is approximately \$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.

From the Lab...

The spring semester's introductory biology offering comes with a new twist: for the first time, we are running a lab science class inside San Quentin. At root, biology is a science of observations and experiments, and we are delighted to add a practical component to the lecture and discussion based biology class.

So far our students have compared what cells from different tissues look like using light microscopes, isolated the molecules that gives Swiss chard its colors, and used beans to study the inheritance patterns of human disease. Over the second half of the class our students will watch photosynthesis in action, dissect sheep brains to learn how they work, and investigate the principles of evolutionary variation by using clothespins to represent the beaks of Darwin's finches.

For our students experiments have not just been about keeping hands busy. The labs have already led to spirited discussions, and biology experiments serve as a great introduction to statistics, critical thinking, and data collection and interpretation. Students will summarize their findings from the brain dissection lab in formal lab reports, as reporting one's results to the community is a crucial aspect of doing science.



photo by Linn Lee

While students are learning about the biological principles behind the experimental component through lectures and independent research, we hope that the lab helps the lectures and papers come alive!

Many heartfelt thanks to our students for their willingness to experiment, the PUP staff for their hard work, and the individuals at CDCR who have been so supportive helping us get lab materials to our students.

We would also like to give special thanks to Ann Fischer of U.C. Berkeley (Molecular and Cell Biology) for loaning us microscopes, Prof. Robert Knight and Allyson Mackey of U.C. Berkeley (Helen Wills Neuroscience Institute) for help with our neurobiology section and Jill Marchant of U.C. Berkeley (Integrative Biology) for loaning us materials for our physiology labs.

— Adam Williamson, Instructor (team-teaching with Rachel Walsh, Mark DeWitt, Dr. Charles Gross, and Shirley Rubin)



photo by Linn Lee

Stanford University at San Quentin

This spring has brought several unprecedented opportunities for collaboration between students and faculty from Stanford University and the College Program at San Quentin.

■ This semester, 10 Stanford students are leading an **interdisciplinary seminar on criminal justice issues** with 20 San Quentin students who have already completed the Associate of Arts degree. Coordinated by law students Maggie Filler and Sara Mayeux, the course focuses on topics ranging from philosophies and narratives of incarceration, to racism and stereotyping in the criminal justice system, to systems of parole. The seminar project was recently profiled in an article in the Stanford News,

and then picked up by KCBS Radio, and Channel 2 News.

■ In February, **Jennifer Eberhardt, college program volunteer and Professor of Psychology** at Stanford, brought 15 students currently enrolled in her Social Psychology course at Stanford to meet with San Quentin students who had taken the same class with her last semester. The students spent nearly three hours together, discussing and critiquing Loïc Wacquant's article, "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh."

■ On two separate occasions in February, **Joan Petersilia, Professor and Faculty Co-Director of the Criminal**

Justice Center at the Stanford Law School, brought students from her Sentencing and Corrections class to meet with San Quentin students currently enrolled in Critical Thinking.

Afterwards, several Stanford students wrote to express their gratitude: *"Please let the men that we met know how grateful I am for the stories and insights they shared. It was truly an educational opportunity and one that I'll never forget."* *"Everyone I met, without exception, was a wealth of experience and information. The articulate, reflective manner with which our hosts spoke was amazing and, considering the decade-plus that many still have to serve, heart-breaking."*

Alumni and Faculty News

Refreshing and perfecting what I used to know—An Interview with Alumna Tiana Manning

Longtime math 50 volunteer Sarah Tahamont recently interviewed Tiana Manning, her former student, about her life today and goals for the future.



ST: Tell me what you've been up to?

TM: I've been working and going to school. I am working for Liberty Tax Service as part of the marketing department and I'm going to Laney College and Merritt College for paralegal training and for licensed vocational nursing (LVN).

ST: What is your most significant memory from being involved with PUP?

TM: Math50 and study hall - I learned how to write an essay after so many years and how to better phrase my sentences from fragments and run-ons. Learned how to do division again since it had been so long. I really hadn't been in school in so long.

ST: What made you come to school in the first place?

TM: Wanted to get back into writing, since I write music. Plus, I wanted to be a writer because I write books and short stories. I wanted to refresh and perfect what I used to know. Because I do want to write a book.

ST: What is your book going to be about?

TM: Honestly, it is going to be about prison life experience being transgender. I want to do short stories.

ST: Would you be willing to share a brief story or anecdote with me now?

TM: Let me find my PUP folder. This one is called "I'm Bound":

I'm bound in my mind begging God please. I'm talked about also ridiculed all because of who I am. I feel like a motherless child, I'm handcuffed down to my soul. I'm bound. My hopes and dreams have all faded away. Family has turned their back on me, friends nowhere to be found, all I love has left me alone. My heart is shackled behind these

prison walls, my heart has suffered one too many a tax for the love I have lost. I can't sleep at night. If I had one wish I'd wish for love, but my heart is cold, my mind is vexed, I'm Bound.

ST: That is so poetic.

TM: It is a song actually. I have two people that are willing to work with me and hopefully turn it into a single.

ST: It sounds like if you wrote a book it would be a mixture of your songs/poems and your actual experiences. Would you be willing to share one of your experiences?

TM: Where can I even start this? The looks, the stares and name-calling, the hate, those that care and are afraid to share.

ST: Meaning that those who cared were afraid to show it?

TM: Yes, it was challenging for a while, but when you find that person eventually it becomes what it really is. □

Better understanding what the universe is made of – An Interview with Volunteer Seth Zenz

PUP: Can you share a bit about your academic background and your current work?



SZ: I'm an experimental particle physicist, working on a detector at the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) in Geneva, Switzerland. That means I helped build and run equipment to detect what comes out when the LHC runs protons into each other really, really fast. We're looking for new particles, which will help us understand better what the universe is made of. Out of my seven years in graduate school at the University of California, I've spent about four years in Berkeley and almost three in Switzerland. Starting this summer, I'll be a researcher at Princeton for the next 3 or so years, working on a different experiment but still at the LHC.

PUP: Would you describe the extent of your involvement with the college program at San Quentin over these last several years?

SZ: I started teaching in the Fall of 2004, the semester I arrived in Berkeley for graduate school. I've been teaching ever since, as long as I was in town. I've been a Math 50 tutor for eight or nine full semesters, plus helping out with geometry and physics classes for one semester.

Math 50 is a self-paced pre-college math class which many of our students need to bring them to the level of college algebra, which they need for the AA. Since January 2010, I've been actively involved in discussions of how to improve Math 50. That process will culminate in major, professionally-designed revisions, but in the short term it led to me becoming lead coordinator for the class. In that role, I facilitate organization and communication between the folks on all four nights of Math 50 and with PUP staff.

I've also done some work, beginning particularly when I was living abroad and couldn't volunteer, on building

PUP's web presence and fundraising. I've been a regular donor for a long time -- I think it's important to get in the habit of doing good while your spare cash is still little enough that you can bear to part with it -- and I try to use birthdays and extra donations as encouragement for my friends and family to contribute.

PUP: What is it like to teach at San Quentin, and what motivates you?

SZ: It's very strange. The barbed wire and decaying buildings I've gotten used to, but the enormous challenges our students face in establishing the habits and skills of learning always trouble me. Their educational experience is enormously different from mine, which means I've had to learn a lot in order to improve my teaching.

In the long run I've seen that our work really makes a difference. Turning even a few lives around is worth all the time I've put in and more -- and I think that all of us together have managed quite a bit more than that. □