

# Reaching inside from the outside

An OSU sociology class behind bars benefits students and inmates  
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SALEM — Most college classes don't require students to go through a metal detector, turn in their photo identification for a numbered badge or make their way through a series of locked doors. Then again, most college classes aren't held inside a prison.

For a handful of Oregon State University students, the Oregon State Correctional Institute in Salem is their Tuesday evening classroom for an "Inside-Out" sociology class.

The 30-member class is comprised half of students from OSU and half of inmates from the prison.

Sitting in a circle, alternating inmates and OSU students, last Tuesday's class began with a report on community outreach projects the students have been working on. The class then broke into smaller groups and discussed what they've learned during the term through books and discussions, and how they see themselves making a difference in the future.

This is the first time OSCI has hosted an Inside-Out class. The prison is an 892-bed medium-security facility for male inmates and part of the Oregon Department of Corrections. About 600 of the inmates are within six months of release.

The inmate students are selected by the prison administration based on several criteria, including that they have not been convicted of a sex crime and that they have been following the prison rules for the past two years.

The prison students are "generally looking toward their future," said Wendy Hatfield, a spokeswoman for OSCI.

All the students who participate agree to certain rules including that "inside" and "outside" students not have contact once the class ends, which will make this week's last class and goodbyes that much more final.

Another rule is that only first names are used. (The Democrat-Herald also agreed to use only first names in writing this story.)

The title for the senior-level class is "crime, justice and public policy." It covers causes and theories of crime, purposes and philosophies of prison, and how prisons developed.

OSU associate professor Michelle Inderbitzin, Ph.D., has been teaching the Inside-Out class for OSU since January 2007. The class is part of the national Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program headquartered at Temple University in Philadelphia. The University of Oregon and Portland State University also offer Inside-Out classes.

For the OSU students, the class brings a "real-life component" to theories, Inderbitzin said. "It becomes a really honest room where they can ask just about anything."

The class can be life-changing, Inderbitzin said.

And some of her students agree.

David, an "inside" student incarcerated 12 years ago for attempted murder, is working toward an associate degree from Chemeketa Community College. Some of the inmate students receive credit through Chemeketa and others take it for the experience.

Being around people from outside the prison has been good, said David, who is looking forward to his release in two years.

"You feel human again," he said.

For Abby, an OSU sociology major, her "inside" classmates have been "some of the most articulate people I've ever met," she said. "This is the real world."

As part of the class, students discuss the flaws of the prison system in America. At the same time, they try to make a positive difference.

The students work together — inside and outside the prison — on projects to benefit individuals and groups.

David, who's a member of an African-American club at OSCI, said one of the club's projects is to collect backpacks and school supplies for children whose fathers are incarcerated.

The Inside-Out class decided to help the program and collect even more backpacks and school supplies.

David said that could mean enough supplies for children of inmates at OSCI as well as other prisons.

Another project is raising funds for grief counseling for some children in Beaverton whose mother died earlier this year after their father allegedly beat her to death. The final tally isn't in yet, but so far, donations among inmates at OSCI have reached \$2,000.

Also, the class is collecting children's books and toys for the family visiting room at the prison.

Bake sales, store gifts, donation jars and flyers are just some of the ways students have been working to collect the money and donations.

Anyone who wants to contribute to the class projects can contact Inderbitzin at (541) 737-8921 or at [mli@oregonstate.edu](mailto:mli@oregonstate.edu).



Jesse Skoubo/Democrat-Herald Classmates, OSCI inmates and OSU students, discuss how they can use their experiences within the Inside Out class in their future Tuesday evening at OSCI in Salem.



Caption: Jesse Skoubo/Democrat-Herald OSU student, Tara, checks in her badge number with a security officer before being allowed into Oregon State Correctional Institution for Inside Out class Tuesday evening.