

Lessons in the Lockup: Law Students Teach in Innovative Prison Education Program

Lawyers usually encounter criminals as advocates or adversaries in the middle of their journey from crime to courtroom to prison. But a group of current law students have been working with criminals in an entirely different fashion, serving as instructors in Cornell's Prison Education Program (CPEP). These students, while teaching groups of committed prisoners working towards associate's degrees at the Auburn Correctional Facility in Auburn, New York and the Cayuga Correctional Facility in Moravia, New York, have also learned some important lessons.

"I was surprised by the extent of our students' legal knowledge," says Agnetha Jacob '10, who taught a course on the rhetoric of due process law with Benjamin Keep '10. "For the first day, we had crafted a hypothetical case to discuss. We estimated that the entire activity would take anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour. Our students deciphered the problem in a matter of minutes. Their legal knowledge and ability was just astounding. At that point, we realized how hard we would have to work to challenge them."

"These students were the most motivated learners you could imagine," says Jeremy Smith '11, who taught a course on the American legal system with Kelly Cardin '11. "If I told them to read and study twenty pages, several of them would read an additional fifty pages. The dedication and drive of these students was inspiring."

"For our students, education is key to their successful re-entry," says Lauren Mitchell '10, who is teaching Constitutional Limitations on Criminal Procedure with Anna Friedberg '10. "It gives them the opportunity to see themselves in a different light—as capable students, instead of prisoners."

"We've designed our course to be a vehicle to teach our students how to be critical thinkers and better advocates," says Friedberg. "We want them to hone their analytical skills and be able to use that in everyday interactions."

"Recidivism rates are high, but evidence has shown that programs like CPEP help combat against that by giving inmates tools that will help them once they are back in the real world," says Natalie Kim '10, who taught a course on constitutional law and individual rights with Pradine Saint-Fort '10. "This is one of the most worthwhile and unique things I've done in law school. Aside from the legal aspect, being able to connect with students and hear their stories is an amazing thing."

"Many benefits flow from the program," adds Keep. "The program has sparked more discussions about prison and criminal justice reform than I can count. Anyone can look at the numbers and realize the system isn't working, but the program gives us a personal view."

"The law students have been fantastic and their reception at the prisons phenomenal," says James Schechter, who directs the program. "When I started a year ago, the prisons were skeptical about our offering law classes, but they now see we're not engaged in advocacy, but education with academic merit."

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