

CHRONICLE ONLINE

Prison Education Program expands its offerings

By Daniel Aloï

Published March 5, 2009

Auburn Correctional Facility inmate Stephen Kuber has studied many subjects during his incarceration, but it was a political science course taught by Cornell government professor Mary Katzenstein that "awakened something in me -- an inner drive."

Kuber is taking three courses this semester in the Cornell Prison Education Program, now in its 10th year at the maximum security institution in Auburn, N.Y. Katzenstein is faculty director of the program, which also offers instruction at the nearby medium-security Cayuga Correctional Facility (CCF) in Moravia.

"I ate it up," Kuber recalls of the course he took with Katzenstein. "The diversity of approaches she came up with each week -- Machiavelli, Marx, social movements -- the main focal point she kept our attention on was power. That kept my attention."

Each semester, the 15-week program brings in volunteer faculty and teaching assistants from Cornell, providing a liberal arts curriculum free of charge to inmates who can now work toward an associate's degree from Cayuga Community College.

This academic year the program has expanded its course offerings, and added a monthly lecture series that began Jan. 29 with David Harris, Cornell deputy provost and vice provost for social sciences, speaking on race, poverty and inequality.

Since Cornell faculty members began teaching courses for credit to some of the nearly 1,800 inmates at the Auburn prison in 1999, the program has grown from two or three courses each semester to the 11 courses offered now, taught by 18 members of the Cornell faculty and graduate students as well as 30 undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants.

Professor emeritus Pete Wetherbee (known to the inmates as "Doc") began teaching classes in what he describes as a "one-room schoolhouse" in the mid-1990s, Katzenstein said. By 1999, due to his efforts, the program began to offer classes for Cornell credit.

Program executive director James Schechter says the aim is to build an academic community within the prison walls.

Michelle Smith, a graduate student in government, teaches a course on representation and political thought in hip-hop. "Don't think this is just hip-hop; you're going to have to work hard," Smith said she told her prison students. "It's political theory, very serious stuff."

Smith said that "there are a lot of talented, smart people in prisons ... these guys hang on every thing you say, and they'll challenge you. They turn you into a better reader and a better thinker."

Other courses offered at Auburn this semester include economics; constitutional law and individual rights; creative writing; genetics; medical anthropology; international human rights; a writing course; and noncredit courses in writing, math and Asian meditation. A course in ancient philosophy is also being taught at the Moravia facility.

"With funding and collaboration with the community college, it's plausible to have all the disciplines represented," Schechter said.

Inmate Etheriage Pierce has earned 15 credits -- in "everything from memoir writing to existentialism," he says. He is taking four more courses this semester.

"In all the semesters I attended, it's always put back on me how they encourage you," he says. "Not what I got right, but what I need to work on. It's encouraging."

Last fall, more than 130 men at Auburn took an assessment exam for the associate's degree program, for which 26 were selected. Another 60 to 70 inmates have also enrolled in individual courses. The degree program is supported by Cornell's Office of Land Grant Affairs, the prison and the Sunshine Lady Foundation.

Recently, the prison administration approved Schechter's proposal to host a computer room with desktop computers to be donated by a campus group that recycles university hardware.

Instructors have also successfully encouraged publishers to donate current textbooks or significantly discount them for the program, and the Friends of the Tompkins County Public Library has donated boxes of dictionaries, Schechter says.

"This is a phenomenal opportunity," said Kuber, who has taken Cornell courses at Auburn since 2003. "By all rights, this is a Cornell education."

The program is currently soliciting course proposals, due March 10, in all subjects from faculty emeriti, current faculty and graduate students. Prospective instructors can contact Schechter at jas349@cornell.edu.

Source: <http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/March09/prisonEd.da.html>