

CU Program Offers Hope to Prisoners

By Sue Henninger

"The Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP) enables students to remain positive and sane in a dehumanizing environment. It also gives them hope, and a sanctuary from the rest of the prison setting," says executive director Jim Schechter in when explaining why CPEP has been so successful over the years.

Schechter believes that in the classroom, "issues like race and class just fall away," and that the classes Cornell faculty and students offer to the maximum security prisoners at the Auburn Correctional Facility and Cayuga Correctional Facility also restore a sense of confidence, self-esteem, and capability in the men, as well as often being their first exposure to a positive educational experience.

"We try to provide them with a bigger world view and offer varied perspectives so they can think critically," he explains, adding that a secondary goal is to help the inmates develop the patience and fortitude to find their own solutions to personal problems.

CPEP is the outgrowth of English professor (currently Emeritus) Pete Wetherbee's volunteer work at the Auburn prison. When tuition assistance programs were terminated by former New York State Gov. George Pataki, the number of higher education programs in the state's prisons dropping drastically from 400 to 11.

In response, Wetherbee created a "one-room schoolhouse" within the prison walls, which he operated as an enrichment program until 1999. His teaching program proved so popular that he asked Cornell's Continuing Education program to provide free credits and transcripts for his students. Once this was in place a precedent was established and Cornell resources were increasingly allocated to the Auburn facility, and eventually the Cayuga Correctional Facility.

The professors recruited by



Jim Schechter is the executive director of the Cornell Prison Education Program.

Wetherbee to teach their courses in the prison were enthusiastic about the opportunity to use their teaching skills in a new and very different setting than the Cornell classrooms, and soon CPEP had blossomed to an average of 12 courses, represented by five of Cornell's colleges.

CPEP continues to expand and now offers a guest lecture series, featuring speakers including Cornell President Skorton, law classes, a "Community Read" and various courses for prison staff.

The latter is important, says Schechter, because although some of the guards and administrators applaud the way CPEP keeps prisoners positively occupied, there has been some concern about why prisoners are receiving high-quality free educational resources instead of the communities that the prisoners are housed in.

Schechter explains that research has shown that prison education is one of the few interventions that consistently reduce recidivism rates by 20-60 percent, ultimately lowering the cost of incarceration to the public. Inmates who leave the prison with a college degree in hand are less likely to return, and often become contributing members of society.

Obtaining financial resources for this type of program is always a challenge, says Schechter. However, as luck would have it, Doris Buffet of the Sunshine Lady Foundation became aware of the Cornell Prison Education Program in 2007 through a serendipitous series of events (including an Ithaca snowstorm) and determined that Cornell, with the infrastructure of its prison program already in place, would be a perfect match for the foundation's interest in supporting efforts that provide quality education to incarcerated individuals.

A two year pilot program was subsequently launched in 2008, which specified that the monies granted be attached to an associate's degree awarded by Cayuga Community College, so that the foundation and Cornell could track the progress of students and the success of the program.

The dollars received have gone toward things like stipends for the doctoral students, implementing a full liberal arts curriculum and hiring program staff.

Cornell faculty members are not compensated for their time or travel expenses; their contributions are made strictly on a volunteer basis.

Currently there are three collaborators in CPEP: Cayuga

Community College in Auburn, Cornell and the New York State Department of Corrections. Coordinating three bureaucracies, two of which emphasize the ideals of higher learning and the other whose mission is "care, custody, and control," has taken exceptional effort on the parts of all involved Schechter says.

He notes that the logistics of running this type of program are often daunting.

But the gratification of seeing the prison students gain an economic foothold, develop the ability to communicate effectively, and expand or rekindle their positive social networks makes the extra work well worth it.

Schechter speaks proudly of a prison student who went from the education program to a good job to becoming a member of CPEP's advisory board. Schechter is also impressed by the prison's literary journal, "Writer's Bloc," that the prisoners contribute to and a Cornell student editorial board publishes.

Schechter is assisted by Robert Turgeon, program faculty director and professor of plant biology, whose duties include overseeing the advisory board and structuring the program's policy.

Additionally, seven to 12 graduate students submit proposals to teach a class each year and there's also a group of some 25 undergraduates (out of over 55 applicants) who become assistants in CPEP.

Schechter explains that the students come from a broad array of backgrounds. Many of them were involved in social justice causes in high school and are committed volunteers, he notes.

Schechter and his staff hope to eventually incorporate community volunteers into the program. Those interested in learning more can e-mail jas349@cornell.edu or visit <http://cpep.cornell.edu>.

Schechter notes that Cornell's founders, A.D. White and Ezra Cornell, whose stated goal was to establishing a "university where any person can find instruction in any study," would be proud of the way the CPEP program lives out their vision.

CPEP is just one of many Cornell community engagement programs that resulted in the university being named one of 115 colleges to recently receive the 2010 Community Engagement Classification from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.