

## **New York Times**

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### **Resolved: Inmates Make Tough Debaters**

By SUSAN DOMINUS

The two debate teams sat across a large room on Thursday night waiting for their face-off to begin. On one side were the visitors, four undergraduates at the New School, and their equally young coach poring over documents and comparing last-minute notes. Across the room the home team, four men in their 30s and 40s, leaned back in their seats, pictures of poise, their neatly arranged index cards at the ready but untouched.

The students from the Eugene Lang College of the New School were nervous because their team had lost here the previous year; in fact, the opposing team was undefeated in its two-year history, besting opponents like St. John's University and New York Law School. The students were nervous because they were young and earnest and, as one of them put it, "afraid of offending someone."

And they were, as one put it, "meta-nervous," perhaps because they had to argue that the government should not finance higher education in prisons, right there at the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility, against a team of incarcerated men who could be seen as Exhibit A for the opposing view.

So the Arthur Kill team had the home-turf advantage, plus passion, not to mention direct personal experience — of the four debaters, three are currently special students at the New School, as are many of the two dozen inmates who were on hand to watch. Then there's the advantage of general life experience, on the outside and in.

"I'm kind of used to public speaking," Andrew Cooper, 43, said.

In his dark green uniform and wire-rimmed glasses, Mr. Cooper had the look of a graduate student working some night shift to play the bills. He said that he had done some teaching while in prison, and that he occasionally spoke to at-risk youth about the consequences of "bad choices." Fifteen years ago, while a student at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, he made a bad choice and joined a robbery on Long Island. "I was a fair student," Mr. Cooper said. "But I went for the quick fix."

He and his teammates displayed a consistently confident, Obama-inspired style: some measured, almost soothing oratory; some strategic finger-pointing; some appeals to reason. Statistics poured out at a steady rate, about the country's high recidivism problem and the links between higher education in prisons and lower recidivism rates. Higher education, Mr. Cooper argued, represents "the last bastion of civility and the last hope for inmates to slip the bonds of incarceration and become tax-paying, productive, caring members of society."

The New Schoolers could not quite bring themselves, as one of them, Santiago Posas, put it, to make some “Republican we-can’t-coddle-criminals argument.” Instead, they went nuclear, debate-style, rejecting the education system altogether: Even if higher education in prisons is ethical, Mr. Posas argued, that premise “does not address the basis for true equality within our society that is structured by complex and hierarchal racist, classist and gendered norms that produce the prison-industrial complex.”

Why import into prisons the same flawed educational system that landed inmates there in the first place? The undergraduates spoke of “the dominant discourse” and “hegemony”; there was talk of “the revolutionary praxis” and, of course, Foucault.

There were also more than a few awkward pauses. “I was reading my speech about how to deal with the fact that education comes from the oppressors to the oppressed, using big words sometimes I myself don’t understand,” Mr. Posas said later. “And I’m thinking: I’m the oppressor! I’m the oppressor here!”

Listening to revolutionary fervor delivered in academia’s native tongue, the Arthur Kill debaters looked amused. “I think they misinterpreted,” one said to the others as they conferred during a short break. “I think they’re misquoting Foucault.”

George Milligan, a lanky man with a smile that flashed gold, finished strong for the Arthur Kill team. “We agree it would be intellectually dishonest not to recognize a correlation between education and crime,” said Mr. Milligan, 40, who was convicted of robbery and assault 19 years ago.

But he hammered back the points about recidivism — sure, failing public schools might essentially funnel poor black men into prison, but once they’re there, receiving some higher education seems to help keep them out, and keep the citizenry safer. Then he asked, “So why are we allowing the criminal justice system to function in a way that does not protect us?”

It came as a surprise to no one when the three judges decreed the debaters from Arthur Kill the victors. But their winning streak — does that surprise the Arthur Kill team, considering they’re up against law students, criminal justice students and, in the case of the New School, theory-happy academics?

“Yes,” said Leonardo Cepeda, who is 30 and serving time for robbery. “They have the upper hand. They have the Internet.”