

CT FEATURE

Different Worlds Converge As College Students And Inmates Meet In a Prison Classroom

By Sabina Kaplan, Eileen Leonard and Mary L. Shanley



During the 2008 and 2009 fall semesters, 10 students from Vassar College, a private, liberal arts college in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., drove an hour to Taconic Correctional Facility, a medium-security women's prison in Bedford Hills, N.Y., once a week to join inmates to learn about sociology — and life.

The two-and-a-half-hour weekly mixed class at the facility was the first in a New York state prison and could serve as a pilot for others in the state — and perhaps in other states as well. At the Recognition Day ceremony held each year in the multipurpose room of Taconic to honor all the students who successfully completed academic courses at the facility, one student from Vassar and one from Taconic spoke about their course, "Gender, Social Problems and Social Change." In 2008, Kya Finn, the student chosen by her Taconic classmates, challenged her Vassar classmates and others present to extend the benefits of the course to others:

This program is important for inmates, but it is more important for outsiders, so we can refute the preconceived notions of what a criminal is," Finn said. "I am an intellectual; I am a mother, sister and daughter, and my classmates are as well. Do not let us fall by the wayside. Utilize this program to reevaluate and, where necessary, change the rehabilitative process.

Picking up on Finn's call, this article describes the course and the kinds of issues that Vassar and the New York State Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) considered in deciding to go ahead with this experiment. The course required much thought and effort, but in the eyes of all concerned, it has been a resounding success and well worth the commitment of the time and resources it entailed.

BACKGROUND OF THE COURSE

The "Gender, Social Problems and Social Change" course was born out of the curiosity and determination of Vassar sociology professor Eileen Leonard and political science professor Mary L. Shanley. They heard about Temple University's Inside-Out program in Philadelphia, which trains faculty to offer college courses enrolling students from both inside and outside prison. They enrolled in the training program and began to investigate educational programs in correctional facilities in New York state. While there are several degree-granting programs and individual courses offered in New York state prisons, DOCS had not previously allowed students from the outside to study alongside those on the inside.

Taconic Correctional Facility appeared to be an excellent place to try a pilot program to see if a mixed classroom would be educationally valuable and feasible without compromising security. A medium-security women's facility, Taconic carried lower security concerns than a maximum-security prison. Courses through both Mercy College and Nyack College, and College Connections, a program directed by Gina Shea and Johanna Foster that offers precollege and college courses in math and English, were already in place to prepare women for the proposed Vassar course.

DOCS Commissioner Brian Fischer was supportive, as were Taconic's superintendents, Sabina Kaplan and her predecessor, Dolores Thornton.

"Education and positive social interaction are both critical to offenders' ability to readjust successfully to the community after prison — and to cope during incarceration," Fischer said. "This program brought the best of both worlds to the participating offenders at Taconic Correctional Facility. It is clear that those offenders, as well as the participating Vassar students, learned a great deal not only academically but also about understanding and accepting others' points of view."

ANTICIPATED DIFFICULTIES AND FACTORS THAT PROMOTED THE SUCCESS OF THE COURSE

Nevertheless, DOCS and Taconic Correctional Facility officials grappled with significant issues before approving the mixed class. Primary among these was security. Would inmates try to get students to take items in or out of the facility? Would college students be mature enough to conduct themselves appropriately on prison grounds? Would they violate stipulations against establishing any contact outside of the classroom? Precautions were possible, but no one could guarantee that everyone would exercise good judgment.

Measures began with screenings for any obvious security risks. The facility reviewed the records of offenders with respect to criminal history and facility adjustment. Each Vassar student underwent the screening that New York requires for all prison volunteers, which includes fingerprinting and a history of arrests.

The selection process for choosing students was rigorous. The director of the College Connections program at Taconic selected women based on standardized tests, writing samples and interviews. Shanley and Leonard interviewed 20 of the 40 course applicants and assessed each student's ability to listen carefully to others, engage in cooperative learning and comply with prison rules.

The class met in a building used for educational programs, and although no correctional officer sat in the classroom, a glass window afforded the officer assigned to the building direct supervision of the class. The faculty members were always in the classroom, and students went for bathroom breaks one by one. For considerations of both security and privacy, only first names were used. Although last names were sewn onto the prison uniforms, they were hard to read from any distance and were not used in calling roll, handing back papers or at any other time. These measures were both effective and unobtrusive, and they succeeded in creating a typical college classroom where students and instructors could freely examine and discuss course materials, sometimes arguing vehemently but with mutual respect. Beyond the classroom, security officers reported to the superintendent that the college courses promoted maturity and growth among the inmates and, therefore, contributed to stability and responsible behavior.

In addition to providing security, Taconic administrators wanted to ensure that students enrolled in the course had the ability and resources to succeed. The unequivocal support of the commissioner and superintendent set the

tone necessary for success; their explicit commitment carried over to the correctional officers and all the students enrolled in the course. The College Connections prep work was crucial in giving Taconic students, including those who had not studied beyond high school or a GED, the confidence and skills they needed for college work. Since the Taconic students were barred from the Internet for security reasons, the class had to use printed materials — books and photocopies of articles — but this was not a hindrance. In fact, the instructors were old enough to have taught before the age of the Internet and electronic files, and they found it easy to gather class materials before the semester began. The prison is looking into ways to give its students access to computers (without Internet capability) for word processing, but in the meantime, handwritten papers have been acceptable.

Administrators at Vassar College were simultaneously supportive and concerned. They respected the prison's judgment concerning security measures. After the instructors and students attended the orientation that Taconic requires of all volunteers who participate in programs at the facility, the instructors returned to campus and reinforced the stipulations about anonymity and maintaining boundaries. They also emphasized that the purpose of the class was to create a community of scholars akin to any other college classroom, not to form friendships or to treat classmates as objects of curiosity.

The college administration offers financial and administrative support. It waives tuition for the students from Taconic, grants credit to all students who complete the course successfully, and counts the course as part of the faculty members' regular course-load. The course credits are transferable and encourage the women to pursue their education when they finish their sentences. The college sees the course as a way to provide a concrete expression of Vassar's commitment to equal educational opportunity and to put into practice the proven use of education to reduce recidivism.

For their part, both sets of students had their own anxieties. The Vassar students worried that the women at Taconic would regard them as sheltered, privileged, spoiled and naïve. The Taconic women who had not previously done college work worried that they were not smart or prepared enough for college, and even those who had previously taken college courses feared that the Vassar students would see them as social outcasts. By meeting separately with each group of students for the first class, the instructors were able to encourage students to express these concerns and then address them directly. The ways in which the class was structured for the duration of the semester helped establish free-flowing and respectful dialogue that seemed to resolve many of the students' apprehensions.

IN THE CLASSROOM

The prison's location an hour's drive from the Vassar campus meant the course could only meet once a week, so class periods were two-and-a-half-hours long. The instructors used a format of very short introductory lectures (about 15 minutes) followed by both directed and small group discussions that provided vehicles for the students to learn from one another as well as the instructors.

The topic of the course, "Gender, Social Problems and Social Change," reflected the instructors' interests but also offered the kinds of material that encouraged the participation of students from both inside and outside the prison. Discussion of contemporary issues (education, health care, family-work issues, prison reform) accentuated the benefits of having a mixture of gender, class, racial and age backgrounds. Indeed, the wide range of ages of the Taconic students provided an extremely valuable exposure to different views for the Vassar students. A course in literature, history or political science — any topic enriched by different perspectives and life experiences — would take full advantage of the mixture of "inside" and "outside" students.

A number of techniques were used to help stimulate serious academic discussion while putting students at ease. The class sat in a circle, allowing every student to see each classmate and speak directly to her or him. Two students per week presented short oral reports on the readings, helping each student develop speaking skills and self-confidence. In many classes the instructors showed short video clips, drawing into the discussion students who were more comfortable with visual than written materials. A required

The ways in which the class was structured for the duration of the semester helped establish free-flowing and respectful dialogue that seemed to resolve many of the students' apprehensions.

weekly response paper turned out to be very effective, prompting students to formulate questions for class discussion ahead of time and providing weekly practice in formal written work. Both instructors wrote comments on the papers before returning them the following week, deepening the students' sense of connection to the course.

In addition to large group discussions, the instructors broke the class into discussion groups of four students to answer particular questions. They configured the groups to create a balance among vocal and less vocal, men and women, younger and older, and inside and outside students. These small groups proved to be one of the best features of the course. The students liked the interaction, got to know one another much better than they could in the larger group, and benefited from working collectively to respond to the discussion questions.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The Recognition Day ceremony concluding the semester's work was an affirmation of the success of the collaboration between DOCS and Vassar College. Both institutions believed that, although the risks in permitting the course were real, the possible benefits for the women of Taconic Correctional Facility and Vassar students alike were tremendous, and that vision carried the day.

At the conclusion of the course, every student completed an anonymous written evaluation, as Vassar requires in all its courses. The evaluations were uniformly positive. Several Taconic students mentioned that this course had inspired them to continue their education for themselves — and their children. One wrote: "I've always been afraid of going to college. This class has opened my eyes to a whole new way of learning, and built my confidence in a way I never could have imagined!" At the 2008 Recognition Day ceremony, Vassar student Amanda Giglio reflected:

When I first entered Taconic Correctional Facility I had no idea how much this experience would change my life. These women, women who I am proud to call my classmates, have strong, intelligent voices that are clamoring to be heard, voices that deserve to be heard outside the walls of our classroom and the facility.

I have had an amazing time learning with and from all of you ... You have made a lasting imprint on both my 'sociological mindset' and my heart. And I hope that one day we can stand side by side fighting to change the social problems we have been talking about all semester, because you can make a difference — you already have.

This was a powerful testimony to the positive change that can come from talking across differences in a college classroom. Both Taconic Correctional Facility and Vassar College found this course to serve the missions of their respective institutions and, the course will be offered again this year. The authors hope to encourage others to undertake similar programs.

Sabina Kaplan is superintendent of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Eileen Leonard is a professor of sociology at Vassar College. Mary L. Shanley is a professor of political science at Vassar College.

new online
degree

School of Criminology & Criminal Justice



The Online Bachelor of Science in Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University is designed to provide students with the practical and theoretical knowledge of crime control and the analytical skills needed to succeed in the Criminal Justice field. Online students are taught by nationally prominent faculty.

- Affordable quality education
- Flexible class schedule
- Distinguished faculty

For more information, visit our website at: asuonline.asu.edu

The School also offers The Master of Arts in Criminal Justice (MACJ) offered on campus or online & The Master of Science in Criminology and Criminal Justice (MSCCJ). For more information about these programs, visit our website at: <http://ccj.asu.edu/degree-programs>

be a part of crime control & public safety

ASU College of
Public Programs
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY