

The Miscellany News (Vassar College)

Vassar Women's Prison Program Still Inspires: Class Intends to Address Inequalities

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Published: Wednesday, September 21, 2011

Updated: Wednesday, September 21, 2011 16:09

The sociology class Gender, Social Problems and Social Change in the Contemporary United States takes place at the Taconic Correctional Facility, pictured above. Students participating in the class engage with inmates on topics such as gender, race and criminal justice.

Vassar has a long history of spearheading innovative methods of education; it was the first of the Seven Sister schools to admit men, and the first college in the world to offer an undergraduate degree in Cognitive Science.

Although the Greenhaven Prison Internship program was canceled this year by the Department of Corrections, Vassar is continuing its role as an educational innovator with another course related to the student-prisoner relationship.

Formally titled Gender, Social Problems and Social Change in the Contemporary United States, the course brings traditional college students and incarcerated women together in one classroom. It is the first course of this kind in New York State. Both inmates and students are offered an unique perspective on the nation's most pressing social problems in more ways than one.

Offered through Vassar's Sociology Department, the class itself is the brainchild of Professor of Political Science Mary Shanley and Professor of Sociology Eileen Leonard. The two were inspired to create a course that incorporates incarcerated people after they completed training for Temple University's Inside-Out Prison-Exchange program, which has been facilitating the creation of mixed classes of college students and inmates inside prison walls since 1997.

Inside-Out hopes to provide a means for college students to explore pertinent social issues while simultaneously reducing criminal recidivism through higher education for incarcerated people, as students have class with people from Philadelphia prisons.

Because no program of this nature formerly existed in the state, the two professors then decided to write a curriculum that would be able to engage both college students and inmates while adhering to both prison and state protocol.

With the support of both the New York State Department of Correctional Services and the Taconic Correctional Facility, the program was formally instated in the spring of 2009. A medium security prison located in Westchester County, the Taconic Correctional Facility is approximately an hour's drive from Vassar's campus and was considered an ideal location for this experimental program because of its relatively low security level. Moreover, the prison itself houses women who, in many cases, are given a number of opportunities to advance their education while incarcerated.

Before the establishment of Shanley's and Leonard's class, the prison offered courses through Mercy College, Nyack College and College Connections, which is a program that offers college prep courses in both math and English. Yet giving these women the opportunity to learn with college students is an educational experience within itself for both parties.

As New York State Department of Correctional Services Commissioner Brian Fisher noted in a 2010 article by Sabina Kaplan on the Vassar Class for Corrections Today, "Education and positive social interaction are both critical to offenders' ability to readjust successfully to the community after prison—and to cope during incarceration. 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."

Vassar's Course Catalogue describes the mission of the class as "[examining] the general issues of inequalities based on economic and employment status, racial and ethnic identity and gender and sexual orientation."

Admission to the class is highly selective for both inmates and Vassar students. Those incarcerated are selected based on factors such as standardized test scores, writing samples and interviews. Leonard and Shanley personally interview those who qualify for the course and assess their ability to engage in classroom discussions. With a high level of interest in the class and only 10 available spots, admission for Vassar students is also competitive. The students who enroll are subject to the traditional background screenings given to all non-incarcerated prison volunteers.

Due to the prison's relative distance from Vassar's campus, the class itself meets once a week for two and a half hours. Vassar students are transported to the correctional facility in a prison van. They are then screened through security and are escorted by guards into the classroom. Once there, they then arrange the chairs in a circle and alternate seats with the students from Taconic.

The topics discussed range from gender and race to criminal justice. They encourage both Vassar students and Taconic students to draw from their own experiences. This discourse has ultimately helped reshape how both sets of students view each other.

"Instead of being a statistic or a journal article, these women are our classmates and have the opportunity to voice their opinions on the social issues that affect them . . . many of us have many things in common with the women—they most certainly do not fit any of the stereotypes that many envision of 'criminals,'" noted Abby Nathanson '14, a Vassar student who is currently enrolled in the class. "But we're not there to study them, and that is very important. We are there to create a community of learners together."

The class does try to harness the atmosphere of a typical college classroom within the facility, although there are clearly some differences.

Nathanson said, "It is very difficult to get past the fact that no matter what, the Vassar students have much more privilege than [the incarcerated women] do. At the end of class, we can leave. We can drive away and go back to Vassar, sleep in our own rooms, [and] wear something other than a green prison uniform and white sneakers."