

Students behind bars mix with those from 'outside'

At Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, inmates are earning degrees alongside students from the outside. Once a week, students from Marymount Manhattan College drive up to the maximum security women's prison for a class called Theories of Justice.

Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY | 6:31 p.m. EDT April 27, 2013

In this pioneering course, "Theories of Justice," which epitomizes equality and justice for all, prisoners feel liberated learning alongside students from Manhattan.



(Photo: Eileen Blass, USA TODAY)

BEDFORD HILLS, N.Y. — Nine of the college students wear matching green denim shirts and pants, and some carry clear backpacks. The other seven — one with nose rings and tattoos, others sporting trendy glasses or skinny ties — say their dress is the only thing that differentiates them from their classmates.

"If we were to all switch clothing, it would be hard to tell who was who," Jess Kennedy, 22, a sociology major at Marymount Manhattan College, says after class this month.

Each week this semester, she and six students from the Manhattan school's upper-east-side campus drive 40-plus miles north to join classmates at a branch campus deep inside the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York state's only maximum security prison for women.

Marymount has offered a college program to inmates here for years, but this is the first time students on the inside and outside have taken a class together. Students say the combined classroom symbolizes key themes of the course, called Theories of Justice.

"To me, it signifies that we're equal. We're all in the same situation. We're all getting an education," says Claude Millery, 40, who is pursuing a bachelor's in sociology. She was sentenced in 1993 to 25 years to life for her role in a double homicide and hopes to be granted clemency.

Marymount's program was one of hundreds to shut down in the mid-1990s, after then-president Bill Clinton signed a law stripping inmates of eligibility for federal Pell grants. In recent years, college prison programs have seen a resurgence because of private donors.

The Bedford Hills program, which was resurrected in 1997 with help from a seven-college consortium and costs about \$250,000 a year to run, has been supported since 2004 by a \$2.5 million privately funded endowment. Doris Buffet, sister of billionaire Warren, has contributed \$8.5 million to more than 20 college prison programs, most of them launched in the past five years. The Ford Foundation just granted \$500,000 to Bard College for its 10-year-old prison initiative.

"People are starting to figure out how to do this in creative ways," says Lori Pompa, founder of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange program, which has trained about 375 instructors nationwide on how to conduct combined classrooms.

Among them is Marymount sociology professor Michelle Ronda, who teaches this class. She says inside students must meet the same admission criteria, take the same required courses and pass the same tests as their outside counterparts, but often have to work harder because they have access to fewer resources.

There are a few differences. Outside students are asked not to Google their inside classmates because the women inside can't Google them. And inside students like Millery, who earns 25 cents an hour working in the laundry, pay \$5 per semester for books and supplies. Tuition and fees for full-time outside Marymount students this year totaled \$25,688.

Outside students, who had to apply for the course and sign off on pages of paperwork for permission to enter the prison, say the investment is worth it. "Some of the best debates and most intelligent conversations I have had during my college career have taken place in this course," says Matt Corridoni 23, a political science and theater arts major.

Like their outside counterparts, inside students, who were selected to participate in Ronda's course, view their education as a ticket to a better future.

"For me, this is preparation to be able to get a job, to develop social skills, to learn conflict resolution, to debate in a way that is productive, that is safe," says Teourialeir Johnson, 31, an honors student and mother of two who leads prenatal classes for incarcerated moms-to-be. Sentenced to 17 1/2 years in 2005 for attempted murder, she hopes her degree and good behavior will make her eligible for an earlier release.

The prison also offers basic literacy education and courses toward a GED. Joseph Joseph, a deputy superintendent at the Bedford Hills facility, says educational programs improve the climate inside the prison and increase the odds that women who are released won't return.

Not all inmates jump at the opportunity, at least initially. "I felt like, with (a sentence of) 25 to life, I was never going home, so what was the point?" says Millery, who now sees herself as a role model. "As I got myself together I felt, this isn't the end of the world. And education is the one thing you can't take from me."

During this class session, as students grapple with questions of justice and fairness, Ronda asks them to put on a "veil of ignorance" — to imagine how they might divide limited resources if they didn't know anything about where they fall in the social order.



Cheryl Santiago, Gemma Inguanta and Claude Millery in the "Theories of Justice" class at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. (Photo: Eileen Blass, USA TODAY)

At the break, LaNetta Hill, 44, a mother of four who is serving 15 years for a robbery conviction, says she puts on that veil every Thursday.

"When we're here, we're not incarcerated," she says. "We're in college."