

## **Democrat and Chronicle – UR becomes latest college teaching in prisons**

By: James Goodman

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By offering a course about world religions at the Five Points Correctional Facility this fall, UR joins a growing number of colleges with teaching programs in prisons.

In New York alone, 22 colleges have offered courses in 21 state prisons this year — more than four times the five colleges that offered programs in 2000.

They show a high rate of success — with 84 percent of the 129 inmates who earned a college degree while in prison and were released in 2011 not returning to prison after three years, according to the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision.

That means prisoners who earned their degrees in college were more than twice as likely to stay out of trouble when released as the general state prison population, which had a 42 percent recidivism rate.

Spearheading UR's efforts to bring the classroom into state prisons is Joshua Dubler, an assistant professor of religion at the college since 2012 who first taught in a prison in 2007.

"We incarcerate, overwhelmingly, people who are poor and did not have the best opportunity the first time around. We owe it to them to provide an education," said Dubler, who last fall taught a course, Theories of Religions, at the Auburn Correctional Facility.

Working with the Cornell Prison Education Program, Dubler has the immediate goal of UR teaching two courses a semester in state prisons.

Dubler, however, wants to go well beyond teaching in prisons and has established the Rochester Prison Education Project to encourage a public rethinking of prison policies and criminal justice policies.

"That doesn't just mean educating incarcerated people. It also means educating our students and members of our community about the facts of incarceration," he said.

As part of the kickoff of this program, Dubler will in February bring a guest speaker, Caleb Smith, a Yale University English professor who edited and wrote the introduction to the recently published book, *The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict*.

The book sheds some light on local history because it is a compilation of a 19th-century memoir by Austin Reed, an African-American who grew up in Rochester and spent time in the Auburn prison.

### College-prison pipeline

Dubler's prison outreach has the support of the UR administration as part of the university's community involvement.

"It is a beneficial program for us as well as prisoners," said UR Dean of the College Rich Feldman.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges are beginning their fifth year offering courses at the Five Points facility in Romulus, Seneca County. About a dozen faculty, volunteering their services, have taught some of the same courses, including calculus, that they teach to students on campus.

One of the longstanding programs is Nazareth College English professor Ed Wiltse's Jail Project, which entails students in his Crime and Punishment USA class meeting with inmates at the Monroe Correctional Facility participating in the course.

"I wanted to stop teaching narratives that end with the slamming of the jail door," said Wiltse. "I wanted to give the students and inmates an opportunity to learn together about how crime and punishment are represented in our culture."

Journal entries made by inmates participating in the class express a deep appreciation for the experience.

"I will never again read any book without thinking of you guys and your Crime and Punishment course. I am not the only one affected," wrote one inmate.

And she noted: "Other inmates and I have talked for hours after you left about the profound difference your class has made in our lives."

Nazareth has also provided faculty for Medaille College's associate degree program at the Albion Correctional Facility.

Monroe Community College, with its main campus in Brighton located next to the Monroe Correctional Facility, has since 1991 had faculty members teaching several for-credit courses and vocational courses at the facility.

“We are trying to get people to change their lives,” said Sabra Hickam, educational coordinator for the facility.

Genesee Community College has faculty teaching at the Attica Correctional Facility. The program, established six years ago, is funded by private donors and offers about four courses a semester — mostly in human services and business.

### Visions of reform

Dubler, 42, has a track record of working with prisons — with an eye toward alternatives to incarceration.

He is the author of the 2013 book *Down in the Chapel: Religious Life in an American Prison*, which is based on his research of the high-security Graterford Prison outside of Philadelphia and recounts seven days of conversations with inmates there.

And he is completing a book, co-authored with Villanova University religion professor Vincent Lloyd, that will be titled *Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice and the End of Mass Incarceration*.

Dubler also recently received a \$200,000 Carnegie fellowship to continue his research into prison reform.

In making his case that teaching in prison should be the beginning, not the end, of radical prison reform, Dubler revisits the history of the tremendous growth of the prison population — from fewer than 350,000 in prison and jails in 1972 to about 2.2 million today.

Something is disgraceful, Dubler noted, for the United States, with about 5 percent of the world's population, to have 21 percent of the world's prison population.

"I think mass incarceration is manifestly a moral, social and economic catastrophe. This has been clear to some people for quite some time," he said.

### Wars on crime revisited

Dubler noted a change of public attitudes, saying the "landscape has changed dramatically."

As the Vera Institute of Justice has documented, almost all the states have looked for ways to reduce their prison population in recent years — if for no other reason than the cost of incarceration has been a drain on state budgets.

Marc Levin, policy director of the conservative group Right on Crime, recently wrote that he was pleased that the Republican platform includes language that reflects the Right on Crime Statement of Principles.

The platform, Levin noted, endorses state reforms that have expanded the use of alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent offenders and urges reining in overcriminalization by reducing the number of crimes and ensuring a culpable mental state is required for conviction.

But there is concern that Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump's campaign as "the law-and-order candidate" will change the tide.

"The danger is that law-and-order rhetoric moves us to the idea that we should use prisons to warehouse instead of to rehabilitate," said Nazgol Ghandnoosh, research analyst at The Sentencing Project, a research and advocacy group based in Washington, D.C.

It was such law-and-order rhetoric by President Richard Nixon that helped shape the mass incarceration mindset that took hold in the 1970s.

But as Ghandnoosh noted, the rapid rise of the prison population was more the result of increasingly punitive criminal justice policies than crime rates.

The New York prison population, which was 12,579 at the end of 1970, mushroomed to 72,896 in 1999, but then decreased by 28 percent to 52,399 in 2014. The state prison inmate population at the end of May was 52,291.

And while some other states also began seeing a reduction in their prison population, the nation's prison population increased by 16 percent between 1999 and 2014.

But the reduction of New York's prison population did not unleash a surge in crime.

Instead, violent crime dropped by 35 percent in the state between 1999 and 2014 — a sharper decline than the 30 percent nationwide.

In his acceptance speech at the Republican convention, Trump said there was a 17 percent increase in homicides last year in the 50 largest cities and that the progress in bringing down crime was "now being reversed" by the Obama administration's "rollback of criminal enforcement."

But Trump didn't note that the steady decline in the homicide rate — 54 percent between 1991 and 2014 — included the first six years of the Obama administration.

And Trump's focus on large cities overstates the nationwide increase in homicides since, according to Ghandnoosh, the FBI reported a 6.2 percent increase in murders in the first half of 2015 compared to a similar period a year earlier

Final FBI statistics for all of 2015 are not yet available.

### **Prison education makes comeback**

The more punitive approach to crime during the last decades of the 20th century proved costly to colleges teaching in prisons.

A big blow came with the 1994 federal omnibus crime bill's prohibition of prisoners receiving federal Pell grants to pay for college courses.

A year later, the state prohibited inmates in New York from receiving Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) grants.

By the time the Great Recession took hold in 2008, many cash-strapped states were looking for ways to reduce the prison population.

In recent years, 46 states — by legislation, executive order or ballot initiatives — have implemented changes in criminal justice policy, according to a new report by the Vera Institute.

Most of the policy changes have focused on diverting people away from the criminal justice system, expanding opportunities for early release from prison and increasing their support, and reducing the number of people admitted to prison for violating the terms of community supervision.

But Dubler said such piecemeal reform is nowhere near sufficient.

"You can nip and tuck at policy and cut the prison population by 20 percent. But you will have the most expansive prison state in world history," he said.

Although Gov. Andrew Cuomo's efforts to revive TAP for inmates two years ago fizzled in the face of opposition, the Manhattan District Attorney's Office has now earmarked

\$7.5 million in forfeiture funds for prison education. The funds come from settlements with financial institutions for violations of U.S. sanctions.

A total of \$5 million will be distributed to colleges for teaching in prisons. The selected colleges are expected to provide matching funds for the program.

Between 800 and 1,000 inmates, who are between 1.5 and 5.5 years away from completing their sentences, will take courses with the funded colleges. The remaining \$2.5 million will help coordinate educational programming and provide support services for the participating inmates upon their release from prison.

And Pell grants for inmates have made a comeback as a pilot program.

Last month, the U.S. Department of Education announced the first round of participants in the Second Chance Pell pilot program, which will involve 67 colleges partnering with more than 100 federal and state prisons, though none in the Rochester area.

Both initiatives cited a 2013 RAND Corp. study, which found that inmates who participated in correctional education programs were 43 percent less likely to recidivate and 13 percent more likely to find a job than inmates who didn't participate.

The state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision uses a partnership model for developing a college education program in a prison, with the college doing the fundraising.

Foundation funds, including \$1 million from the Mellon Foundation allocated to the Cornell Prison Education Project last year, have helped finance stepped-up efforts at state prisons.

MCC has been able to continue its education programs at the Monroe Correctional Facility because of revenue generated by the jail commissary. About \$75,000 will be earmarked for such purposes in the Correctional Facility's proposed budget.

Dubler also helped arrange UR philosophy graduate student Jarod Sickler to teach an introduction to religions course at Five Points this coming fall.

"It will show employers that these students are committed to a long-term goal and will see it through," said Sickler.

Three faculty members from UR's Department of Art and Art History will this coming school year teach an art course at the Buffalo Federal Detention facility in Batavia.

Teaching in prison has proved to be a learning experience for Nazareth student Melissa Stio, 22, who made six visits to the Monroe Correctional Facility as part of the Crime and Punishment in the USA class.

“On the last day, we laughed and joked with each other — finding similarities between prison and college,” said Stio.

John Vaughn, an associate professor of math and computer science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, has taught math courses at Five Points for the past four years.

He is one of about a dozen faculty members who have taught at Five Points. They teach the same courses at the prison as they do at HWS, though they do so on a voluntary basis.

A plaque in Vaughn's office, presented by inmates at Five Points, is a reminder that his efforts are appreciated.

It says: “Thank you for changing the image we have of ourselves.”