

Written by
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LANCASTER -- An unusual corrections course taught at Ohio State University-Newark brought together college students and prisoners at the Southeastern Correctional Institution for the third consecutive year this fall.

The course, titled "Inside-Out," is an in-depth look at the U.S. criminal justice system.

On Wednesday, 23 students from the prison and the university received their course completion certificates during a ceremony at the prison. They included 13 university students and 10 prison students.

OSU-Newark students majoring in areas that include education, psychology, sociology and criminology went to the state prison outside Lancaster each week. They talked with the inmates about the effects of crime and imprisonment on victims and communities.

Zachary McPherson, a sophomore in criminology, was selected to speak for the "outside" students during the ceremony. He said the course was an eye-opening experience for many of the "outside" students.

"With one in every 24 Ohioans having a felony conviction, we as a society need to learn how to better understand the men and women who are incarcerated. This class made that possible for us," McPherson said. "The media portrays all offenders as uncontrollable animals who will never change, but sitting down with these men for the last 10 weeks and getting to know them and their stories, it is very easy to see that this portrayal is inaccurate. Everyone in prison is not an animal. They are people who made a wrong decision and got caught."

During the 10-week course, the students learned to critically examine the U.S. criminal justice system, with a particular focus on corrections.

Angela Harvey, assistant professor of sociology at OSU-Newark and the program coordinator, said this was graduate seminar level work completed by the students.

"This is very difficult work with reading and papers due each week," Harvey said. "In the first half of the course we review the problems in the criminal justice system and in the latter half we work on solutions."

For the prisoners, it is a way to break the boredom of the routine at the prison and a chance to work with college-level material.

"It is a good outlook of the system that is true and not sugar-coated," said Greg Leach, of Columbus, the prisoner selected to speak for the "insiders" who took part in the program.

Leach has served about one year of a four-year term for felony theft and tampering with evidence.

"We're not your stereotypical convicts or inmates," Leach said. "We're all human beings and we've all got good minds. Some of us just made mistakes, some of us were maliciously prosecuted, and some of us got caught doing stuff that was accepted in the environment we grew up in and some of us just had bad attorneys."

Leach said some of the problems in prisons can be handled without an increase in cost.

He said all prisoners, when they become inmates, are tested for their educational attainment. While there are programs to help inmates, he said sometimes they don't work.

He used the example of two inmates he knew who wanted to work on their GEDs, but because they had so much time left on their sentence were not allowed to participate yet.

"I see two guys who want to educate themselves and the system is telling them no," Leach said. "So I'm sure there's so many other issues like this that are able to be broken down."

He urged everyone to keep an open mind and look for solutions in the corrections field from unexpected places.

Warden Sheri Duffey welcomed everyone to the ceremony and said the program, if it did nothing else, allowed the SCI prisoners to find out they were capable of being college students.

"You know now you have the brain power to succeed out there," Duffey said.

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