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CULTURAL IMMERSION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE:

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program at St. John's University

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This article highlights a unique educational partnership between St. John's University and the New York City Department of Correction's jail on Rikers Island. Students from The University join incarcerated young adults in a sociology course that analyzes the processes of criminalization and punishment and the multiple consequences of mass incarceration. The simple but profound aim is to engage the "other" in breaking down walls that divide us and to work toward building a more just society. The course directly supports the goals of an engaged and informed citizenry in an integrative and experiential learning environment that encourages a sense of personal and social responsibility.

On a bright October afternoon, 10 St. John's University students and their professor enter a jail classroom and join a circle in which 10 incarcerated young adults sit in alternate seats. Enthusiastic greetings and nods of familiarity have replaced the polite, tentative handshakes of only a few weeks prior. The college students have not travelled to Rikers Island simply to visit, or to assess the jail and its prisoners, or to deliver services. Their purpose is to study as peers with those inside, grappling with fundamental issues of criminality, punishment, and reform. In this blended classroom of "Inside" and "Outside" students, all participants are equal contributors to the collective experience. The sociology course, Crime and Justice behind the Walls, addresses the significant social phenomenon of mass incarceration and associated policy issues. It challenges students to explore questions such as: What are prisons for? Why do people commit crime? Why do we punish? Who do we punish? The ensuing dialogue provides an opportunity

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for all to reconsider what they think they know about crime and justice, to place their own life experiences into the larger social context, and ultimately to answer: "Together, what can we do?"

The United States is the world's leading carceral state. Nationally, approximately 6.7

million men and women are under the jurisdiction of correctional authorities. While most are on probation, parole, or other forms of community supervision, over two million individuals are hidden away behind the bars of jails and prisons (Carson, 2018; Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). The incarcerated are largely drawn from the most disadvantaged segments of the population: mostly men under age 40, disproportionately minority, and poorly educated. They also often experience drug and alcohol addiction, mental and physical illness, and suffer from a lack of work preparation or experience (National Research Council, 2014, p. 2). An abundance of

research confirms that African Americans in the U.S., though approximately 13 percent of the population, comprise 35 percent of the state and federal prison populations and are incarcerated at over five times the rate for Whites; Hispanics are incarcerated three times the rate for non-Hispanic Whites (Carson, 2018; Subramanian, Riley, & Mai, 2018; National Research Council, 2014). Many are branded felons for life and so, even upon release, are locked into a permanent second-class status excluded from employment (Western, 2002); housing (Manza & Uggen, 2005); voting (Sentencing Project, 2017); and educational opportunities (Blumenson & Nilsen, 2002). Upon release, an extensive “web of laws, regulations, and informal rules, all of which are powerfully reinforced by social stigma” (Alexander, 2012, p. 4) marginalize these individuals from mainstream society, deepening social fissures between family members, neighbors, and communities (Braman, 2004; Wildeman, 2010; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Even as crime rates declined in the 1970s, incarceration rates rose—the end product of a plethora of legislative policy decisions designed to extend the use of imprisonment, exemplified by “three strikes and you’re out” laws, mandatory minimums, and the imposition of stiffer and longer sentences (National Research Council, 2014).¹ The number of people imprisoned in the U.S. continued to rise at unprecedented rates throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, accompanied by massive increases in law enforcement budgets and prison construction—and sharp reductions in social welfare programs. Sociologist Loïc Wacquant has noted that in 1996, federal funding for public housing was slashed 61 percent while the budget for corrections increased 171 percent, “effectively making the construction of prisons the nation’s main housing program for the urban poor” (Wacquant, 2010, p. 77). The phenomenon of mass incarceration has taken a particular toll on African-American and Hispanic communities and increasingly has targeted women, yet the political decisions to distance these “others” have generated profound sociological, political, and economic shifts that affect all citizens. The result, many have

argued, is a weakened democracy (Wildeman, 2010; Kruttschnitt, 2010; Loury, 2012; Mauer, 2002). Undoubtedly, the extent and ubiquity of mass incarceration and its nefarious outcomes has the potential to blind us to the possibility of alternatives.

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

The seed of what would develop into The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program® was sown in 1995 after a remarkable discussion between Lori Pompa, a Temple University Criminal Justice faculty member, and Paul, a man serving a natural life sentence at a state prison in Dallas, Pennsylvania. Pompa regularly arranged class visits to correctional facilities that included conversations with groups of incarcerated people. This time Paul expressed his hope that the dialogue somehow could be extended, suggesting, “Why can’t we do this every week?” He and other incarcerated participants pointed out that prison walls were constructed not only to keep “them” in, but also to keep “us” out. Absent any dialogue between incarcerated and free citizens, there could be no shared knowledge or understanding of the forces contributing to mass incarceration, nor any means of critical, alternative problem solving. In her efforts to operationalize Paul’s hope, Pompa designed a partnership between institutions of higher learning and corrections; the first Inside-Out course was initiated in the Philadelphia jails in 1997 and expanded to the Graterford (PA) maximum-security prison in 2002. With the support of a Soros Justice Senior Fellowship, Pompa then worked with others to organize the Inside-Out National Instructor Training Institute in order to replicate the program nationally. The first training of 20 instructors commenced in July 2004 and included the first author.

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (Inside-Out) is an educational initiative that aims to transform ways of thinking about crime and justice. Its innovative approach is “tailored to effectively facilitate dialogue across difference” (Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, 2017). A distinctive feature of the Inside-Out model is that approximately half of the registered students are

incarcerated individuals, and classes take place inside prisons and other correctional facilities. And yet, “the essential germ of Inside-Out is not the prison; even more fundamental is the power of educational exchange and collaboration to transcend the social barriers and institutional frames that define and corral us all” (Davis & Roswell, 2013, p. 8). Inside-Out courses differ from others offered during standard semester periods on most college campuses, given the pedagogical approach, classroom location, the number and selection of students, as well as the time required. In addition, all affiliated instructors must complete the 60-hour training offered by the Instructor Training Institute.²

Course pedagogy is deeply rooted in inquiry and the Socratic method, promoting dialogue and active, faculty-facilitated conversation amongst a mixed group of students. Class participants bring varying perspectives from their own experiences, which foster “interactional diversity, that is, engagement in which diverse perspectives are valued resources for consequential problem solving” (Davis et al., 2014, p. 3). An array of carefully sequenced exercises and techniques, theme-based readings, reflection papers, and a group project with real world significance emphasize collaborative learning and community building. Reflections on self, other, social systems, and justice are integral to all classes taught in this model regardless of the specific discipline or course content. Broadly speaking, Inside-Out works to mobilize individuals, institutions, and resources to expand and deepen higher education opportunities within prisons and jails, and to bring about “radical and lasting positive change, metamorphosis, transformation for all participants”: college students, jail participants, as well as the instructor facilitating the class (Pompa, 2013, p. 24). In creating space for dialogue and exchange, the Inside-Out model encourages participants to generate new ideas and fresh solutions to problems related to crime and the administration of justice.

Rikers Island sits in the East River about 100 yards from New York City's La Guardia Airport. Access to the 416-acre complex is by a single, restricted bridge; prior to 1966 all passage was by ferry.

St. John's University on Rikers Island

Jails are the front door to our prisons. But, unlike prisons, jails primarily detain people who are not convicted of a criminal offense—and so are legally presumed innocent. In 2016, nearly two-thirds of all jail inmates nationwide were awaiting court action on a current charge, while the remaining 35 percent were either awaiting sentencing after a conviction, or were sentenced for one year or less (Zeng, 2018, p. 4).³ Most individuals were held for crimes related to poverty, mental illness, and addiction, and often because they could not post bail (Subramanian, Delaney, Roberts, Fishman, & McGarry, 2015; Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2012). Second in population

only to the Los Angeles County jails, the Rikers Island complex currently incarcerates just under 9,000 people whose legal status mirrors those national statistics.⁴ In a letter to the City Council, for example, New York City's Budget Office reported that on average, 78 percent of Rikers' population consists of pretrial detainees, and of these, 52 percent are incarcerated because of their inability to post bail at arraignment (Lowenstein, 2017). Furthermore, a recent report on criminal justice reform in New York City estimated that “nearly 20 percent of the incarcerated population suffers from serious and persistent mental health conditions, such as schizophrenia and major depression” (Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform, 2017, p. 85).

Rikers Island sits in the East River about 100 yards from New York City's La Guardia Airport. Access to the 416-acre complex is by a single, restricted bridge; prior to 1966 all passage was by ferry. The first penitentiary building was constructed on the island in 1935 and expansions added buildings in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Today the jail consists of

10 facilities, one of which is designated for female offenders. Despite Rikers' proximity and size, however, few citizens wish to acknowledge the jail's presence, and most probably could not locate it on a map. A lack of awareness on the part of the average New Yorker is not helped by the fact that neither the bridge to the island nor the city bus line that traverses the narrow causeway appear on the regular MTA transportation map. In his preface to the 2017 Independent Commission's report, Chair and former New York State Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman described this separation: "Rikers Island is not just physically remote—it is psychologically isolated from the rest of New York City. Rikers severs connections with families and communities, with harmful consequences for anyone who spends even a few days on the Island" (Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform, 2017, p. 3).

Only a 20-minute drive from St. John's University, Rikers Island is a world away from the verdant Queens campus. Yet, since the Spring of 2016, nearly 40 undergraduate college students have moved beyond metaphorical and physical boundaries to join their incarcerated counterparts in the *Crime and Justice behind the Wall* course. Operating in partnership with Rikers Island's Youthful Offender & Young Adult Programming Unit, the University Provost's Office has made a pedagogical and financial commitment to support faculty training, student transportation and course materials, and perhaps most importantly for the incarcerated students, three college credits. The collaboration between these two institutional structures provides a solid foundation upon which to address the educational needs of the marginalized and disadvantaged.

Student Selection and Course Content

The Inside-Out course seeks to put a human face on justice issues while addressing the public discourse on incarceration and incarcerated individuals. Through personal engagement in a safe and respectful context, all participants are challenged to re-evaluate cultural stereotypes, resist generalizations, and fully meet one another as fellow members of the same society (Allred,

2009). The course is semi-anonymous (first names only) and confidential (what is said in class is not to be repeated outside of class in any way that would identify the speaker). In addition, the physical location of the class restricts the number of college students to approximately 10, with a matching number of Inside students. Rikers educational staff set the criteria for Inside students and so recruit, screen and approve all admissions. Participants must be at least 18 years old and have a high school diploma or GED; be sentenced to less than one year (or awaiting sentencing) for a non-violent offense; and have no record of disciplinary problems within the facility. Candidates also write an application essay.⁵ Outside students must also be at least 18 years old and at a sophomore level or above, with a 3.0 GPA. Students complete a brief questionnaire on their interest in and reasons for taking the course, and provide at least one reference. Their responses and any concerns they may have about attending class in a jail are probed more fully in a personal interview with the instructor.⁶

Over the course of four semesters, a total of 64 students completed the class; nearly two-thirds (63%) were Outside students.⁷ Of the 64 students who completed, 72 percent identified as female and 28 percent identified as male. While the goal is for an equal number of male and female students in every class, institutionalized gender segregation means variation depends upon the mix of university students.⁸ Racial and ethnic diversity is also a consideration in selecting Outside students, recognizing that the incarcerated students are likely to represent minority racial groups. The racial and ethnic makeup of the combined four cohorts was Black (38%); White (31%); Hispanic (25%); and Asian/Pacific Islander (6%).⁹ Most students were between 18 and 25 years old.

The initial Inside-Out course grew out of Pompa's criminal justice focus, which informs how instructors are trained and is at the core of the St. Johns-Rikers Island *Crime and Justice behind the Walls*. The course is an opportunity to gain a deeper sociological understanding of justice systems and policies. It operates within

an integrative framework of education and social change, uniting theoretical knowledge and practical experience. St. John's student *Bulletin* describes the course as "an experientially based seminar examining the function and social consequences of justice policies, particularly mass incarceration [and the] intersection of race, ethnicity, class, and gender" (St. John's University, 2017, p. 86). Other institutions and instructors, however, have offered Inside-Out courses that span the disciplines, including English Literature, Social Work, Law, Black Studies, Geography, History, Theology, Public Health, and Mathematics. What distinguishes the Inside-Out class is its pedagogical process and interaction. The "unique, intense, and carefully sequenced and calibrated mixture and juxtaposition of strategies" makes the whole larger than the sum of its parts (Allred et al., 2013, p. 201).

In the first few weeks, icebreaker exercises help create a relaxed atmosphere and inject humor into what can be an anxious atmosphere, while nurturing the growth of trust between individuals and within the larger collective. Only then does the group begin to focus on course readings and the questions that inform the semester. Most students are new to sociology and so the course begins with an exploration of what is meant by the sociological imagination and extends to concepts of intersectionality, socialization, and power. Students read historical and contemporary criminological theory and treatises on the social role of punishment and sanctioning, and interrogate how individual components of the justice system operate. Later in the semester, students discuss victims and victimization, and the possibilities of restorative justice. The course material, however, is only the starting point for dialogue and discussion that allows participants to engage with and learn from one another.

The experience of taking a course in jail with incarcerated persons offers dimensions of learning that are difficult to achieve in a traditional classroom. Asking students to consider, for example, the rationale for prisons and the inherent flaws as presented by de Beaumont and de

Tocqueville's *On the Penitentiary System* (1833) and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1979), while sitting in a Rikers Island classroom, opens up a whole new perspective. At a very basic level, the setting allows college students to examine theories they have learned and apply them in a real-world setting. As one Outside student wrote in an anonymous course evaluation, "I gained a much deeper understanding of the American justice system, as well as the philosophies and forms of justice and punishment, as seen through the lens of one of the largest correctional facilities on the planet." Continuing, the student admitted that the course also "forced me to face my biases and misconceptions about Inside individuals, jail life, and the system that polices and imprisons as a whole." By experiencing the system first-hand, even in a limited way, Outside students become more "literate" about the criminal justice system and mass incarceration. As another wrote: "I was able to be immersed in the material, literally." Such immersion learning stimulates a powerful interaction between content and context; it is the difference between "reading the word" and "reading the world" (Freire, 1992). Those living inside are also able to situate their individual experiences within a broader academic framework (Pompa, 2004, p. 26-27). Reflection papers encourage students to write about their observations, analyze readings, and examine their emotional reactions. A final comprehensive paper is also required.

The regular shifting between large and small discussion circles enhances participants' ability to give full voice to their experiences and reflections, and begins to chip away at preconceived differences. One Inside student described the class as "a window of opportunity in a place of hardship," and another wrote that it provided a space where "our voices matter. I was amazed at the opportunity to share our stories with the Outside students and to understand their many perspectives on the criminal justice system." Finding common ground is a course objective and is essential to the required final group project. Each of the four cohorts collaborated to produce a practical application of course material:

an architectural redesign of the jail applying Scandinavian penal philosophies; a graphic novel describing women's pathways into criminality and the supports necessary to exit that life; a published newspaper (distributed at the university and in the jail) with political news, editorials, a crossword puzzle, and reentry resources; and a magazine of interviews, poetry, short stories, and news, all associated with aspects of mass incarceration.

Outcomes and a Look to the Future

The Inside-Out course exposes both those inside and outside the walls to new forms of knowledge, with the intent of expanding cultural perspectives and appreciation for differences. Collaborative learning is a key component, and the resultant relationships are highly valued. When asked about what they would take from the course, a student wrote "the relationships that have been formed within the class... because this is probably the only class in my whole St. John's career in which I had to interact with each and every student." Many students also expressed new confidence in their own academic potential and a renewed interest in learning. One Inside student stated that the course "has changed me by actually wanting to attend college upon my release" and another revealed that "even when the work seemed like too much, because I haven't really done school, something wouldn't let me fail. After every class I have wanted to leave with them and be a real student." Most demonstrated improved writing and public speaking skills (when asked, one said the class provided "the courage to stand up and speak in front of groups"), and many wrote of an increased sensitivity to, and understanding of, the complexities of systems of social control. After completing the course, several Inside students have sought guidance in accessing a college education. Through our relationships with other colleges and universities, and a number of organizations specifically dedicated to facilitating pathways from jail and prison to higher education (e.g., College and Community Fellowship, The College Initiative, Fortune Society), we have been able to provide that assistance. For example, two young women are enrolled in Columbia

University's humanities-based *Justice-in-Education Initiative*, and another recently began classes at St. Francis College (Brooklyn) through the post-prison education program *Hudson Link at St. Francis*. In December 2017, a former Inside student joined her Outside classmates for a St. John's University panel discussion of a film on prison-based higher education.¹⁰

Outside students have continued their involvement with criminal justice issues both academically and through service and advocacy. For example, several students presented on their course experiences at the American Society of Criminology Annual meetings in 2016 and 2017. A number of Outside students report re-evaluating or revising their career choices, stating they wish to incorporate a focus on populations most directly affected by the justice system. Two students added a minor (Sociology; Social Work) and a third was accepted into a clinical psychology doctoral program that addresses the needs of at-risk youth and juvenile delinquents. Students have sought out justice-related internships, including two in which students returned to Rikers Island to work with the Education and Youth Advocacy Services Unit and the Horticultural Society of New York's therapy program. Other interns are tutoring system-involved youth and adults (Petey Greene Program) and have worked with the New York Legal Aid Society, after "hearing the stories from my Inside classmates about their personal experiences." To more fully assess the dynamics of this unique course, the first author and a McNair Scholar student are conducting an exploratory study using indicators from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Data include anonymous responses to pre- and post-course questionnaires and qualitative data from student reflection papers.

Building on the success of the sociology course, we anticipate increased faculty participation from a variety of disciplines and the expansion of course offerings in the liberal arts, humanities, and the sciences. Indeed, a second course, *Social Justice and Contemporary Issues in Public Health*, which addresses environmental justice and health as a

human right, has been approved by the University and awaits Department of Correction approval. St. John's School of Law faculty have expressed interest in participating in the Inside-Out program and additional faculty are likely to come from the Vincentian Research Fellows, an interdisciplinary forum of scholars whose research interests advance the social justice mission of St. John's University.

As an institution of higher learning, the university can be a critical link in the journey of those returning back to local communities. We know that corrections-based college education not only reduces recidivism and increases employment, but also raises individual aspirations, self-confidence, and self-esteem while honing critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Davis, et al., 2014). Upon release, however, individuals face stigma and tremendous obstacles in terms of housing, employment, and the pursuit of higher education (Sokoloff, n.d.). While St. John's University can provide some support and guidance, it is critical to also partner with community service providers and advocates in the metropolitan area. The university's membership in the New York Reentry Education Network (NY-REN), a collaboration of people in community-based organizations, government agencies, and colleges dedicated to making education central for people with criminal justice involvement, has enhanced our ability to promote successful reintegration. Moving ahead, we are building a resource database to assist students during reentry, and a webpage to facilitate communication and highlight activities of the Inside-Out Project at St. John's University.

An idea conceived in a Pennsylvania prison over 20 years ago has evolved into an international movement. Since 1997, more than 150 correctional and higher education partnerships have formed, serving over 30,000 students. The Inside-Out Training Institute has prepared more than 800 educators from 250 colleges and universities in the

U.S., Canada, Australia, Mexico, and the United Kingdom; these instructors have since expanded the pedagogy in their own areas, both in terms of geography and discipline. Catholic and Vincentian colleges and universities are well represented among the Inside-Out institutions, including St. John's University and St. Joseph's College in New York; DePaul University in Chicago; LaSalle University, St. Joseph's University, Cabrini University, Duquesne University, and Mount Aloysius College in Pennsylvania; University of Notre Dame in Indiana; and University of Dayton and Xavier University in Ohio.

A growing recognition of the damage caused by 40 years of mass incarceration has generated new support for prison and criminal justice reform. Systemic change, of course, is never easy and particularly today, in light of increasing diversification and political polarization, it demands that each of us strive to respect other perspectives while standing firmly committed to social justice. The St. John's University Mission Statement (2018) declares that, "Wherever possible, we devote our intellectual and physical resources to search out the causes of poverty and social injustice and to encourage solutions which are adaptable, effective, and concrete." The Inside-Out model is consistent

with the Vincentian tradition espoused by the founding order of the university, and will continue to provide transformative educational opportunities for participants on both sides of the wall, individuals who may well become leaders dedicated to building a more just and equitable society.

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Additional Resources

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

<http://www.insideoutcenter.org>

Just Leadership USA is dedicated to cutting the US correctional population in half by 2030. <https://www.justleadershipusa.org/>

The Sentencing Project: Criminal Justice Facts

<http://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>

Second Chance Pell Grants: Pilot program of the Department of Education/Department of Justice <https://www.vera.org/research/second-chance-pell-convening-playlist>

Vera Institute of Justice: Initiative to Reimagine Prison. <https://www.vera.org/research/reimagining-prison-the-journey-begins>

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Notes

1 According to the National Research Council's 2014 report on *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States*, half of the 222% growth in the state prison population between 1980 and 2010 was due to an increase of time served in prison for all offenses.

2 In New York and elsewhere, some instructors who did not participate in the Inside-Out training do teach combined classes of incarcerated and traditional college students. In some locales, there are also trained Inside-Out instructors who do not reference the affiliation at the behest of the correctional facility administration. The training is an expense that some colleges and universities may be unable to afford.

3 Prisons are operated by the state, whereas jails are administered locally. In addition to detaining those with sentences of less than one year, jails may hold a smaller number of people awaiting transfer to a prison to serve a longer sentence; who have violated probation or parole; or are being detained pending resolution of a federal criminal charge or immigration hearing.

4 For the first time in 35 years, the New York City jail population dipped below 9,000 in December 2017. At its peak in 1991, the population had swelled to over 20,000 in buildings designed to house 15,000 (Toure, 2017). The numbers have decreased significantly in the last three years, and the City of New York is in the process of reducing the population further by the end of 2018. In March 2017 Mayor De Blasio and the City Council announced plans to close the complex by 2028, a timeline many activist groups are hoping to shorten.

5 Evidence of a GED or high school diploma is required because Inside students are able to earn three college credits upon completion of the course. The essay serves to demonstrate interest, as well as basic writing and critical thinking skills.

6 Selected students are subject to a Department of Correction criminal history background check, are fingerprinted, and must attend two security briefings at the Department of Correction headquarters, after which they receive a volunteer ID card.

7 Jails generally have high turnover, and despite efforts to recruit individuals able to complete a semester, each cohort suffered some attrition as Inside students were released or transferred to upstate prisons.

8 The course was offered twice at the Eric M. Taylor Center, a facility for sentenced men, and twice at the Rose M. Singer Center, the only female facility on the island. Among Outside students, more females than males applied.

9 The Fall 2017 racial/ethnic composition of the full-time student population at St. John's University was: White (41%); Black/African American (15%); Hispanic (8%); Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (16%); American Indian/Alaskan Native (1%); Two or more races (5%); Unknown (7%). (Data provided by St. John's University Office of Institutional Research, March 14, 2018)

10 The National Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program maintains a non-contact policy after the course; however, "postcourse contact can occur, but only if it is Inside-Out programmatic in nature, for example, think tanks, alumni groups, and so forth." (Van Gundy, Bryant, & Starks, 2013, p. 202).

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