

Breaking Down Barriers: Student Experiences of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

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Introduction

The majority of the incarcerated population will be released back into society, so why isn't society helping to reintegrate ex-prisoners and advocate for them? How can society better understand who is incarcerated when the media floods us with violent images of the incarcerated population and primarily blames African Americans for most crimes? The citizens society incarcerates are fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, uncles, and aunts, yet the prison facilities are often miles away from their families, creating hardship and alienation. Members of society usually only hear one side of the story (from mass media outlets), but what if members of society could hear the other side of the story from incarcerated individuals themselves?

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (Inside-Out) is an international initiative directed at transforming ways of thinking about crime and justice. The idea for the program was inspired by Paul, a man serving a natural life sentence in Pennsylvania, and designed by Lori Pompa of Temple University in 1997 to bring college students and incarcerated individuals together as peers in a classroom setting that emphasizes dialogue and critical thinking. In the hopes of expanding this innovative partnership between institutions of higher learning and prison systems, Pompa organized the Inside-Out National Instructor Training Institute, with the assistance of the Philadelphia Prison System, Temple University, and the Soros Foundation. To date, over 300 instructors from 150 colleges/universities in 37 states, two Canadian provinces, and Australia have participated, returning to their institutions and starting Inside-Out classes across many academic disciplines. As a result, Inside-Out has been able to bring over 10,000 “inside” (incarcerated) and “outside” (university) students together in classrooms behind prison walls in order to consider the issues of crime and justice in a real-world setting.

Inside-Out² is designed to counter predominant stereotypes and myths held about prisons and prisoners through personal engagement; encourage participants to see crime and justice issues from new perspectives that otherwise might not be considered; assist students (free and incarcerated) in seeing themselves as actors in relation to these issues, and consequently as potential agents of social change; provide inside and outside students a positive experience from which to build new ideas about public service and meaningful citizenship; and initiate a grass-roots movement through education directed at transforming public thought and opinion on mass incarceration by creating cross-dialogues between free and incarcerated citizens with an

¹ An email from Professor Angela Bryant explained that Inside-Out rules require that students use first or nicknames during the course. The writers selected to use their legal names for publication, which is allowable for programmatic involvement of I/O after completing the course.

² “The Inside-Out Center,” last modified 2010, is available online at <http://www.insideoutcenter.org>.

emphasis upon alternative problem solving. Inside-Out courses support community-based or experiential learning objectives by providing students with exposure to the context of prison while fostering critical discussions between those outside and inside prison walls. These weekly dialogues, in which all voices are equal (including the instructor's), allow participants to confront stereotypes and assumptions held about crime, criminals and justice. Additionally, the routine exposure to the context of prison life; the creation of a safe space to explore critical sociological issues and problems in society; and the individual and group activities, assignments, and projects allow participants to move beyond the class and see themselves as agents of social change (see Pompa 2002 for a thorough discussion).

The Ohio State University –Newark began participating in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program in 2009, and classes are held at Southeastern Correctional Institution (SCI). SCI is an all-male institution that houses 1,642 minimum and medium security prisoners, and the incarcerated (“inside”) students who participate in this class are screened by prison staff and by the instructor of the course. The university (“outside”) students participate in the same screening process with the instructor. The screening process is designed to determine the appropriateness of the student's participation in the course and introduce a strict set of institutional and classroom rules including semi-anonymity (first names only) and a strict no-contact rule upon completion of the course. Program staff at SCI provide the initial screening of “inside” students based on interest in taking the course, disciplinary records (no more than three “major” rule infractions within the previous year), mental health issues (if on an active mental health case load, the person must be recommended by the case manager as “appropriate” for the class), and the presence of a H.S. diploma or GED.

The instructor conducts all face-to-face screening meetings with interested outside and inside students, looking for things like maturity, openness to others' viewpoints, ability to be part of a group process (neither dominating nor only listening), and an understanding of and willingness to stay within the parameters of the program. Furthermore, the instructor makes it clear to the inside students that they are not to talk about their convictions, and the outside students are not there to study those on the inside, as their convictions are not relevant to studying issues together.

Our particular course engages students in critical readings and discussions focused on the origins and development of the American criminal justice system, the historical and contemporary use of punishment and rehabilitation, the re-emergence of restorative justice, and the broader relationship between criminal and social justice. Critical to the pedagogy of Inside-Out, we hold all our weekly three-hour class meetings in a circle format, alternating seats of inside and outside students. Everyone's voice is equal, including the instructor's role of facilitator, ensuring that we all learn from one another rather than presuming any one person is an expert.

Through the course, participants write a minimum of six reflection papers that require the students observe, feel, reflect, analyze, and integrate the information in the readings with the prior week's discussion. In lieu of a final exam, a final paper is utilized as an opportunity for students to pull together the entire experience of the course, reflect on their own process (and that of the group), and further analyze the issues that were addressed. In the last few weeks of class, students design and participate in a final group project utilizing empirical research to guide specific criminal justice policy recommendations, and the final product is formally presented to all participants at the public closing ceremony. At a closing ceremony before an audience that includes administrators from the university, SCI, and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and

Correction (ODRC) representatives, each student is presented with a certificate acknowledging his/her participation in the Inside-Out Program, and the final group project is presented to all attendees.

Our paper reflects on specific Inside-Out classes and experiences that led to shifts in our perceptions including how the media shaped our preconceived notions about crime and criminals; our impressions from the first joint meeting, and what we found to be some of the most riveting topics discussed throughout the course. In writing this paper, we seek to promote the Inside-Out model of immersion-based higher education learning because we all have gained so much from taking this course.

Within this course, we became colleagues. We came together to write this paper as one collective voice with the exception of where we discuss our different views on the process of how the course changed our overall perceptions.

The Role of Mass Media in Shaping Public Perceptions of Crime

“Most Americans only come to ‘know’ about the people cycling in and out of prisons through fictional police dramas, music videos, gangsta rap, and ‘true’ accounts of ghetto experience on the evening news” (Alexander 2010, 178). As Alexander stated in this powerful quote, public perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system are primarily shaped by the mass media; all of our pre-conceived notions we had originated from the media. News and movies portrays all criminals as cold-hearted people who commit crime only to get ahead in life with no regrets for who they hurt in the process. The message from the media is that people who are locked stop normal life activity once they go behind the prison walls. It is because of the Inside-Out program that we now know otherwise.

The cultivation theory states that fear of crime is correlated to violent, dramatized television programming (Romer, Jamieson, and Aday 2003). The media tends to select impactful, one-sided stories about a crime that has been committed, which helps morph fear into misconceptions. Hearing these “terrifying stories” has led 40% of whites and 47% of blacks feeling unsafe walking alone in their neighborhood at night (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004). Most crimes are non-violent in nature, yet the media primarily focuses on violent crimes, further perpetuating citizens’ fear of crime.

Another misconception created by the media is who the most common offender is. This stems from the over-misrepresentation of African Americans. “For more than three decades, images of black men in handcuffs have been a regular staple of the evening news” (Alexander 2010, 177). The media introduces “black crime” to its viewers, alluding to the image of a young African American male who is constantly armed and is involved in many murders and rapes (Walker, Spohn, and DeLone 2004). “The image of the typical offender that emerges from the data...conflicts somewhat with the image in the minds of most Americans. If by the phrase ‘typical offender’ we mean the offender who shows up most frequently in arrest statistics, then for all crimes except murder and robbery, the typical offender is white, not African American” (50). What the media commonly introduces to its audience is a violent, aggressive offender of color and that these offenders are cause for fear. However, interestingly, most of the people that society incarcerates are not violent; rather they are of low socioeconomic status. The people who pose the biggest danger to society are well-off and are often “weeded out of the system” (Reiman and Leighton 2010).

It should be noted that the United States has the largest prison population in the world. According to the 2010 PEW Report, there are over 1.4 million people incarcerated, and African

Americans make up a disproportionate rate of the incarceration population. “Nearly one-third of black men in their twenties are under the supervision of the criminal justice system...and blacks are about eight times more likely to spend time behind bars than whites” (Roberts 2004, 1272). In examining these statistics, it is no surprise people stereotype African Americans as “dangerous offenders”. However, the disproportionate representation of people of color in prison is primarily the result of the War on Drugs (Alexander 2010). With the constant perpetuation of negative stereotypes by media outlets and racialized criminal justice policies, it is difficult to untangle the myths and facts of the incarcerated population, thereby creating a need to educate society on the truth about the criminal justice system. We strongly believe society should mandate the media to utilize a public education approach based on actual data and research on crime, offenders, victims, and the entire criminal justice system. We received our education through Inside-Out, and we collectively realized that the media is only after ratings, not the truth.

The First Class

Preconceived Notions (Inside Students)

Before we were incarcerated, we thought that prison was exactly like what we see in the movies: fighting, murders, and rapes. We even made jokes to our friends like “don’t drop the soap” and “you would get auctioned off in the joint.” Naturally, the jokes are not as funny when you end up incarcerated yourself. We perceived prison to be a place of violence, where fighting to prove one’s masculinity was an everyday occurrence, and a place where homosexual encounters happened constantly.

Before our first class, we believed that the outside students would be judgmental and critical toward the inside students. We assumed that the outside students would be judging the us as soon as they walked through the door by our tattoos and the color of our skin. We also assumed that the outside students would use our appearances and stereotypes the media portrays to society as a means of placing violent crime with our faces and body types. Those on the outside do not know what goes on behind the prison walls; all we have to rely on is the media. The media depicts incarcerated individuals as violent people, homosexuals, and con-artists, and prior to actually going into a prison, the outside student authors thought of prisoners as being crude harsh murderers with little intelligence who were going to be big, muscular, tattooed, scary men.

We also thought that the outside students were going to be snotty rich kids who lived sheltered lives, never personally experiencing harms or crime. We believed that the outside students would rank among those who never made mistakes or got in trouble. Being in a place that is considered a bad place for the “bad” people of society, the inside student authors felt like they are judged by anyone who is not incarcerated. We aspired as inside students to show the outside students that we are human beings and more specifically, intelligent people who made mistakes.

First Impressions and Ice Breakers

Prior to traveling to the prison for our first joint class, the outside students met for a separate meeting to discuss the Inside-Out class parameters as well as the prison rules. The outside students felt a little uneasy going into an all-male institution and having class with convicts; it was intense. Our professor went over the rules of the institution, the history and

overview of Inside-Out, and the use of labeling language (e.g., use of negative labels such as inmate). Also, the outside students were introduced to a prison staff member who took them through a condensed training on the rules of the institution. The liaison told us that inmates are very manipulative and cannot be trusted; lending an inside student a pencil could lead to more things, which made us even more nervous. Instructions were given to the outside students regarding appropriate contact with the inside students. We were only allowed to shake each other's hands and nothing more. What happens if we bump into one another on accident or rub shoulders with each other? It could all lead to "inmate manipulation." This condensed training with the staff member really made the outside students feel that everything depicted in the media is true: these people are manipulators who should not be trusted. Needless to say, the bus ride over to SCI felt like a long one thanks to the heightened anxiety levels.

The outside students were the first to arrive in the visiting room at SCI and carried on normal conversation, until the inside students arrived. There were a lot of female outside students in the class, which added to the inside students' anxiety levels. When the outside students think of a criminal, they think of a murderer, or someone who has raped or molested a child. This is obviously not the case because it is known that the majority of the prison population is locked up for drug and/or property offenses (Haney and Zimbardo 1998). Nonetheless, the outside students' envisioned someone that has no sympathy and no regrets.

When the inside students came in, both sides could feel the different layers of awkwardness, nervousness, anxiety, and adrenaline in the room, and like human nature, everyone was judging each other based upon appearances and attitude. Some of the inside students appeared to be very fierce and strong willed. They walked in with their heads held high as if to send the message that they were not afraid of anything let alone the outside students. The inside students began telling themselves "don't say anything stupid" and "no sudden movements, we don't want to scare anyone." Thinking and acting like that actually showed the inside students how isolated they are from society. First impressions speak loudly especially in a setting such as an Inside-Out class.

The collective objective was to get along, follow the class rules, and not scare or intimidate anyone. We were required to sit every other seat in a circle (each inside student seated between two outside students). Everyone was feeling the same awkwardness and nervousness as we began to introduce ourselves to one another. After a few minutes, we were all engaged in conversation. Through these conversations, everyone came across as polite, well-mannered, and genuinely nice. It was initially thought that the prison stigma or the way the media portrays prisoners in society was going to be a communication barrier between the two groups of students. When starting the icebreaker exercises, everyone started to feel more at ease. It seemed to make everyone feel a little more welcomed into the classroom. In our first icebreaker, we were rotating around the circle while answering the questions given to us, which gave us a chance to laugh and get comfortable around each other. This exercise gave us the opportunity to see everyone's personality. The exercises also released some of the tension and allowed us to communicate with one another better; a starting point of breaking down the barriers of "us" versus "them". Instead of looking at the inside students as if they were evil people because they are incarcerated, the outside students started to view the inside students as fellow classmates. Finally, we created rules of dialogue as a class, and it was great to see everyone participating. It was also exciting to see the outside students backing up the inside student's rule suggestion or vice versa. At the end of the day, everyone felt more at ease about the upcoming weeks of class.

We can definitely say that our first impressions of each other were way off base; our judgments were influenced by incorrect societal stereotypes.

Class Discussions

In this section, we focus on three class discussions: the alligator river story, the victimization survey, and reentry. These discussions and activities are specifically discussed because we believe they were the significant events that brought us closer together as a class, allowed us to understand one another, and significantly shifted our perceptions of crime and justice.

The Alligator River Story

The alligator river story consisted of five main characters: Abigail, Gregory, Sinbad, Ivan, and Slug.³ In short, Abigail was in love with Gregory and wanted to cross the river to see him. Ivan refused to help her, so Abigail turned to Sinbad to get her across the river. Sinbad's condition for his assistance was for her to have sex with him. Abigail eventually consented and was able to get across the river to see Gregory. When Abigail explained what happened to Gregory, he wanted nothing to do with Abigail. The angry Abigail went to Slug and told him what happened, and Slug proceeded to brutally beat Gregory.

In small groups, we ranked the characters based on fault. Each group viewed the situation differently. Some felt Abigail was to blame for everything, and others felt Slug was more to blame. It was interesting to hear each group explain who was more at fault and why. Three weeks in and we do an exercise that blows us away. It gave us better insight and understanding about how criminal cases are brought into existence and argued. We witnessed firsthand how diversified we were when determining who was wrong, who was right, and why. We almost felt like politicians for a moment; no one could agree with the exception to agree to disagree.

As a class, we came up with a few possible scenarios to help us determine who was really at fault in the story. Abigail could have been stalking Gregory, and Sinbad engaged in the crime of gross sexual imposition, propositioning a woman for sex. Abigail told Ivan what happened, and Ivan did not do anything, which may be criminal. Ivan, not wanting anything to do with the situation, might have made Abigail feel like prostitution is acceptable due to his lack of concern, but prostitution is illegal. Gregory did not want a woman who would do that and rejected Abigail. Abigail then turned to Slug with the whole tale. Who is Slug to her, a brother, friend, father, lover? Beating Gregory was wrong, but so is the fact that Abigail set up Gregory. She was the puppeteer the whole time. She knew who to manipulate to make an example and this happens very frequently. Women are often overlooked in these situations, yet if you take Abigail out of the story then there is no crime.

Another scenario that could have happened is that Abigail came to her brother, father, whoever Slug was to her; she cried on his shoulder. Slug wanted to hear both sides, so he sought Gregory out. Gregory, tired of hearing about Abigail, pulled a knife on Slug. Slug in turn beat him brutally in self-defense. He would be innocent in a lot of states. So as a class we examined

³ The Alligator River Exercise and Victimization Survey are part of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program's instructor training manual.

why it was that we “convicted” Slug before more facts were brought forward. There was a definite need for more information. The justice system is not supposed to convict a person based on vague statements; otherwise anyone could end up incarcerated for not getting along with someone else. The law is supposed to be innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Yet, 95% of crime cases are resolved through a plea agreement so neither side of the story is ever heard at a trial in our justice system (Kappeler and Potter 2005). If one class debated that much, it means there was reasonable doubt. Yet, in the end, we convicted Slug without having all the information.

After this particular class, we had many disagreements, and we had to negotiate a common course of action as a class. We all struggled because everyone saw different crimes or harms happening but seeing this exercise in action opened up our views; our perceptions had shifted. We began to better understand beyond a textbook description of what happens when people face the criminal justice system. Every case is different, and mistakes happen very easily. That day left us all with awareness that we should look more into the facts of the situation than what appears to be obvious.

Furthermore, we should look more at the needs of the victims and the offenders as well as the community, instead of our current model of focusing on punishing the offender. If we were to take restorative justice seriously, it would involve a different way of thinking about traditional notions such as deterrence, rehabilitation, incapacitation, and crime prevention (Braithwaite 2002). We need to implement a restorative justice system and stray away from the “get tough” and “three strikes you’re out” current model that we are following given it clearly is not an effective model of preventing crime and recidivism.

The Battle of Reentry

The readings and activities about reentry helped us understand what little our system does to prepare those who are released back out into the community. The discussions were difficult due to their sensitive nature, yet we learned so much because of them. We were able to understand just how tough it is for individuals to reenter society. Living behind prison walls is like living in another world. There is a class offered within the prison (SCI) to help with reentry, however, if the offender is not motivated to seek guidance on reentry, they are not going to attend the class. Most of the inside students said that the class is useless, and it does not prepare them for release. To us, that is a form of punishment. Prisoners need to learn to socialize and communicate back out in society. Prisoners are people that need help getting back on the right track, and it is society’s responsibility to ensure they reintegrate back into society successfully. A felony conviction basically means a loss of citizenship rights. We did not ever think about it that way until this class. We always thought a felony conviction meant checking a box on an employment or academic application to let people know that you made a mistake. We never really stopped to think about how much a person loses with a felony conviction. How can anyone expect a successful reentry when you are stripped of a lot of opportunities and rights?

We learned through our class that families, too, are punished alongside the convicted. Government housing and other forms of assistance are not available if someone in the family has a felony conviction. We cannot imagine how hard it must be to have no money, and then be rejected from government housing just because a family member made a mistake. As if prison is not enough of a punishment, the government takes away housing and food opportunities that the family needs. Families deserve a fair shot at government housing, and just because one person in the family has a felony does not mean the rest of the family should have to pay for it. This class

taught us the uglier side of incarceration, which is that the punishment of the offender does not end with a prison sentence but continues to be inflicted on them in the community and on their families. This reality was hard to swallow considering this topic is something that never crossed our minds until this class. “Local housing authorities should use their discretion to adopt fair and balanced admission and eviction policies that consider individual circumstances and reinforce the community’s goals of encouraging people to remain in recovery and facilitating the successful reintegration of returning offenders into the community” (Chesney-Lind and Mauer 2002, 49). Housing authorities need to be able to use their own discretion versus the government just shutting out a family because of one family member’s mistake.

When we were discussing the various barriers to reentry, one of our class discussions went south. One of the inside students felt as though he was being belittled by an outside student’s comment on prisoners’ reentering society, so he spoke out and the interaction caused some tension. An outside student compared our broken reentry system, metaphorically, to releasing five-year old children out to the world with no support or guidance. Most of the outside students felt that the comment was a legitimate one because she was discussing how it is a difficult transition returning to society when someone had been locked up for a long period of time. So, at first, it was difficult to realize how much of a negative impact that comment created, and how much it hurt our fellow inside student. Upon more thought and discussion, it became clear as to why the individual was offended. There is a reason for discussing labeling language on the first day of class and this was it. Unfortunately, we did not make the connection that the inside students may be sensitive to those types of comments because of the prison environment in which he resides.

The inside student who felt belittled by the outside student was highly offended. He held himself in high regard and was proud of the man he had become physically, educationally, and mentally. When placed in terms of a child, he felt he was being deemed helpless, as if he had no chance without guardianship. Life in prison is basically “if pushed, push back or keep getting pushed.” The best way to solve problems in prison is early confrontation. However, our class rule is to let someone finish his or her point without interruption, so this is what made his interruption more hostile.

We had a difficult time re-grouping after this class; it created a sense of “us” versus “them” once again. Rules are set in place to help avoid situations like this, but when rules are violated, it can cause some serious issues. The rules are in place to protect all students, and as we witnessed, it affects everyone when one is violated, not just one person. The inside and outside students had a separate meeting and discussion with the professor about the situation and how to move forward from it. Although we all knew what was expected, it was hard to push the feeling aside and move forward in the next class. We did not truly reunite again as a whole until the class discussion about victimization.

Victimization Survey

The victimization survey was something that really hit home with everyone and made us all realize that almost everyone has been subject to crime in one way or another. Not only have the outside students experienced crime victimization, but so have many of the students on the inside. The discussion of this survey brought us together as a class due to the amount of sensitive information shared and the amount of emotion that it brought up.

Victimization is a hard thing to address, particularly in a prison setting. Our class took an anonymous survey³ that asked, “Have you, or someone you love, been a victim of...” and

consisted of two columns: self and loved one. The crimes listed were fraud, theft, motor vehicle theft, household burglary, purse snatching/pocket picking, physical child abuse, assault, kidnapping, sexual child abuse, sexual assault, rape, manslaughter and murder.

To prepare for the class where the survey results were revealed, we were assigned some readings about victimization, some specifically regarding sexual abuse. For example, having heard the male prisoner perspective, we had the chance to read about how incarcerated females are treated when they are strip-searched. The inside students in our class were not thrilled that they have to go through that before and after every one of our joint class meetings. In one of our class assignments, we read about sexual abuse within prison walls, and it was not between prisoners. "Sexual abuse is surreptitiously incorporated into one of the most habitual aspects of women's imprisonment, the strip search" (Davis 2003, 81). This reading helped us all understand that victimization goes on everywhere, even inside prison walls, especially regarding the processing of prisoners. This reading helped to debunk pre-conceived notions regarding sexual abuse in prisons, as it is inaccurate in media depictions.

Another form of victimization is a child with incarcerated parents. "Shame, guilt, anger, and resentment are typical reactions of children to the loss of a parent through incarceration, and the lack of acknowledgement, support, and services may result in long-term consequences for them" (Chesney-Lind and Mauer 2002, 142). There is no replacement for parents, since they play an important role in a child's life, and that role is irreplaceable. The lack of support and acknowledgement may be the hardest part because some of these children are placed in foster care or with a relative that does not know how to properly handle the situation. Also, the child may have no way of going to visit the incarcerated parent because of the location of the prison.

When filling out the survey, we did not have any feeling or emotion, but when the results were revealed to the class, it was bone chilling. Everyone had the same look of shock, sorrow, and sadness in their eyes. So many of us had been affected by crime and were victims ourselves. Over 85 instances of personal victimization and over 177 crimes had been committed against a student's loved one. Eighteen loved ones were murdered, nine were raped, and two of our classmates were raped. Three of our classmates were victims of sexual assault and three were victims of sexual child abuse. It put faces to those statistics we were reading. Those numbers are our family, friends, neighbors, and their families. Everyone in the class was appalled by the results; it was heart wrenching to see how crime has affected so many folks inside and outside of the prison system. This exercise made us more empathetic towards others; and it united us after seeing the results. We all had the chance to comment and reflect on how we felt looking at those results, and most people shared the same response: shock and sadness.

Class Graduation

From our first discussion, through class conflicts, to the eye-opening victimization survey, it was a time to celebrate our accomplishments as a class. University officials, SCI officials, representatives for ODRC, and our professor all discussed their thoughts on this program and what it was accomplishing: change. After the different representatives spoke, it was time for one inside student and one outside student to give a speech, representing their classmates' experiences with the program. The inside and outside students chosen represented us perfectly; their speeches were absolutely unforgettable. The insight that was shared by the students' speeches opened our eyes to a whole new world; a new way to look at things that did not come up during the class.

After those speeches concluded, we were handed our certificates of completion, which we were all proud to receive because we worked hard for this moment. After the certificates were distributed, we enjoyed some snacks and mingled with one another. The inside students were able to eat food that they are usually not offered, making them feel of some value again in an environment that strips individuals of self-worth.

The outside student who made the child remark came to sit by the inside student who was offended by her comment. The outside student informed the inside student how much his speech moved her and that he would be missed, which astounded the inside student. The inside student said, "I thought you thought I was aggressive" to which the outside student retorted, "aggressive no, assertive yes." She told him that being assertive is a great quality and that he had really changed her perceptions. The inside student regretted feeling isolated by the outside student and realized at the end, the person he felt attacked by was in fact one who respected him. He felt that he had learned a valuable lesson and that he needed to work on his social skills; college lessons taught him life lessons. Specifically, he learned through the experience that it's not how one perceives what one's saying but rather how others perceive it.

The public ceremony helped us realize that we were not two separate groups, but rather one group trying to better understand each other's views and how we can educate others about what we learned from this class and from one another. Our class sought to reform our current prison system and to eradicate misconceptions about offenders and crime. We had all taken a big step as a class: our perceptions had changed for the better. Stereotypes became obsolete by the end of the course, and we started on our path as social change agents.

After the public closing, it was time to say goodbye to our fellow students in our last joint class. We were given a reflection question to help us prepare, but it was not something we could really prepare for. For many us, it was more than saying goodbye to the wonderful people we had met. For some, it was saying goodbye to that feeling of value, humanity, and freedom they were allowed to experience every week for a few hours. It one of the hardest goodbyes we have experienced because we had to leave something that we invested so much time and emotion towards. It is amazing how we became this weirdly unique family and how comfortable and close we were with one another. This was an experience that changed our views on the Criminal Justice system, and it changed us.

Final Thoughts on the Process of Change

Inside Student Perceptions

This class was a rare opportunity for a more hands on experience of higher education. Being able to get a first person view of prison life is actually different from what you read, hear, or see in the movies. Being able to ask what you want and discuss what you always wanted to discuss, can really change the perceptions of what we originally thought. For us, it was more about changing perceptions of what is thought about prisoners. We are all people who have loved, lost, and made mistakes. We are fathers, sons, brothers, and uncles to real people. Most importantly, we will be back in society trying to heal the scar prison has marked us with for life. This class was our chance to experience and change the myths and beliefs of prison life and explore the ethics of criminal law from the inside, out.

The group dynamics changed over the time of this course and more than once. We loved how the course made us forget that we were still incarcerated. It seemed for those moments in time that everyone was viewed as equal; we felt that we were a part of something more. We felt

inspired by the professor and the students, inside and outside. We felt self-worth. We saw how assertive and passionate the professor was. We need people like her in the world, especially in the system. That drive is an example we plan to follow in many areas of our lives. The course kept everyone hungry for more knowledge.

We experienced a few distractions from corrections officers (namely, not leaving our classroom which is an agreement the instructor has with SCI) that could have changed the dynamics but examples were shown that day; stand up for what you believe in and everything else will fall into place. We learned that when you think you're a person who looks at the whole picture, you realize it was only a small area your eyes were focused on. There is a lot more to see. We realized that we could be doing more. Holding more conversations to uplift and educate prisoners on better ways to live. When we get out, now it will be easier for us making that transition. Every single class worked in a stacking method to broaden our perceptions in ways we never knew to be possible.

Halfway through the class, we realized that the old lifestyle we used to love did not appeal to us anymore. We saw an outside participant show up even though her mom was in the hospital, which forever changed our lives. We saw that person put off negativity. We saw that no matter what goes on in life, negative or positive, you should not let it affect what you are doing. We cannot change or stop what happens or what is going to happen, but we can live everyday with focus. Also, do not let personal hurt and pain drag someone else down. True maturity was shown that day. No matter what happens in life, you keep moving forward. We learned by the metaphorical "child" statement made by an outside student how we came across to people. It was not what was said but how it was said. We learned that we needed to watch what we say because of how it is perceived by others. This one course showed us how to be more empathetic towards people.

The victimization survey provided us further proof that the fast life is never a way to come up and make a living. We do not care if life gets hard or if we have to live in a cardboard box, rather we question whether we would add to these numbers as a perpetrator again. This course and the people that shared their experiences touched our lives with a few real examples to follow inside and outside students. It was more than what the course offered through textbook material; it really made us think how we could have ever hurt anyone knowing what it felt like being hurt ourselves.

When we first heard of Inside-Out, we thought we were going to be a torch for the outside students. We assumed that it would be the incarcerated students on one side of the room and the outside students on the other. We thought the class would be debating one on one, which would eventually broaden the outside students' thoughts, letting them see that we are far more than numbers in a sociology class because we are men of loss, love, hope, and just human beings. If we only knew that coming in with these perceptions, it was actually us who were being judgmental. It was us who assumed, and it was us who convicted the hearts of people we had yet to meet.

We started this class to broaden people's perceptions and in turn we had our own perceptions broadened, and our lives changed for the better. The ripple effect works; with the passion that we felt instilled in us, we put ourselves out there in positive ways. We have gained patience and understanding towards those who do not know what it is like going through what we have been through.

Outside Students Perceptions

From the beginning to the end of the class, our view of prisoners and the criminal justice system changed significantly. What started off as uncomfortable and awkward turned into a family-like dynamic where everyone was comfortable with each other and everyone had something to bring to the table. In the beginning, we thought of all criminals as coldhearted, vicious people, but by the end, we recognized that many of them were caught up in the moment, and most people, inside and out, are very genuine and sincere. We were also under the assumption that many prisoners are not intelligent because of what the media depicts to us. They portray the worst-case scenario, which is what the public sees. We feel as if we have viewed things one-sidedly due to media depiction. When we discussed the criminal justice system as a class, it felt like we finally learned the other half of the story, like we could finally put the puzzle together now that we had all the pieces. We have newfound feelings for the inside students, especially those who want to get out and do big things with their life. We are inspired by those who have it pretty rough right now but are working to make their life better one step at a time. We learned the most from the inside students, and they helped to shape our views by helping us to realize the flaws in our system and how many changes are needed.

Conclusion

Inside-Out is a journey for all who partake in the adventure. It forces one to tap the brakes in his/her own life, inside and outside. When life slows from normalcy, one is able to see all the roads that one did not know were there. It is like taking the blinders off so one can see in more than one direction. With that new direction, one can see the horizon at a new angle, which broadens one's thinking and perceptions. This course consisted of more than just reading and learning about the criminal justice system. It forced us to take a step back and reflect on our own lives and what has happened to us. This paper is only a small glimpse of what the class was like for us, but we do believe it gives students' perspectives on the importance of community-based higher education and in particular, the Inside-Out Program.

This was a life changing course for those of us who partook in the class; however, we also believe there is room for improvement within the program. Better communication would allow for the inside students to get into contact with the professor outside of class meetings. For example, obtaining an email account or a phone line for the inside students, so they have a way to contact the professor and get any questions answered or resolve any issues. Furthermore, it would provide a means to relay messages between students, inside and out, since students work on joint projects. Enhanced communication would make it easier to coordinate and complete group projects.

Establishing more technology inside of the prison can help the students participate and get assignments completed faster. Computers would also allow inside students' access to the most widely used source of information, the internet. Allowing inside students to access computers and the internet would allow them to complete assignments more effectively and efficiently. The use of computers would allow inside students to type their work and save it, and that way they could go back and make corrections. The internet can allow incarcerated students to find resources and other material for assignments and group activities. Allowing inside students' computer and internet access would ease the workload burden currently placed on the outside students.

While we recognize the amazing growth of the Inside-Out program over the last fifteen years, we believe more universities and prisons should partner to utilize this pedagogy because it is beneficial for all involved. We also believe that current Inside-Out universities should offer more series-based courses in order to allow all students, but particularly incarcerated students, to continue down the educational path. This program instilled passion and hope for many of us. With these few adjustments and enhancements, we feel this program could go further. We hope to see it grow in the future.

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