GRADUATE STUDENTS PURSUE A UNIQUE TEACHING OPPORTUNITY AT THE MONROE CORRECTIONAL COMPLEX

Submitted by Catherine G Quinn on June 29, 2017 - 3:48pm

Political Science graduate students make essential contributions to undergraduate education as teaching assistants and instructors while earning their PhD degree. This year, three of the department's outstanding graduate student instructors devoted their teaching skills in a novel setting: The Washington State Correctional Complex in Monroe. Chelsea Moore, Emma Rodman, and Emily Christensen taught a college level Introduction to American Government course to a group of prisoners as part of the University Beyond Bars (UBB) program.

The three graduate students report having a very positive and rewarding experience with the class. Moore, who also directed the Political Science Writing Center this year, reported that the men in the class were some of the brightest students she has had the opportunity to teach: “The level of student commitment to and engagement with their education was extremely impressive.” Moore also noted that in addition to taking courses, many of her students are already actively engaged in bettering their communities—including one student who published a book that received very positive reviews. Working with prisoners in the class convinced Moore that “given the right opportunities, these men will be able to make many other positive contributions.”

What motivated three very busy graduate students to devote time and energy to teaching American Politics in a prison? The three students explained that it was their belief that education in prison is important, not just for helping prisoners but also for serving the interests of the rest of society. Rodman, for example, noted studies showing that education helps to prevent prisoners from retuning to prison after serving their sentences. (Nationwide, 7 out of 10 people released from prison return within 3 years.) One study by the nonprofit RAND Corporation showed that prisoners who participate in educational programs are 43% less likely to return to prison. That study also found that every dollar spent on education translates to $4 to $5 saved in re-incarceration. Rodman also explained: “While the United States has the world's highest rate of incarceration, funding for prisoner education has diminished over time.” In Washington State, the legislature has banned the use of public funds for prison post-secondary education programs since 1995. The UBB program developed in response to that ban. An entirely donor and volunteer based organization, UBB makes college and enrichment programs accessible to over 1,100 prisoners each semester. Programs include Associates and Bachelors pathway courses with transferable credits, as well as an educational speaker series.

Moore, Rodman, and Christensen all noted some funding challenges that make the commitment of the students even more impressive. UBB does not currently have the resources to support all of the students interested in taking courses. The courses have a $250 tuition fee, and six of the students in Moore, Rodman, and Christensen's course did not have support from families or friends to cover that cost. Those students had to self-pay by working in the prison. At just 43 cents an hour, it took nearly 600 hours to earn the $250 for tuition. “Some of them saved up for a year just to take a single course,” according to Moore. When Moore, Rodman, and Christensen found out about the funding difficulties, they expanded their volunteer commitment to run an online fundraiser for the self-paying students. They raised enough money to reimburse the six students and to pay for a future course. Moore notes, however, that this fundraising success was only a “temporary stopgap.” UBB continues to have unmet student demand due to lack of funding. Moore urges readers to consider making a donation for students on the UBB website.

Moore, Christensen, and Rodman continue to advance in the PhD program while also carrying teaching responsibilities in the UW undergraduate program. Yet they are not finished with prison teaching after just one course. Moore is teaching a Constitutional Law course at Monroe over the summer, and has even enlisted some of the department's faculty members to join some classes as guest instructors.