



LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

JODY LEWEN

One of the most stressful aspects of both living and working inside California prisons is dealing with the terrifying complexity of housing policy and practice. Being incarcerated means that at any time, you may be housed on a yard, or in a cell, with someone who might decide to hurt or kill you. Working in a prison means living with the knowledge that a single bad decision about housing could get someone hurt or killed.

For decades, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

has housed separately individuals or groups of people it considered likely to harm each other. They have also maintained segregated housing units (called “Sensitive Needs,” or “SNY Yards”) for especially vulnerable people. This includes people who have dropped out of gangs, those convicted of sex offenses, former law enforcement, LGBT people, and people with serious mental health or developmental challenges.

ly half the California prison system. New gangs have formed on those yards, and the steady fracturing of the population into often mutually hostile segments has made it increasingly difficult either to avert violence through segregation, or to provide broad access to scarce education and mental health programs.

As a result, the Department recently announced a massive overhaul of its housing policies: going forward, SNY yards will be eliminated, and all prisons will become either “programming” or “non-programming” institutions. Those prisoners who are willing to repudiate violence, “give up gang politics,” and participate in programming will be separated from those who are not.

The desire to contain the influence of gangs is not hard to understand: every year, approximately thirty people are killed in California prisons; many more are severely injured. A great deal of that violence arises from inter-gang conflict or the enforcement of gang cultural norms. Much of it is directed by gang leadership and carried out by “soldiers,” who comply under threat of violence against themselves.

One of the most complex dimensions of many gangs is their paramilitary focus on unity, obedience and purity. Many identify specific categories of people as “garbage,” and require members to seize any opportunity to attack them, or else risk being hurt or killed themselves. Because gangs extend across prisons, and often into the outside world, a person who “fails” to commit such violence risks retaliation not just in the moment, at the given prison, but later on at another prison, or even after they are released.

People considered obligatory targets of violence commonly include those who’ve committed sex crimes (especially against children), members of rival gangs, and people who have dropped out of the gang. That violence is imagined as “cleaning house” — purging those who might pose a threat, or violate cultural norms — or as revenge. What to outsiders looks like sheer depravity is understood to preserve order, and protect the group.

Every gang-affiliated person has a unique story. Some were already affiliated when they got to prison; others joined after they arrived. Some were enthusiastic; for others it was a matter of survival, or some combination. Many are financially dependent on their gang, because they support themselves and even their families through the massive underground economy in drugs, cell phones and other contraband.

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Over the years, the SNY population has grown; today it comprises roughly

half the California prison system.

The Prison University Project's Technical Assistance Program aims to promote the proliferation of high quality in-prison education programs by developing a skilled, knowledgeable and professional community of in-prison higher education practitioners through the provision of resources, training and individualized support.

March's Statewide Training Conference on Prison Higher Education

March 18–20, the Prison University Project hosted a statewide training conference for approximately 100 practitioners of in-prison higher education, and others interested in learning more about the field. Attendees came from across California, as well as ten different states.

Session topics included faculty and staff recruitment, training and supervision; academic and administrative planning; institutional rules, regulations and culture; college preparatory programs; prison-related logistics and planning; and supporting students post-release.

“The training solidified my belief that the motivation behind a program should include heart, enthusiasm, and commitment to providing quality curriculum; without these elements, we are missing what really matters — the human stories behind incarceration.”

— TORY EAGLES, PELICAN BAY PRISON PROGRAM FACILITATOR

THE WISDOM OF INVESTING IN SOMETHING SO PROVEN TO HEAL

CARLOS FLORES, '15

As a former student, I went into the training with a skeptic's eyes, looking for the people trying to turn a buck off the funds being allocated for colleges, but by the second day I felt I was around men and women who really believed in the transformative power of education. I was a point of interest for many of these people, as they wanted to hear about my prison experience and college days, but the whole time I was observing their behavior, tone, motives and most importantly, dissecting what they believed.

I came to realize two key things: 1) how blessed I was to partake in the Prison University Project, and 2) that others throughout the state and nation have serious obstacles to overcome in order to get their programs up and running. The men who have been able to be part of the Prison University Project have luxuries due to private funding that others will not have because of the

restrictions associated with state and federal money. Some programs only admit what they consider the most worthy students, as opposed to the Prison University Project's come as you are approach.

Some of the people had been ridiculed for wanting to educate incarcerated men and women, some had been shunned by their communities or prison staff. Other limitations are more than likely due to most other prisons being located in rural, conservative or impoverished areas.

Some of the concerns raised by people against educating us men and women have valid points, but the best argument against these points are the men and women transformed through education. Educating and empowering people is a tried and true method of rehabilitation. I can think of no research that says otherwise, and from my own personal experience I've seen others completely change their outlook on life after attending college.



Behind a prison education community beyond the basics, it's easy to lose sight of liberation."

I feel so confident that these brave people endeavoring to bring prisoners education stand on solid ground, and will be able to justify their work. There will be failures and struggles, but people will realize that the old mind frame of punishment without a legitimate means of rehabilitation only makes our society sicker. These people know that the gift of educating the prisoner does not end with the person being educated, but it goes on through him or her back to his or her community and family. It's not fair that many children and adults in our society struggle to get an adequate education and that the prisoner should be rewarded, but the alternative is worse and one has to see the wisdom of investing in something so proven to heal.

Affiliation is often determined by which gang was prevalent in one's county, city, neighborhood, school, or family. While the general public imagines gangs as purely anti-social and destructive, for some they are an honorable, tradition-bound, fiercely protective family that provides the only sense of camaraderie, identity, and safety they have ever known.

Because formally separating from a gang is usually not an option, people are more likely to gradually drift away than make any sudden overt break. Yet no matter how distant the connection becomes, in times of crisis anyone who has ever been affiliated must be prepared to fight.

Imagine, then, the impact of the Department's announcement of its plan to integrate SNY prisoners onto general population yards: rival gangs will suddenly be mixed; highly vulnerable people will be housed with people sworn to kill them; "lapsed" gang members will now have to either harm someone, or be harmed. Most people — both prisoners and staff — have reacted with disbelief; many are certain that the true goal is to incite violence throughout the system.

Shortly after it was announced that this plan would proceed imminently at San Quentin, some College Program students with at least historic gang affiliations began to let us know that they planned to seek transfer to other prisons. Others indicated that they had serious concerns about their safety, but would stay anyway, in order to remain in school.

Well before all of this began, a number of CDCR policy changes over the last few years had already altered the social landscape at San Quentin. One allowed young people

(known as YOPs, for Youthful Offender Program) who had been convicted of serious offenses to be sent directly to medium security institutions like San Quentin, rather than starting at the higher security ones. The goal was to allow them to more quickly access programs, and to avoid the negative influences and extreme violence of the higher security-level institutions.

Another change allowed people who had previously been validated as gang members and held, sometimes for decades, in solitary confinement, to be moved to lower security level institutions, including San Quentin. Many of those men (known as SHU, or Security Housing Unit, "kick-outs") had spent much of their lives in maximum security prisons. Like some of the YOPs, many were strongly gang-identified.

Many people were initially concerned that all of these new arrivals would negatively impact the unique culture of San Quentin. Yet it gradually became clear that, in spite of the enormous culture shock, many were sincerely interested in participating in programs. As a result, the community began to embrace them — often providing mentorship, and helping them to acclimate to the radically new environment, where people of different ethnicities interact much more freely, and gang culture plays a much less dominant role than at most other prisons.

Many of those individuals had been doing extraordinary work, opening their minds, in order to seize these new opportunities. Their presence over the last few years also brought new intellectual, social and cultural diversity to the College Program, and challenged us to learn and grow in critical ways.

But shortly after some SNY prisoners were brought into San Quentin, one of them was attacked, and the institution then received "intel" that a certain gang

had issued orders to harm them. Staff began to interview, place in solitary confinement, and/or quickly transfer out of San Quentin anyone they believed was either influential in, or susceptible to pressure from, that gang.

First it was a few, primarily Latino prisoners, affiliated (however loosely) with that one gang; eventually it was a vast segment of the Latino popula-

tion of San Quentin, including some people who had never even been affiliated. While clearly an attempt to avert violence by removing people who might possibly be subject to coercion, these mass transfers were widely experienced as collective punishment, and as systematic discrimination.

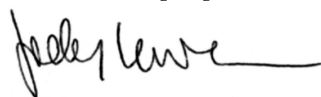
But even if it were possible to identify with precision those individuals who might either want to commit violence or be coerced into doing so, is it either ethical or rational to deny all of those individuals access to programs? Does the Department's mandate to "rehabilitate" prisoners not extend to people with histories of gang involvement? What are the public safety implications of excluding these communities from programs? What responsibility does the Department have towards prisoners who want to program but will now face enormous risks doing so? What responsibility does the Department bear for the risk that its new policy creates for those individuals formerly classified as SNY, or for those who might be

harmful for not harming them? Is it appropriate to require people to risk their lives in order to go to school?

The reality is that gang culture dominates virtually every aspect of life inside the California prison system, and that hold will loosen only when those inside are provided with the levels of physical protection, human dignity and economic opportunity that the gangs alone currently

provide. In the meantime, what gang-involved people need is not to be isolated, starved of opportunity and issued ultimatums; they need to be respected, supported and engaged, both socially and intellectually. In other words, like all human beings, they need access to quality education.

The scope of the challenges the Department now faces nearly defies the imagination, and the responsibility cannot be theirs alone. We must all work to further reduce the overall prison population, and to increase public and private support for in-prison programs. At the same time, gang-involved people throughout the system — above all, decision-makers — should seriously consider what will be lost for the communities they care so deeply about if it becomes impossible for them to program, and they should do everything in their power to ensure that this does not happen. The potential for both good and for harm is great, and the wellbeing of thousands of people is at stake.



SPRING SEMESTER

Course Offerings

- English 98: Strategies for College Reading
- English 99A: Developmental English I (two sections)
- English 99B: Developmental English II (two sections)
- Math 50A: Developmental Math I
- Math 50B: Developmental Math II
- Math 99: Elementary Algebra (two sections)
- Math 115: Intermediate Algebra
- English 101A: Reading and Composition
- English 101B: Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing
- English 204: Interdisciplinary Reading, Writing and Research
- Business 221: Macroeconomics
- Politics 241: American Government
- Psychology 211: Abnormal Psychology
- English 249: American Literature: Romanticism to the 20th Century
- Communications 201: Journalism
- History 101: US History I
- Spanish 101: Elementary Spanish I

Other Activities Happening This Spring

- Math Circle: an alternative non-credit math enrichment program
- German Language Group: a weekly non-credit group that explores the basics of German language
- Science Discussion Group: a weekly non-credit group that studies a wide variety of topics in current science



ETHICS BOWL MATCH

San Quentin hosts its First Ethics Bowl Match

On February 13, the UC Santa Cruz Ethics Bowl team came to San Quentin to compete against the Prison University Project student team, which formed in September and met weekly to discuss philosophical and applied ethics together with their coaches, volunteers Kathy Richards and Kyle Robertson. Ethics Bowl is a debate format that prioritizes conversation and reflection on questions of applied ethics. Participants are judged on their ability to demonstrate their understanding of the ethical issues involved in a particular case, to address concerns that might be raised by the other side or by judges, and to engage civilly with the competing team.

This debate covered the ethics of psychiatric diagnosis of public figures, national boycott campaigns, the Goldwater Rule, collateral damage and unintended consequences, and utilitarian benefit calculations. The Prison University Project team won the debate and all participants agreed that they were looking forward to the next match.

Reflections from Ethics Bowl

FOUNDER ROBERT LADENSON

The week before Thanksgiving this past year I received an email message from Kyle Robertson, of UC Santa Cruz, inviting me to be a judge in an upcoming Ethics Bowl match at San Quentin State Prison. Immediately I realized this was something I wanted to do. The match, from my standpoint, was a huge success. The two teams each made articulate, well-prepared presentations, and did excellent jobs of listening and responding to both the other team's commentary and the judge's questions. San Quentin edged the UC Santa Cruz team in a close match.

Everyone with whom I conversed, including the team members and also the sizeable audience of other inmates and supporters, was warmly enthusiastic. Most important, and reinforcing to me, however, was that all of the intelligently enthusiastic comments expressed a clear understanding of the Ethics Bowl's basic educational objective — to help students develop attitudes and abilities needed to address ethical issues that are important, complex, controversial, highly viewpoint dependent, and difficult to resolve.

The Ethics Bowl seeks to do this by providing a distinctive learning experience that hopes to promote open-mindedness, willingness and readiness to engage in meaningful conversation, careful analysis, and deliberative thoughtfulness. I believe the Ethics Bowl can, and does, succeed in developing such attitudes and abilities, and I believe as well that according a high value to this success is neither culture bound nor elitist. To the contrary, I would say, these skills are intrinsic to moral judgment for any human being.

I'm deeply grateful for having been invited to take part as a judge in the Prison University Project San Quentin – UC Santa Cruz Ethics Bowl match.

Robert Ladenson is an emeritus faculty associate at the Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions and an emeritus professor of philosophy at the Illinois Institute of Technology. He is also the creator, developer, and organizer of the Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl.



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“Education is the gateway to possibilities — confidence, self-worth, purpose, forgiveness, redemption, healing — and freedom to navigate the world with knowledge” – MICHAEL “YOSHI” NELSON, STUDENT

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WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

The mission of the Prison University Project is to provide excellent higher education to people incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison, to support increased access to higher education for incarcerated people, and to stimulate meaningful public dialogue about higher education access and criminal justice in California and across the United States. We provide approximately 20 courses each semester leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses, to approximately 350 students. All instructors work as volunteers; most are faculty or graduate students from local colleges and universities. We rely entirely on donations from individuals and foundations. The program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland, CA.

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YOU CAN HELP

We've accomplished so much through the generosity of our donors. Your contribution helps us increase our capacity at San Quentin, build a national model for prison higher education, train and support the next generation of prison higher education providers, and amplify the voices of incarcerated people across the nation.

To contribute, please go to prisonuniversityproject.org/donate.



PHOTOS

Masthead: Son Nguyen, friend, Kevin Neang, Thanh Tran at the Ethics Bowl (Eddie Herena)

Page 2: Phil Melendez, graduate, at the statewide training conference (Andrew Landini)

Page 3: Roy Brown in Modern American Literature (Eddie Herena)

UC Santa Cruz Ethics Bowl team competes against the Prison University Project team (Eddie Herena)

Photo above: Juan Espinosa and Tony Bernadakis prepare for class (Eddie Herena)