

The Prison University Project at San Quentin State Prison dates back to 1994. That year, Congress passed a law that barred incarcerated men and women from receiving Pell Grants. Two years later, the Project's first courses were taught, largely through the initiative of a professor at UC Davis. Today, the Project offers two levels of courses to inmates who are eager to learn and who have excellent disciplinary records.

The first tier is the College Prep Program, which enrolls 100 men in each of the year's three semesters. Courses at this level are designed to help students work toward their California High School Equivalency Certificate. Courses are in English and Math, and most students spend one to two years completing the requirements.

The second tier is the San Quentin College Program that leads to an Associate of Arts degree. Students must complete 60 semester units (that's 20 classes) in the humanities, social sciences, math, and science. Several elective courses are also required so that students can fulfill the transfer eligibility requirements to the UC and Cal State campuses. And yes, some alumni of the College Program are now enrolled at these schools. About 100 men have so far completed their A.A. degree at San Quentin; several more will parole before completing the required courses, and they will continue their studies on the outside.

All teachers and tutors in the Project are volunteers, and the program is funded entirely by donations from foundations and individuals. Current institutional donors include the Annenberg Foundation, the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, the Ford Foundation, and the Philanthropic Ventures Foundation. The vagaries of our state budget do not affect the Project's performance.

In the summers of 2011 and 2012, I volunteered as a study hall tutor on Friday evenings from 6:00 to 8:15. Whenever our group—teachers and tutors—crossed the prison yard and headed toward the Education Unit around 5:45, we would see men already lined up. Most greeted us as we passed, and for me it became a weekly ritual. A high point too.

With few exceptions, the same 20 or 25 men attended study hall every Friday. Many told me they were there most other nights of the week too.

The men I worked with one on one during study hall readily asked for help: interpreting a literary work, organizing an expository essay, or improving word choice and grammar in a draft. Each week I was impressed by their determination and perseverance. They could have spent Friday evenings playing games, hanging out, or watching TV; instead, they came to learn.

Despite being within high walls topped with barbed wire, I always felt completely safe; only rarely would prison officers come into the study hall or the adjacent classrooms. We were a focused, serene community.

Here's the flip side:

Each incarcerated person in California costs the state about \$60,000 per year. The vast majority of prisoners, unfortunately, will stay in prison for years to come, even with the imminent early release of some who are serving time for non-violent, mostly drug-related crimes. Sadly, most of those housed by the California Department of Corrections will leave prison with no appreciable improvement in their education or employability. California has the second highest rate of recidivism in the country, according to the Pew Research Center. Almost 58% of the state's offenders are sent back to prison within three years of their release.

The Prison University Project offers a chance for both educational growth and personal regeneration. Whether the inmates I knew had a definite parole date or were many years from one, they embodied the belief that the Project gave them enhanced self-worth and a shot at a brighter future.

The Project's success can be measured by an almost zero recidivism rate among alumni and by the lives they have led since reentering society. The April newsletter features some testimonials by recent alumni of the programs. Here is one man's perspective:

"Education is the gateway to possibilities. [. . .] The possibility of forgiveness, redemption, and healing. [. . .] I am an educated man. I committed my crime at the age of 15, uneducated, insecure, and full of pain, rage, and grief. Today I am a college graduate. [. . .] I would much rather return to your communities as the man I am today than [as] the boy who made your streets unsafe."

I placed several copies of this newsletter near the entrance to Whitaker Hall. Please take one.

A poem I wrote after one visit to San Quentin expresses a dominant impression of my experience. At first, I didn't think to give the poem a title—after all, I rarely write poems—but I remembered a sermon in which Yael said that in early Celtic Christianity, wild geese represented the Holy Spirit. So I called the poem "Wild Geese at San Quentin."

Wild Geese* at San Quentin

A breezy, sunny summer evening—□

men toss baseballs, jog, play chess;□

others line up at the education unit,□

hold books, notepads, pens,□

swap greetings with volunteer teachers and tutors.

As always, Canada geese strut on the sparse grass of the ballpark.

In deep center field, a man sits cross legged, □

his right arm outstretched, hand palm up. □

A goose, one of many, pecks from his hand, □

swallows, pecks again.

Here, all come to be fed.

Last summer, I didn't return as a tutor. The distance from home to San Quentin and back, which makes for a seven-hour commitment in all, proved too much to sustain. But I do miss my Friday evenings there.

Now, I support the Project through donations and advocacy. I also hope to attend the 2014 graduation at San Quentin in June. The 2011 ceremonies made a lasting impression on me, especially seeing the pride on the faces of the graduates and of their family members who came for the occasion. The two valedictory speeches—one by a GED graduate, the other by a recipient of an A.A. degree—were the most moving I have ever heard. Neither featured the clichés and bromides that one inevitably hears in high-school and even university addresses. If you would like to watch a recording of the 2011 College Program valedictory speech, here is the URL:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QL1MHOR0FS4>

It's fitting that the Bible have the last word. The Project's executive director, Jody Lewen—who calls herself a non-religious Jew—likes to quote Hebrews chapter 13, verse 3: "Remember those in chains as if they were bound to you."

Thank you.