

March 30, 2009

Dear Professor Ager and members of the Sociology Department,

As some of you may know, last semester the five of us gathered at William James Hall at 6:55 a.m. every Thursday morning to travel to MCI Norfolk with Professors Bruce Western and Kaia Stern. When we arrived at Norfolk shortly after sunrise on our first morning, we immediately realized the magnitude and reality of the prison experience, as we moved through the numerous security measures in place at the prison. Having prepared for this experience as best we could, we were quite unsure what to expect after a brief orientation to the school and introductions with our fellow students as we began the first session.

Yet, after those first three hours, we got back in the car and could not stop talking about how incredible that brief meeting had been. The discussion had been inspiring, with everyone contributing and sharing their experiences. In fact, everyone wanted to keep talking, even after our allotted time had finished. Our first meeting was a true indication of what our semester would be like. We realized how important this course was to the men in the prison. Our classmates did not take their opportunity for education for granted, and this was inspiring for all of us. In turn, we felt more accountable, and each of us worked hard to engage with the reading, which, along with the diverse array of experiences that we shared, made for incredibly valuable discussion. Our experience was also magnified because of the equalizing partnership between ourselves and the other students; we were not there to tutor or mentor them, but to participate alongside them in an effort to understand social problems and to work together in groups on various community proposals for change, which we presented at the end of the semester. Indeed, over the course of these weeks we began to see our time in the prison as a reprieve from the rest of the world; disconnected from the internet, cell phones, Harvard, and homework, we were free in this classroom to share and discuss dynamic ideas about social problems and social change with individuals who continued to amaze and inspire us with their knowledge, personalities, and compassion.

More importantly, however, the unpleasant stereotypes or conceptions that people often have about prison were quite rapidly shed as we began to try to understand what life is like for those inside the constrictive walls of a penitentiary. Reading about prison and the rise in mass incarceration cannot compare to the actual experience of entering a prison; our efforts to try to explain this unique civilian experience to our peers, classmates, and family were met with interest, yet it was clear that what we were describing was a singular experience that only seven of us could truly understand.

This experience, though important, cannot lapse into a tale of the one semester where Harvard was able to offer this class; it needs to become a staple of the Sociology curriculum, in some shape or form. Such an opportunity is necessary to engage in an informed discussion about mass incarceration and its adverse effects not only on the urban poor, but also on all segments of society. We think that most would acknowledge the economic burden that mass incarceration places on the general public. However, the problems are more firmly rooted. Mass incarceration is not a way to manage crime, but a way to manage society. Consider the influx of gated communities and the transition of public schools as places of education to places of surveillance

and discipline. The work of sociology, as you know, is about real people and real experiences; the more opportunities there are to allow students to grapple with – and grow from – these situations firsthand, the better.

Our semester would not have been as fulfilling and transformative without the dedication of Professors Western and Stern. Their dedication to the course and to all of the students was unprecedented: organizing the course, guiding our individual projects at the end of the semester, providing detailed feedback on our work, and their unwavering support of every individual student are just a few examples of their commitment to us and to the class as a whole. Over the course of the semester, they constantly invited us to events outside of class that related to the criminal justice system, further enriching our education. They treated us as equals and as valuable students.

This class was without a doubt the most transformative, eye-opening course any of us has ever taken at Harvard. You can learn a lot from reading informative articles and books, but you will never truly understand the materials you are studying unless you engage with them firsthand. We strongly hope you will continue to offer this Junior Tutorial again and perhaps even expand on the idea to be able to offer it to more students. We would be more than happy to meet with any members of the Sociology Department to discuss these sentiments in person, and we hope you continue to offer this wonderful, enriching course again next fall.

With gratitude,

Robert Granados  
Jessica Luna  
Dwight Pope  
Danielle Schnur  
Cathy Sirois