Description:

The United States currently incarcerates about 2.4 million men, women and children. The number of incarcerated does not take into account how many people’s lives are affected by our extensive system of punishment, including those on parole or probation; children of incarcerated parents; and communities that support prison systems. Furthermore, racial disparities in arrests, sentencing, and prison time call into question our guarantees of equal justice and fundamental fairness. Inside the prison walls, many prisoners are subject to a system of control that prioritizes punishment over rehabilitation. This course explores these elements of the penal system with a group of prisoners at the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP), a maximum security male prison, and asks, what can be done to reform and improve the system? Nine of our classes will be held at OSP; students and prisoners will work together on reform ideas, culminating in a research project that will go to a lawmaker, advocacy group or corrections organization for consideration. (Note: Students must have a government-issued identification, submit to and pass a criminal background check, and follow the rules of dress and conduct established by the Oregon Department of Corrections.)

Objectives:

Students will be expected to: 1) Identify the causes and consequences of mass incarceration for poor communities; 2) Analyze the relationships between crime prevention, rehabilitation, and recidivism; 3) investigate and evaluate reform strategies for the criminal justice and corrections systems.

Required Texts:


Grade Distribution:

10% Class participation
20% Class reflections (6)
20% Reading responses, approximately 750 words (3)
30% Research Project, approximately 10-15 pages. (The research projects will identify an audience (e.g. The Department of Corrections; the Equal Justice Institute or another non-profit; a lawmaker or other advocacy group) and present a solution for a current problem in the criminal justice system.
20% Final essay exam on the readings
Schedule of Classes:

Jan 18 WU-only class: Introduction

Meet with students to cover logistics, requirements, idea of mass incarceration and variation across states, social science and the individual, and introduction to OSP.

Jan 25 OSP: What is prison? Should we have prisons at all?
Angela Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete? (Seven Stories Press, 2003.) Chapter 1: Prison Reform or Prison Abolition? and Chapter 6: Abolitionist Alternatives. [on WISE]


Class reflection due by Friday, January 29th by 10am to Smullin 328.

Feb 1 WU: An individual, not a statistic.
Betts, A Question of Freedom (in its entirety).
Why doesn’t Betts want his to be a redemption story? Is he successful?

Response to reading due by Friday, February 5th by 10am on WISE under assignments.

Feb 8 OSP Policing and Prosecution: Why is the racial disparity in prison so great?


Gottschalk, Chapters 6 & 7, “Is Mass Incarceration the ‘New Jim Crow’” and “What’s Race Got to Do with it?”

Class reflection due by Friday, February 12th, by 10am on WISE under Assignments.

Feb 15 WU Political Economy of Prisons: Why did we see such a crazy boom in prisons during an anti-government, anti-tax period? Who is making money from prisons?

Response to Reading due by Friday, February 19th by 10am on WISE under Assignments.
Feb 22 OSP Crime—why does it exist?


Piper Kerman, Orange is the New Black (Spiegel and Grau 2011) Chapter 1: “Are you Gonna Go My Way?” [on WISE]

Class reflection due Friday, February 26th at 10am on WISE under Assignments.

Feb 29 WU—Impact on community

Response to Reading due by Friday, March 4th by 10am on WISE under Assignments.

March 7 OSP: Addressing Victim Needs. Can a more just system for offenders also better account for victim needs?


Class reflection due Friday, March 11th at 10am on WISE under Assignments.

March 14 OSP: Reforms: Where are the opportunities to create change?
Gottschalk, Chapter 12: Bring It On


Reform project stage one—brainstorming ideas in your research groups.

Class reflection due Friday, March 18th at 10am on WISE under Assignments.


March 28 OSP—prison tour
Lin, Chapters 3-5 + Conclusion

Class reflection due Friday, April 1st at 10am on WISE under Assignments.
April 4. WU: Exploring Reform Ideas

Bring annotated bibliography of 5 sources related to your reform area.

April 11 OSP: Research groups--Each person will have contributed one article for the research group to read and discuss.

Workshop on the research assignment itself.

April 18 OSP: Feedback on drafts. Research teams are responsible for dividing responsibilities for drafting.

April 25 WU: Research Workshop

May 2 OSP: Sharing Reform Proposals

Final Exam: Monday, May 9th from 7-10pm