



TAKE A FREE COLLEGE COURSE AND GET 3 CREDITS!
Inside Out Prison Exchange: Exploring Issues of Social Justice
Tuesday, 5:30-8:00 PM
Date: September 8 – December 15, 2020

My name is Dr. Patrick McGrain (my students call me Doc), and I am a Criminal Justice professor at Gwynedd Mercy University. This fall, I am teaching a course that I think you would really be interested in. The course is entitled, “Exploring Issues of Social Justice,” and focuses on the variables that lead to inequality in our society. We will look at things such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, but also things like reentry, rehabilitation and choosing restorative justice over than imprisonment. The goal of the course is to get an understanding of the things we do NOT think about; to share ideas from our experiences, to help each other learn about life in someone else’s shoes and understand what social justice means to them.

As you can see in the title, the class is called “Inside Out Prison Exchange.” The class was built on the idea that college students (Outside students) and incarcerated individuals (Inside students) could come together and learn from each other in a classroom setting. It is a true college course that allows people from different backgrounds to come together to discuss social justice and how we can fix some of the inequalities that we currently see in society.

The classes are held over the course of a 15-week semester, and the idea of the class is that we discuss and work on projects related to issues of crime and justice — as equals. Everyone in the class has an equal voice and an equal stake in the learning process. It is a shared learning experience that is actually very powerful. In fact, both inside and outside students tell us all the time how life-changing an experience the class is for them. In fact, here is a testimonial from one of the Inside students at the Federal Detention Center:

“During our Inside-Out class, I learned that not everyone is as judgmental as I thought. Inside-Out is a class I will talk about when I leave the FDC. This is a class I think EVERY student should take, because the learn that inmates are just regular human beings, too. These students coming here and treating me like I am normal helped my time go by and helped me realize that I am not all that different from them. I learned there is no way to change sentencing guidelines but that’s OK because re-entry and other things can change. Meeting these great kids has made me want to better myself. It made me sit back and think. I want to go to college now. I want and need school in my life.”

Testimony from the outside students shows they were equally thrilled with the course:

“Regardless of any mistakes we make, we’re all human. No one deserves judgment, no one deserves to feel like an outcast. We all deserve equal opportunities and we shouldn’t be so quick to make assumptions. Mistakes don’t define who we are or the path that our lives take. I feel like I’ve grown as a person throughout this class. I came into this class very naïve about people in general. This class pushed me to not be judgmental. My outlook on the prison system has changed and this class has made me want to fight harder, especially for all of the men and women that have had to deal with unfairness and who have had to be away from their families for the most ridiculous reasons. This class wasn’t about learning content, it was about real-life experiences.”

So, here is the current situation. We are not able to get into prisons right now, due to the pandemic, so I am holding my Inside-Out class on the outside. I thought it would be interesting to have students who had been released, giving the class a different perspective on social justice. Living inside is one thing but facing the inequalities and difficulties upon re-entry is a whole new perspective. You truly have an opportunity to both share knowledge and receive knowledge, exchanging ideas among equals.

The class will meet weekly, every Tuesday evening, from 5:30pm to 8:00pm, via ZOOM. The first meeting will be held on **Tuesday, September 8, from 5:30-8:00pm**, and will only include those who were previously incarcerated. [I will be meeting at a different time with the campus-based students during this first week.]

The reason for using ZOOM for the course is that we are trying to decrease the spread of the virus by shortening the amount of time on campus. I have taught classes this way in the past and it works very well. Everyone gets to be in a virtual classroom and participate equally, which is very important.

Coursework:

What is involved in the class is dialogue about issues of crime and justice, readings (books and articles), papers to write, and group projects. If you take the course and successfully complete the assignments, you will earn 3 college credits, transferable to any college or University in the country.

John Pace will be your main point of contact prior to the class, though if you have any questions for me, I can be reached at mcgrain.p@gmercyu.edu. Please feel free to drop me an email if you have any questions. I’m looking forward to seeing you this fall!

