

EDUCATING ON THE INSIDE

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE INMATE SCHOLARS PROGRAM

November 2020

ISP FAST FACTS

Classes: This spring we are increasing our course offering to 134!

Faculty: The Inmate Scholars Program has added 15 new professors!



Facilities: We offer instruction in 5 prisons on 12 yards

WELCOME!

This year has been challenging for all, and COVID-19 has certainly affected the Inmate Scholars Program and the way that we usually operate. We have shifted to a correspondence-based model of instruction for the full academic year.

Although it comes with challenges, and we all miss interacting with our incredible students, we know that this model allows for them to continue with their studies and get closer to reaching their ultimate goals.

Keep reading to learn of some of the ways we've been operating this year.

EXPANSION THIS SPRING

This spring, via the correspondence method, the Inmate Scholars Program is growing. We have expanded offerings in Art, Business, History and Sociology. For the first time our scholars are taking classes such as Survey of Art – Latin American Art, Western Art I and II and Asian Art, Business Law, Human Relations and People Skills, Entrepreneurial Business Plan, History of Chicanos in the Southwest, Introduction to Kinesiology, Introduction to Nutrition Science, Minority Relations and more!

The expansion highlights not only the growing interest for faculty to teach inside the prison system, but also the thirst for knowledge of our students. Even via this new model, they are excited and eager to learn all they can. In this issue some of our faculty share stories of the resiliency both our students and staff have shown during this pandemic.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Professor Laura Munger teaches Geology for the ISP. She began at BC in 2017 teaching at Corcoran State Prison, which was the first facility to allow this lab science. Since then, Professor Munger's Geology class has been added at Kern Valley State Prison and North Kern.


Laura has both a BA in Geography and MS in Geology, both from University of Montana, Missoula. Previous to joining the ISP team at BC Laura taught 25 years at an all boarding, 9-12 independent school in Santa Barbara County, teaching a variety of courses and serving as both the Science Department Head and Dean of Studies. She also taught Public Speaking at Deep Springs College and began her work with KCCD in 2016 teaching at Eastern Sierra Community College.

While teaching at Deep Springs, Professor Munger read a *New Yorker* article by Larissa MacFarquhar, "Building a Prison-to-School Pipeline", and knew she wanted to teach inside a prison. Once she relocated to the Central Valley and joined the team at BC, she, along with the program director, persuaded the warden at Corcoran to try the geology class and the rest is history.

Laura says that working for the ISP saved her. After 25 years in a teaching environment where she lived among the school community she knew what it felt to be valued as an educator and feel like an integral part of a community. In her first few years teaching for KCCD she struggled to find that feeling in classes full of students who seemed more interested in their phones than the geological wonder that they were surrounded by: the Eastern Sierras. All that changed when she walked into the classroom building on A Yard at Corcoran for the first time. What she found among the incarcerated men she was teaching was that they were most similar to the boarding school students she knew so well. They were smart and curious, respectful, supportive of each other and they wanted to learn, even if they had never taken a science class before.

Last semester one of her students told her that now, during security alerts out in the yard, for which all inmates must lie facing down on the ground, he finds himself looking at all the loose sediments and identifying the minerals or rocks. He said that he even surprised himself by using what he learned in class. These are the remarks from students that make Professor Munger's day. She says, "Being a part of the ISP makes me feel part of a large group all working for the same goal, and that matters."

Laura is originally from Bergen County, NJ, and left at 18 to head west, living in Montana, Idaho and eventually, California. A dedicated swimmer, Laura and lives with her husband Ben. They have one daughter, Emma, and are looking forward to her COVID-19-postponed wedding next June.



"Teaching community college was initially a grind, but finding the ISP renewed my love for teaching. Teaching on the inside energizes me; most students have never considered the idea of landscape before: mountains, streams, the granodiorite of the Sierras, but many students show genuine curiosity and interest in these topics." – Laura Munger, Professor of Geology



ISP IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Our move to a correspondence model has brought many logistical challenges to both our faculty and students, however the team is committed, and the wheels won't stop turning. Below, Jeff Newby, Assistant Professor of History shares some of his experiences this fall about our new, but temporary, normal. Professor Newby currently teaches five sections of History B1 and two sections of History B2, four of which are for the Inmate Scholars Program and are spread across four yards at three different prisons.

What have some of the challenges be teaching via correspondence?

Not being able to discuss the complex historical events in real time in an environment where some students may only have extremely limited understandings of history has been most challenging. Because of that, a lot more time and thought goes into my correspondence packages, in an attempt to anticipate some of these challenges. But the nature of COVID makes any quick responses to student inquiries unrealistic. Having said all that, we are really doing the best with what we've got and making the best out of a not great situation. That goes for the entire team.

What have been some of the successes or good moments you've had this semester?

I have my students write Reflection Papers to self-assess and help them really evaluate their own learning processes. These papers are always the most fun to read because it allows me to see students struggle with learning new things or, most importantly, *re-learning* things they thought they knew. For example, a lot of them are shocked to learn that new evidence points to the fact that the pyramids of Old Kingdom Egypt were not built by slave labor, but rather by paid specialists and conscripted civilian labor. There's usually some scorn, as though Disney's *The Prince of Egypt* had betrayed them all these years. I have had more than one instance of reading through a reflection and laughing, smiling, or nodding along to my students digesting new "savage" or "mind blowing" material, as they often put it.

What positive reflections have your students shared with you?

I received a Reflection Paper that was more or less a "Thank You" letter for doing what I do. This is a sentiment that our students share for every single one of the ISP professors. This student in particular was simply hungry to learn and grow, and they were especially thankful that we didn't see them as a "waste of time." That was a special paper.

Is there anything else you want to share about the work in the ISP?

Although there can be some complaining about the move to correspondence education, the fact that the program keeps running regardless of the road bumps is a testament to the dedication of everyone involved and our desire to keep doing important work such as this. Education is a human right, after all. So, even though COVID has thrown a major wrench in things, I am proud to be part of a program as hardcore as ours.

Want to learn more about what it is like to educate on the inside?

Sara Wallace, English Professor at Bakersfield College, has published three blog entries for her blog titled: "Reflections from Inside: Teaching in the Inmate Scholars Program" on *Medium*. She has been working as a full-time instructor at a total of five different prisons since the Fall 2019. This blog is her reflection about doing this important work.

The first two entries posted reflect her work before the pandemic changed everything. She published a third entry that reflects some of the changes during the pandemic. Check them out with the links below!

