

Presentation to the Board of Trustees: Grinnell Prison Education Program
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April 24, 2009

Welcome

Thank you for coming. At the end of a long day for you, at the end of a long week for all of us, we gather with you to celebrate something promising and good that has grown up among us. As our Trustees, we want you to know of this initiative, and to embrace it as so many of us have—because you are trustees of the College's endowment; but, most importantly, as our former students, you are stewards of the College's tradition.

Grinnell students have been teaching courses at Newton Correctional facility since 2003; Grinnell faculty members have been joining them for those six years. In 2008—2009, Profs. Michael Guenther and George Drake have each taught college-level History courses, identical to ones they are teaching concurrently on campus. This year a Prof. Shawn Womack went into Mitchellville to teach a class in the Iowa Correctional facility for Women. Emily Guenther and I with the help of many, many people developed a proposal to expand our Prison Education Program to award credits to incarcerated students when they complete Grinnell courses offered in prison, and to pilot a Certificate in the Liberal Arts. We begin with some clips from the classes. Then I will make a few remarks and introduce our panel. And then we will ask for your questions.

Remarks:

The proposal you have before you is in process. The President supports it, the Dean supports it, and the Registrar says it can be done. Our faculty members have discussed it in their divisional meetings, the Student Government Association has prepared a resolution of endorsement. The Curriculum Committee endorses the proposal and so does the Executive Council. And the faculty will vote on a motion to approve the proposal at our final meeting on May 4th.

This is a proposal that will affect our whole community, and so, of course, there are objections as well as support. Since the support is here this evening all around you, let me mention the three most profound objections.

When we award credits to Grinnell students on campus, we presume they have taken courses but the context is as important to us as the content. Here we have primary sources, open discussion, labs for experiments and creative arts, a tradition of student self-governance. A Grinnell education implies conditions of learning as well as content of knowledge.

But a prison is the antithesis of the College. A prison is hostile to freedom and designed to intimidate. So what are we doing, or what are we pretending to do, if we award Grinnell credits to incarcerated students?

You cannot enter Newton Correctional facility without being made viscerally aware of this contradiction every time you go. Can we do this with authenticity, not only for the inmates, but also for Grinnell? It is a profound objection, and I don't know the answer.

Yet I think that there are contradictions that you cannot resolve conceptually, but if you move into them, practically speaking, they become paradoxical. Then the constraints of the prison environment, while always severe, become the parameters of our pedagogical fluency. The un-freedom of the prison inspires agility and invention for which liberal arts professors and our students seem oddly well suited. The deprivations of the prison create intense motivation and joy in learning. As one of our students wrote:

"[This class] was new and uncomfortable. But, after a while, it was exciting. And it helped me a great deal. To look at something from several different angles instead of one. Knowing where these angles were hiding. This was the main thing. How to tear something apart. It was awesome. ... Every bit of it. Scary and exciting. Fun as hell."

In the beginning, we didn't see the inmates as fully capable liberal arts students; but we've been going in and out now for six years, and both their capabilities and ours have changed.

Moving between these environments—the College and the prison—the contrast throws light on our whole mission. At the end of a class once, a Newton student said to me: "This is my freedom." I said: "You know, this is my freedom too."

The second objection is economic. If we pursue the Prison program, on this new scale, it will compete for time, attention, and money with other things we might do and are doing. Even if we can fund this with foundation or donor assistance, it will also claim time and attention of students, faculty, and staff.

At its most dignified, human freedom is paradoxical. Meaningful choice always leads to constraint; the name of that constraint is commitment. This Program solicits profound commitment among many faculty, students and staff, for the next five years, and if it is successful, years beyond.

But it is worth our commitment because it has the virtue of binding us together to do something only we can do: Bring liberal arts to people who are deprived of freedom, to restore their freedom by engaging the life of the mind.

Let me read you a quote from one of the guys—he has been in prison for twenty years: “Grinnell has changed my life. I now have positive goals and the ability to achieve them, can appreciate the beauty of the world around me, and have learned to cherish the differences in others. Not only have I given my family something to be proud of, strengthening wounded relationships, but I’ve also learned the social skills necessary to relate to them how important they are to me. Grinnell has given me a gift that has positively imbued every aspect of my life. So, yes, I find it difficult not to cry when I discuss the program.... I wish everyone had such a good reason to cry.”

The third objection concerns timing: Why now? When our endowment has collapsed, when we fear worse is coming, when we are reeling from strife and moral distress among us, why commit ourselves now? Why not wait for more prosperous and peaceful times?

The great thing about crises is that they are so disillusioning. In crises, when our luck runs out, when our future is uncertain, when conflicts remain painfully unresolved: We find out what we’ve got, and who we are.

And then our core values are laid bare in what we do next.

This is our mission—to teach the liberal arts in our distinctive way, and to share our commitment to social justice from one generation to the next. This is what we’ve got. This is who we are.

“No limits”—our PR slogan—was just decadence if it only meant that we were rich.

Now we have the chance to show what it meant all along—that we are free: No limits to our ingenuity and daring, no limits to encompass our diversity, no limits to our steadfastness in conflict and distress, no limits in a world where grace abounds.

So with those brief thoughts, please let me introduce our panel, so we set no limits on your questions.