WHY DO WE NEED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR FACULTY WHO ARE WORKING IN THE PRISON?

by Pat Smith

Safety for all faculty is a high priority when going to work in a prison. Even all newly hired CO staff and prison support staff generally receive new hire orientation regarding safety/security and about the operations of the prison. It is essential to understand what it means to work with inmates. Some inmates can be difficult to work with but so many are cooperative and appreciative that you are there trying to make a difference in their lives and that you are trying to make a difference in society to reduce recidivism.

Any faculty, who decides to work in a prison, must understand that we are going into “their” house -- we get to go home and they do not. To make the workplace safe for you and everyone at the prison, many factors must be taken into consideration so there is no disruption to the operation of the prison. You are subject to CDCR rules and regulations as soon as you drive into the parking lot and park on the prison grounds because custodial staff monitors the parking lot for any suspicious activity.

You will go on a tour of the prison and you will begin to notice the prison culture immediately. You will be screened at the point of entry into the prison each time as you enter the prison. Of course no contraband is allowed. You will learn what the prison considers as contraband. You will see where classes are conducted. BC will soon begin a professional development orientation for faculty who would like to work at the prison.

Many routine tasks are performed throughout the day at a prison. There are mandatory counts at designated times and each inmate must be accounted for. Any inmate who is missing may cause a lock down and an immediate search of the inmate will be conducted. You will see officers conducting searches of various areas of the prison from time to time based on security threat information they receive. Allow the custodial staff to perform their duties and be respectful at all times. Your class can be interrupted temporarily due to safety concerns – safety always comes first.

Overall inmates are very respectful and appreciative of their privilege to attend a college class. You represent change to them and an opportunity to get their mind off of prison for a while. Because the classroom is racially integrated, certain inmates can receive hostile confrontations on the prison yard just because they are associating with mixed races in the classroom. A strong “code of conduct” (the prison subculture) exists among inmates. For example, inmates are generally not allowed to associate outside their own race otherwise the inmate may encounter serious repercussions on the yard and this “green light” on the inmate can even follow them into the community upon release. This is known as “prison politics.” This topic will also be addressed during professional development orientation.

If you take something into the classroom you must keep track of it. You must account for everything you bring in because inmates can make a weapon out of a rolled up newspaper, a pen, a pencil...just about anything can be used to make a weapon. As you enter into any prison in California, you become a threat to the prison because you are someone who can potentially bring in contraband. In reality, illicit drugs can be brought into prisons by visitors, custodial staff, attorneys, etc., so you are no different.

Understanding yourself is also of importance. Are you easy to manipulate, are you an aggressive person, and are you an easy “mark?” Do you have a strong desire to rescue persons when they tell you a sob story? Do you share too much information about yourself? With inmates you cannot share personal information. Inmates can use any information about you in ways that can be damaging. Stay on track of why you are there and have a clear understanding of what a professional relationship with the inmate is. Inmates know if you are a vulnerable person and they soon begin the “con” game with you. You will receive a copy of “Anatomy of a Set-up” and a copy is posted on the prison education link in inside BC. This is a classic training booklet for anyone who will be working with inmates and is also handed out to CDCR staff.

In summary, working with inmates can be very rewarding. The professional development orientation will provide some important information about working at a prison because it is not for everyone. Inmates can ultimately be the best students you ever had but it comes with a price because it is done in an institutional setting. There will always be problems within a prison and the custodial staff depends on you to support them. The classroom can be one of the safest places in a prison because education is of great benefit to the inmate. Education is an earned privilege for the inmate and it can be taken away if they act out. Most of the prison violence occurs in the cells, on the yard, or in food service and a lot of it is alcohol related. Inmates make “pruno” which is their version of alcohol. Inmates are very creative and they can obtain just about anything they want through illegal means.

Just remember -- To be respected -- be respectful!! Know what the rules of the prison are because the inmates will test your knowledge of the prison rules. It all comes down to being effective, firm and fair with them at all times. Stay consistent in how you treat each inmate and avoid making one inmate your “pet.” Prison education gives inmates the impetus to change their own lives. For the Rules and Regulations in California prisons refer to the “DOM” at www.cdcr.ca.gov (Department of Operations Manual).