In a recent op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Columbia Professor of Philosophy Christia Mercer relates her experience volunteering as a teacher in a women’s prison, highlighting the need for prison education programs in the country with the highest number of incarcerated people in the world.

Professor Mercer’s class is the first course offered as part of the newly established Justice-in-Education Initiative, a collaborative project by the Center for Justice and Heyman Center for the Humanities at Columbia University to provide education to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons and to integrate more fully the study of justice into Columbia’s curriculum.

The Justice-in-Education Initiative, sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, will offer courses, taught by Columbia instructors, in local prisons and provide those who have come home from prison with the opportunity to continue their education at Columbia and its partner institutions, drawing on the support of community organizations.

In the coming months, the number of courses taught in local prisons by Columbia faculty will grow. The project has already expanded to include a program at Rikers jail, where four-week courses are being offered on topics and approaches that are likely to stimulate and engage the interest of young people, such as a module utilizing hip-hop to address issues of justice.

In addition to offering college-level courses to people who are in prison, the Initiative will also offer high-quality humanities education to those who have come home from prison or are otherwise court-involved. Beginning this summer, the Heyman Center Public Humanities Initiative, in partnership with Columbia’s English Department, will offer a skills-intensive humanities course based on Columbia’s Core curriculum for undergraduates.

The Justice-in-Education Initiative is taking several actions to further integrate justice issues into the curriculum at Columbia, including developing a website with materials that would support discussion of contemporary justice issues and supporting the design of new interdisciplinary courses on justice issues.
As Prof. Mercer highlighted, incarceration rates have risen drastically over the past 30 years, while opportunities for education during incarceration have plummeted. As she explains, these opportunities are especially crucial.

“A National Institute of Justice study has found that 76.6 percent of formerly incarcerated people return to prison within five years of release. According to research by the Rand Institute, recidivism goes down by 43 percent when people are offered education.

Those who leave prison with a college degree are much more likely to gain employment, be role models for their own children (50 percent of incarcerated adults have children), and become active members of their communities.”

The overarching goal of the Justice-in-Education Initiative is to develop new programs and to extend the reach of existing ones in order to offer educational opportunities to a population often excluded from the educational system. It also provides a wonderful teaching opportunity for professors and graduate students at Columbia. Professor Mercer expressed that a scholarly environment in correctional facilities is unique and valuable:

“The [play] “Oresteia” ends with an insecure compromise between forms of justice. Although my Columbia undergrads find this conclusion unsettling, the play’s ambiguity seems just right to my incarcerated students…These women’s intellectual courage and uncanny insight have created a magical space of moral and literary exploration. Despite the oppressive confines of the prison itself, they flourish before my eyes.”

Prof. Mercer argues that America owes it to itself and to incarcerated individuals to make intellectual growth a priority in prison, writing “We must find it in ourselves to educate all Americans.”

Read the full article here.