

University students add to state prison's library

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EUGENE — A group of students at the University of Oregon is helping spruce up the library at another kind of school—the one of hard knocks.

They were among the first to take part in a new state program, going to Salem once a week to take a class alongside a group of inmates at the Oregon State Penitentiary. Now they're gathering books to help their former classmates maintain their newfound appreciation of literature.

Katherine Philipson, a sophomore majoring in international studies, said the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program allowed her to see prisoners and the prison system in a different light.

She said she was impressed with the thoughtfulness inmates brought to the class.

"People just came with such openness and interest in discussing the literature," she said. "I was deeply impressed with the intelligence and desire to learn of the inside students."

Philipson took the class last year and was in the national program's first literature class on Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment." Near the end of the term, inmates and students met to discuss both literature and the prison system.

Philipson's group talked about the prison library and ways to improve it. The result is this year's book drive.

Inmates said they see only a limited selection of books, which inspired Philipson and some fellow UO Honors College students to try to expand the collection by getting other students to donate cast-off textbooks.

They sought donations at the end of fall and winter term, when other universities were sponsoring the class. The UO will be back during spring term and be able to take new books to the prison with them. The UO, Oregon State University and Portland State University take part in the Inside-Out program, designed to give inmates a chance to pursue higher education and give college students an inside look at systems of punishment and reform.

OSU and PSU offer classes on criminal justice and public policy.

The students and specially chosen inmates sit side-by-side. Fifteen students from the UO and 15 inmates are signed up for the spring term class on literature and ethics.

"I think it's a wonderful program in that it brings students together with people that are in prison and allows them to get to know one another and break down a lot of the stereotypes and barriers that we have," Philipson said.

She said inmates are particularly interested in books on science and math, history, art, foreign language instruction and classic literature.

The book drive is a joint project with a group of inmate students trying to improve the library. People wishing to donate books can call 503-547-3810 or 503-574-1105.