

Miami Dade College is hosting classes behind bars. Inmates get the best grades.

[BY COLLEEN WRIGHT](#)

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Students participate in a constitutional law class at the Everglades Correctional Institution through Miami Dade College's Inside Out Prison Exchange Program. The goal is to bring students and incarcerated students together over education. BY [MATIAS J. OCNER](#) | [COLLEEN WRIGHT](#)

Some students in Samantha Carlo's Introduction to Constitutional Law class know quite a bit more about the law than others.

The ones dressed in light blue uniforms know their Miranda rights. They know about the appellate process. They can even name drop the landmark 1963 U.S. Supreme Court case that grants defendants' free legal representation.

That is especially important to the students in blue who are inmates at Everglades Correctional Institution.

To the professor, they are all her students — the "inside" students serving their sentences sitting side-by-side with the "outside" students enrolled at Miami Dade College who travel to the prison on the western edge of the county for class once a week. They must all complete homework, papers and group projects as part of the college's Inside Out Prison Exchange Program, but it's often the students in blue who earn the best grades.

"It's also kind of like a social justice experience where they're kind of learning from one another," said Carlo. "Students are seeing that there are people who are intelligent in prison who just made bad decisions. The students inside prison are learning that they're capable. It's kind of transformative for everyone involved."

The Inside Out Prison Exchange Program is the first of its kind in Florida. Carlo and psychology professor Minca Davis-Brantley finally got approval to host college classes at the prison in January after years of running a program with MDC students at Everglades

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called E.S.U.B.A., or “abuse” spelled backwards, which seeks to reverse and undo the effects of abuse in inmates.

The pair received a grant from the college that paid for training in Illinois and began screening hundreds of inmate applicants at Everglades, a prison for inmates with track records of good behavior, as potential students. Inmates who participated in E.S.U.B.A. were given preference. Both professors picked 15 “inside” students each for the spring semester and swapped rosters for the fall semester class, so inmates would take both constitutional law and introduction to psychology courses in 2019.

Fewer applications came in for “outside” students of all majors who must find transportation to the far-flung prison from the college’s North campus. They were also screened and underwent training for the class. There are about 10 “outside” students donning a gray program T-shirt in each class.

“It’s a once in the lifetime opportunity for the inmates and the students as well,” said Charles Legido, 26, an “outside” student who is working toward an associate’s degree and wants to study criminal justice. “There’s so much to learn from them and it’s so much for them to learn from us. It’s not something you can get from a textbook or learn from the news.”

Ideally, Carlo would like to exclusively teach inmates in an associate’s degree program. But prisoners are banned from receiving federal Pell Grants for higher education, so “outside” students’ tuition dollars are needed to fund the classes. Miami Dade College administrators have made a verbal commitment to retroactively honor inmates’ credits if they enroll after they are released, Carlo said.

That day could come soon for Ricky Hixon, an “inside” student who didn’t get to finish Carlo’s constitutional law class because he was released in September after 29 years of incarceration. He’s in transitional housing in Tampa but plans to request permission from the state to travel to Miami to enroll in online classes so he can put his A in psychology to good use.

“Miami Dade gave me my first opportunity,” said Hixon, who was incarcerated at 16. “I stick with those who believe in me.”

Hixon, like many other inmates, told the Herald the classes offer more than just challenging material. They teach humanity.

“One of the first things Dr. Brantley said to me is there are no inmates in my class, everyone in my class is a student,” he said. “That within itself is really what touched my mind hard. I said to myself, ‘OK, this is the place I need to be, an environment that sees me as human and not just a convicted animal.’ ”

Hixon said he studied six to eight hours a day. “No one who joined those classes was in there to waste time,” he added.

Jose Dural can’t wait to go back to college to study computer technology and programming.

“Most inmates are getting back in the game at some point, so we need to be prepared for when we get out,” said Dural, whose release date is in 2023. “We need the best education, we need the best way to cope with stress, we need self confidence, we need all these things not only for ourselves but for society.”

Larry Fordham earned the highest grade in Carlo’s class last semester. He’s on track to be the first in his family to graduate from college, even though he won’t be able to be on a college campus until 2024.

“I want to show my baby cousins that even from inside prison it can be done,” said Fordham, who at 46 has been imprisoned for 28 years.

“Inside” students are the most vocal in class, leading discussions and sometimes sharing details on their own case as real-life examples to supplement the content. Their participation shows in their grades.

“I think they see the value in really trying to self improve and learn and grow and stretch and be a part of something that isn’t just their everyday,” said Davis-Brantley, the psychology professor. “When we have these things accessible to us, sometimes we take them for granted.”

John Massie earned an A in Davis-Brantley’s psychology class last semester. He already has a bachelor’s degree in theology he earned while incarcerated on top of certifications as a law clerk and paralegal.

He'll never be able to use his education "outside." He's serving a life sentence.

"When someone's been in prison for a substantial period of time, they must continue to learn," Massie said. "We have to continue to learn. If you don't grow, you die."

Donations to the Miami Dade College Inside Out Prison Exchange Program can be made [here](#). Donors must enter that it is for the 100/110 Institute for Educational Empowerment.



Luther Collie, an incarcerated student, right, participates in a constitutional law class at the Everglades Correctional Institution in Miami, Florida on Wednesday, October 2, 2019. Miami Dade College's Inside Out Prison Exchange Program aims to bring students and incarcerated students together in jails and prisons during a class semester. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM



Larry Fordham, an incarcerated student, participates in a constitutional law class at the Everglades Correctional Institution in Miami, Florida on Wednesday, October 2, 2019. Miami Dade College's Inside Out Prison Exchange Program aims to bring students and incarcerated students together in jails and prisons during a class semester. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM



A student jots down notes during a constitutional law class at the Everglades Correctional Institution in Miami, Florida on Wednesday, October 2, 2019. Miami Dade College's Inside Out Prison Exchange Program aims to bring students and incarcerated students together in jails and prisons during a class semester. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM



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Samantha Carlo, left, a Miami Dade College professor, teaches her constitutional law class at the Everglades Correctional Institution in Miami, Florida on Wednesday, October 2, 2019. Miami Dade College's Inside Out Prison Exchange Program aims to bring students and incarcerated students together in jails and prisons during a class semester. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM



Samantha Carlo, a Miami Dade College professor, teaches her constitutional law class at the Everglades Correctional Institution in Miami, Florida on Wednesday, October 2, 2019. Miami Dade College's Inside Out Prison Exchange Program aims to bring students and incarcerated students together in jails and prisons during a class semester. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM



Oniel Pedley, an incarcerated student, and Dorsey Coba, a Miami Dade College student, right, participate in a constitutional law class at the Everglades Correctional Institution in Miami, Florida on Wednesday, October 2, 2019. Miami Dade College's Inside Out Prison Exchange Program aims to bring students and incarcerated students together in jails and prisons during a class semester. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM



Troy Martin, center, an incarcerated student, participates in a constitutional law class at the Everglades Correctional Institution in Miami, Florida on Wednesday, October 2, 2019. Miami Dade College's Inside Out Prison Exchange Program aims to bring students and incarcerated students together in jails and prisons during a class semester. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM



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