



ARE PRISONS OBSOLETE?

Expository Writing 20

Mindich Program Engaged Scholarship Course

Mondays and Wednesdays | 1:30-2:45 or 3:00-4:15 PM

Hudson Vincent, PhD

rvincent@g.harvard.edu

Office Hours: Wednesdays 4:30-5:30 PM

** This is a Mindich Program Engaged Scholarship Course, and we will be meeting with community leaders throughout the semester. To accommodate students in both sections of the class, course visits will be scheduled 2:30-3:30 PM on several Mondays and Wednesdays in October and November. All students are expected to attend these visits.*

With 1.8 million Americans currently locked behind bars, the United States imprisons its citizens at a higher rate than any other country in the world. But calls to reimagine our country's carceral system are on the rise. Black Lives Matter and other movements are asking urgent questions: why are Black Americans imprisoned five times more than white ones? Should there be for-profit prisons? What crimes merit confinement? What is the purpose of prisons? And do we even need them? In this course, we will grapple with these questions by examining a variety of scholarly perspectives on the United States prison system. We will begin by analyzing the arguments for prison abolition versus reform in [Angela Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* \(2003\)](#). To situate ourselves within a broad debate over the history of mass incarceration in the United States, we will then compare recent scholarship on the subject by [Michelle Alexander](#), [James Forman Jr.](#), and [Elizabeth Hinton](#). We will also read first-hand accounts of prisons in [Reginald Dwayne Betts's memoir and poetry](#). Over the course of the semester, we will receive visits from prison abolitionists, civil rights attorneys, and formerly incarcerated people, who will help us understand the movement to end mass incarceration in the United States.

All writing assignments in this course build toward a final research paper and capstone project on a topic of your choice. Students will develop skills in critical analysis, research, and the creation and structuring of academic arguments. Along the way, we will learn that

Writing is a process. You will take notes on your reading, write and revise response papers, compose drafts of your essays, and fully revise those essays. This continued process of drafting and revision is the primary work of this class and is the main way your writing grows stronger. Inspiration is the moment we all hope for in our writing, and it comes most readily when that inspiration is earned—when you have dedicated sustained effort to that process of reading, thinking, questioning, drafting, and revising. This course will ask you to be reflective about that process and about what you want to accomplish in each assignment: in your cover letters about each essay and in your reflection letters at the beginning and end of the term.

Writing is thinking. That evolving writing process also allows you to develop your thinking with greater depth and meaning. Writing is one of the best ways to figure out your ideas, so you should expect your ideas and arguments to evolve during the writing process.

Writing is a conversation. When you write, you are often in conversation with the sources you are writing about. You are likewise in conversation with your audience. You will express your ideas in your response papers, drafts, and revisions, and your audience from this course will be responding to those ideas, telling you what their strengths are and where they can grow stronger. In addition to the feedback you get from your classmates, you will have conferences with me about each essay (these conferences are a required part of the course), and you will receive extensive written feedback from me throughout the semester.

COURSE TEXTS AND MOVIE

13TH. Directed by Ava DuVernay, interviews with Michelle Alexander, Angela Davis, Bryan Stevenson, et al., Netflix, 2016.

Alexander, Michelle. "The New Jim Crow." *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law*, vol. 9, no. 1, Fall 2011, p. 7-26.

Betts, Reginald Dwayne. *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2009. [selections]

Betts, Reginald Dwayne. *Felon*. W.W. Norton & Co., 2019. [selections]

Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Seven Stories Press, 2003. [selections]

Ellis, Eddie. "An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language." Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions, 2003.

Forman, James, Jr. "Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow." *New York University Law Review*, vol. 87, no. 1, April 2012, pp. 21-69.

Hinton, Elizabeth. *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Harvard University Press, 2016. [selections]

* *Digital copies of all readings will be provided. These readings may change over the course of the semester.*

GRADES

Comparative Essay: 35%

Research Essay: 40%

Capstone Project and Presentation: 15%

Engagement: 10%

The vast majority of your grade will be based on your writing. The standard for each writing assignment will become more demanding as we progress. This is an engaged scholarship course, and your engagement grade will reflect your constructive contributions to class activities and assignments, as well as the care with which you respond to your peers and our visitors.