

Signature Experience: Approaches to Justice

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Our “Signature Experience: Approaches to Justice” project serves as a bridge between classroom-based education and education that occurs through active participation in the broader Atlanta community. The project began with the “Georgia State Prison Initiative” (GSPI) in the fall of 2011 as a service learning project that brought together GSU students and state inmates at a men’s prison outside Atlanta. By combining research of secondary sources on the social crisis of mass incarceration (Supreme Court documents, prison writing by Malcolm X, and scholarly articles) with primary research (a collaborative writing project with the inmates), group discussions on civil and human rights, visiting lectures on restorative justice, and reflective writing, our project has broadened our understanding of incarceration. In 2012 the initiative shifted to a course-credit program, and serves as a pilot for the Strategic Plan’s “signature experience,” in which students will actively participate in a social issue while studying it in the classroom. In addition to our academic study of critical prison theory and collaborative writing with the inmates, we are tutoring children of incarcerated parents in an after-school program, offering education and support to these children -- the forgotten victims of America’s justice system. This initiative has changed our perceptions of incarceration, and empowered us to make a difference in social issues. Urban institutions, such as Georgia State University, are influenced by factors that cross our organizational boundaries: crime, prisoner re-entry, recidivism, and the broader societal effects of mass incarceration intersect with our university population in more relevant ways than more geographically-isolated universities. And not only does Georgia have one of the highest incarceration rates in the nation, but Atlanta receives almost twice the number of released prisoners of another city in the state. Georgia State’s unique Signature Experience provides the opportunity for students to not simply show up to class for a grade, but to learn passionately and holistically. The Signature Experience brings students and educators together to address failing social programs in a way commensurate with our values and abilities. This project has a strong visual component, and through illustrations, photographs, charts, and writing samples, the Georgia State University’s Signature Experience graphic poster will display primary and secondary research, photographs of the students and inmates, and offer a glimpse into the social crisis of incarceration.