Georgia Tech Undergraduate Reflections

Celebrating Shakespeare’s Birthday at Phillips State Prison
April 22, 2016

All I can say is what an incredible experience. I can’t even begin to describe how much I’ve thought about the gift you have given me. It feels like I’ve been looking out a window all my life and you took the entire wall down. These last few days all I’ve been able to think about while walking around Tech is how poorly we are treating some amazing people.

To be honest I was fairly nervous going in, mostly out of not knowing what to expect but it really didn’t take long before it could have been a classroom at Georgia Tech for all I knew. The men amazed me at how much they knew and how well read they were. After a discussion about implementing C++ versus C#, my only thought was how cool it would be to see the solutions they could create for some of the challenges we are facing today. As I am sure everyone has told you thus far, the time flew by in class, I wish Tech classes were more like that. There are some incredible stories in that prison, the world deserves to hear them.

Let me know if there is anything I can do. Also, please please don’t forget to add me to the re-visiting list, I would honestly walk the distance if that’s what it took.

Clark Kent
The Daily Planet
Favorite literary character: Mark Whitney from The Martian

More than anything else I think it is important that your education and accomplishments are not qualified by prison. You are not students despite being in prison: you are students. You are students who welcomed me and my peers, and who made us immediately comfortable in your intellectual space. When I prepare myself for a new experience for which I have no good way to know what to expect, I try to go in with few expectation, and to immerse myself in the experience. Despite this, I was expecting to meet men with a perspective on incarceration and, in the broadest sense, life that is very different from my own. This expectation was met, and I am very grateful for all that you shared because I feel that I learned a lot even in our short time together. What I did not expect, and
maybe what I am even more appreciative of, was the depth of thought and focus that each of you brought to our reading of Shakespeare. Several times I chose not to speak, preferring to hear your insights. I respect each of you always and think of you often. I look forward to seeing all of you again in the fall to finish *Much Ado About Nothing.*

All the best,

Holden from *Catcher in the Rye*


When I first walked in it was the blue walls that caught my attention. If I have been in school for the past 17 years, then for 17 years I have spent my time in classrooms with plain white walls. Now there may be some reason the walls are blue, but to me they symbolize a contrast between the sanitized academic environments I have spent my life in and the unsanitized environment of the prison classroom where men can have discussions which would be frowned upon on the outside. These kinds of conversations, I think, should be a part of the academic world. In the prison there may not be freedom but there is an island of academic discussion isolated from the … sensitive outside world. The structure, class change bells, and too-easy access to information have not yet soiled these men’s academic world. On the inside, men are forced to develop arguments by truly researching a topic rather than by becoming 10-minute Wikipedia experts. I want these men to know I have no envy of their situation. Yet I admire that in their circumstances, in spite of whatever they may have done, nothing has crushed their desire to learn and contribute to the academic world. I have grown up with family in and out of jails and prisons, to see a group of men on the inside who weren’t spending every day talking about their first beer on the outside nearly brought me to tears. For that I am grateful.

Murry, Lear from *King Lear*


First, thank you. Can you guys make a reading list of your favorite books/ most influential to you all? I want to read your reading lists because I realized how small a perspective I have comparatively.

I really appreciated the class on Friday. I can’t fully articulate why though, which is puzzling to me. I’m thinking and I’m thinking but I can’t come up with a good answer. It’s more than a different perspective on the world. I was most amazed how we all *wanted* (*yearned?*) and supported learning. Where I went to high school, people practically condemned other people who tried and wanted to learn, who didn’t just accept but asked questions. Active engagement I think is fundamental to learning but so seldom is actually involved in class. I honestly, felt like I walked into a classroom focused on learning, from Dr. Higinbotham and everyone else in the room. I don’t have a reason for why I came, but I want to come back. It rejuvenated my want for knowledge.

I know this paragraph barely touches on what I appreciated from Friday. All I can say is that I want to come back and listen.

-Mara, Walton, from *Frankenstein*
I want the guys to know how valuable their space was to me so I can only imagine what it means for them. They are brilliant. I loved getting to talk to people that love reading and Shakespeare as much as I do - which is hard to get at a place like Tech. I cannot wait to go back and get to talk to them again. Thank the guys for me because it was such a valuable experience.

As we go into finals I find that I miss discussions like the ones we had on Friday. I'm tired of studying for chemistry and biology because (even though I'm a biochemistry major) they just seem so useless compared to actually TALKING to people. I can't wait to see them again, please give them my best.

Sophia, Hermione from *Harry Potter*

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Getting the opportunity to visit Phillips State Prison was truly a remarkable experience. It is one thing to hear Dr. Higinbotham talk so highly of the class that she teaches there, but being able to actually witness the class being taught at Phillips completely shatters the expectations that you already built up. It was an amazing, cultivating learning environment for learning. The classroom was free with flourishing thoughts and powerful discussions which are two of the more important needs when discussing literature. Dr. Higinbotham did a great job of describing the capabilities of her students, but it wasn't until I stepped foot in that classroom that I fully realized exactly what she meant. From the moment I first stepped in and was greeted with a heartwarming smile and a firm handshake, I felt at home.

It would be a devastation to deprive anyone from visiting the class. And, in my opinion, it would be a missed opportunity for everyone not to witness that intellectual environment.

It will change your preconceived ideas. Whether you realize this fact that beforehand or afterwards will only come after you have submersed yourself in their environment.

Wells, Gatsby from *Great Gatsby*

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Joining the prisoners at Phillips State Prison for your class was an amazing experience. Although I had spent an entire week in high school studying *Much Ado About Nothing* (and was very sleep deprived during the trip), I gained a much deeper appreciation and understanding for the play than I had before. The prisoners’ comments about and experiences of surveillance in the prison environment, especially with regards to the panopticon, gave me an entirely new perspective about the theme of eavesdropping in Shakespeare’s comedy. I was very impressed by the prisoners’ passion for and knowledge of the subject-matter and wish we could’ve spent more time there. I look forward to our reunion in the Fall!

Josh, Dr. Hoenniker from *Cat’s Cradle* (Kurt Vonnegut)