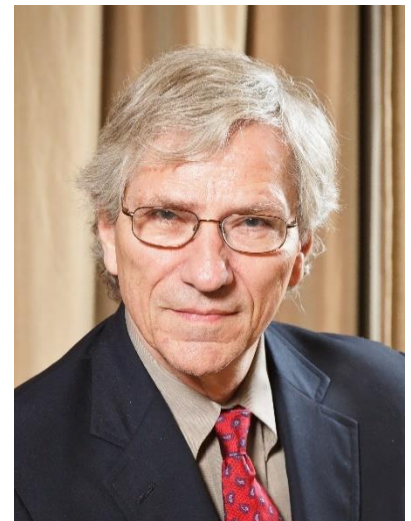




From Bill “Woody” Woodward C’68 Working with the Incarcerated: San Quentin, California

A 45-minute drive takes me from Oakland to San Quentin, California, a tiny town in the shadow of San Quentin State Prison. You park in the prison’s “lower lot,” a huge parking lot at the bottom of a long uphill walk to meet up with the small crowd of graduate students (less than half male), and an occasional old person. Your pockets must be empty except for a driver’s license or passport (a cell phone could get you arrested) and you cannot wear any of the prison colors (orange, blue, gray). After a short wait we cross the first threshold gate holding our credentials in the air for the guard to see. Another walk to the main entrance follows, to have credentials checked against a cleared persons list, to get stamped with invisible ink, and to sign in. Then into the “Sally Port,” a 12' l x 12' w x 15' h cage with heavy bar doors on each end, one of which is always locked. Gathered in there, with both sides locked, we again show credentials to the guard behind the (likely bullet-proof) glass and then the inside bars open and we exit through a 500 lb. solid, antique steel door into a beautiful courtyard with roses, palms, succulents, and many flowers for the walk to the education center.



San Quentin, California’s oldest prison started as a sailing ship to house the bad people from San Francisco. Those inmates began building on land in 1852 and there still remains

a “dungeon” dating to 1854 (a tour stop in the dungeon for the lucky few will surely bring nightmares). San Quentin has this country’s (the world’s?) largest death row (around 700, but shrinking on account of old age and dismantling by Governor Newsom); it’s been many years since the death chamber (another ghoulish tour stop) was in use. Death row inmates have been housed in a separate old building with the words “Condemned Row” in 24 inch high, old-English style letters over the barred door. These mostly ancient prison buildings are unexpectedly quite beautiful, with a front that dates from the 19th Century and many “antique” doors, cells, and other spaces. The newest part is a modern hospital, built in response to class action lawsuits.

San Quentin has had its share of luminaries: Black Bart, Eldridge Cleaver, Sirhan Sirhan, Merle Haggard, and Charles Manson all spent time there. Another “famous” resident is Christian Karl Gerhartsreiter (AKA “Clark Rockefeller”—google him) who currently tutors GED students in our destination, the education center. San Quentin has several inmates who were locked in solitary confinement for several decades at a stretch.

The education center is at the end of another walk, down a big hill, past the dungeon, then past “the Yard,” a large open space with tennis and basketball courts, baseball diamond, and exercise equipment. Except during “lock downs,” the Yard is typically teeming with activity—always basketball and pushups; often baseball or tennis. As we pass this area, we begin to see and greet people we know, people who are or have been students in what was the “Prison University Project” and is now “Mt. Tamalpais College.” The education center is another gathering place, with two guards, a couple of bathrooms, and the college’s main prison office. We sign in again.

The primary teachers for Mt. Tamalpais College are volunteers and almost always are UC Berkeley or Stanford graduate students. Their courses are extremely challenging and rigorous, no doubt a reflection of the level of instruction they themselves are receiving as graduate students. My role in the program is “writing tutor” and the work takes place in a warehouse-type building, 50 yards away, in one of its large rooms with cafeteria tables, chairs, and a few of the incarcerated (usually including Clark Rockefeller who now tutors GED students in grammar). The group that comes to Study Hall for help range in age from 19 or 20 to over 70. A few of these students could not even read or write when they first entered prison. Many of them have been locked up for 20 years or more, often victims of California’s infamous “Three Strikes Law.” Very few are Caucasian.

Mt. Tamalpais College’s program is about half math and half non-math. On the non-math side where I work, the courses can range from “99A” and “99B”— entry level pre-college writing – to linguistics, public health, history, poetry, feminism and racism, philosophy,

and many others. Students in these classes sign up in 30 minute slots for help with their assigned writing projects. Leon (in 30 years plus but getting out soon), a 65 plus year old, needs help one week with an essay analyzing a poem that's about a page long; the next week he needs help editing his own poem. Habib (in 20 years plus), a gregarious 60 year old, whose 17 year old step-grandson tragically killed Habib's older son last Summer, needs help with linguistics, a subject he is studying to gain insight into ebonics. Forrest (released into Oakland after 22 years where he's since become a good friend) solicited help on an articles he was writing for the San Quentin News. On a busy night, each of the two of us will work with four men, typically on very different writing projects. Given the range of subjects, it's usually the case that their project will be in a subject that I know little or nothing about. It still seems to work: our focus is mainly structure, grammar, flow, etc., areas about which I know slightly more. Of course, discussions often veer into politics, culture, and family; close friendships often evolve from our repeated encounters.

At the end of the evening, the process goes in reverse: sign out; out past the Yard; up past the dungeon, through the beautiful plaza, into and out of the Sally Port, sign out again, then past the invisible ink checker, through the main gate, and out to the car. Much of the year, that last walk offers a broad Bay vista to the East with an orange sun at some point in its descent reflecting off the Richmond Bridge. Who could have imagined such a setting for a prison! Yet there's a grim steadiness to the scene that adds a little discomfort. Even though San Quentin is rich with programs, it is still a prison; next week's visit might, of course, bring rare, big news about a "regular" being released. But next week—or next semester—we can pretty much count on again being with our same old friends from this very different world.

Information about Mt. Tamalpais College, the only stand-alone, accredited prison university in the United States, can be found here: <https://www.mttamcollege.org/>

The SAN QUENTIN NEWS, a newspaper with a national circulation published by the incarcerated is here: <https://sanquentinnews.com/>

San Quentin's award-winning podcast, EarHustle is here: <https://www.earhustlesq.com/>