



# THE EFFECTS OF UTM'S WALLS TO BRIDGES PROGRAM ON STUDENTS, STAFF, AND ORGANIZATIONS

Professor Phil Goodman

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*Images used are original photographs by Anam Ahmad.*





# INTRODUCTION

In this research project, the team investigated the effects of the University of Toronto-Mississauga's (UTM) Walls to Bridges program on students, staff, and organizations. In UTM's version of the Walls to Bridges program, half the students are criminology, law and society majors or specialists at UTM, and half are incarcerated people at a jail or prison in the Greater Toronto Area who are enrolled, for the term, as UTM students.

The team conducted approximately 15 interviews with 'outside' students (i.e., UTM); future research by the team may also interview additional outside students, as well as currently and formerly incarcerated 'inside' students. They are also interested in reaching out to staff working at the provincial and/or federal level involved now or in the past with Walls to Bridges.

## FINDINGS

### **Prior Knowledge and Assumptions**

'Outside' students held varied assumptions regarding 'Inside' students. Some expressed empathy in their consideration of the potential social and structural barriers that may have influenced their peers' engagement in crime and subsequent incarceration. Alternatively, other Outside students described how before taking the course they perceived Inside students as being less able to be engaged, critical, or knowledgeable; they expected their Inside peers to be less able to contribute at a University level, thus reflecting a process of 'othering.'

<https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/faculty-research-projects>



## **Educational and Pedagogical Context**

In reflecting on their educational experience, Outside students consistently positioned the communication and acquisition of knowledge as incomparable to that of a traditional university course, beyond that which can be acquired through a textbook and lecture or seminar. Outside students discussed how SOC450H5 humanized Inside students in ways that reconceptualised prisoners beyond mere objects of academic study and criminal classification.

Emotional responses evoked during discussions, (i.e. scepticism, frustration, or anger) toward the criminal justice system, aroused a desire among outside students to raise awareness, create transparency, and to produce change surrounding social injustices associated with the penal context.

## **Community Impacts**

The intimate space of the classroom was established on mutual equality and respect, the integration of experiential and academic knowledge, collaborative and inclusive opportunities for teaching and learning, and the development of friendships; all combined, these contributed to Outside students' understandings of SOC450H5 as creating a community.

Although students did not themselves perceive a sense of community at the institutional level, many Outside students did express the belief that universities and prisons should have a central role in creating educational opportunities for both prisoners and students – a collective responsibility toward building healthier communities more generally.