

# Criminology students team with corrections professionals to solve real-world challenges

**Partnership with Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry provides mentorship, potential for policy implementation**

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News  
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The problems were not hypothetical. Neither was the audience.

In early May, eight groups of students from Arizona State University's Institutional Corrections class presented research-backed ideas to help address real challenges facing prisons.

The audience included criminology faculty and staff, along with leadership from the [Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry](#) at the department's main office in downtown Phoenix.

The topics came directly from corrections staff, who developed a list of more than 20 challenges in prisons across Arizona and in the corrections field more broadly. Students then selected issues from the list and spent the semester researching the challenge and creating solutions.

Their recommendations ranged from expanding peer programming to support incarcerated individuals with Alzheimer's disease to increasing capacity for [Arizona Correctional Industries](#) by requiring state purchasing contracts to consider its products before using third-party vendors. Other groups focused on digital literacy, including programs that would teach incarcerated individuals computer skills and how to apply for jobs online. One group recommended partnering with ASU students to develop online modules that teach IT skills to help prepare people for today's workforce.

The course is an elective in ASU's [School of Criminology and Criminal Justice](#) that provides an overview of U.S. correctional facilities, with a focus on prisons and jails. It is required for the [certificate in correctional studies](#).

Two themes emerged from the students' work: improving support for corrections professionals to strengthen mental health and reduce burnout, and helping incarcerated individuals build a better quality of life after incarceration, not just reducing recidivism.

For Jasmine Meza, a third-year student studying criminology and criminal justice, the project offered a chance to better understand the people working inside correctional facilities. She explored hiring incentives for corrections departments, which led to her speaking and interviewing two correctional officers.

"Meeting with the professionals was inspiring and motivational," Meza said. "Most of my research was based on information they provided. It prepared me to look at helping people within the facilities, not just inmates but also correctional officers."

Many of the corrections staff and leadership who attended the presentation served as mentors to the students throughout the project.

The collaboration was the result of several years of relationship building and coordination between [Andrea Montes](#), associate professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, and [Ryan Thornell](#), director of the Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry.

Together, they designed a final project that would give students a clearer understanding of how Arizona prisons operate while supporting the department's work to modernize correctional practices and ASU's mission to assume responsibility for the communities it serves.

By working directly with professionals, students can better understand what is feasible and know whether an idea builds on efforts already in progress by the department, Montes said. The nearly 1-to-1 student-to-mentor ratio gave students frequent opportunities to ask questions and test ideas, she added.

"The department can provide more on-the-ground knowledge to complement what the students learn in class or from research they're reading," she said.

Thornell said the students' concepts will help guide how the department approaches key challenges.

"Our partnership with the university created a meaningful opportunity for students to engage with real-world correctional challenges and collaborate directly with department leaders. The students brought fresh perspectives and questions that energized our staff, and they shared ideas that will inform our strategies in key areas, including digital literacy, geriatric care and other important policies," he said.

Montes agreed that the mentor-mentee relationship motivated both corrections leadership and students. For the students, it meant connecting classroom learning with real-world needs, while providing a safe space to network with professionals.

Meza said she hopes that the Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry will use the students' research and ideas as it continues shaping its vision for supporting correctional facilities and the people within them.

The School of Criminology and Criminal Justice is part of the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions.

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Andrea Montes, associate professor in ASU's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, introduces student presentations at the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry offices in downtown Phoenix on May 5. Photo courtesy of the Watts College