

Teaching on racial injustice & policing

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

For many CUNY faculty, teaching about the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown was unavoidable. Issues raised by these cases are not some distant concept that CUNY students learn about only in the classroom, faculty told *Clarion*: for many of their students, injustices like racial profiling are an everyday reality.

"This semester, one of my best students missed an individual conference with me, [because] he had been stopped and detained by the police on his way to the train to school," Tony Alessandrini, associate professor of English at Kingsborough Community College, told *Clarion*. "Ironically, we were supposed to meet to discuss a research paper he was writing on racial discrimination in detention and imprisonment." The student had done nothing wrong, Alessandrini said: "[This is a] representative experience for a lot of young, African American students...at KBCC."

RACIAL INJUSTICE

In Adrienne Urbanski's class at BMCC, a black student described being ordered out of his car at gunpoint. The reason? Police assumed he had stolen the car because it had a broken window, Urbanski said. Other students "shared their personal experiences of being stopped and frisked by the police when they were simply on their way home from work," she added.

"Our student body is Michael Brown," said Maureen Fadem, an assistant professor at Kingsborough. "We can't just teach our classes and go home. Our students need this [discussion]."

The CUNY student body and CUNY faculty also include working police officers. William Doherty, a police sergeant in Nassau County and an adjunct associate professor at Queensborough Community College, says that when there is a major news event that relates to his class on criminal law, he uses it as a reference point. "Typically, I'll ask if anyone read the newspaper and I'll have that person open up discussion. I'll figure out a way to tie it in," he told *Clarion*. Doherty says he focuses on "black-letter law," established legal rules that are rarely disputed, and combines that with his personal experience: "I explain it from the perspective of someone who puts handcuffs on people."

The deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner this past summer sparked a growing public debate on racism, policing and the US criminal justice system. And during Fall semester, faculty across CUNY tackled these subjects in the classroom. The deaths of NYPD Officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu came at the end of the semester, during final exams; faculty members said the impact of their deaths would become part of discussions in the Spring.

Discussion on recent cases



Barbara Winslow, professor of education at Brooklyn College, (R), teaches many working K-12 teachers. Winslow's student Yorel Greene (L) says it was important for her middle-school students to discuss and learn about the issues around the death of Mike Brown and Eric Garner.

Sara Simons, an adjunct assistant professor at City Tech, taught a course this past Fall that addressed the deaths of Garner and Brown and put them in a larger context. Reading for the 200-level English class, "Whose America?," included the country's founding documents, literary works, such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Anna Deavere Smith's play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and articles about Ferguson, Detroit and Los Angeles.

MILITARIZED POLICE

"We compared photos of police in riot gear, tanks, et cetera, from these earlier episodes [in Detroit and Los Angeles] with eerily similar photos taken in Ferguson in August," Simons told *Clarion*.

Law students in professor Frank Deale's class on federal administrative regulation looked at the 1033 Program, a federal program that allows police forces to acquire "excess" military equipment. "Students wrote about ways that the notice-and-comment rulemaking process and public mobilization could be utilized to roll back the program," Deale told *Clarion*. Students in Deale's federal courts class wrote about potential legal strategies "to defeat burdensome permit requirements that have been used to provide police with foreknowledge of protest plans and routes, allowing them to re-

strain people's desire for direct action [and] civil disobedience," Deale said.

Avram Bornstein, an associate professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, has been teaching critical race theory to members of the NYPD for more than a decade. Readings in his class span historical instances of race and policing, from slave patrols and controlling race "riots," to looking at *Floyd v. City of New York*, the case in which a federal judge ruled that the NYPD's stop-and-frisk tactics were unconstitutional. Bornstein's class analyzes how institutional bias operates; he says he aims to move the discussion beyond "dichotomous arguments" in which either "all cops are racists" or "there's no race problem in the NYPD." Bornstein says that a key goal of his class is to get students talking to each other.

"It's pretty intense. It's very personal, because police officers are facing this in very complicated ways," said Bornstein. "There's a great deal of internal criticism" of NYPD policies, Bornstein added. "There's an incredible critique of the numbers game," the reliance on quotas.

Saul Roth is a retired Nassau County police lieutenant who worked for 10 years in New York City, in the NYC Transit Police, in Corrections and the NYPD. Today he teaches as an adjunct lecturer

at Queensborough Community College. "No minority person should be profiled, and neither should police officers," he told *Clarion*. It's important for the public to understand that institutional policies set the context for individual officers' actions, Roth says: "Police officers are not like professors who have academic freedom. They enforce the policies of those that supervise them."

DANGERS OF POLICE WORK

Roth says he wants students to understand the risks that cops face: he describes an incident during his years on the NYC Transit Police when a routine interaction over a minor violation suddenly turned violent. There was a struggle for Roth's nightstick, and Roth was thrown onto the tracks. "You don't know where an incident is going to go," Roth emphasized. "I know what force needs to be used to effect an arrest."

Dangers of police work were tragically highlighted by the December 20 shooting of Officers Ramos and Liu. Officer Liu (promoted, like Ramos, to detective after his death) had been a student at CUNY: a graduate of Kingsborough Community College, he also studied at College of Staten Island. When Liu and Ramos were killed just before the end of the semester, many CUNY faculty held a moment of silence, as faculty had done for Eric Garner earlier in the semester. Eric Garner's daughter, Emerald, is also a former CUNY student: she was previously enrolled at BMCC.

These intimate connections with CUNY show the role it plays in the lives of working-class New Yorkers, so it is no surprise that these topics often burst into CUNY classrooms. That happened in Barbara Winslow's course on Diversity in the Inclusive Classroom at the Brooklyn College School of Education, which focuses on institutional racism and the school-to-prison pipeline. The class includes many working teachers, and Winslow often begins by asking them what their own students are talking about: unsurprisingly, discussion about the Garner and Brown killings was high on the list.

STUDENT DISCUSSION

"We spent time discussing how their students reacted to the two non-indictments," Winslow said. "One teacher created her own lessons about Ferguson, Staten Island, racism and the schools."

That was Yorel Greene, who teaches at Collaborative Arts Middle School in Queens. "I saw urgency in teaching because my students fit into all these statistics, all of these molds," said Greene. All the students in her class are African American or Afro-Caribbean and many come from low-income families, she told *Clarion*. "I felt that it was important for them to

discuss what's going on in America and in their community."

In Greene's new lesson plans, news videos, articles and editorial cartoons served as launching points for class discussion on public and police reactions to the non-indictment in Ferguson, the effectiveness of protest and how the media portrays events. She plans to continue to address these issues in the rest of the school year and hopes that more of her colleagues do the same.

"Crisis-response teaching is sometimes inevitable" and can be important, says Naomi Braine, associate professor of sociology at Brooklyn College. But the headlines reflect problems that are longstanding. "The structural processes of racial injustice are embedded in the day-to-day," Braine told *Clarion*. "Teaching about them should, ideally, be part of ongoing pedagogy."

For Spring semester, several CUNY colleges are planning large events around racial justice and the legal system. College of Staten Island's CORE Program, a freshman-level civics course, is planning a week's worth of mass lectures in mid-March. Donna Scimeca, CORE program coordinator, is helping plan the "moderated open forums," which around 2,000 students will attend.

"I don't think racism is going to go away anytime soon," Scimeca told *Clarion*. "Students really are concerned; it's an opportunity for the college to give [students] a chance to have that conversation."

At Kingsborough Community College, there will be a daylong symposium, "99 Voices Teach Ferguson." At the February 10 event, faculty, students and staff will reflect on the roots of injustice.

SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

Hank Williams, who addressed the Garner and Brown cases in class this semester, will be a presenter at KBCC, discussing how the image of "the black criminal" is constructed, and how this connects to policy decisions and institutional structures. An adjunct lecturer in English and African American Studies who has taught at CUNY since 2002, Williams hopes the event will place particular instances of racial injustice in a larger context.

"We have to go beyond thinking of racism as just an individual thing, and deal with larger issues of structural and institutional racism," Williams told *Clarion*. "There's a moment, and there are protests and there's a movement. At some point you need to begin to think strategically. Hopefully, people will be able to look deeply at what's going on right now and see where it connects to systemic issues."

For a list of readings for teaching about racial injustice and police conduct, see psc-cuny.org/Jan15-Resources.

Dave Sanders