

Siebel hosts conference on justice

By: Megan Loïselle

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Some of the nation's leading students in computer science and business gathered in the Thomas M. Siebel Center, the newest computer science building on campus, to talk about issues outside of their field.

While the topic, "Justice in America," has little to do with their collegiate careers, the graduate students in the audience - all from leading universities - could potentially change the nation's justice system in the future.

"It has nothing to do with computer science and business," said Albert Lin, a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and 2005 Siebel Scholar. "But it has everything to do with us, as residents and citizens and a part of this society."

University alumnus Thomas Siebel holds a conference every fall for Siebel Scholars, a group of 50 students from the nation's leading universities, five of whom are from the University. The conference is held at a different university each year and tackles various social issues facing the nation.

The University's Class of 2005 Siebel Scholars includes Anthony Kaap, Ivan Lee, Yogesh Mehta, Philip Morton and Paul Spyridis - all graduate students in the department of computer science. Each received \$25,000 for tuition and other expenses for their final year of graduate school.

"This is the future leadership of our country," said Marc Snir, the head of the department of computer science.

Eight experts in the area of criminal justice took part in panels that were moderated by Charlie Rose, Emmy award-winning host of The Charlie Rose Show and 60 Minutes II. The panels were preceded by a tour to the Champaign County jail Friday.

Jeffrey Liaw, a 2005 Siebel Scholar and Harvard graduate student in business, said the prison was "exceptionally well-run."

On Saturday, the first panel focused on prison inmates and how they ended up there. In the morning session, panelists included General Barry McCaffrey, Bradley Distinguished professor of international security studies at the United States Military Academy; Marc Mauer, assistant director of The Sentencing Project in Washington D.C.; Bernard Kerik, 40th commissioner of the New York City Police Department and Bill Fraser, 36th commissioner of the New York City Department of Corrections.

Rose said the panel discussion was important because it got students to see the "different perspectives" of the issue.

"It's a nice opportunity to dialogue with the leaders and students we don't normally connect with," Mauer said. "(The students) will hopefully be more enlightened citizens, knowing the fundamental issues to be engaged with."

In the afternoon, the second panel of experts gave the audience an inside look into the harsh conditions of prison: presence of infectious diseases, sexual abuse and mental illness. Panelists included Nadine Strossen, president of the American Civil Liberties Union and professor of law at New York Law School; Ron Angelone, CEO of Correctional Solutions Incorporated; Craig Haney, professor of psychology at the University of California at Santa Cruz and Alan Elsner, national correspondent for Reuters News Service.

Fifteen percent of prisoners, or 300,000 people, have a serious mental illness, according to Alan Elsner, who is also the author of *Gates of Injustice: The Crisis in America's Prisons*.

Elsner also said disease is spreading in prisons because they are not checking for them.

He blamed politicians for under-funding such prisons, where inmates are charged a fee to see a nurse.

Strossen agreed with Elsner, saying the "major problem is politics.

"I'm glad there's citizens and voters here," Strossen said.

But Angelone said prison conditions are "not as bad as everyone paints it."

He said problems like mental health and AIDS came from outside the prisons and their roots in society. While the country's justice system has its flaws, like the recent incident in Texas where a prison guard helped an inmate escape, Angelone said correctional officers are now receiving more education than they have in the past. Kerik said the best way to inspire correctional officers is through leadership.

Andy Forsell, vice president of OnDemand Operations of Siebel Systems, said it was especially interesting to hear from Kerik and Fraser, both of whom have supervised prisons. Though a large percentage of the U.S. population has been in the prison system, much of the audience did not know anyone who has been incarcerated.

"We don't intersect with that part of society at all," Forsell said.

Morton said he learned some interesting statistics from the conference, like who ends up in prison.

Liaw said the conference's topic was more interesting than he had expected.

"It's a subject I had not previously thought of before," he said.