ANGOLA — Camp J’s strict confinement regulations astounded them, the stark simplicity of the electric chair at Camp F gave them cause for sober reflection and the sheer magnitude of the Louisiana State Penitentiary overwhelmed them.

“I didn’t think it was this big. This place is huge,” said Dequindra Akin of New Iberia, one of 25 criminal justice students from the University of Southwestern Louisiana who visited the 18,000-acre prison farm last week.

The students, members of Burk Foster’s criminal justice “issues” class, spent almost four hours touring the prison and its farming operations, guided by Angola classification officers Tom Norris and Tom Butler.

Each semester either Foster or Clifford Dorne choose an issue of current interest in the criminal justice field for senior-level students to study in depth, such as violent crime or child abuse.

After U.S. District Judge Frank Polozola declared a state of emergency at Angola in late June and criticized state officials for a lack of attention to the state’s prison overcrowding, Foster had an easy time selecting this semester’s issue; “Current Problems in Louisiana Corrections.”

“Most of these students have never been to Angola,” Foster said, “but many of them will be working in the corrections field. They need to see the place that houses the state’s long-term inmates.

“And since the course deals with the current problems in Louisiana corrections, they should see the place that’s at the center of focus,” he added.

Problems that made recent headlines were evident during the tour, such as interim Warden Larry Smith’s statement earlier this month that a lack of vehicles for transporting prisoners was contributing to security problems.

The students were hauled around the sprawling grounds in an aging bus that
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balked at going into second gear and flatly refused to shift into third.


Available now only in a paperback edition, but soon to be published in hardcover form, the book is used in the class and is edited by Foster and two Angola inmates, Wilbert Rideau and Ron Wikberg.


The criminal justice professor’s first publishing effort gives students a grasp of the state’s criminal justice system—from the commission of a crime to incarceration.

When he began collecting articles for the second book, Foster said, he realized that many of them had been written by Rideau and Wikberg, editor and co-editor, respectively, of the prison’s news magazine, The Angolite. For that reason, he invited them to participate as editors, beginning a lengthy series of editorial conferences accomplished by mail, telephone and Foster’s visits to Angola.

The students who accompanied Foster and Dorne to Angola last week were able to meet the inmate editors, and the three held an impromptu "autograph party" to sign copies of the text.

Profits from its sale go to the USL criminal research center. “We’re trying to get a new computer for the center,” Foster said.

“This is our gift to the people of Louisiana,” Rideau added.

The students also had chance meetings with two people featured in their textbook. After asking Norris about Lt. Shirley Coody while driving by the “yard” at the main prison, the group was surprised to see her behind the control desk at Camp J. Coody seemed a little embarrassed when several students asked her to autograph their books.

Coody’s trials as the first female security officer assigned to the main prison as a supervisor were first examined in The Angolite.

The group also met inmate Aaron Gill, a Camp F orderly, who was featured in “The Longtermers,” an Angolite article reprinted in the text. Gill is now in his 30th year at Angola.

Rideau and Wikberg said the interest in Angola shown by the USL group is not the prison’s first contribution by Lafayette area residents. In 1977, Lafayette newsmen Vince Marino and Jim Bradshaw and photographer Pete Piazza held a series of journalism seminars for members of The Angolite staff.

“The university and Lafayette should be given credit for contributing to what the magazine is today,” Wikberg said.

A year later, a Lafayette Kiwanis Club sponsored business enterprise and art classes for Angolite staff members and other inmates.

“I’m glad we cultivated that relationship,” Wikberg said.