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HWS Forms Prison Education Program

Posted on Thursday, December 08, 2011

Hobart and William Smith Colleges have become only the third institution of higher education in New York State to have a prison education outreach program, joining Cornell University and Bard College in the effort. The HWS Educational Second Chances Program has recently been approved as a student-run organization. Through the program, HWS professors will volunteer to teach at Five Points Correctional Facility, in nearby Romulus, N.Y., while student volunteers will serve as teaching assistants.



Gideon Porter '12 led the effort to organize a prison program at HWS. He first began studying secondary prison education when he was a senior in high school and then, in his first year at HWS, he did a research project on the positive benefits of secondary prison education. Porter spoke alongside representatives from the Cornell Prison Education Program at a Fisher Center Lecture this past spring in an effort to provide information about and generate interest in starting such a program. The Colleges have since finalized plans to begin teaching two classes in the spring semester at Five Points.

"The prison system in America is extremely problematic--the U.S. incarcerates the most people in the world, yet we do not come close to having the world's largest population. The HWS Education Second Chances Program is a concrete way to improve the state of prisons," explains Porter. "Now that the program is a reality I feel more determined than ever to expand and grow it."

As a student-run club, students and professors will help facilitate and coordinate the program. Each semester there will be a volunteer coordinator who stays in regular contact with Five Points. For the first semester, Porter will serve in that role. So far, more than a dozen students have volunteered for the program.

"If there is one thing that I have truly learned during my time here, it is that knowledge is power and power is confidence and motivation. It seems natural that HWS would provide an outlet for our professors and students to give back to a population who can truly benefit from what we have to offer," says volunteer Lucia Berliner '12. "I truly hope that this program takes off and helps provide a new direction for those in need."

Classmate Jared Ravreby'12 is also excited about the development of the program. "The HWS Educational Second Chances Program provides a unique and potentially highly rewarding experience for HWS students. I view the prospect of facilitating positive change in the lives of inmates as an opportunity to not only improve their lives, but to improve my own. This experience will allow me to learn and grow as an individual."

Faculty who have already committed to teach at Five Points include: Associate Professor of English Laurence Erussard, Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science John Vaughn, Associate Professor of Religious Studies Richard Salter, Associate Professor of Sociology Renee Monson, and Assistant Professor James McCorkle '76, who teaches in the First-Year Seminar program and in the Africana Studies program. Erussard and Assistant Professor of English Stephen Cope, both of whom are among HWS faculty who have experience teaching in prison, will serve as faculty coordinators.

A number of other faculty members from multiple disciplines have expressed interest in teaching in the future.

Built in 2000, Five Points is an all male, maximum-security prison that can house up to 1,500 inmates. In 2008, there were 1,386 inmates.

To enroll in the HWS Educational Second Chances Program, inmates will have to hold a high school diploma or a G.E.D. and demonstrate readiness by passing an HWS administered placement exam. This entrance exam will be the same exam given to inmates at Auburn Correctional Facility who seek to take classes with the Cornell Prison Education Program. In addition to participate in the program, inmates will have exemplary behavior records at Five Points and will have to be recommended by the Five Points administration.

"We have a strong plan in place for the next few years, but I think the potential is limitless for where this program goes," says Porter. "We are now focused on getting motivated and dedicated underclassman involved."

Anyone interested in volunteering should contact Porter at Gideon.Porter@hws.edu.

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