

# Completion Report

ITL Application

Developing Pedagogical Approaches to Collaborate between Whitman and Incarcerated Students: Building Resources for Rhetoric, Incarceration, and Civic Engagement courses

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## 1. Did recipients complete what they set out to complete?

Yes, absolutely. More will be explained in the answers that follow. But, in short, the course (RHET 270) was successfully piloted in the fall semester of 2016 with twenty (20) Whitman students and twenty (20) Walla Walla Community College incarcerated students.

## 2. What are the products of their efforts in terms of content, format, and public dissemination?

As noted above, the RHET 270 (Rhetoric, Incarceration, and Civic Engagement) course was successfully piloted in the fall semester of 2016. Twenty (20) Whitman College students were enrolled in the course and we worked with twenty (20) incarcerated Walla Walla Community College students, which made a total of forty (40) students in the course total. The course met every Wednesday evening from 5:15-8:10pm inside Washington State Penitentiary. We aligned the course along these learning objectives, from the Rhetoric Studies' learning goals in the Whitman College Course Catalogue:

### Learning Goal #5: Critically analyze messages

1. Identify meaning(s) embedded in messages (our examination of “dog whistle politics” when it comes to discourses on crime throughout history)
2. Analyze characteristics of mediated and non-mediated rhetoric (looking at discourses from media versus politicians)
3. Recognize the influence of rhetoric (in this case, the influence of discourse on crime and punishment on mass incarceration policy)
4. Engage in active listening (via working in groups)
5. Enact mindful responses to discourse (via group work and via participation in the final public town hall forum)

### Learning Goal #7: Apply ethical rhetorical principles and practices

1. Identify ethical perspectives (in pursuit of finding an ethical framework around crime and punishment that addresses the problem of mass incarceration)
2. Explain the relevance of various ethical perspectives (in answering the competing views around mass incarceration and its myriad problems)
3. Articulate the ethical dimensions of discourse (in reviewing the discourse of politicians, academics, and the public around crime, incarceration, and punishment)
4. Evaluate ethics in relation to discourse and rhetorical situations

### Learning Goal #8: Utilize rhetoric to embrace difference

1. Articulate the connection between discourse and culture (particularly how discourse built a culture in which mass incarceration has been enacted)

2. Recognize and appreciate individual and cultural difference (this, along with #3 and #4 were a huge part of the weekly interaction in the experiential part of the course working across our two cultures – Whitman and WSP)
3. Respect diverse perspectives and the ways they influence public discourse
4. Articulate one’s own perspective and how it affects public discourse

Learning Goal #9: Influence public discourse

1. Explain the importance of rhetoric in civic life (in looking toward suggestions to address mass incarceration)
2. Identify challenges facing communities and the role of rhetoric in confronting those challenges (specifically, in Walla Walla and Washington concerning incarceration at WSP)
3. Evaluate rhetoric at local, national, and global levels (with respect to the problem of mass incarceration)
4. Advocate, empower, and utilize rhetorical perspectives to draw conclusions about discourse and civic life (in drawing some conclusions and making recommendations for change at the final town hall forum for the public)

Overall, in this process, the students completed reading the book The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander together and completed additional research on some specific topics from her book, based on their group assignment. The class was divided into nine groups where each group was comprised of both WWCC incarcerated students and Whitman students (evenly represented in each group). The groups completed additional research on the following topics with an eye toward their relationship to mass incarceration: race, drug policy, education programs in prisons, labor conditions in prisons, presidential rhetoric around crime, felon voting disenfranchisement, re-entry programs after prison time, international perspectives on incarceration including the Scandinavian prison system, and Washington State Penitentiary policies.

This research culminated in a public town hall event, held Tuesday, December 6, 2016 at 5:30pm, in which there were fifty (50) guests from Whitman College, Washington State Penitentiary, and the Walla Walla community in attendance. At this town hall, students presented their research and took questions from the audience.

**3. Do any of these have potential long-term positive effects on the curriculum or academic program more generally?**

I believe there are a number of long-term positive effects of this program on the curriculum and the academic program at Whitman, generally.

a. This course was submitted and approved as a “cultural pluralism” designation in the fall of 2016. It enhances the College’s offerings to students within the cultural pluralism designation. It enhances these offerings in a way not many other courses around the College can – it puts our students in contact with, learning alongside of, incarcerated individuals often from myriad racial, socio-economic, political, and class backgrounds. This experiential piece of the course creates an environment where learning and personal (as well as academic) growth is uniquely fostered. Rhetorical concepts are not just learned but

must be put to use in working together to research a topic of social significance and present the research to a public audience, which some of the students have never done before.

b. The course diversifies both the Rhetoric course offerings and the College's curricular offerings. It also serves as one of few courses in the curriculum that involves this kind of experiential learning within a diverse community with an eye toward social good.

c. The course solidifies the College's partnership with Washington State Penitentiary as a community partner in ways that positively affect the entire College's offerings around incarceration, diversity, and civic engagement. This additionally offers our students opportunities for further work with WSP. For example, two Whitman students from this course have already secured their own internships or work opportunities within WSP for next semester and for the summer, using connections they made during their participation in the course.

#### **4. How many students were directly involved or indirectly impacted by the grant?**

Twenty (20) Whitman College students enrolled in and took the course. In addition, another (33) thirty-three Whitman College students signed up to be audience members at the final town hall deliberation that occurred on Tuesday, December 6, 2016. We also had five (5) Whitman faculty members attend the final town hall and seven (7) Whitman staff members. In addition, twenty (20) incarcerated Walla Walla Community College students had the opportunity to take the course as a result of this grant.

#### **5. Did the project enhance the quality of learning experiences offered to students?**

Absolutely. By studying alongside students from different backgrounds than themselves, who are facing incarceration as their daily life experience, the quality of learning experiences in this class are unmatched in terms of thinking about communicating across cultures, oral communication in both interpersonal and public settings, and diversity with regard to cultural pluralism.

#### **6. What evidence do you have that demonstrates impact on student learning (if applicable)?**

The course has been written up in The Whitman Wire (see [here](#)) as well as by the Whitman College Communications office (this will come out in the next week or two). I believe the student evaluations of this course speak volumes about its ability to positively impact student learning. For example, Anna Middleton (class of 2018) says, "***I think more than any other Whitman class it has pushed me to think in different ways. It's easy to think of criminal justice as a faraway thing that you might know is problematic in some ways or good in some ways depending on your opinions, but it's hard to really imagine the people who are affected by it.***" (Emphasis mine.) Meghan Ash (class of 2017) says, "***This class has been the best experience I have had at Whitman. It was by no means easy, but it challenged me in ways that no other class at Whitman has before. The most important lesson I learned in this class is how to talk to people who don't necessarily agree with me or hold the same political views as I do...Whitman is an absolute bubble, both physically and intellectually. In this class I had conversations that really challenged me...I feel like this class gave me an experience that***

*forced me to critically think about how to approach conversations where I want to persuade someone or how to have difficult conversations with people who don't hold the same values that I do. It was so important for me to learn this and experience this before I left Whitman.”* (Emphasis mine.)

In short, I think this course is one of the most important I've had the opportunity to teach at Whitman and speaks directly to the values of the College and the purpose of Innovation in Teaching and Learning grants. Specifically, the course helped students “think across disciplinary boundaries and/or to make connections between what they learn inside as well as outside the classroom” (ITL grant examples webpage). We will be looking for ways to teach this course yearly and offer the experience to all interested Whitman students. There is already a 50-person wait list of students who we could not accommodate for the next iteration of the course, which will happen in the spring of 2017. However, starting next year, due to Rhetoric department staffing limitations, we will probably only offer this course once per year.

**7. What were the limitations or failings of this project, and how, in retrospect, might they have been better addressed or remedied?**

The main challenge of this course moving forward is the time and effort it takes, on a weekly basis, to maintain the ongoing relationship with WSP staff and corrections officers. Since we (Whitman) are very different in bureaucratic structure and in organizational structure, I found myself needing hours a week to keep up the relationship, to work with corrections officers to ensure they were comfortable with the weekly make-up of the course (including for example, making sure our students followed the stringent dress code, etc.), and preparing for the large final public town hall – an event that took a great deal of time to plan for within WSP based on safety plans, logistics, and such. I think for future semesters, I will work to establish a more firm logistics plan with WSP staff before the semester begins because I have now learned the specific glitches that can arise on a weekly basis when we're working within the prison. Now that the course has been successfully piloted, I believe that we will have a much easier time repeating it.