



MUSE

*The official newsletter of the Humanities Division
Brandeis University*



Prison Initiative Director Hillary Binda leading a class inside the prison
(photo credit: Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University)

a message from the Head of the Division

As Head of the Division of the Humanities, and on behalf of all the Faculty and Staff in the Division, I want to welcome everyone to the fall semester, and let you know that we are all here (even if in “virtual space”) for each other, especially for our undergraduate and graduate students. Our Lead UDR (Undergraduate Departmental Representative), Madeleine Cahn (majoring in Classical Studies and Math), the whole team of UDRs across the Division, and the great group of GDRs (Graduate

Departmental Representatives) stand together with us to help all students navigate this challenging semester in a time of worldwide pandemic.

To begin our new sequence of editions of MUSE, the newsletter of the Division of Humanities, I offer you an insightful interview I had with three remarkable Brandeis faculty members who are involved in The Brandeis Justice Initiative. This initiative is a collection of programs that exemplifies some of the best activities that Brandeis has to offer us all in terms of actually “living” the words “Social Justice”. For this interview, I talked to Professor John Plotz (English); Professor David R. Sherman (English), and Professor Rosalind E. W. Kabrhel (Legal Studies). I have listed everyone by initials, JP, DS, RK, including my own initials, AOK-O.

All the best as you start the new semester!

Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow
Kevy and Hortense Kaiserman Endowed Chair in the Humanities
Professor of Classical Studies
Head of the Division of the Humanities

The Brandeis Justice Initiative

AOK-O: Please name and give a brief description of the project.

JP: The Brandeis Justice Initiative is a collection of various programs at Brandeis, many of them in collaboration with other universities, and others just in the fledgling stages. It will eventually provide avenues so that all sorts of Brandeis folks, including faculty, staff, graduate, and undergraduate students can be involved in teaching, mentoring, or otherwise reaching out to folks who are impacted by the criminal justice system.

AOK-O: Who is involved? Just the three of you from Brandeis (students?), or other faculty (and/or students) from other universities?

JP: Professors Dave Sherman, Roz Kabrhel, and I have been here from the get-go, but there is a “working group” that profits from the wisdom of many other folks including Senior Associate Provost Kim Godsoe, Dean of Students Jamele Adams, Director of Community Service Lucas Malo, and others. We also received a Mellon Connected PhD grant that, in addition to funding some teaching replacements, has allowed us to hire Daniella Gati as our administrative coordinator.

RK: Undergraduates were the first students to start working with incarcerated individuals through the Petey Greene Program, which trains students to tutor in prison. In addition, students worked with incarcerated youth on small group projects in my course, Investigating Justice.

AOK-O: What prison(s) are involved?

JP: Brandeis faculty have taught and will go on teaching with the Emerson Prison Initiative at MCI Concord. There have also been students active at the Judge Connolly Youth Detention Center and elsewhere, through the Petey Greene Program. I taught a literature class there in Spring 2020; Robin Miller will teach one in Spring 2021, involving prison literature.

AOK-O: Will you be teaching both men and women?

JP: So far our programs have only reached men’s prisons, but we have also explored working with a pre-release center for women in Framingham. And we have connections to Changing Lives Through Literature, which teaches both men and women.

RK: Our work with juveniles also includes both young men and young women, and undergraduates have been placed in both male and female facilities for tutoring.

AOK-O: How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your programming?

RK: Covid-19 has slowed the development of some of our initiatives. There is significant concern about the health and well-being of incarcerated individuals, who are experiencing the effects of the pandemic at alarming rates. Facilities are focused on minimizing exposure and effects to the individuals for whom they are responsible, which eliminated in-person programming. Prisons are not set up for virtual learning. We are preparing for in-person programming to resume, but in the meantime, we have placed a greater emphasis on other groups – including those emerging from incarceration, at-risk for incarceration, and those who are on probation. These groups have fewer restrictions on their participation in programs.

AOK-O: What are your learning goals for the encounters?

RK: Learning goals are both general and specific depending on the needs of the students and the

nature of the programming. Overall, we want to inspire inquisitiveness and curiosity, which are the cornerstones of learning regardless of subject. We also want to encourage communication and empathy between students and educators. Learning is also mutual – educators and Brandeis students who participate in programming will learn about the prison system, the needs of the at-risk and in prison community, and the often-thin veil separating those on the inside from those on the outside of the prison walls.

AOK-O: What is the level of education of most of your students in the prison(s)?

RK: This will vary based on the programming, but it is anticipated that most students will have completed their Hi-Set or GED, and several will have had taken college courses provided by other facilities.

AOK-O: What is your desired impact on incarcerated individuals, and do you see an impact at every encounter?

JP: One of the things I like most about our initiative is that only a small percentage of it will be with imprisoned students. There are already existing programs that reach them (like the EPI) but what we hope is to build a pipeline or a pathway towards integrating folks into the community when not behind bars. This partly means collaborating with post-release programs such as one just launched by Hilary Binda at Tufts—and partly with diversionary programs like Changing Lives Through Literature.

AOK-O: What have been your greatest challenges in the program?

RK: There are many challenges to working with an at-risk or in-prison population, but most significant is probably timing. Our community partners don't operate on a typical college semester-based calendar, and often incarcerated and at-risk individuals move around (they are transferred, released, have other life obligations, etc.). Getting a commitment that programs will be offered from x-date to x-date with x number of students is a challenge. As the service providers, we have to adapt and learn how to be flexible if we want these programs to work for their intended recipients. While this is a challenge, it is also a wonderful skill to develop in those who want to engage in any type of social justice work.

AOK-O: What are your needs for continuing the program, especially in these difficult times?

RK: Funding. Grant funding is only guaranteed through the end of the fall semester, so funding is needed to build off of the work we have accomplished so far. For example, programming support from graduate student Daniella Gati has been extremely helpful this summer as we are building many relationships and thinking about the different needs of our partners. There are many moving parts, and she has been great at keeping us organized and informed about the prison education landscape in Massachusetts and nationwide. Funding to maintain this support is crucial. Additionally, funding would support materials and technology necessary to connect with our students and community partners for both live and in-person instruction.

AOK-O: If a student, staff, or faculty member would like to be involved, whom should they contact, where, and how?

Any of us are happy to answer questions about the programming we are developing, and we encourage everyone to become involved! You can reach us best this semester by email at rkabrhel@brandeis.edu, dgati@brandeis.edu, plotz@brandeis.edu, or dsherman@brandeis.edu.

AOK-O: Thank you all for sharing your plans and showing us an initiative that is as timely as it is necessary and impactful in the current world. You are all demonstrating “on the ground” the values that the Humanities can offer to us all in all sorts of circumstances.