

NEWS FROM
HOPE COLLEGE



**"I WAS IN PRISON,
AND YOU CAME TO
VISIT ME."**

My friend and colleague Jared Ortiz said to me one day back in 2017, "I'm teaching a religion class to guys in prison for the Calvin Prison Initiative. You know, Hope and Western Theological Seminary could partner to provide a similar program at another prison. You should get it organized."

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hours observing my class and see if it changes your mind?"

Three weeks later I was frisked and escorted through the grim, clanging bars at Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan. I hoped my anxiety didn't show. After a stroll across what looked like a college quad, we entered the classroom where I took my seat as far back in the corner as I could. At 8 a.m., 40 men walked in — each dressed in well-worn, baggy prison-issued orange and blue clothing. Forty pairs of questioning eyes landed briefly on the stranger in the corner. Cue the anxiety again.

And then it happened. As the clock clicked to 8:03, a student raised his hand, was called upon, and stood to ask his question. "Professor Ortiz, can you explain what Irenaeus is saying on page 83 of our text? It seems to contradict what Origen professes in the footnote on page 153." Jared called on one of four students whose hands shot up in response to the question. "If my colleague would read with greater care and attention," declared the respondent, "my brother would note that Irenaeus goes on to explain himself in greater detail on page 96 such that his thesis comports perfectly with what Origen has to say in the footnote on page 153."

"Huh?" I thought. "**Where am I?** Why don't my students ask questions like that?"

This was my epiphany. My Damascus Road moment. I didn't know what God had in store for what would eventually become the Hope-Western Prison Education Program, but one simple exchange between two incarcerated students was all it took for Jesus' parable in Matthew 25:35-46 to come into bright, shining focus.

Fast forward to summer 2021. Hope and WTS have partnered (Drs. David Stubbs and Pam Bush are my WTS partners in this work) with each other and the Michigan Department of Corrections to offer the Hope-Western Prison Education Program — a Hope Bachelor of Arts degree at Muskegon Correctional Facility. But toward what end? HWPEP exists to:

- Extend the Hope and WTS missions to those living in incarcerated environments,
- Transform the hearts and minds of prisoners and all involved in the program, thereby enlarging their imaginations for purposeful living as flourishing, beloved children of God made in His image and likeness,

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perspectives.

Twenty students were recruited from the Muskegon Correctional Facility "population" to form HWPEP's first cohort. These pioneers have taken six non-credit courses as part of the program's pilot phase. They will comprise the first group of students to begin the journey toward their bachelor's degree in "Faith, Leadership, and Service." Subsequent 20-student cohorts will be recruited from the 31,000 men incarcerated in the MDOC's 26 prisons around the state. Once admitted to HWPEP, they will be transferred to MCF and begin their college education.

**"GOING TO COLLEGE IS
EQUIPPING ME WITH TOOLS TO
BUILD MY COMMUNITY INSTEAD OF
DESTROYING IT."**

— PROGRAM STUDENT

How have the students in the first cohort tackled the challenges of college-level learning? Consider what one student had to say in the second week of the first class, back in March 2018:

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Augustine, Aquinas, and Plato." The rest of the class nodded in affirmation, as if **everyone** had read Aristotle four times cover-to-cover in one week.

But a college education is about more than just learning facts, ideas, and skills. All colleges — but especially Christian liberal arts colleges like Hope — have a duty to form their students as whole persons — mind, body and spirit. Even in its pilot phase, HWPEP has worked to help its students understand themselves in new ways — ways connected to their status as children of a loving God in whose image and likeness they are made. As **new creations**. Consider how these students' sense of purpose and being is shifting as a result of their education:

"Going to college is equipping me with tools to build my community instead of destroying it."

"The chance to be a college student is another reminder that God is not finished with me."

"A Hope College education offers an opportunity to regenerate my soul, edify my spirit, and bolster my ability to be of service to others."

The mission statements of Hope College and Western Theological Seminary direct each institution to educate students. But which students? Albertus Van Raalte and his hardy flock of Dutch immigrants created what are now Hope College and Western Theological Seminary to educate immigrants so they could enjoy the blessings of liberty in their new home. The HWPEP students are "educational immigrants" seeking the same blessings. The liberty they achieve has much in common with those early students. Both of their futures were and are being transformed by the freeing of their minds and the formation of their spirits. The same **Spera in Deo** — the same hope in God — was made possible by Hope and WTS in 1866 and now again in 2021 — in Holland and Muskegon.

The ways in which incarcerated students benefit from a college education are pretty obvious. But what about our traditional Hope and WTS students? How does having incarcerated peers advantage their educational and spiritual formation? There are and will be many opportunities. WTS is developing a Certificate in Restorative Justice for which traditional WTS students will take courses alongside incarcerated students inside the prison. Several WTS and Hope students have served as teaching

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"I remain blessed by the connections made with the HWPEP students, having seen the work they put into their writing and heard their wisdom weekly in the classroom. Walls and bars cannot contain the work of the mind. These students showed me that, and it is a lesson I will not soon forget."

"Listening to (the HWPEP presentation in) chapel today was inspiring for me, hearing that Hope College is trying to make a positive impact on a system that is so broken made me even more grateful that I chose to come to this school!"

Professors who teach inside prison walls are deeply impacted by the experience. The chance to teach diverse, eager students who have experienced the toughest circumstances imaginable leaves professors better equipped for the challenges of the Holland-based classroom. Consider the views of Dr. Steve Bouma-Prediger '79 of the Hope religion faculty:

"I can honestly say that teaching *"What is the Good Life?"* in the prison was one of the most challenging and rewarding courses I have ever taught. Challenging because the course material — a series of "Great Books" beginning with Homer and Plato and extending through the Bible and Augustine, Dante and Machiavelli, Shakespeare and Frederick Douglass, Marx and Tolstoy, and ending with Flannery O'Connor and Martin Luther King, Jr. — was demanding, asking each of us to think hard and long about justice and forgiveness and love. But it was also extremely rewarding. The 20 students met the challenge with their hard work, keen perseverance, and ever-present honesty, not to mention their good humor and care for me and each other. To see such a combination of virtues displayed is nothing short of exhilarating for those of us who teach. For a couple hours every Wednesday night it felt to the students like they were not in prison."

**"A HOPE COLLEGE EDUCATION
OFFERS AN OPPORTUNITY TO**

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**SPIRIT, AND BOLSTER MY ABILITY
TO BE OF SERVICE TO OTHERS."**

— PROGRAM STUDENT

What can you do to become involved with Hope College's newest students in its newest location? Do what you've always done! Pray for these students. Remember them. Acknowledge their humanity, their yearning, and their essential worth. At this point I'll also note that none of the hard-earned tuition dollars from our traditional Holland-based students are used to fund HWPEP. All of the costs associated are being provided by generous donors, who we continue to recruit, although by 2023 we also hope to access federal Pell grants to help offset the basic costs of each student's education. Please be sure to visit hope.edu/hwpep for more information about the program.

Author — and Hope-Western Prison Education Program co-leader — Dr. Richard Ray is a professor of kinesiology who has been a member of the Hope faculty since 1982. Among his other extensive service to the college, he was also formerly head athletic trainer, dean for the social sciences and provost, and developed Hope's academic program in athletic training, which under his leadership grew into a full major.

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by Richard Ray

SUMMER 2021

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