

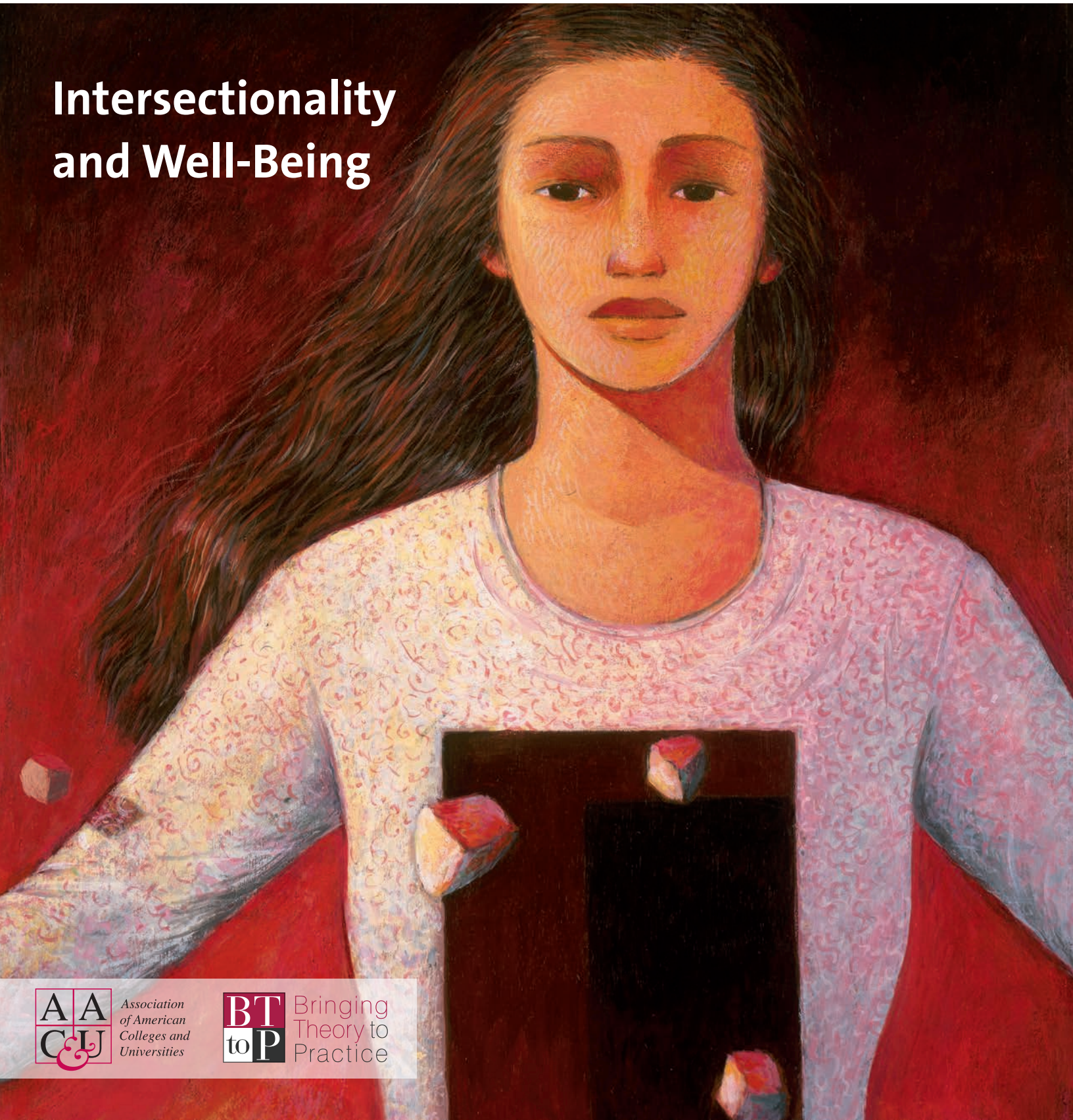
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# Diversity & Democracy

CIVIC LEARNING FOR SHARED FUTURES

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## Intersectionality and Well-Being



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## [CAMPUS PRACTICE]

# Critical Learning, Radical Healing, and Community Engagement in Prison

■ **TESSA HICKS PETERSON**, Associate Professor of Urban Studies and Assistant Vice President of Community Engagement at Pitzer College

It is day one of Pitzer College's Healing Arts and Social Change class, and twenty-two students quietly find their seats in the cramped portable classroom, awkwardly accustoming themselves to sitting in a circle instead of in rows. Their anxiety is not just a sign of new-class jitters—it is evidence of the weight of unknowns surrounding our class, one of California's first semester-long, credit-bearing courses taking place within the

up, through icebreakers and community-building activities that invite us to reflect on our (multiple) identities and chip away at the assumed walls between us, relishing points of commonality and investigating the conditions that have led to our differences. We start by developing communication ground rules to foster a safe enough space for respectful dialogue. We then tell the stories of our names in pairs, sharing family lore, and

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walls of a prison with a mixed class of incarcerated and nonincarcerated college students.

The eleven incarcerated students are a racially mixed group of men who earn seven to seventeen cents per hour; the eleven nonincarcerated students are all women and are majority white and wealthy. As instructed, the students sit in a circle, alternating between “inside” (incarcerated) and “outside” (nonincarcerated) students. The presence of assumptions, fear, and ignorance about the “other” is almost palpable. Yet so, too, is an energy of genuine interest, hopefulness, and curiosity.

These tensions will all be brought to the surface before our first two hours are

sometimes the traumas and values we have inherited, in the process. Next, we stand in concentric circles of rotating pairs, where each person speaks freely and then listens actively as we answer questions that range from silly (“If you could choose, what superhero would you be?”) to serious (“Whom and what purpose does this class serve?”) to personal (“Where are you from culturally, geographically, and politically?”).

The final activity is a freewriting exercise. I provide a word drawn from the course topics (such as “prison,” “education,” “healing,” and “social change”) and ask students to write about how they think that word looks, feels, and sounds. Students then share their writing

in small groups. I overhear one inside student say, “Prison sounds like the deafening noise of souls in despair.” I hear another remark, “Healing sounds like instruments that have been in discord, finally finding harmony.” I am both awed and unsurprised by their effortless engagement with spontaneous poetic writing and their willingness to share with people about whom they had so many misconceptions just hours before.

In a critical reflection assignment given after the first day of class, one inside student writes:

We built a completely free community within the confines of a prison. It was utterly healing to my spiritual self and psyche. I was no longer a prisoner in the system but a student of a prestigious college. My preconceived notion of judgment was completely off kilter. The outside students were very respectful, warm, open, and embracing. I cannot wait for the next class and to see what the semester will bring. If I was to be asked, “What did class look, sound, and feel like?” I’d reply, “Bright eyes expounding on topics uncommonly heard around these rigid systematic grounds. It felt like freedom.”

## Fostering Shared Well-Being

The sixteen-week Healing Arts and Social Change class engages students in self-reflective activities each week (including meditation, journal writing, paired sharing, and group check-ins) alongside rigorous analysis of current economic, environmental, political, and psychosocial problems and correlating theories for social change. This approach aims to disrupt historical patterns in higher education that divorce the growth of one's mind from that of one's body, heart, and spirit. Through critical self-reflection, our class cultivates richer individual and collective well-being and becomes mindful of how our individual

and collective identities can connect—and even clash—in productive ways. We explore justice and injustice, identity and positionality, and well-being and transformation with individuals across a range of intersectional identities and experiences, working toward creating healing and social change in our own classroom community.

In so doing, we demonstrate that when we bring our whole selves to the classroom; are given space to reflect on the intersections, foundations, values, and vibrancy of our many identities; and do so with others to see how our respective identities connect or differ, we become much more invested in the relationships built and the learning made possible within that class. When we feel that our well-being, and the shared well-being of our diverse group, is as important as our cognitive outcomes, both are improved. We negotiate not only our own sense of self but that of others, navigating divides as well as bridges in messy but consistent attempts at relationship building, intercultural dialogue, and critical analysis. As bell hooks says, we embrace “a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet” (2000, 88).

### Navigating Complexity

Our class is part of an international effort known as the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (<http://www.insideoutcenter.org>). While this form of community engagement is deeply transformative for both inside and outside students, it also is embedded in a complex and contradictory set of relationships. The prison staff members with whom we partner are committed to working against a culture of indifference to create programs for rehabilitation through education, job training, drug recovery, and the arts. Yet through this partnership, my outside students and I unwittingly became cogs in the prison



*Pitzer College's Healing Arts and Social Change students with (in the center of the second row) Pitzer Interim President Thomas Poon, Professor Tessa Hicks Peterson, and Dean of Faculty Nigel Boyle. (Photo by Kolapo Soretire)*

industrial complex, engaging politely with the very system that we study, critique, and advocate for dismantling. We carry this tension with us on every visit, while the inside students hold tensions of their own every time they watch us walk away freely after class as they return to a reality of dehumanization and disempowerment.

Nearly every community-campus partnership is well meaning but imbalanced, rife with challenges related to the unequal distribution of wealth, resources, power, and access. Because the inside-out model is based not on providing a “service” but rather on facilitating a reciprocal exchange of learning among peers (where all are equals, earning the same credit for the same class), some power inequalities typical of service-learning partnerships are not relevant. Yet some imbalances are even more pronounced in the prison environment, requiring us to actively explore how to make our short-term engagement equal, reciprocal, and respectful while promoting long-term structural change.

Concurrent with these tensions, I find that this form of community

engagement and our course's concentration on healing and social change have engendered a praxis of liberation from the inside out. This praxis demands some transformation of both the college and the prison by disrupting oppressive norms that exist within both. It also supports students in cultivating self-awareness, critical learning, and radical healing as tools for confronting interpersonal and structural violence and oppression. Such efforts push our institutions—and ourselves—toward intimate and collective shifts that are lifelines for our own well-being and that of our fractured but interdependent communities.

This is well reflected in an outside student's final paper:

This course has taught me the necessity of understanding one's positionality and acknowledging one's ignorance. I am [made] uncomfortable by how much I do not know and by opinions I have formed in the past solely based on the little I have read and what I have seen on television. It is difficult to admit to myself that my



Students in the Healing Arts and Social Change class read a collective poem they wrote on the last day of class. (Photo by Kolapo Soretire)

privilege has afforded me a protective layer of ignorance, but these are all parts of myself that I must accept. This class has both inspired and humbled me. From this I have begun to understand that change must begin within ourselves, but that none of us are disconnected from the world around us. Our well-being is connected to the well-being of others. It is comforting to feel accountable in that way because we cannot just exist within ourselves . . . I cannot remain ignorant of my place in the world

because ignorance results in apathy, which contributes to the injustices that plague our society.

### The Web that Binds Us

On our last day of class, we stand close together in a circle, symbolizing both the pedagogical approach to our shared learning and the interconnectedness of our diverse group. We take turns reading one line from our own writing to create a collective poem, responding to the prompt: “What does this class look like, feel like, and sound like?” Our invited

guests on this closing day are the college president, dean of faculty, and prison warden, but the performance is really for us. Looking into each other’s eyes, we speak freely the words that are the evidence of the web that now binds us:

Let’s discover ourselves  
What else is there?  
Both hope and despair  
This class has changed me  
Compassion for self  
I’m a more clear-minded soul  
I hope we can make a better way  
We are healing  
In a season of shadows  
Hope competes  
A new understanding in the world  
I’m in  
It feels like community  
A tapestry of interwoven narratives  
The all-seeing “I”  
And you and you and you  
Near freedom . . . @

*Tessa Hicks Peterson is the author of the newly released book Student Development and Social Justice: Critical Learning, Radical Healing, and Community Engagement (2017).*

### REFERENCE

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