

Books Behind Bars: Life, Literature, and Leadership

Sept 20, 2016

Dear Prospective Student,

I am delighted that you are interested in enrolling in *Books Behind Bars*. This service-learning course is an original experiment and an exciting journey that should inspire, challenge, and change you. It seeks to answer an important question: Can reading and discussing great literature affect personal and social change?

You will be grappling with this question on a personal level, but you won't be doing it alone or exclusively within the confines of a UVa classroom. Rather, you will meet regularly with residents at a Virginia juvenile correctional facility to discuss literature that has touched countless lives through powerful themes that are universally human.

Rather than thinking of yourselves as "teachers," you will be acting in the capacity of discussion facilitators and mentors. You will work with residents in small groups, exploring real-life issues raised by the short works of fiction that both you and they will have read in advance.

The young men you will work with (ages 17-21) have backgrounds that may include psychological illness, anti-social, or criminal behavior. They live in a secure facility where discussions about freedom, moral responsibility, human nature, cultural alienation, and finding one's place in the world, are more than just academic debates. You should discover, in an immediate way, that these are real issues with significant consequences.

This discovery, in turn, should reinforce your understanding of the literature itself. Russian writers who knew first-hand what it meant to lose one's freedom, to be outsiders, to search for an ideal in a broken world, will become more strikingly relevant. While gaining a global perspective, you will also develop a deeper appreciation of things that all human beings share. Central to your learning will be explicit reflection about connections between characters and themes from the literature and your discussions with the residents.

The discussions themselves should prove to be a learning opportunity. Empathy for others—one of the course's learning objectives—will be essential to your success in establishing a rapport with your audience. You will experience adolescent offenders as real people, not social types. You will discover that they are complex, multi-faceted human beings, with hopes and dreams, joys and sorrows, noble and negative traits, just like the rest of us. While you will be encouraged to use your analytical skills to understand the literature, you will also have the opportunity to develop your leadership and relationship-development skills, and tap into your creative and emotional selves, as well.

The staff and residents in the Virginia Juvenile Justice system are excited about working with you. As successful university students, you will serve as positive role models for people often lacking such positive influences. In many cases, just making human contact with these residents will make an important contribution to their lives. With this course you will be providing a valuable service to your community.

This course may be different from most others you have taken for many reasons:

- Your learning will be experiential, not just theoretical.
- You will have the opportunity to provide a needed social service in the community.
- You will work in a relatively unstructured, real-world environment.
- You will be working closely and regularly in groups with others.
- You will have the chance to develop practical relationship-building and leadership skills.
- You will have the opportunity to self-reflect in this class, both orally and through writing.

- While there will always be professional staff accompanying you to help ensure your safety, you will nevertheless be faced with some challenging situations, such as a resident who is hesitant to share his thoughts or a resident who tends to dominate the discussion. Part of your learning in this class will be reflection on what those situations mean to you and how you respond to them.

Students who have taken *Books Behind Bars* have come from a wide range of backgrounds and from over 25 different majors and five of the seven schools at UVa. There is no such thing as a “typical” *Books Behind Bars* student. The diversity of students’ backgrounds and interests is one of the features that makes the course unique. No matter what your area of interest, chances are you will find this course to be hugely beneficial.

I am seeking students who are strongly motivated to take this course. Students who have already done community service work and enjoyed it might find this course appealing, although prior community service experience is not a requirement. Literature majors also would enjoy this course, provided that they are attracted to the idea of connecting literature to life and are comfortable with the idea of using literary analysis not as an end, but a means to something larger. Students considering a career in teaching, who have already taught in some capacity, or who are studying education could also benefit from this course, although again, a background in teaching or education is not a prerequisite.

Ultimately, I am looking for students who are self-starters and want to stretch themselves academically and personally; students who are willing to work hard and take responsibility for their own educational experience; students who are energized by the prospect of being part of something different and experimental.

Space in this class is limited. In order to ensure the best fit between student goals and interests and the aims of this course, each prospective student is asked to fill out a brief application. Before doing so, please consider the Course Description, as well as this letter, and decide whether this is a course you think you would like to benefit from and contribute to. **(Applications are due by 9 pm, Monday, November 14, 2016)**

Please also be sure to request enrollment in the course through SIS as soon as possible so we have an electronic record of your interest.

I look forward to hearing from you, and welcome any other questions you might have. Please feel free to email me at adk5w@virginia.edu or our program coordinator Ms. Monica Patterson at map9jw@virginia.edu

Kind regards,

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