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## Students and College Guild bring education behind bars

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Over the last few weeks, posters emblazoned with quotes and statistics about the U.S. prison system have appeared all over campus. The group responsible is College Guild, a Brunswick based non-profit organization that aims to reduce recidivism rates in prisoners through educational programs.

The organization, which is entirely funded by donations, was co-founded in 2001 by Julie Zimmerman, a Harpswell resident.

Offering a variety of courses from Greek Mythology to Journalism, College Guild provides inmates with course units, which they complete and mail at their own expense to the organization's headquarters. From there, they are sent to volunteer readers, who provide feedback that encourages and instructs the inmates.

The courses are non-traditional, non-credit academic courses, which gives the organization flexibility in developing their own engaging lesson plans.

College Guild currently serves approximately 300 prisoners but has a waiting list with over 700 inmates hoping to join the program. Due to financial constraints, the organization cannot meet the demand for its services.

Bowdoin's student-run College Guild chapter is led by Elizabeth Brown '15, Emily Hochman '15 and Kiran Pande '15. Jackie Fickes '15 and Jennifer Zhang '15 sit on the College Guild Board of Directors.

Bowdoin students have been involved since the organization's inception. When College Guild was founded in Brunswick, Zimmer-

man began offering orientations at Bowdoin to get new volunteers involved. Now, approximately 50 students volunteer for the program, more than 40 percent of all of College Guild's volunteers.

"As leaders of the Bowdoin chapter, we really try to facilitate and bring in a lot of volunteers. We've been seeing that students are really interested in getting involved so we're trying to make that as easy as possible" said Hochman. "Coming into this year, we all felt that we wanted a stronger presence on campus since it had been in the past more of a solitary activity."

Victoria Lowrie '18 started volunteering for College Guild in the fall.

"I think that empowering prisoners is a great way to lower recidivism rates," Lowrie said. "Being able to facilitate confidence in their thoughts is really important because the kind of confidence they are building in their own abilities from this is going to translate into positive action when they leave prison."

In light of the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner and subsequent student-led responses on campus, members of the Bowdoin chapter have been discussing issues of race in its varied manifestations, specifically mass incarceration.

In their written responses, prisoners often reflect on issues of race, class, and the criminal justice system. Bowdoin leaders say it is enlightening to hear new perspectives on these issues.

"A lot of them have spoken about ideas like the school-to-prison pipeline and just have this great awareness that the reason

# PRISON

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

that they are imprisoned isn't necessarily because of their individual choices, it's partly because of a societal problem or the color of their skin" said Brown.

The student leaders expressed that volunteering their time to read responses is not only enriching for the inmates' educational experience, but is also a positive experience for the volunteers.

"[The inmates] are so appreciative and so thankful of the fact that someone who is a complete stranger doesn't view them as this animal in a cage or this monster but views them as someone worthy of respect and dignity," said Fickes. "Being on the other end of this is a really powerful experience and I don't know any other organization that does it in this way."

Readers are often impressed by the profound responses that inmates take the time to craft. Hochman recounted her experience of reading one man's poetry.

"The caliber of his thought, the words he was using, just the structure of the poetry was so far beyond me and that was amazing to see," said Hochman. "I felt really lucky to be able to read his work and offer my comments."

While the program is not intended to be a pen-pal type cor-

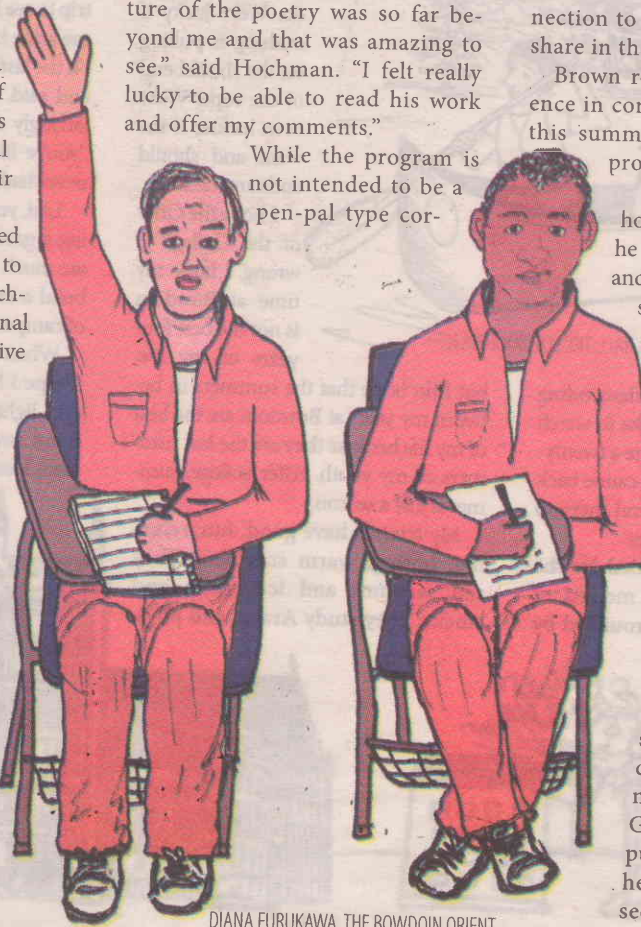
respondence, the leaders say that student readers often feel a connection to the stories that inmates share in their responses.

Brown remembered her experience in corresponding with a man this summer who was facing the prospect of parole.

"[He] wrote about how hopeful he was because he had a bunch of nieces and nephews who he corresponds with through mail and they are growing up while he's in prison," said Brown. "I found out in the next unit that he didn't get parole and it was really crushing."

With all four leaders graduating this spring, the future of Bowdoin's chapter is uncertain.

"Our biggest plan for the future is to continue active leadership in the club," said Pande. "This has definitely been the most involved College Guild has been on campus since we've been here so we would like to see that kept up."



DIANA FURUKAWA, THE BOWDOIN ORIENT