The *Just Mercy* Project - Fall 2015

Fall 2015 offered an opportunity to integrate arts-based learning in an especially compelling and high impact way for first-year BBA students enrolled in the Compass program.

**Concept**

The 120 students of the *Direct Admit* LEAD Course: Principles in Leadership, Ethics, Authenticity, and Development took part in a hands-on project specifically tailored to the semester's curriculum plan. The class was slated to participate in the 2015 *Go Big Read* program. *Just Mercy*, the selected book for the common read, addresses many important and intertwining social justice themes. Using art as a means to further investigate the ideas presented by author Bryan Stevenson was an obvious choice.

LEAD Course instructors – Dani Barker, Louis Macias, Tara Milliken, and Wyl Schuth – and I (Angela Richardson) collaborated with Wheelhouse Studios Director Jay Ekleberry and Sheila Stoeckel, *Go Big Read* Program Lead, to design a screen printing and bookmaking project for students to take part in in response to *Just Mercy*. 
Implementation

Students in the LEAD Course were asked to make an effort to identify the major themes and important takeaways as they read. They were to look for vivid imagery in the writing, interesting statistics, and especially striking quotes or turns of phrase. We urged students to take notes, underline, highlight, scribble in the margins – do whatever they had to do to capture those key concepts as they came across them. The information they gathered and the ideas they generated were then used as inspiration for our printmaking project.

In class, we began by reviewing posters from historical and contemporary social justice movements. We talked about how ideas are represented through text and image, in addition to discussing specific design choices. A video interview with printmaker and social justice artist Favianna Rodriguez provided additional context for thinking about our own projects. After a large group discussion of the themes in Just Mercy, we did a series of individual and small group exercises in order to brainstorm poster concepts. Students were challenged to think of themselves as members of a marketing team, charged with identifying this book’s most compelling concepts and choosing one to develop into a promotional poster. Their primary audience? Students just like them. We asked the class to consider: What kinds of messages do you want to communicate? What visual and design components are likely to catch the eye? Working collaboratively in teams of ten during class, each group chose one concept to focus in on, adapted that idea into a slogan, and then developed imagery to accompany that message.

Wheelhouse Studios staff prepared the screens for students’ use, and during the following class session, group members printed posters by hand there using the silkscreen method. Also while at Wheelhouse students constructed handmade, saddle-stitched, blank notebooks that were donated to the Wisconsin Books to Prisoners and the LGBT Books to Prisoners Projects.

Every class member kept a copy of their group’s 11”x17”, single-color poster. A master set of the final twelve posters went on permanent public display in Grainger Hall after being featured at a December BBA arts showcase event. Another set of the prints is enjoying a temporary installation in Bascom Hall just outside the Office of the Chancellor. The students’ posters were also sent as a gift to Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama.
Follow-up

Students attended the *Go Big Read* address given on campus by [author Bryan Stevenson](#). In the class sessions following that event, the four sections welcomed guest speakers – all of whom use the arts as they work for social change. We pressed students to continue reflecting on the themes of *Just Mercy* and to consider how the ideas presented by Stevenson could play out in their own lives.

Stevenson outlined “four steps to really change the world”:

1) Get close in order to truly understand the problems and issues that you’re interested in working on
2) Change the narrative by challenging the stories that reinforce systems of inequity and injustice
3) Stay hopeful
4) Put yourself in uncomfortable situations

[Artist Jay Katelansky](#) visited one of our Wisconsin School of Business LEAD course sections on October 28th, 2015 to speak about her artwork and the experiences/social context that inform that work.

She left us inspired to stay engaged, to keep talking, and to work towards "changing the narrative" around race and identity on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus and beyond.
There was more amazing art-think/talk/do with our first-year Wisconsin School of Business students - this time with phenomenal artist/activist Alaura Megan Seidl of The ArtWrite Collective.

“What issues are important to you? What are your values? How can you use words and images to move us all in the direction of the world you dream of? And if you're business-minded, can social entrepreneurship be part of the picture?”

So much food for thought! Alaura fed us full of so many BIG ideas to ponder...we'll continue to imagine and reach for those alternative worlds.

Creative entrepreneur Pat Dillon joined our Wisconsin School of Business class to talk about her work and share the very moving, personal story of how she crafts a meaningful life.

Art, journalism, activism, and running a small business (Dillon Gallery) all intertwine in her on-going efforts for racial justice. Our hearts and minds are opened wider for having heard her perspective.
Talented writer and educator Laurel Bastian was the last of four amazing speakers who visited our Wisconsin BBA LEAD Course class sections for *The Just Mercy Project*. Laurel shared her experiences working with the Writers in Prison Project.

She challenged each of us to search for that sweet spot where three important things overlap: what you're great at and love to do, the issues you're passionate about, and the resources you have at your disposal. It's a brilliant formula for working out a lifetime's worth of guiding intentions.

**Conclusion**

This project allowed students to practice a set of skills that are useful in both business and in life – collaboration, analysis, communication, leadership, creative thinking, and empathy, among others. It also provided them with an opportunity to reflect more upon the reading they'd been doing and make connections with their own lives and shared struggles.

Our printmaking project was designed to create an opportunity for students to discuss and think deeply about mass incarceration, police brutality, and problems with the criminal justice system. By working together in small groups to design and create their own posters, they add their voices to the on-going dialogue around these issues.

**Photos**

See a full set of photos about The Just Mercy Project [here](http://tinyurl.com/zesf4y5).
Press
From page to poster: Business students create art inspired by 'Go Big Read' selection
http://news.wisc.edu/24117

Wisconsin BBA Students Study Ethics Through Lens of Art and Literature

Wheelhouse Studios Collaboration with Go Big Read and the Business School