When it comes to how the show handles class, well, er, um, it doesn’t really. *Orange* largely ignores differences in class status. We hear some lip service with inmate nicknames like Piper’s being called “College,” but otherwise, class differences disappear. At one point the inmates even discuss their prison life as analogous to high school. I doubt that the opportunities and antics in high school are the same as those in prison. Prison is not an equal opportunity venture, yet one would not know this when watching this show. The vast majority of the women seem to have mistakenly fallen into a bad way, prison as result of individual, bad choices. In reality, we know that poor socio-economic communities are heavily policed and constantly under surveillance thus creating a deep, cyclical relationship between low SES and imprisonment. *Defending Justice* notes that only 33 percent of prisoners have completed high school. Furthermore, a classist (and racist, sexist) society systematically creates disincentives for defendants to demand their right to a trial, which leads to more than 90 percent of criminal cases resulting in plea bargains.

I think *Orange is the New Black* provides a great opportunity for us to teach our students how to use intersectional analysis in order to see the patterns of oppressive representational politics that the show reproduces. However, I also think what is most distressing about *Orange is the New Black* is the rather benign representation of the prison system. If (minimum security) prison entails dance parties, sex, and drinking, then many might think it’s not such a bad place to be. If getting a running track returned to operation were as easy as placing a minor threat against administration, there would be more change. In a time when the U.S. is in dire need of criminal justice reform, I fear that this pop culture show about prison is injurious to the movement and a misleading representation of the criminal justice system for our students to see as reality. So I suggest the next time we find ourselves drawn into a conversation about *Orange is the New Black*, we also steer the conversation towards the real issues confronting us: 1 in every 107 people are in prison or jail, there is a disproportionate amount of people of color in prison, and the number of women in prison is a population that is growing at double the rate as that for men.

**Democracy and Engaged Education: Students Teaching Students**

*By Christopher Wetzel, Stonehill College and Hailey Chalhoub, Stonehill College ’13*

“This class forced me to look inside of myself more and therefore look into others more. Knowing that everyone at Stonehill has their own story has really inspired me to seek to learn more about those I come in contact with.”

The premise behind democratic education is to create highly interactive environments where students can learn directly from the wisdom and experiences of their peers. In doing so, the goal is that students will become more engaged in their own educations and begin to grasp the myriad connections between life off and on campus.

As we contemplated how best to organize democratic education project at Stonehill College, we researched the innovative programs that have been established at both public institutions like DeCal at the University of California, Berkeley and DemTex at the University of Texas, Austin as well as private institutions such as the Experimental Colleges at Oberlin College and Tufts University. We were particularly intrigued by the prospect of small classes that were motivated by big questions.
In October 2012, Stonehill’s Faculty Senate approved Integrating Democratic Education at Stonehill (IDEAS) for a two year pilot project. During its first year, the IDEAS program offered six one-credit, pass/fail classes on topics such as the chemistry of baking, design for the iPad, environmental action, multiculturalism, nerd culture, sabermetrics. The 37 students who enrolled in the class were drawn from across campus representing 19 different majors, a relatively even split between men and women (campus is 71 percent female, while the program was 51 percent female), and from all four years (although the largest group of participants was first year students). We jointly facilitated a weekly seminar for the 12 course instructors, using this as a chance to reflect on successes and challenges in our classrooms.

As part of our evaluation research, we asked students in the classes to reflect on how participating in IDEAS impacted their perception of learning. Given widespread questions about the value of liberal arts degrees, we thought it important to hear what students took away from their experiences. On the one hand, students reflected on their personal growth. For example, students commented: “I think I have really become more confident when giving my opinions in class. I am able to speak more openly during class,” “It has made me more apt to discuss my ideas with fellow students;” and “Homework assignments that let us apply what we learn and experience to our own lives make the material a lot more personal and engaging.” Here students are talking about their personal growth and development. Participating in democratic education gave them greater self-confidence to speak out and share their opinions in other classes. Moreover, they found the assignments to more directly connect with their lived experiences. Students also reflected on their connections with other people. For example, they noted: “It made me see new ways and models of teaching and engaging students. I think these classes show that students can learn from each other, and bounce ideas off of each other: two very important things to education,” and “I think it has showed me the importance of interpersonal interactions and closeness in the academic process. When you feel supported and comfortable, you will be more open to new perspectives.” Regardless of the specific substantive content of a course, students’ participation in democratic education left most feeling a greater connection with the lives and experiences of others on campus.

As the quotes illustrate, IDEAS can be transformative. We see democratic education as fulfilling the promise of the sociological imagination, helping students see the linkages between the personal and the public. We believe this optimism is well founded — for the second year of IDEAS, we received 23 proposals for student-led courses. But perhaps the most powerful outcome of such an effort will not be found in how many courses are offered WITHIN the IDEAS program, but the impact these courses and the students who take them have on the rest of the campus as they DEMAND a more liberatory education everywhere they study.