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Humanities Action Lab Expands Mass Incarceration Exhibit With Support From Mellon Foundation

By Lawrence Lerner

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States of Incarceration, a groundbreaking project of Rutgers University–Newark’s Humanities Action Lab (HAL), will expand its traveling exhibit on mass incarceration in the U.S. to 10 new communities thanks to a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The \$300,000 grant will help HAL bring the exhibit to historically black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, community colleges, and institutions in rural communities or in close proximity to correctional facilities.

“Our goal is to connect this project more closely with communities most affected by mass incarceration,” says HAL Program Manager Shana Russell. “It’s important those voices be heard in the national dialogue around this topic.”

HAL is a coalition of universities, organizations and public spaces in 20 cities that collaborate to produce community-curated public humanities projects on urgent social issues.

Under HAL's unique model, university students partner with organizations in each city to develop local versions of national traveling exhibits, web projects, public programs and other platforms that draw on local experiences around social issues. Projects travel nationally and internationally to museums, public libraries, cultural centers and other spaces in each of the communities that helped create them, spurring important public dialogue.

"The Mellon Foundation plays a key role nationally in fostering these kinds of community-university partnerships, and we're thrilled that they're supporting HAL," said Jan Ellen Lewis, Dean of Arts and Sciences at RU-N.

The *States of Incarceration* exhibit opened in April 2016 in New York City has since been visited by nearly 100,000 people in 16 cities. It is slated to travel to 14 communities in the next three years.

In addition to expanding the exhibit, the Mellon grant will provide resources and training for university faculty to develop lasting partnerships between universities and correctional facilities or orgs working with formerly incarcerated citizens.

These include developing guidelines and best practices for teaching currently incarcerated students, along with an initiative to create innovative public-humanities-based curricula for prison-education programs.

According to Russell, U.S. prison education has focused mostly on skill-building for trades, traditional literacy models, or examinations of the criminal justice system through sociology, criminology and related social sciences. HAL is looking to introduce project-based learning in prisons with a course centered on creating local versions of the *States of Incarceration* exhibit, which asks incarcerated students to articulate their perspectives on the issue, tell their community story, and produce part of the exhibit with photos and text.

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Bringing the benefits of the humanities—content knowledge, empathy, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, creativity, increased efficacy—to bear on prison education is the wave of the future, says Russell, and RU-N and HAL are at the forefront of the movement.

“We are not aware of any other national program that invites incarcerated people and returning citizens to use the humanities to analyze and understand their own experience and to create national public humanities projects that educate broader audiences,” says Russell.

“Our project is a public history that is both informed by

and narrated by people who are directly impacted by mass incarceration in collaboration with students.”

RU-N and HAL have taken this approach locally as well, working with the New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons Consortium (NJ-STEP) to introduce the humanities into that org's curriculum.

NJ-STEP is an association of higher-ed institutions in New Jersey that works in partnership with the NJ State Department of Corrections and the NJ State Parole Board provide higher-education courses for all of the state's incarcerated students and assist in their transition to college life upon their release into the community.

The partnership between RU-N, HAL, Rutgers University and NJ-STEP is in its early stages, says Russell. This week, NJ-STEP will hold a Humanities in Prison Education conference at RU-N, which

Russell will take part in. Both HAL and NJ-STEP are supported by the Mellon Foundation.

HAL was started in 2014 at The New School, in New York City and remained there until fall 2017, when it moved to RU-N. The partnership gives RU-N a leading role in navigating a course for this premier public-humanities initiative.

HAL was awarded a \$300K National Endowment for the Humanities grant to support public dialogues and local exhibits around *States of Incarceration* while housed in New York City. The new Mellon grant is the group's first since HAL relocated to RU-N.



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