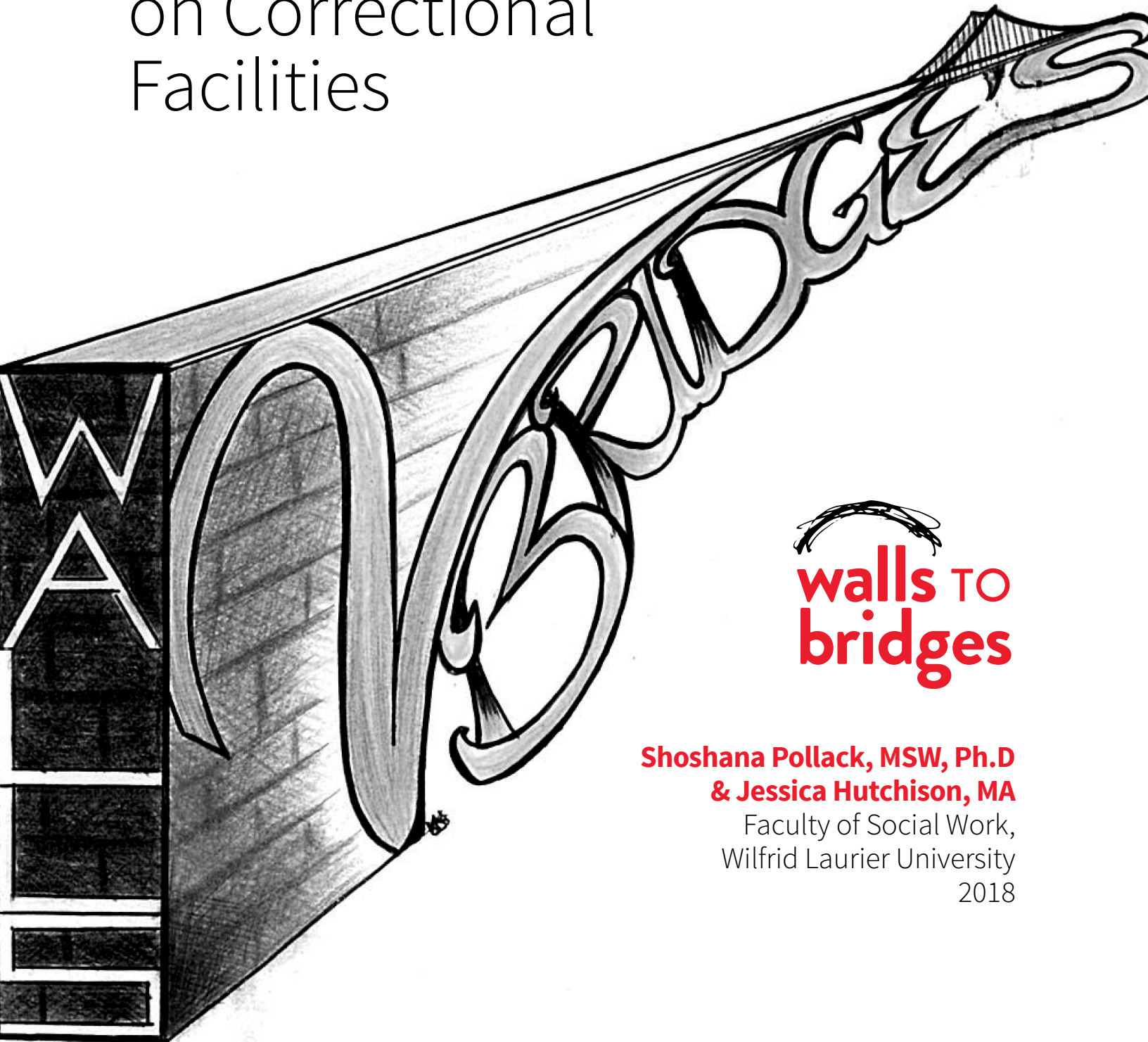


IMPACT OF WALLS TO BRIDGES CLASSES

on Correctional
Facilities




**walls TO
bridges**

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CONTEXT/BACKGROUND

“It’s a unique opportunity for the offenders to access post-secondary education...in a positive academically rigorous and enriching environment that’s virtually no cost to [corrections]. It is no budget line cost whatsoever.” – **CAYDEN¹, FACILITY STAFF**

Inspired by the U.S. Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, Walls to Bridges (W2B) offers university and college based classes taught in jails, prisons and community correctional settings. Students who are or have been incarcerated study together with students enrolled in university/college programs. All students who successfully complete the course receive a university/college credit. An important principle of W2B courses is that students from outside the correctional system are not ‘mentoring’ or ‘helping’ or ‘working with’ incarcerated/criminalized students: all participants in the class are peers, learning the class content together through innovative, experiential and dialogical processes. There are currently 73 W2B trained instructors in Canada and the UK.

The W2B National office is in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University². Working closely with a group of alumni at Grand Valley Institution for Women, we provide an annual five-day intensive facilitator training for educators wishing to learn the W2B pedagogical model and establish their own university or college partnerships with local correctional settings. During Facilitator Trainings, participants engage in dialogue and experiential activities designed to learn the W2B pedagogy, including ‘facilitating’ rather than lecturing, engaging in circle learning processes, and creating an equalitarian classroom climate. Following this training, colleges/universities and interested jails/prisons partner to establish a Memorandum of Understanding to permit the professor to teach a W2B course. Classes are taught in a variety of academic disciplines including Sociology, Urban Studies, Criminology, English Literature, Global Studies, Philosophy and Social Work. Both ‘inside’ (incarcerated/criminalized) and ‘outside’ (from the university) students interested in taking the class apply for the course and are interviewed by the professor to ensure readiness and suitability. To date, **733** students have taken W2B classes, and **9** jails/prisons/halfway houses have partnered with **8** universities.

1. To protect the identity of participants, all names are pseudonyms.

2. We would like to acknowledge with gratitude the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation for their generous financial support.

RESEARCH & METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH

In 2015, the alumni group at Grand Valley Institution and Dr. Shoshana Pollack, Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University conducted a qualitative research study on the impact on students **(Pollack, 2016)** of taking a W2B course. Thirty-seven students, incarcerated, formerly incarcerated and campus enrolled, were interviewed about their experiences of W2B classes. Key findings from this research were that the classes were transformative in several ways: they dispelled stereotypes, motivated students toward social action and fostered a powerful learning community. As a follow up to this impact study, the national W2B office in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University conducted a research study to examine the impact of W2B classes on the correctional facilities³ that host the classes. This report summarizes the key findings and provides recommendations to help strengthen the provision of classes in a variety of correctional contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Seventeen people participated in this study during the summer of 2016. Participants were comprised of correctional staff⁴, university faculty members teaching W2B classes, and formerly incarcerated W2B alumni. These three groups of stakeholders were interviewed to capture perspectives from various vantage points. All participants were asked questions about their perceptions of how hosting W2B classes impacts the correctional environment. Under the supervision of Dr. Shoshana Pollack, two research assistants conducted in-person and telephone interviews. Transcripts were analysed by Dr. Shoshana Pollack and Jessica Hutchison, co-authors of this report. All members of the research team completed the Tri-Council's Ethics Certificate Course prior to commencing interviews. Participants were asked questions about their perspectives on how W2B classes have impacted the correctional facilities/centres that host them.

3. In addition to being approved by the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board, this project was also approved by the Correctional Service of Canada and the relevant Ministries to enable us to interview correctional personnel involved in the implementation of Walls to Bridges classes.

4. Some of our requests to interview correctional staff were not granted.



FINDINGS

Participants in this study identified three broad themes related to hosting W2B classes. These are:

- 1.** Building Bridges Between Universities and Correctional Facilities;
- 2.** Transformation of Individual Perceptions and Stereotypes and
- 3.** Moving Forward: Strengthening and Expanding the Program

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

“This was another way to bridge academic and community.”

- ADDISON, INSTRUCTOR

There are many stakeholders involved in running W2B courses - university professors and administrators, correctional staff and managers, incarcerated and campus-enrolled students, and program funders. As such, W2B classes are dependent upon collaborative efforts. Findings from this study highlighted the significance of support from university administration, senior leadership and front-line staff at correctional and community facilities in building the foundation for a collaborative and innovative educational experience. Bridges were built between correctional/community facilities and universities, between correctional staff and ‘inside students’ and between the student group themselves.

Post-secondary classes are generally taught in lecture halls and classrooms and typically only include ‘traditional’ students attending university/college programs on campus. Recently, though, experiential and community-based learning is gaining prominence and innovative pedagogies and sites of instruction are emerging in post-secondary institutions. Findings from this study emphasize the vital importance of upper university administrative support in bringing course instruction from the lecture rooms of the ‘ivory tower’ into institutional and community correctional settings. Universities provide tuition bursaries for ‘inside’ students, and provide the course materials necessary for students to complete the class (e.g., all required readings) and pay for the professor’s time and work in teaching the course. Additionally, the university/college must be committed to enrolling ‘non-traditional’ students who have no access to electronic means of registering, are not fee paying and whose educational background may not meet the normative application requirements.

The quotes below illustrate the strong commitment to reducing barriers to education for incarcerated/criminalized students and the contribution of financial and human resources within universities to ensure this happens.

“At each point, I think, again, the relationships and everybody’s commitment to the actual principles of Walls to Bridges was so strong. So, the university really, clearly wanted to make it happen, so they were willing to negotiate a little bit with us.” - LUCCA, FACILITY STAFF

“We have wonderful support from the universities... the President, people in various departments...so much support and so much excitement about this program.” - CARSON, INSTRUCTOR

“The [university] registrar was such a strong advocate, and [the registrar] talked about that - the Walls to Bridges program was a highlight in [the registrar’s] career. So, [the registrar] really went out of [their] way to...make things work for us... trying to make it easier in terms of enrollment, and credit, and supporting all the different levels that needed to approve this program.” - ADDISON, INSTRUCTOR

Equally significant, of course, is the support and ‘buy in’ from correctional facilities in the Walls to Bridges partnerships. Committed professors and higher educational institutions are only half of the equation: W2B cannot be properly implemented without correctional partners who are also committed to W2B principles and willing to make the partnerships successful. Findings from this study highlight the fact that key staff and administrators in correctional settings where W2B classes are offered are extremely supportive of the program and are profoundly committed to the university-correctional partnership. Several W2B instructors noted that both upper management and the correctional program staff worked very hard *“to ensure that... the program could run”* and felt that correctional staff were *“proud to offer these courses in a way I wouldn’t have anticipated.”* Moreover, fundamental to successful implementation of W2B programming in any correctional facility is an internal staff person or ‘champion’ who is supportive and committed to the implementation of W2B classes. Participants in this study stated that the experience and dedication of these individuals was invaluable as they were often able to navigate complex institutional environments to reduce barriers and coordinate the logistics necessary to operate university-level courses in a correctional facility.

“I had to, first of all, pitch the idea, the concept, to senior administration... so part of it was to sit down and putting it together with my institution experience in such a way that they could see it as a doable thing.” - ALEX, FACILITY STAFF

“[Name of staff]’s presence is integral to the success of this program. [They are] incredibly supportive of it, and has gone to bat, I think, for the program in a number of ways..” - DARYL, INSTRUCTOR

“[Name of staff] understood how the system worked, understood the limitations, everyone’s roles and they navigated a number of hurdles for us that I’m not so sure, for me and my role coming in from the university, it would have created more challenges.” - ADDISON, INSTRUCTOR

“[Name of staff] especially was our biggest advocate and did whatever [they] could to promote the program.” - AVERY, ALUMNI

In both provincial and federal correctional systems, access to post-secondary education is limited. Federally, prisoners may have access to the few post-secondary correspondence courses that are not online. In addition to financial barriers to accessing correspondence courses, prisoners do not have access to the internet which means they must rely upon the few ‘paper-and-pen’ correspondence courses. In addition to the role W2B classes play in providing access to post-secondary education, participants in this study noted the positive impact W2B classes had on the correctional ‘host’ facilities in fostering a culture of education. An instructor stated:

“I do think it cultivated more of a sort of culture of pursuing education...people were excited of the possibility of other courses...other people were hearing about them and wanting to participate in Walls to Bridges courses. Individuals went on to pursue more of an education afterwards.” – ROWAN

Students enrolled in W2B courses helped to create this culture of education because of their enthusiasm about what they were learning and because of the W2B teaching model. ‘Inside’ students would often speak with their peers about their W2B class, eager to share their unique experiences with others and encourage further student involvement. The support and community-building resulting from W2B classes was also evident in what participants said about relationships between ‘inside’ students. For students who have either not been in a classroom in a while and/or who have never taken a post-secondary course, W2B can be daunting at first. Some ‘inside’ students do have prior educational experiences, but as findings from the **Impact on Students** report revealed, they are often concerned about their academic abilities and about being judged by ‘outside’ students. In this current study, participants noted the various ways that ‘inside’ students supported each other while taking a W2B class.

“...you know you’re writing an essay or you’re trying to get other people’s ideas or supporting and helping each other with your essays and stuff. I think a lot of [students] supported each other...” – EVE, ALUMNI

“Often I saw that they became quite close within themselves and so I feel they supported each other quite a bit throughout that time as they kinda went through that journey.” – JODY, FACILITY STAFF

“So [they] were struggling so I would sort of be there for [them] and tell [them] well you know as soon as I’m finished my paper we can start working on yours or I can give you ideas...and so I was trying to keep [them] motivated and so [they] did it and [they] actually graduated.” – AMARI, ALUMNI

In some cases, the culture of education was supported by correctional staff, particularly those more experienced, who took an interest in what the students were studying as one alumni pointed out: *“...some of the guards really took an interest in the course and would ask us about it and what are you learning?”* University instructors also noted the centrality of staff support, stating, *“the staff really appreciate what we are doing. We get people commenting on us all the time on how important this is for the [inside students] and that correctional staff have been very supportive, respectful, friendly.” – CARSON, INSTRUCTOR*

For staff, students and professors, the evolving culture of education feels positive and exciting.

“...And so they had this momentum whenever they went to run it again; like a lot of people were like ‘oh yeah I’ve heard of it, I want to sign up for it.’” – TONI, FACILITY STAFF

“There were a few [inside students] in particular that were really looking forward to completing their high school classes so that they could take Walls to Bridges and be on good behaviour...so they could get into the Walls to Bridges classes.” – AVERY, ALUMNI


“I hear from them often that they’re talking about what they’re learning in class and sharing it with the other [incarcerated people] on the inside as well.” – CAYDEN, FACILITY STAFF

Significantly, several participants also stated that *“the number who are doing post-secondary on the outside is increasing substantially”* as a result of taking W2B classes while incarcerated or on parole.

Running a university-level course within a correctional facility provides an opportunity for both universities and correctional/community facilities to *“think outside the box about what’s possible”* as one instructor commented. As W2B was new to all the facilities involved in this research, there were, not surprisingly, various challenges and modifications made to standard procedures; however, a number of study participants pointed out that administrative staff at the facilities are highly committed to the program and *“[C]ase management has shown a willingness to adapt some of their policies, timelines, procedures to fit for the students.”*

Examples of flexibility in policy and practice were related to ensuring W2B students were able to attend their class, access to computers to complete their assignments, pass systems, and flexibility around who can participate in the class. One facility staff person noted that after the first initial class, the institutions had adapted and *“[O]nce it has been operationalized, well then it is just a repeat performance that keeps happening.”* An instructor observed that after the first class was successfully completed there was a *“shift in, you know, how the staff are taking up the program... with sort of trusting this program more as we offer the course more frequently.” – DARYL, INSTRUCTOR*

It should be noted that while study respondents stated that there were many supportive correctional staff there were a number of instances where both students and instructors experienced discouragement from front line staff. These experiences - at the front entrance, during class, or in between classes - were experienced as demoralizing and undermining for students and instructors. In particular, disparaging comments about ‘inside’ students as well as inconsistency in allowing or disallowing ‘outside’ students entering into the prison, were seen as very challenging to the successful operations of the program. However, the positive experience of the class and the support of key correctional personelle far outweighed these challenges. The following section discusses the transformative impact of W2B classes on students, staff and instructors.



TRANSFORMATION OF INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTIONS AND STEREOTYPES

“It was a door opening for them to something I don’t think they’ve ever contemplated before.” - **LUCCA, FACILITY STAFF**

Participants in this study spoke about the opportunities for personal and institutional transformation created by W2B classes being held in/with their facility.

Walls to Bridges aims to “create educational opportunities in correctional settings where the experiences of teaching and (un)learning challenge assumptions, stigmatization and inequality” (www.wallstobridges.ca). As stated above, there are multiple stakeholders involved in the delivery of W2B classes - ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ students, professors, and correctional staff – all of whom may have their assumptions challenged about each other. When groups of people have very little opportunity for social and professional contact, stereotypes can have a very tight hold. Participants in this study talked about how being exposed to the W2B program helped transform perceptions about those perceived to be ‘other’.

An instructor, for example, talked about the opportunity granted to Correctional Officers to “reconstruct” who they believe the ‘inside’ students to be, by seeing them as students, rather than only as ‘inmates’. One participant talked about staff being skeptical about whether one of the inside students would be able to complete the class, but once the student completed the class and enrolled in college in the community, *“what seemed like an impossibility in their eyes suddenly became clearly a possibility.”* Perceptions and stereotypes of ‘outside’ students as those “born with silver spoons in their mouths and have had everything handed to them” were also challenged. W2B classes involve a great deal of dialogue among students, thus allowing them to build relationships and experience multiple perspectives. As a result, as stated by a facility staff, ‘inside students’ come to realize *“that a lot of these kids [‘outside’ students] have really had a lot of their own horrible experiences that they’ve had to deal with too.”*

In addition to transforming perceptions, study participants also noted the transformative impact that W2B classes had on ‘inside students’. For example, one formerly incarcerated alumnus stated:

“I’ve just seen amazing things happen through this program. I’ve seen people in the prison who I was with just transform from being, you know, their self-esteem and confidence just being the lowest of the lows and then transforming themselves when they’ve been released and being able to overcome that through this program is an amazing thing to see.” - EVE

Another alumnus remarked: *“If it wasn’t for Walls to Bridges I really don’t know where I’d be right now. Like it really just, aside from the classroom stuff and the book knowledge that I learned, the growth I did as a human being because of it was huge.” - AVERY*



MOVING FORWARD: STRENGTHENING AND EXPANDING THE PROGRAM

“I think anybody who might have been skeptical about it, after seeing the first program go through was very quick to change.”

- TONI, FACILITY STAFF

Importantly, correctional facilities that offer W2B now have a model of how to implement it in correctional institutions and are willing to share these learnings with other facilities. As one staff said:

“You know you can probably bring three or four institutions onboard simultaneously, because they are close enough travel wise. Spend the day here, a day there, a day there, and help them make it happen and mentor it.” - **ALEX, FACILITY STAFF**

As this report has outlined, there are many positive impacts of offering W2B courses in correctional and community facilities. As with any program, study participants identified areas that could be improved to strengthen the program. Below are recommendations for areas of improvement that will provide a foundation for universities and correctional/community facilities to move forward together in their collaboration to offer unique and innovative educational opportunities via W2B.

TECHNOLOGY

The most common barriers mentioned by study participants were lack of consistent access to computers, technology such as DVD players, classroom space and the internet.

“Finding some way that our students could do research better, that’s Internet access for us. Right now the outside students do their share of the research and then they share it with the students who might do the write-up, that kind of thing. Or what generally happens is the professor

prepares a sort of thorough enough package at the beginning and that's sort of everything because our students can't really do much." – **CAYDEN, FACILITY STAFF**

Similarly, 'inside' students often lacked access to hardcopy educational materials.

"About three sessions in they realized how far behind they were falling because they had no access to dictionaries, a thesaurus or anything...." – **CARSON, INSTRUCTOR**

The biggest challenge for 'inside' students was the lack of access to computers in order to complete their class assignments. Many correctional facilities required 'inside' students to write the papers by hand, using mini-golf pencils.

"First and foremost we need to bring it into the 21st century. The [inside students] need to have access to electronic devices... they should have access to a stand-alone laptop."

– **ALEX, FACILITY STAFF**

University professors are accustomed to utilizing various modes of instruction, including resources on the internet, to provide relevant and meaningful material to students. Given the current reality of a lack of access to the internet in correctional facilities, professors are modifying their delivery methods to incorporate these materials.

SPACE

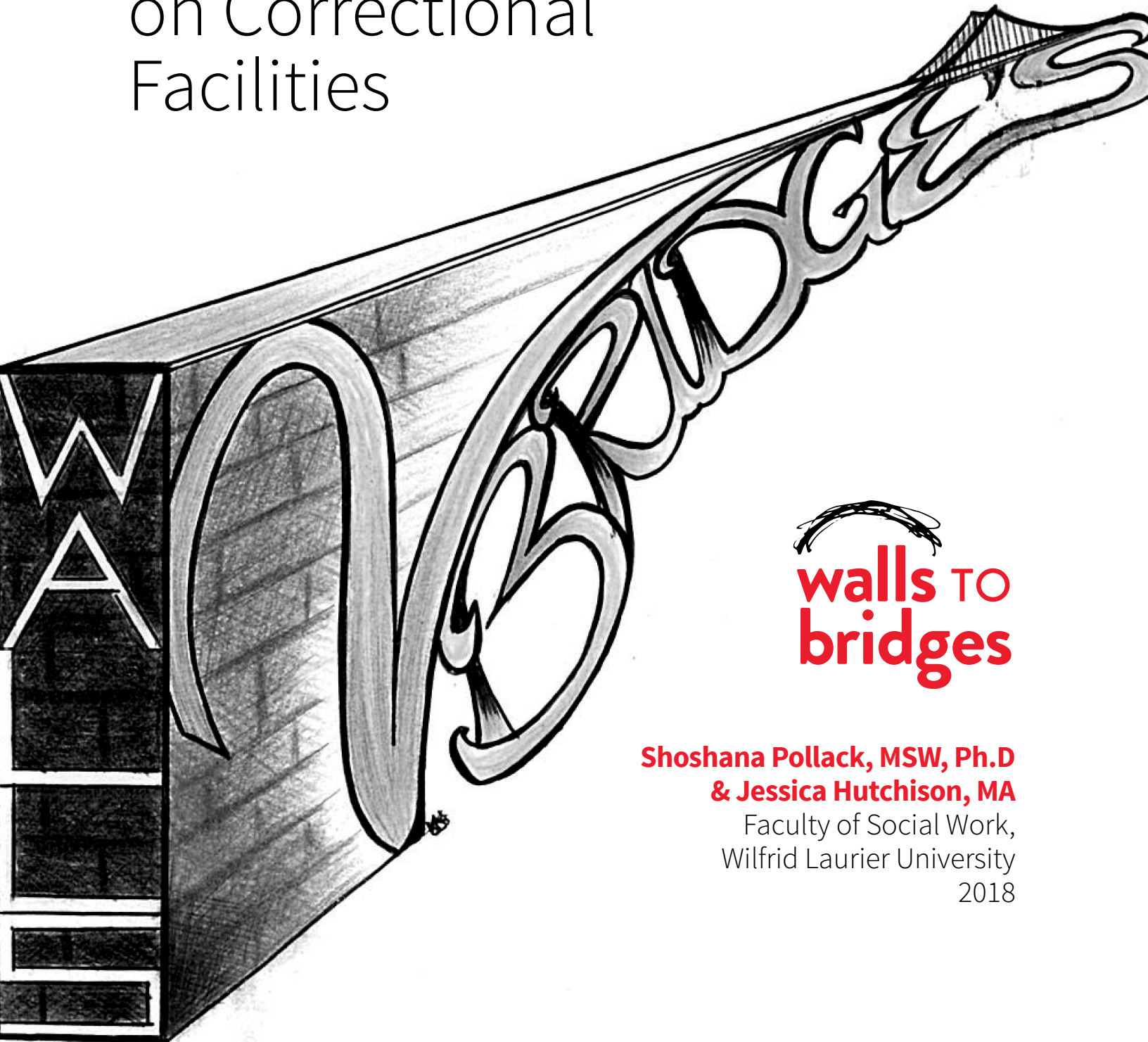
W2B is delivered using circle pedagogy and sitting in circle is an essential component of the learning experience. However, at several of the facilities, access to "*space is an issue*", especially space conducive to W2B pedagogy.

SUMMARY

Walls to Bridges is an innovative educational model using a collaborative learning approach based on circle work and experiential activities. Results from this study indicate that in addition to the documented transformative impact W2B classes have on students (Pollack, 2016), correctional facilities that host the classes are also positively impacted. Significantly, the W2B program builds bridges between universities/colleges and correctional facilities, institutions that do not typically collaborate with each other. Walls to Bridges connects these institutions and the students within them, towards a common goal of providing transformational learning experiences. This study demonstrates that universities and correctional facilities are strongly committed to working together in partnership to deliver W2B courses. While some challenges were identified by study participants, such as negative attitudes from some front line correctional officers, lack of internet and technology, the benefits of the W2B programming outweigh these barriers. Dedicated instructors, champions within correctional facilities and educational institutions, support amongst students and shifting perceptions of 'the Other' all contributed to W2B courses successfully being offered in correctional facilities.

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