



# Education Justice Project

An Initiative of Education at Illinois

## I Prison Censorship

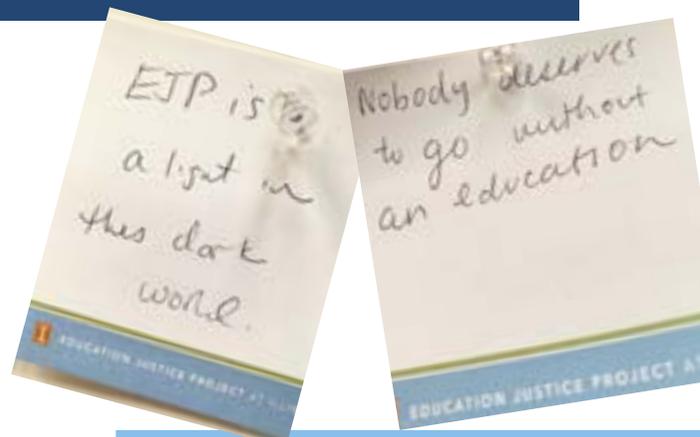
by Rebecca Ginsburg, EJP Director

This article about censorship at Danville Correctional Center has been a long time coming.

While I've posted on social media about the banning, removal, and censorship of EJP's academic materials at the prison and there have been several stories in the media (for example, on [NPR](#), the [local Champaign-Danville paper](#), and [TV news](#)), EJP hasn't yet released a comprehensive account of what happened. With the situation changing from week-to-week, and several moments of vulnerability for the program in the past few months, it's been hard to know the right time to share information.

However, last week EJP informed Danville prison administration that we plan to return the books to the prison for re-review. This seems like a good moment to explain what our program has been through and how we are responding.

Let's assume you already know that EJP offers academic programs to men incarcerated at Danville Correctional



Above, boxes of books from EJP's library at the prison, currently in our campus office.

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Center in Central Illinois, has been operating for 10 years, and is a well-respected, multiple award-winning program. We'll jump right into what happened... There's a lot to cover.

### **November 2018**

EJP staff dropped off several boxes at the prison, marked for the attention of the Assistant Warden of Programming, Felicia Adkins. This was standard procedure. The boxes contained books and course readers that our instructors wished to assign the following semester. We were seeking advance approval to bring the texts into the prison in the new year and distribute them to our students.

We were surprised when, a few weeks later,



over a dozen of the books were denied. Those titles included **Uncle Tom's Cabin** by Harriet Beecher Stowe and **The Souls of Black Folks**, by W.E.B. DuBois. Some books, like **Locking up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America** by James Forman, Jr, winner of the 2018 Pulitzer for General Nonfiction, were denied on the basis of their titles alone; the assistant warden didn't even allow the books to enter the prison so she could examine them personally.

### **January 2019**

Fortunately, some of the books and all of the course readers that we had submitted for review in

November were approved. Accordingly, we purchased multiple copies of them—one for each enrolled student—and brought them to the prison in early January. This, again, was standard procedure. These approved materials were seized by prison staff. We were not allowed to distribute them to



*Above, photos of the EJP Community Library at Danville Correctional Center. These rooms hold course reserves, EJP's circulating collection, fiction and non-fiction books, reference books and periodicals. Prison staff removed over 200 titles from the library in January 2019.*

students. We were told they had to be reviewed again.

These books included ***Transforming Feminist Practice*** by Leela Fernandes, and ***Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City***, by Matthew Desmond.

Shortly thereafter, Danville's warden, Victor Calloway, told us that all EJP programs were suspended until further notice. He said that EJP would be investigated; we were never informed of the subject of the investigation. In late January, Mr. Calloway informed us that EJP programming could resume.

However, the instructional materials that prison staff had seized were not released. That is, classes could begin, but we were not able to provide students with course readers or books.



A period of uncertainty followed. At one point, Ms. Adkins told me that she wanted us to remove all of EJP's course materials from the prison, something that would have required us to cancel most of our

*Below, EJP is an academically rich college-in-prison program. Our students and instructors rely on access to a diverse collection of books and academic resources.*



spring classes. Subsequently, the head of Danville's Internal Affairs, Charles Campbell, communicated that he was going through the seized materials and would let us know when items were approved for use.

We waited. Our instructors did a commendable job of teaching their courses without books. They behaved with professionalism and flexibility throughout, as have the EJP students.

Eventually, on Feb 19, Mr. Campbell told us that the previously-approved material were again approved for use in the classroom—except for four readers. Those readers would be released only if we physically extracted certain pages from them.

To be clear, we were asked to literally tear pages from the readers.

You can find a list of the impacted instructional materials [here](#), and a photo of the torn-out pages to the right.

### Library Books Removed

EJP maintains our own library at the prison, separate from the state-run prison library. It provides academic resources and also serves as a quiet space for studying and tutoring. We call it the EJP Community Library.

On January 28, Danville staff (two assistant wardens, the head of Internal Affairs, and Internal Affairs staff) were seen by several EJP members in our library, going through the shelves and putting books into boxes. This was during the program's suspension. There was yellow tape around the room, so no EJP members were able to enter. However, they observed that 6 boxes were carried away.

I received no notification about this. There was no response to my email queries after it happened. The prison staff put nothing in writing that acknowledged that the materials had been removed or why. EJP's Director of Academic Programs, Lance Pittman, was told to remove the boxes

of materials from the prison. He declined to do this until we received an inventory in writing of what had been taken from the library. It took some time to secure that, and the boxes were finally removed from the prison and returned to the EJP office on the University of Illinois office on March 8, 2019.

That is where they are currently.

### Why?

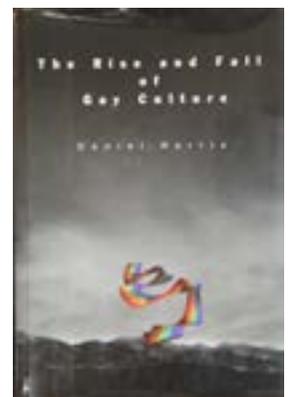
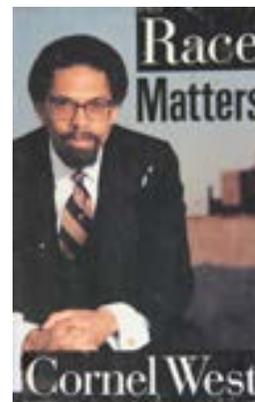
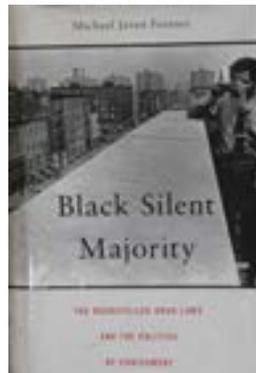
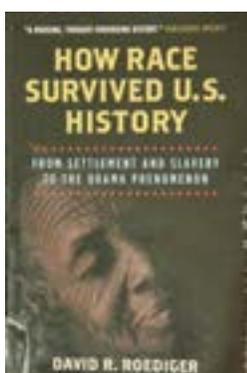
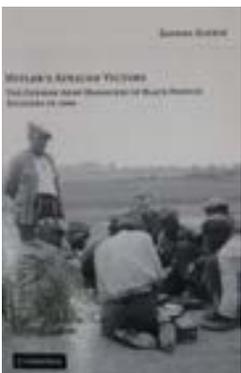
We have yet to receive an explanation.

I was told by the warden, Mr. Calloway, and by the Chief of Programs for the

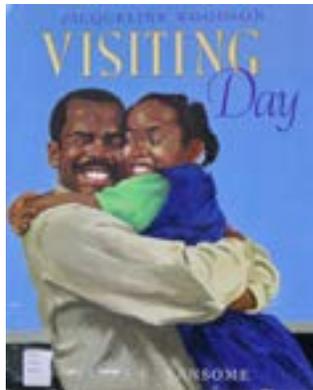


Illinois Department of Corrections, Anita Bazile-Sawyer, during a phone call on

*This page and following, photos of a few of the over 200 books removed from EJP's library at Danville Correctional Center. In some cases, as with **Race Matters**, below, it's possible to make out the book's spine label.*



March 25 that the books' subject matter was "divisive." Most concerned race and struggle. For example, there were many titles about slavery, civil rights, the Holocaust, and freedom struggles. Other impacted topics included education policy, gender and identity, and children's books about having an incarcerated



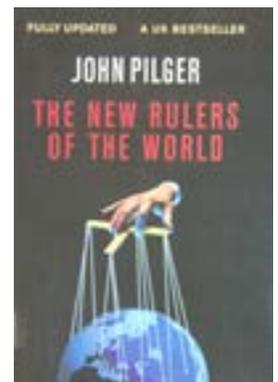
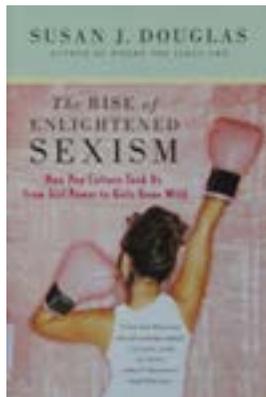
parent. You can view the [entire list of removed books here](#).

Later, the Illinois Department of Corrections issued a statement that the books had been removed because

they had not gone through the proper review process.

There is so much that's troubling about this rationale.

If the prison had knowledge that some of the books in the EJP Community Library had not gone through the proper review process, they should be able to provide evidence for this. However, there is no mark that a book receives after review, no way of looking at a book and determining whether a given text has been reviewed. How and when did they learn that certain books, some of which had been in the EJP Community Library for years, had not been properly approved?



Further, if this is what happened, prison staff must have relied on a list of some sort when they went through our library, removing some books and letting others remain. To date, they have not produced such a list.

And, if the problem was that the books had not gone through a proper review process, why not simply review them?

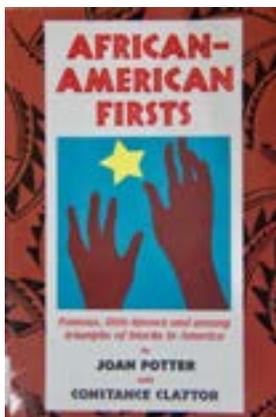
We contend that all books in the EJP library had been reviewed and approved.

The prison requires that we submit for review all books and other teaching materials. The review protocols change frequently, but typically they involve the

EJP office seeking advance permission to bring materials in, e.g. providing written lists of book titles or sending resources via email for review. We have always observed the relevant process, and have significant email records to attest to this.

Indeed, there's been no reason to avoid the review process. Until recently, it had worked

relatively efficiently. That's how we were able to stock the EJP Community Library with 4,000+ titles in the first place.



### Threat to Higher Education in Prison

We wish to expand the EJP program at Danville Correctional Center. Further, we hope in the future to offer a Bachelor's Degree. This is a moment to take

advantage of. Prison education is currently viewed favorably across the political spectrum. Several Illinois colleges and universities are weighing the possibility of starting programs.

However, we need assurances of stability. As with any professional partnership, we want confidence that the institutions and individuals that prison education programs must rely on will operate in good faith and with integrity.

The specter of censorship, of having materials seized, and of opaque or non-existent communications with IDOC gives current and emerging programs pause.

In EJP's case, after several weeks of unsuccessful efforts to resolve our situation through emails and phone calls, I lost hope that the Department of

Corrections was able or willing to confront what it had done. I reached out to the media.

Speaking to the press was a good move, in part because it was consistent with EJP's value of shedding light on prison conditions. I now fear that we were silent for too long. Our practice has been to seek to resolve any conflicts with the Illinois Department of Corrections through discussion and, in one particularly egregious instance, through a series of conversations with the University of Illinois Ethics Officer, who ultimately told me that nothing could be done.



But going public has taught us that something *can* be done—for EJP and the other programs in our state and for incarcerated scholars who yearn to have access to quality educational programs. With our allies, EJP has formed the **Freedom to Learn Campaign**, which seeks to create conditions that will support quality, robust higher education programs in Illinois prisons and more successful

outcomes for people leaving prison who wish to continue their education. You can learn more about it at [the Freedom to Learn website](#), and you can get involved.

### **Our Next Steps**

In the past few weeks, Danville prison staff have urged us to return the removed library books so that they can be, as they put it, “reviewed.” Perhaps, the warden now says, some books can be restored to the EJP Community Library.

We plan to accept this invitation, knowing that the press and others will be curious to learn the outcome of any review.

EJP needs the Illinois Department of Corrections. The University of Illinois can’t fulfill our mission of providing quality education to incarcerated individuals without IDOC’s cooperation. And the Department can’t fulfill its mission of serving justice in Illinois by promoting positive change among incarcerated individuals without institutions like the University of Illinois.

If we behave with principle, integrity, and intelligence, our two organizations can together make a positive difference in the lives of those in prison, their families, and their communities. All agree that higher education in prison is a social good. We owe it to the people of Illinois, and beyond, to make this work.

History suggests that success will not come easily.

*This photo of the 6 boxes of instructional materials that prison staff removed from the EJP library was taken on March 9, 2019, the day after the books were returned to campus. We plan to return the books to the prison next week for review.*



We are grateful to the press for their interest in what happened to our library at the prison, our allies, and supporters from across the country like the American Library Association, PEN America, and the ACLU. Our state legislators, especially State Rep Carol Ammons and State Senator Scott Bennett, have been tremendous.

### **What Can You Do?**

- learn more about the issue;
- reach out to your your state legislators if you’re in Illinois;
- spread news about this effort by sharing this newsletter;
- donate time or money to the Freedom to Learn Campaign or the prison education program or books-to-prisons program of your choice.

# EJP Impact Gala 2019



Celebrating 10 Years of EJP!

Because  
Knowledge  
is POWER

EJP IS A FULL  
PICTURE OF  
COMPASSION, DECENTY,  
AND GOOD WORK.  
♡♡

I'm just learning about this  
program and how much it is  
impacting so many people.  
I will look forward  
to supporting this wonderful  
program and others like it.

We asked guests  
to share why they  
love EJP.



Nurtured  
my  
Humility

I love EJP because:  
• it is supportive  
• it's always going  
• the people there never  
quit

EJP  
causes  
Ripple effects

Systemic hate  
and Oppression  
must be matched  
with  
Organic Love  
and acceptance

DONATE

EJP relies entirely on “soft money.” For the past 10 years, we’ve counted on donors and grants to keep our programs going. Thank you for believing in our vision: a more humane and just world, sustained through critical awareness and EDUCATION.



Recipients of EJP Scholarships were recognized at our gala, including two family members of EJP students, **Monica Esparza** and **Raylan Grace**, and three EJP alumni who are continuing their education post-release, **Tremain Leggans**, **Emmett Sanders**, and **Shaun Wilkes**.

Alumni in attendance at EJP’s 10th anniversary gala included Master of Ceremonies **Daniel Graves**, right; and **Odell Whitehorn** and **Michael Tafolla**, both below left.

Below right, award recipient **Aaron Ammons** and State Representative **Carol Ammons**.

For more photos, courtesy of Jimi Allen Photography, visit [EJP’s flickr page](#).



The mission of the Education Justice Project is to build a model college-in-prison program that demonstrates the positive impacts of higher education upon incarcerated students, their families, the neighborhoods

# Ten Years of EJP

**EJP has offered educational programs to eligible individuals incarcerated at Danville Correctional Center, a men's medium-security state prison located about 35 miles from the University of Illinois' main campus, since 2008.** As we round out our tenth year of operations, it's gratifying and overwhelming to note how much we have grown. EJP instructors are at the prison 5 days each week, morning through evening. (We would go on the weekend, too, if we were allowed.) This year, our schedule includes for-credit courses for which EJP students earn U of I credit, computer programming, a mindfulness group, teacher training, and ten other programs.



## EJP Awards

Aaron Ammons, Charlie Evans, Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers (CLAIM), Annette Taylor

## EJP Scholarships (\$1,000)

Tasheba Adkinson, Matthew Anderson, Monica Esparza, Raylan Grace, Tremain Leggans, Earl Nawls, Emmett Sanders, Shaun Wilkes

On the outside, EJP researchers and writers produce reentry guides for individuals getting released from prison and settling in Illinois (*Mapping Your Future*) or being deported

to Mexico and Central America (*Returning Home*). We have a scholarship program, a research group, and a vibrant internship program for Illinois undergraduates on the Urbana campus.

What distinguishes EJP from other college-in-prison programs?

While there's much that all programs committed to expanding access to higher education share, there are some ways that EJP stands apart. They include our investment in **research and scholarship**, the responsibility we feel towards **supporting the broader field** (we've hosted two national conferences on higher education in prison and helped to launch the Illinois

Coalition for Higher Education in Prison), and our unapologetic effort to lead with our values and enact policies and procedures consistent with our declared commitment to **transparency, gentleness, compassion, and social justice.**

As the other main story in this newsletter suggests, EJP is also distinguished by the fraught nature of our relationship with the Illinois Department of Corrections. It has

twice suspended our operations at the prison. Multiple instructors have been “locked out.” However, the culture of EJP is one of dedication and persistence. We believe **the moral arc of the universe bends in EJP’s favor.** It’s only a matter of time before programs like today’s EJP are the norm. By then, EJP will hopefully be a few steps ahead, addressing the next front in the movement for humane and effective criminal justice and educational equity.

## IMPORTANT UPDATE: HOUSE HEARINGS NEXT MONTH

The Illinois House has just announced a joint subject matter hearing on censorship in Illinois prisons, based on recent events at Danville Correctional Center.

Monday July 8 at 10am

Michael A. Bilandic Building  
C-600, 6th Floor  
Chicago, IL

This event is open to the public and all are welcome.

DONATE