



EDUCATION JUSTICE PROJECT
an initiative of Education at Illinois



info@educationjustice.net
217.300.5150

1001 S. Wright Street
Champaign, IL 61820
www.educationjustice.net

August 2020

The Importance of In-Person Instruction in Prison Higher Education Programs

As the coronavirus has spread, prison higher education programs have had to halt in-person courses and rethink the ways we offer instruction to students. Many have either cancelled classes or converted their courses to distance learning – e.g. teaching via instructional packets sent into prisons. These are good short-term solutions. However, research demonstrates that shifting permanently to distance learning and e-learning models would threaten the benefits that higher education in prison provides to incarcerated people and society. These benefits to our students include deeper engagement in courses, a restored sense of dignity and enhanced success and confidence. In addition, live classes lead to learning for instructors and prison staff and administrators. In-person learning is a crucial component of quality prison higher education programming and should continue to be the default.

Restored dignity and humanity – EJP students refer to the quality of resisting pressures that threaten their self-worth as “resilient dignity.” This dignity is cultivated in part by participating in higher education programming. The prison environment retreats when individuals step into the classroom, which is (or should be) a space of mutual respect, learning, and vitality in which students are encouraged to express themselves, think critically, and engage one another with vigor and respect.

The physical space of the classroom is key, explains EJP alumnus Orlando Mayorga. “Physical proximity to another human being in a classroom is a humanizing act that directly and indirectly validates a person’s existence,” he writes. “Something as simple as offering me a pen when I have forgotten mine by another student in those spaces and I in turn do the same for others are those simple examples of humanization that web/correspondence courses do not provide.”

Enhanced confidence and success – EJP students report gaining confidence in their ability to listen to others and express themselves. According to EJP alumnus Roberto Lazcano, who took both correspondence and in-person courses while incarcerated, this is due not only to participating in discussions during class, but also before and after class and during breaks.

In-person courses assist students in developing communication and leadership skills that are directly transferable to the working world. A 2019 study on in-person instruction published in the *Journal of Correctional Education* found that it prepares students for a variety of contexts, including applying and interviewing for jobs and navigating professional environments after their release.

Deeper engagement - In a 2014 survey, traditional undergraduates reported that in-person instruction keeps them more engaged, which increases attention and focus and motivates critical thinking skills. EJP students exemplify this. They continue class discussions during weekend gym time, keeping each other engaged in coursework even outside the classroom. “If you lose the shared experience, would you have that level of engagement?” EJP evaluator Nicole Robinson says. “It’s that shared accountability toward the work, that engagement with it. Education is not an individual experience - it requires a group environment.”

Reciprocal learning - In-person instruction challenges notions of prison for instructors and enables them to operate as learners as well as instructors. Instructors in an Ohio prison reported a greater awareness of their stereotypes of prison, as well as their power and privilege. EJP instructor Jim Sosnowski said that he confronted his own assumptions about prison after meeting the men there and speaking with them. “It made me rethink about what were my biases and how do I need to challenge them,” he says. “When you really make an effort to think about power, identity, your preconceptions and form those professional relationships with the men and allow them to speak into the biases, that’s when ideas get challenged.”

Demonstrating value - In-person programming makes visible, in a way that correspondence courses cannot, the value of higher education in prison. Staff at Danville Correctional Center, EJP’s host prison, report more positive views on prison education as a consequence of being able to witness the impact it has on students. Photos of incarcerated individuals in classrooms circulated by higher education programs can fight stereotypes and add complexity to popular understandings about the abilities and interests of people who are in prison.

Environment as learning - Many studies have demonstrated the importance of a stable environment on learning. Noise and other distractions, which can be hard to avoid in prison, negatively impact achievement and engagement. Correspondence courses force students to learn on their own time, in cells or common areas where others might be talking or playing games, says Mr. Lazcano.

By contrast, an in-person classroom offers a place of quiet and focus. “By the time you make it to the school building, you’re in that mindset of preparing yourself for class,” Mr. Lazcano says. A physical space separate from the rest of the prison provides students a better opportunity to enter a deep-thinking, scholarly mode.