



EJP Fall 2019 Newsletter



EDUCATION JUSTICE PROJECT

An initiative of Education at Illinois

Censored Materials

Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America, by James Foreman Jr. (winner of 2018 Pulitzer prize)

The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of how Our Government Segregated America, by Richard Rothstein

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, by Frederick Douglass

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, by Harriet Jacobs

Violence and its Alternatives: An Interdisciplinary Reader, by Steger Manfred

A Visit to the Big House, by Oliver Butterworth

Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison, by Michel Foucault

Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, by Patricia Hill Collins

Respect In A World of Inequality, by Richard Sennett

Colored People: A Memoir, by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

and over 150 other titles.

THE RIGHT TO READ

by Rebecca Ginsburg, EJP Director

This newsletter provides an update on the Freedom to Learn Campaign.

While our books have been returned, including those pictured above (on a bookshelf in the EJP library), we continue to push for improvements. Our goal is statewide policies that will protect Illinois' prison higher education programs and incarcerated students from unreasonable restrictions upon access to academic materials.

Please keep reading! This is a story with national significance, and there is much you can do to support us and the EJP students.

What Is EJP?

The Education Justice Project (EJP) is a multiple-award unit of the College of Education at the University of Illinois. Since 2008, we have operated out of Danville Correctional Center, a men's medium-security prison in Central Illinois. We offer for-credit courses, reading groups, tutoring, mindfulness

program, and several other initiatives to eligible men incarcerated at the prison. EJP has a long-standing library at the prison that is independent from the prison library. It currently contains over 4,000 volumes on subjects from philosophy to computing to reentry to women's studies. It exists to support EJP students in their academic classes and intellectual growth. (They do not have access to the internet.)

Why Did the Prison Remove Materials from the EJP Library?

The Department of Corrections (IDOC) has not publicly explained why the books were removed.

Even at the Subject Matter Hearing called by Illinois legislators in July 2019, IDOC did not explain the censorship. The new head of IDOC, Rob Jeffreys, stated, in answer to direct questioning, that he had not been appointed at the time of the censorship and was very desirous of moving forward from it.

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The day following his testimony, we were informed by Danville staff that we were permitted to return all of the removed books to the EJP library.

So, Is It All Over Now?

No.

We are relieved to have the books back on the shelves where the students can access them and grateful for the concerned attention of state legislators, local and national media, and our local community. We certainly have the option of considering this chapter closed.

However, we have chosen instead to make good use of the momentum and keep pushing.

In March 2019, a coalition of prison educators and other allies formed the **Freedom to Learn Campaign IL** to fight for the return of EJP's library books and to advocate for changes to statewide policy around higher education in prison. EJP is a founding member of the Campaign and enthusiastically supports its four priority areas (see box at right). We expect that bringing systemic change to the landscape of higher education in Illinois will be a multi-year effort, one that will make a positive difference in the lives of thousands of individuals incarcerated in our state. We have heard from prison educators in other states who are interested in launching their own Freedom to Learn Campaigns. We're excited about moving this onto a national level.

What's Next?

EJP is working with key state legislators, especially State Representatives Carol Ammons and La Shawn Ford, on legislation that addresses key elements of the Freedom to Learn platform.

We are encouraging IDOC's efforts to revise administrative directives (internal agency regulations) so that they are more in line with IDOC's mission, the needs of Illinois' higher education in prison programs, and the dignity of incarcerated students.

Our members are speaking to groups locally and nationally about prison censorship and what we've learned about resisting it. The challenges we face in Illinois are echoed across the U.S.

The Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (IL-CHEP) has been galvanized by these events. There is nothing like a threat to basic human rights to sharpen focus. IL-CHEP decided to hold its first-ever conference in Springfield in October 2019 (see article on back cover). We were gratified that IDOC's new leadership attended the conference and

indicated their interest in working more closely with IL-CHEP. The coalition, which EJP belongs to, plans a second meeting downstate in Spring 2020. It continues to offer technical support for current and emerging college-in-prison programs in Illinois, and has signed on to the Freedom to Learn Campaign.

How Are the EJP Students Doing?

Many students and program alumni have told me that they are thrilled that we have launched this campaign. Even incarcerated individuals who are not EJP students have stopped me when I'm at the prison to say things like, "I saw you on TV the other night. Thank you for standing up for us."

This has had a galvanizing effect. Maybe we should have taken steps to insist upon fair and transparent policies for Illinois' college-in-prison programs and stronger protections for our students years ago. However, it was hard to think about moving policy forward when EJP has long felt itself struggling just to survive. I'm thankful for the series of censorship acts that pushed us over the edge, rallied our supporters, and supplied the backing, from on and off campus, that empowered us to insist on Illinois doing better.

The Freedom to Learn Campaign

Freedom to Participate in Quality Higher Education Programming, e.g., adequate classroom space provided, face-to-face instruction prioritized, IDOC sets annual goals and releases performance data.

Freedom to Study Without Interference, e.g., students allowed to keep books in cell.

Academic Freedom/Freedom from Censorship, e.g., clear and fair policies around publications clearance and appeals processes.

Freedom to Continue Education Upon Release, e.g., universities have staff specially trained to work with and support applicants with criminal records.

What About the EJP Library?

The library is going strong! We've even had increased donations of books to our collection in recent months, for which we are very grateful.

THANK YOU TO OUR GENEROUS DONORS

We are grateful for recent support from the following:

57th Street Quaker Meeting • Community Foundation of East Central Illinois • First Presbyterian Church of Champaign • Urbana-Champaign Friends Meeting • Unitarian Universalist Church of Urbana-Champaign • Andrew W. Mellon Foundation • Mansfield Family Foundation • Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities • Harvard University Press • UIUC Physics Department • Pearson • Rethinking Schools Publishers • Sigma Tau Delta • The Sun • *and all of our generous individual donors.*

Last year we raised almost \$50,000 from individual contributors, an EJP record! We hope to do as well this year. Our grants don't cover all of our costs. Your contribution supports academic materials at the prison, distribution of reentry guides, scholarships for formerly incarcerated students who seek to finish their degrees upon release, and much more.



EJP Mission

The mission of the Education Justice Project is to create a model college-in-prison program that demonstrates the positive impacts of higher education upon incarcerated people, their families, the communities from which they come, the host institution, and society as a whole.

What Can You Do?

I've been moved by people who have contacted me to say, "You don't know me, but I heard about what happened to the EJP library and I'm angry. I want to help." We've invited them to join the Freedom to Learn Campaign's steering committee and subcommittees, to get involved in IL-CHEP and, of course, to join EJP. Our work requires many hands, from those great at social media to fundraisers, from people with connections to elected officials to those who can take meeting minutes, from strategic planners to event planners. All contribute and all are welcome.

At this point, another great need is for financial support for the Freedom to Learn Campaign so that we can hire a staff person to coordinate all the moving pieces. In 2020, we will ask Illinois residents to support proposed legislation that advances higher education in prison.

As ever, then, the Education Justice Project depends on your financial support. Thank you!



Above, scenes from Danville prison this past semester. Top, students working hard in the EJP computer lab. Bottom, guest speaker Fleet Maull (far right) addresses EJP students and Director of Academic Programs Lance Pittman, in striped shirt.

“The weapons utilized to marginalize, deny, and suppress a person’s sense of humanity, dignity, and ability to critical address their conditions, are located in economic, political, and social realities that stifle the ability to identify, articulate, and therefore disrupt. Yelling in pillows, violently clashing with other brothers seeking to survive, attacking staff, and self-harm through hunger strikes does not make us heard, nether does suicide, throwing defecation and urine. They give credence to ideas of the bestial nature of those incarcerated.

In actuality, these men are desperately clawing at their own throats, attempting to express something, attempting to be heard.”

- Raphel Jackson, EJP student

SOME SCENES FROM THE FIRST EVER IL-CHEP CONFERENCE



Far left, Rob Jeffreys, the new IDOC director, speaks at the conference. Several EJP alumni attended. From left, Jobie Taylor and Chris Harrison. [More conference photos online.](#)

FROM THE DESK OF OUR DIRECTOR OF DONOR RELATIONS

by Debbie Lowe-Morgan



Thank you for your belief and dedication to our students and to the Education Justice Project.

You help change the narrative around imprisonment and allow us to show the gifts that formerly incarcerated individuals bring to our communities.

To all our incredible, remarkable donors who have supported us in our mission to offer high quality education programs inside Danville Correctional Center, **you are appreciated**. We quite honestly could not do this without you.

EJP is aiming high this year. We want to offer more support services for family members of our incarcerated students, distribute more reentry guides to individuals across Illinois, and advocate for fair statewide policies that allow those that are incarcerated to pursue educational studies unhindered.

As we end this year, we ask you to make a special donation to EJP. You can access the [EJP donations page here](#). Thank you, and Happy Holidays from EJP!



Left, EJP alumnus Otilio Rosas reads a paper written by currently incarcerated EJP student Raphel Jackson at the 2019 Illinois Conference on Higher Education in Prison in Springfield in October. Mr. Jackson’s paper is quoted above.

