

EJP MOVING INTO NEW EXPANDED OFFICE SPACE!

Our current location in the University YMCA building on Wright Street is EJP's 5th office, and by far the best.

We started in 2008 with space generously provided by the Center for Democracy in a Multiracial Society on Stoughton Street in Urbana. We had a single room on the 3rd floor with low ceilings, just enough for a file cabinet and some chairs. We quickly outgrew it, and were happy to be offered space by the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities.

The benefits of working in the IPRH building were that our office got larger and we had occasional use of their beautiful seminar space. Still, EJP continued to grow, and the College of Education found us space in the old Colonel Wolfe School on Healey Street in Champaign.

What a charming place to work! It had short water fountains for children and chalkboards. We had use of two large, sunlit classrooms (see photo below) and a storage area. We were disappointed when we were told we had to move because the

building had been slated for sale. At the same time, we recognized that we needed to provide some lockable office space to key staff in recognition of the confidential materials that they were responsible for.

We moved back into the IPRH building on Pennsylvania Avenue in Urbana in April 2017. This time, we had more space than previously—an entire suite of 4 offices, in fact, plus a reception area! This provided the work space our staff and needed, but unfortunately meant that we couldn't as easily offer the same sort of communal working and socializing spaces that we'd been able to offer members previously. We missed that. In addition, it was clear that EJP was continuing to grow and needing more space for meetings, interviews, and events.

Mike Doyle, the former executive director of the Campus YMCA, served on EJP's Advisory Council. He told us about space opening up at the YMCA, and we jumped at the chance to move there. The Y is not a campus building, but lies in the very heart of campus, at 1001 S. Wright

Street. It's home to many progressive and international student organizations, and to community organizations as well. There was, at that time, even a Thai restaurant on the first floor!

We moved in October 2017 and have been at the YMCA since then, though working remotely since March 2020. This summer, we moved into additional rooms at the Y. We're exchanging our large "EJP community space" on the first floor for more offices on the 2nd. This provides the Reentry Guide Initiative needed space, shared offices for the growing number of EJP directors, and even a small self-contained kitchen, which will make it easier for us to host events.

Please join us in person at an open house to see our new, expanded offices at the YMCA from 11–2pm on Friday September 10!



Beth Pearl, Writer • Jamarri Nix, Graphic Designer

CONTACT US

1001 S. Wright Street, Champaign, IL 61820 • info@educationjustice.net • 217.300.5150 • educationjustice.net



LETTER FROM REBECCA GINSBURG, EJP Director

The coming months are full of promising changes for the Education Justice Project. I'm excited to tell you what we have planned and invite you to be a part of it.

Danville

We expect to resume programming at Danville Correctional Center this fall (see story on p. 3). Public health restrictions have kept us from the prison since March 13, 2020. We can't wait to see and work with the incarcerated EJP students again. I hope that our next newsletter, in Fall 2021, will feature stories and photos of our college-in-prison program back in action.

Campus Center

Since last year we have been exploring the possibility of EJP becoming a campus center. Many of you have participated in focus groups on this subject and completed our recent survey.

Over 90% of survey respondents (of 118) indicated that they believe that EJP should pursue campus status.

But what would it mean, exactly, for us to be a center?

We hope that being officially recognized as a permanent (or as permanent as anything can be on a campus so large and complex) unit of the University of Illinois will provide greater visibility and stature to our work. Becoming a campus center doesn't necessarily involve the allocation

of space or funds. However, in EJP's case it happens to coincide with the expansion of our office space at the Campus YMCA on Wright Street, so we believe our space needs are well taken care of for the time being.

(We expect to open our expanded offices in Fall 2021, and you're invited to an open house on Friday September 10!)

Becoming a center will provide greater sustainability. Hopefully, it will also attract funding opportunities. Importantly, it makes more visible the university's commitment to providing quality education to system-impacted individuals.

We're excited about the prospect, which is a multi-stepped process that is likely to take many more months and requires the approval of multiple entities on and off campus. We'll keep you posted on progress made.

Prison to Gown Program

We're piloting a new initiative! Our Prison to Gown Pathway starts with learning more about the needs of formerly incarcerated students on the Urbana campus. We expect it to develop into a full-blown program through which EJP makes wraparound services available to these students, who will eventually be able to enroll in the U of I directly following release and find a supportive and welcoming environment for them.

This effort is not aimed at exclusively at EJP students, but of course we're thrilled at the prospect that some of the participants may be the same students that we work with at Danville Correctional Center.

We'll be ramping this effort up slowly. Ensuring that incarcerated students can continue their education upon reentry is something that many college-in-prison programs are turning their attention to. It's about time.

Campus Scan

We wish to better understand the supports and obstacles that systems-involved individuals currently encounter on campus. Accordingly, we have started conducting an audit of the policies and procedures of the units that they most frequently engage with, e.g. financial aid, admissions, and housing. This isn't just about formerly incarcerated students. We're including the experiences and challenges faced as well by formerly incarcerated job seekers, staff, and faculty.

It can be very cumbersome, for instance, to hire individuals who have a criminal record, and traumatic for them. Indeed, we've had two individuals drop out of the process rather than submit themselves to background check procedures that they found demeaning.

Our goal, of course, is a change in campus

policies and attitudes.

We're fortunate to be working with a coalition of prison education programs from across the Big 10, all equally invested in collecting data on existing procedures, legislative impediments, and unwritten guidelines, as well as the experiences of actual individuals who have tried to navigate our respective campuses' policies. We trust that our findings will eventually contribute to institutional change across the region and beyond.

Policy and Research

EJP's involvement in the Freedom to Learn Campaign has helped us better understand the role of policy in protecting and expanding our work. (See story on the campaign below.) For many college-in-prison programs, it's all we can do to cobble together enough funds to teach a few courses. Having the time to think "bigger picture" is a luxury. In the coming year, we plan to grow EJP's capacity to engage in research that supports policy makers in Illinois and beyond to more critically understand the purposes and values of higher education in prison, the needs of reentering individuals, and to help other programs get involved in this work.

Year of Learning

We have designated 2021 to be EJP's "year of learning" around immigration and deportation. This follows our decision to expand Returning Home, our guide for individuals getting deported after incarceration, so that it's useful to a broader population, including unaccompanied minors, family members of deported individuals, and others caught up in deportation who may not have a criminal legal background. The request to expand the guide comes at the request of the Mexican Consulate in Chicago. Given the connections between immigration and criminalization, and the overlap between incarceration and immigration detention, we're glad to be encouraged to work in this area.

Year of Learning events are open to the public and you're warmly invited. All are currently virtual. You'll find them noted on the "Calendar" section of our website at www.educationjustice.net.

New Degree Program at the Prison

We have learned that the Illinois Department of Corrections encouraged Eastern Illinois University to create a bachelor's degree program at the prison,

even financially compensating them for offering courses. This came as a surprise to us.

In our last newsletter, I reported on the return of Pell funding for higher education in prison programs. Those funds are limited to programs offering degree programs. So, for the time being, we will be supporting Eastern's degree plans rather than proceeding with our own.

We are making it work.

EJP students will benefit from having a degree program available sooner rather than later. Our new colleagues at Eastern are eager to learn about teaching and advising within carceral spaces and earnest about wanting to do best by the students. Of course, there are still many details to iron out, but we're moving forward together, energetically, to ensure that incarcerated students at Danville receive the quality of education that they and, indeed, all people behind bars, deserve.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON RESOLUTION CLOSE TO PASSING!

Good news out of the Illinois legislature! This spring the Illinois General Assembly took up a resolution that will create a task force that will study higher education in prison. The resolution states that one of the goals of the task force would be to

recommend a legislative action plan to expand access to higher education in prison in Illinois and propel Illinois to being a national exemplar in that area. ”

The resolution, HJR 27, has passed both the House and Senate. It requires only a "concurrence" vote when the legislature next convenes, and then a signature from the governor.

The legislation was drafted over the

course of several months with help from the Freedom to Learn Campaign, the advocacy wing of the Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison. Its chief sponsors are State Rep. Carol Ammons and State Senator Kimberly A. Lightford.

The Freedom to Learn Campaign's (FTL) working group, which took the lead on this effort, includes EJP alumnus Pablo Mendoza and director Rebecca Ginsburg. Other members are Tim Barnett, Marsheda Ewulomi, and Ashton Hoselton. Rep. Ammons' legislative aide Jenna Sickenius played a pivotal role in moving this effort forward.

FTL's communications team, which was headed by EJP member Fionna Ek, organized regular focus groups of formerly incarcerated men and women, as well as instructors, to provide feedback to

draft resolutions and FTL's lists of priorities.

EJP alum Pablo Mendoza says that the discussions were a learning process for all, and that they helped make the resolution stronger.

"The process was dynamic and inclusive," he says.

At its heart, Jenna explains, the legislation acknowledges the need for efficient, effective and standardized

The resolution is made better by having all these voices because it's not a top-down approach, but a bottom-up understanding of the nuances, difficulties and challenges of being a student, an instructor or a program director. ”

higher education across Illinois Department of Corrections facilities. It also promises to study the issue and make recommendations that could then become laws.

Legislation is slow, Jenna says, but this is an important first step. "There's definitely an adrenaline rush" to seeing the resolution pass the house, but there's a long way to go. "We've jumped in the pool," she says, "and now we have to start swimming laps."

Pablo echoes her. Though it was a relief to see the resolution move so quickly through both chambers, now is time for the real work. He intends to keep the stakeholders accountable, to push them to make access to higher education easier

for incarcerated people.

I had to lie, steal and cheat " to get into a program," he says. "That shouldn't be the case in a correctional setting. It shouldn't be this difficult.

What's next for FTL? They'll continue advocating for higher education in prison, including a future push for a legislative declaration in support of higher education in prison. They'll also continue looking out for HJR 27, Fiona says. "We look forward to learning and growing from the data that the task force will produce."



Orlando Mayorga, EJP alumnus

WE'RE BACK!

We are incredibly excited to announce that, barring unforeseen complications, EJP will be offering in-person classes and activities at Danville Correctional Center this fall!

Registration forms were distributed at the prison earlier this month. We're starting back up slowly, with three classes available for credit, including the first part of a mindfulness service learning class, an Urban Planning course on cities and immigrants, and Social Foundations of Education.

Instructor Fiona Ngô taught a correspondence course on Immigrants and Refugees this spring. While the experience was positive, they're looking forward to teaching at the prison again in 2022. "I'm looking forward to being in person," they said.

I'm hoping I'll have some " repeat students so I can meet them in person. And I always feel like the students are going to learn best from the other students.

Resuming programs at the prison represents a huge step back into our regular, in-person programming, but it won't look exactly the same as pre-COVID classes. Extra precautions will be in place

to keep everyone safe. The instructors and students will wear masks at all times, and class sizes will be limited to eight to ten, depending on the classroom (down from the usual 15) to allow for social distancing.



Molly Zupan, EJP head intern

Extracurricular activities – such as Language Partners (EJP's ESL program), and Community Anti-violence Education (CAVE) – will also be limited to eight participants at a given time. This means that they will have to adjust their programming to fit the new guidelines.

CAVE plans to meet twice a week starting in August, and will limit meetings to just the core group of inside members and facilitators. They hope, later in the semester, to host larger meetings for the full group in the more spacious chapel, which will allow for social distancing.

To start, the group will serve as a space to process experiences of the past period, regroup, and have conversations about the directions they can take the program in the coming year based on the members' needs, availability, and energy, says CAVE Coordinator Eva Rogar.

The restrictions have not dampened group members' excitement, though.

The outside CAVE " members are delighted to go back inside! Of course there is some general apprehension about the COVID situation and how things will be organized, but excitement to meet our inside members again and continue the program certainly prevails!

— Eve