



Education Justice Project

FALL 2021

LETTER FROM EJP DIRECTOR

In the midst of rising COVID numbers at Danville Correctional Center and across the state, I find myself seeking spots of hope.

Fortunately, there are several things to be grateful for this season.

First, thanks to the efforts of the Freedom to Learn Campaign, the Illinois General Assembly passed resolution HJR 27 during this fall's veto session. It will create a **Task Force on Higher Education in Prison** charged with presenting to the governor a legislative agenda that ensures Illinois' place as a national leader in providing quality college education to people in prison.

I'm honored to have been appointed to the task force, and can't wait to get started.

There are many wonderful and innovative college-in-prison programs in our state. The task force will consider how we can best encourage even more universities and colleges to offer educational opportunities to incarcerated people and engage established best practices in doing so.

Pell funding for higher education in prison will be restored by 2023, a significant victory that deserves celebration. At the same time, it's inevitable that predatory institutions will be drawn to offer prison programming

by the promise of federal dollars.

Thoughtful planning can promote our dual goals of encouraging new efforts on the one hand, while protecting vulnerable populations from exploitative practices. Already, there are stories of emerging programs operating with poor faith or surprising levels of ignorance; it's hard to tell the difference. I hope we can create a lively and connected landscape of higher ed programs in Illinois prisons, along with safeguards that make it harder for bad actors to get started.

Second, I'm grateful for support that makes it possible for EJP to launch our new **Prison to Gown Pathway initiative**. You can read more about it inside. Universities that host college-in-prison programs are finally acknowledging our responsibility to be as proactive towards the needs of formerly incarcerated students as we have been towards those who are currently locked up.

In other words, our work doesn't end at the prison gate.

It's no longer acceptable to offer programs to individuals while they're behind bars, while implementing policies that make it difficult for them to continue their education on campus after release.

Considering the racial disproportionality of incarceration in the U.S., easing the

pathway to college after prison is both sound educational policy and a matter of racial equity.

Finally, I'm encouraged as ever by the spirit and heart shown by **EJP members**. After over a year of not being able to enter Danville because of the pandemic, they engaged in extensive planning so we could resume EJP at the prison in August 2021. Headed by EJP's Academic Director, Ellen Ritter, program coordinators and their teams of instructors delivered a smooth transition back to in-person programming, while setting policies for social distancing and double masking that went beyond what either the Department of Corrections or the University of Illinois required. As a result, we were able to offer a full semester of for-credit courses and extra-curricular activities, and plan to offer 5 new classes, from Linguistics to Psychology and Gender and Women Studies in the spring.

We're also launching our new **Accountancy Certificate**, a partnership with colleagues at Gies Business School, in the new year, of special interest to those who plan to open their own businesses upon release.

Thank you for your support, and best wishes for 2022!

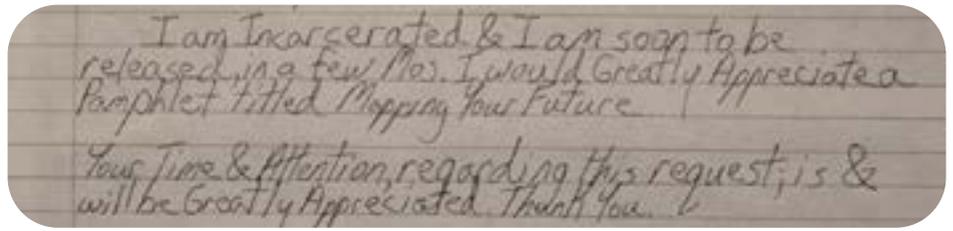
By Rebecca Ginsburg

RESPONDING TO REENTRY GUIDE REQUESTS

One of the duties of Natalia Fic, our Reentry Guide Initiative (RGI) Distribution Coordinator, is to ensure that the letters that come each week from individuals in prison requesting guides are read and responded to. A lot of emotions come up for her in performing this task, which she describes as a difficult one.

Currently, EJP produces two reentry guides, *Mapping Your Future: A Guide to Successful Reentry in Illinois* and *A New Path: A Guide to the Challenges and Opportunities After Deportation*. The RGI team has sent out over 6,000 guides this year so far. (They are also available for download on the EJP website.) On average, we receive around 300 letters from incarcerated people each year (see front banner photograph).

Natalia says that in addition to requesting guide copies, which RGI team members mail out several times



each week, letter writers sometimes ask about EJP's college-in-prison program and how they might enroll. Others share their life experiences and how incarceration has affected their lives. She says what has stuck with her the most is the gratitude from those who have found answers in RGI's reentry guides. Many express their thanks to EJP for believing in them and giving them a chance at gaining back the control in their lives.

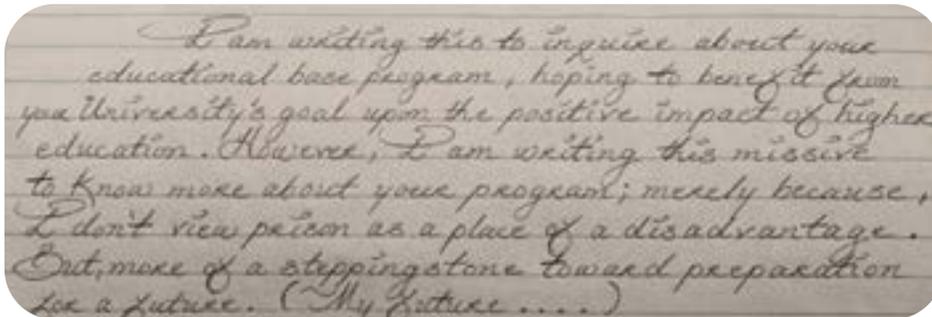
Natalia says, "sometimes an individual will write back to us, thanking us for our time and opening up a bit more about their experience."

While most of the letters come from those incarcerated in Illinois, the RGI team also receives requests from other states. Additional letters come from family members and friends of those incarcerated who want to prepare themselves for their loved one's release. The largest recipient of guides is the Illinois Department of Corrections, to which EJP delivers thousands of copies each year.

EJP started the Reentry Guide Initiative in 2015 in response to alumni's request that we provide reliable information to individuals about what they might expect when reentering the world after finishing their sentences.

The team tries to answer everyone who writes. And despite not being able to answer every question, every person who writes a letter receives a reentry guide as well as any other resources the team can provide. Natalia says, "We do everything we can as a team."

By Grace Siegelman



10 YEARS WITH EJP: REFLECTIONS AS I APPROACH MY RELEASE

As I look back over my decade with EJP, I can truly say that the thing that I am most proud of is being able to take notes and keep up with class discussions.

I am a 61-year old African-American who lived on the Westside of Chicago and went to grammar school on the north side of Chicago in the late 1960s. While trying to obtain my education, I faced a lot of hostile and prejudiced attitudes. As I gaze back over those days, I recognize in myself the symptoms of a learning disability now called dyslexia.

Because of my ability to manipulate and fool the teachers, they thought that I knew what I was doing. This allowed me to maneuver through grammar school and part of high school before I was finally found out. However, I was constantly told by one of my grammar school teachers that, being Black, I would never be anything but a janitor or factory worker, and that I would never make it into college. I began to question my value and worth as a student. Eventually, I dropped out of school.

A few years later, I met the same teacher's son. He was a counselor at the boys' and girls' club that I was attending.



He and some other counselor took interest in me and helped to motivate me to return to my academic endeavors.

I received my high school diploma and did a year and a half at Truman Junior College before I lost interest in school again and started running the streets. I allowed the call of the streets to lure me into taking actions that eventually ended up with me being incarcerated. Inside of prison I heard this taunting voice—my grammar school teacher laughing at me and saying, “I told you that you would not amount to anything.” I felt the academic bug crawling into my guts and biting my pride, setting me back on that road to learning.

Insecurity with my penmanship and spelling made me reluctant to pursue my academic endeavors while incarcerated, but because most of the tests were either true or false or multiple choice, I was able to pass them and gain two certificates—my Associates degree and Bible Study certificate—and took the opportunity to join the EJP family.

In EJP, I was able to improve my poor penmanship, spelling, and grammatical skills. I was given the opportunity to validate my improvement and quiet the laughter of the past. To now be able to take notes and keep up with class conversation makes me feel good and proud.

In EJP I have encountered a few struggles, but they were nothing I couldn't handle. My hardest struggles are with typing up my papers on time. It takes me time to structure my thoughts on paper, and I only recently learned how to type and work on a computer. I am a perfectionist who tries to make everything right, so that I won't get laughed at again.

By Gerome Norfleet

Mr. Norfleet is scheduled to be released in February 2022 after over thirty years in prison.

NEW PRISON TO GOWN INITIATIVE

EJP's newest major initiative is our Prison-to-Gown Pathway (PGP).

Formerly incarcerated individuals, including EJP alumni, face significant logistical hurdles enrolling in and graduating from universities and colleges after release. We wish to better understand those that exist on the Illinois campus and address them.

PGP will start by researching the potential barriers, such as the application process and housing restrictions, and identifying possible supportive services, such as peer mentoring.



Erick Nava

As a first-generation college student, I know how challenging it can be to find and access campus resources, to find your community and a sense of belonging, all of which are critical to college success,

— Richard

Our next step will be to provide some of the identified support services to a selected group of currently enrolled University of Illinois students. Eventually, we want UIUC to be recognized as a supportive landing spot for qualified students getting released from prison.

Research finds that formerly incarcerated individuals are eight times less likely to complete college than students who haven't been incarcerated. Richard Porter, EJP's assistant academic director, understands firsthand the challenges that first generation college students face in applying for college programs and finding success.

He adds, “Making that transition from being incarcerated to being enrolled in a college campus could bring some challenges, and we want to make sure that formerly incarcerated individuals are finding support just like any other student on the campus.”



Johnny Page

Prison to Gown's advisory council includes individuals who have expertise on the transition between incarceration and campus. EJP alumni Erick Nava, a student at UI Springfield, and Johnny Page, who graduated from Governors State University, are among its members. The initiative is supported by funding from the Joyce Foundation and the University of Illinois' Vice Chancellor's Office Of Diversity, Equity And Inclusion.

By DaYeon Eon

“WHAT IT MEANS TO BE PART OF EJP”

We asked the newest EJP students, sixteen individuals who have been participating in the New Student Reading Group since August, “What does it mean to you to be an EJP student?” Here are some of their responses.

EJP is the beginning of a new phase in my transformation. It’s new ideas, strengthening goals, and building bridges. EJP is a glimpse of a new life filled with hope. EJP is a blessing in many forms. Thank you, EJP.

— Rodney Thomas



As an EJP student for the first time, this experience has been incredible. To think that I can participate in a college campus experience while incarcerated has been such a blessing to me. EJP does a wonderful job of bringing university level experiences and education to the “forgotten” (that is, incarcerated). I sincerely hope that EJP will continue to expand and grow and that it will always be available to us.

— Bradley Martin

As a new EJP student, I have valued the opportunity to engage with other people on topics beyond the everyday incarcerated life. These connections, to be honest, keep me sane and promote healthy thinking in ways not available when locked in a cell twenty-two hours a day.

— Matthew Laird



In truth, it gives me immense joy to be able to call myself an EJP student. Just thinking of the energy that the EJP community displays is so infectious. The knowledge shared is so beautiful. I believe that with the teaching methods used, students are always going to advance scholastically as well as socially. I received my GED in 2001—then on to taking my very first MacMurray College.... And then so much more. But I have NEVER found so much pride in my choices until finding myself a part of EJP. I’m gratefully motivated.

— Christopher Walker

Growth is one of the most important aspects of life. EJP has been one of the main factors in my growth during this time of incarceration. It has been a great help in leaning and empowering me mentally. It feels good to know that I’m not just a number but I’m a student who matters.

— Anthony Carroll

EJP rekindles my feeling of being actively alive.

It provides realistic challenges, academically and socially. I have the sense that I’m advancing and moving positively forward in life.

— Austin Onwuamaegbu



Being around other individuals who are in the process of furthering their education in a professional environment allows me to feel good, like a regular person, and not as a person in custody.

— Anonymous

EJP’S MISSION

The mission of the Education Justice Project is to build a model college in prison program that demonstrates the positive effects of higher education on incarcerated students, their families, the communities to which they return, the host institution, and society as a whole.

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