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West Virginia University®

HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON INITIATIVE

Instructor and Visitor Manual

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1. Welcome

Thank you for participating in the WVU Higher Education in Prison Initiative. We are enormously grateful for your commitment to building a degree program at SCI-Greene.

This manual is intended to provide essential information for anyone who will be teaching at or visiting Greene as part of this program. We want to help your classes run smoothly and to offer consistent protocols.

We know all instructors are trained professionals, but teaching inside prison is a different experience. Please reach out if you run into a challenge. We will have meetings during the semester to share experiences and ask questions.

Top Ten Things to Remember About Teaching in a Prison (adapted from Georgia State Univ Prison Education Program Teaching Handbook)

1. Be aware of your surroundings at all times.
2. Be flexible.
3. Always maintain a clear professor-student relationship with students.
4. Treat each student equally. Even small actions can seem unequal in this environment.
5. Remain polite and professional with all prison employees.
6. Report problems to a WVU HEPI coordinator as soon as possible.
7. Do not bring anything unapproved into SCI Greene.
8. Do not deliver letters or any other materials from a student to someone outside prison.
9. Do not correspond with students outside of the prison. Do not look up information on students.
10. Consider carefully materials and topics for discussion.

2. Language Practice

We refer to students in HEPI as students. We recognize that language has the power to create the world, not only describe it, and we do our best to avoid stigmatizing terms. Below are three statements on ethical language practices.

A. From the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions

An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language

“When there is emotional pain, psychiatrists like me believe that we can help. But before we act we need to find some handle for the problem, some name to guide action. Once in awhile, we realize that these names are inadequate for the problems we are seeing. Then we search for new names, or new ways to group old names.”

--- Mindy Thompson Fullilove, M.D., “Root Shock,” 2005

Dear Friends:

The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions is a human justice policy, advocacy and training center founded, directed and staffed by academics and advocates who were formerly incarcerated. It is the first and only one of its kind in the United States.

One of our first initiatives is to respond to the negative public perception about our population as expressed in the language and concepts used to describe us. When we are not called mad dogs, animals, predators, offenders and other derogatory terms, we are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners and felons—all terms devoid of humanness which identify us as “things” rather than as people. These terms are accepted as the “official” language of the media, law enforcement, prison industrial complex and public policy agencies. ***However, they are no longer acceptable for us and we are asking people to stop using them.***

In an effort to assist our transition from prison to our communities as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves, we are asking everyone to stop using these negative terms and to simply refer to us as **PEOPLE**. People currently or formerly incarcerated, **PEOPLE** on parole, **PEOPLE** recently released from prison, **PEOPLE** in prison, **PEOPLE** with criminal convictions, but **PEOPLE**.

We habitually underestimate the power of language. The bible says, ***“Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”*** In fact, all of the faith traditions recognize the

power of words and, in particular, names that we are given or give ourselves. Ancient traditions considered the “naming ceremony” one of the most important rites of passage. Your name indicated not only who you were and where you belonged, but also who you could be. The worst part of repeatedly hearing your negative definition of me, is that I begin to believe it myself “*for as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.*” It follows then, that calling me inmate, convict, prisoner, felon, or offender indicates a lack of understanding of who I am, but more importantly **what I can be.** I can be and am much more than an “ex--con,” or an “ex--offender,” or an “ex--felon.”

The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions believes that if we can get progressive publications, organizations and individuals like you to stop using the old offensive language and simply refer to us as “**people,**” we will have achieved a significant step forward in our life giving struggle to be recognized as the human beings we are. We have made our mistakes, yes, but we have also paid or are paying our debts to society.

We believe we have the right to be called by a name we choose, rather than one someone else decides to use. We think that by insisting on being called “**people**” we reaffirm our right to be recognized as human beings, not animals, inmates, prisoners or offenders.

We firmly believe that if we cannot persuade you to refer to us, and think of us, as people, then all our other efforts at reform and change are seriously compromised.

Accordingly, please talk with your friends and colleagues about this initiative. If you agree with our approach, encourage others to join us. Use positive language in your writing, speeches, publications, web sites and literature. **When you hear people using the negative language, gently and respectfully correct them and explain why such language is hurting us. Kindly circulate this letter on your various list serves.**

If you disagree with this initiative, please write and tell us why at the above address or e--mail us at info@centerfornuleadership.org. Perhaps, we have overlooked something. ***Please join us in making this campaign successful. With your help we can change public opinion, one person at a time.***

In Solidarity and Love, Eddie Ellis Founder

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info@centerfornuleadership.org | www.centerfornuleadership.org

B. From the Underground Scholars Initiative

Building the Prison to University Pipeline

UC Berkeley

UC Irvine

UC Los Angeles

UC Riverside

Language Guide for Communicating About Those Involved In The Carceral System

Increasing attention is being given to the language people use when discussing individual or group identities and experiences. In large part, marginalized people must demand the respect to create and amplify language that they consider more humanizing than the negative narratives imposed on us by dominant society. The late Eddie Ellis, a wrongfully convicted member of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, established the first academic think tank run by formerly incarcerated people: Center for NuLeadership in NY. Paroling in 1994 with multiple degrees, Ellis worked to advance the dialogue around those who have been system impacted. Twenty five years later and our collective struggle to be recognized for the fullness of who we are as people remains.

Language is not merely descriptive, it is creative. For too long we have borne the burden of having to recreate our humanity in the eyes of those who would have us permanently defined by a system that grew directly out of the the institution of American slavery, an institution that depended on the dehumanization of the people it enslaved. It is in this spirit that we, the formerly incarcerated and system-impacted academics who identify as the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI) at the University of California, Berkeley, call on the media, students, and public to utilize the following terminology when discussing our population individually or collectively. This is not about euphemisms or glossing over people's actions, rather it is about reclaiming our identity as people first. It is important to note that this style guide is equally applicable when talking about similarly situated populations outside of the United States.

Thank you in advance for respecting us enough to treat us as humans.

In solidarity

C. From the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison

Drawing upon the rich history of work that has previously been engaged on this topic, we want to express our opposition to the usage of terms that are rooted in a history of violent and oppressive systems. Along with a vast majority of our community members, we share the view that terms such as “prisoner,” “inmate,” “offender,” “convict,” and “felon” are stigmatizing, dehumanizing, discriminatory and continue to enact violence and do not acknowledge an individual’s full identity. We consider it standard practice to abstain from such language, unless you have experienced incarceration and choose to self-identify as such.

3. History of WVU HEPI

The [WVU Higher Education in Prison Initiative](#) developed from a decades-long partnership between West Virginia University (WVU) and the Appalachian Prison Book Project (APBP). APBP is a volunteer-driven nonprofit that mails free books to people incarcerated in six states, creates book clubs in prisons, offers paid and for-credit internships to WVU students, and generates public conversations about mass incarceration and educational equity.

Since its inception, the organization has mailed more than 50,000 books to people in over 200 Appalachian prisons and jails. In 2021, APBP launched an Education Scholarship that provides scholarships to recently incarcerated people enrolled in a WV college or university.

WVU has been offering Inside-Out Prison Exchange classes at state and federal prisons for over 15 years. In 2019-2020, we were able to make these classes credit-bearing for all students, with APBP paying costs for tuition and books for inside students. Establishing credit-bearing classes with full financial support for incarcerated students opened up the possibility of a pathway to a degree program. In 2021, WVU HEPI was awarded a three-year grant from Laughing Gull Foundation to build an associate degree program at SCI-Greene.

4. Educational Philosophy

Education should liberate. We are committed to reciprocal modes of learning, to life-long education, and to joy. We aim to create a supportive intellectual and creative community that bridges the divide of prison walls. Toni Morrison wrote in an essay called “Moral

Inhabitants” that the purpose of education should be to solve problems and teach humans to collaborate in mutually constructive ways. This is our plan for HEPI.

Our goals are the following:

- Offer credit-bearing classes to incarcerated students and create a pathway to an Associate Degree
- Extend educational opportunities beyond the classrooms.
- Seek out and develop leadership from people who have been directly impacted by the criminal punishment system.
- Provide support to returning citizens who want to pursue higher education.
- Integrate restorative practices and a commitment to racial justice into everyday operations

5. Structure

In partnership with Waynesburg University, the WVU Higher Education in Prison Initiative offers for-credit college courses to incarcerated students. Waynesburg will confer degrees. A ten-person Advisory Council meets monthly to discuss and guide HEPI.

Founding Advisory Council (2021-2022)

- Lauri Andress, Associate Dean for Equity, Inclusion and Community Engagement, Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine
- Laura Brady, Director, Center for Writing Excellence, WVU
- Lupe Davidson, Woodburn Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies; Associate Dean for Social Justice, WVU
- Darrin Lester, Master’s Student, Social Work, WVU
- Rayna Momen, PhD Candidate, Sociology, WVU
- Jim Nolan, Chair, Professor of Sociology, WVU
- Ann Pancake, Writer-in-Residence, WVU Humanities Center, WVU
- Katy Ryan, Eberly Family Professor of Outstanding Teaching; Professor of English, WVU
- Joseph Scotti, Clinical Psychologist, SCI-Greene
- Lou Slimak, Assistant Provost for Undergraduate Curriculum, WVU

6. WVU-HEPI Instructor and Visitor Guidelines

(Adapted from the Education Justice Project's Guidelines)

WVU is an educational presence at SCI Greene by permission of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (IDOC). All WVU-HEPI members are asked to remember that we are guests. At all times, observe DOC policies and procedures. This is essential for our relationship with the prison and a matter of safety and security for everyone.

WVU HEPI is a new program. We expect that your experiences on the ground will inform the shaping of these guidelines. Please share your ideas and suggestions with us.

Working with students

While we recognize that each instructor is likely to have their own teaching style and pedagogical priorities, we ask that you adhere to the following.

- Create a relaxed, friendly atmosphere.
- Be available to all students as equitably as possible.
- Be honest and sincere.
- Ensure students are aware of your commitment to their success.
- Look for gains in skill that are the evidence of growth and use them as the basis for encouragement.
- Show respect for students by involving them in decisions about the learning process.
- As you would within any educational setting, seek understanding of students' backgrounds and current contexts and how those might impact class performance while respecting student privacy.
- Be mindful of the strict policy against fraternization (see below).

Instructor Support and Responsibilities

- Attend teacher training
- Read emails on the listserv
- Give a copy of your syllabus to Program Coordinator Rayna Momen (rmomen@mix.wvu.edu). If we are able to create tutoring sessions, please also share assignments. This will help tutors assist your students.
- We will offer roundtrip financial assistance as much as possible to drivers.
- Try to attend other WVU HEPI events on campus and at SCI.
- Provide course evaluations to students each semester
- Bring extra set of clothes in case anything you are wearing is considered inappropriate

Please consider the following when designing your class

- Students are lively and class size is small. Discussion formats work much better than lectures.
- Alternatives to traditional research papers are a good idea. Research will be limited, although we are working to build a connection between the WVU Library and Greene.
- There is no Internet access available, either to students or instructors.
- In the absence of technology, collaborate with students on ways to be creative and meet learning outcomes.

- We hope that students will have access to computers on which they can prepare papers. Please be flexible in your requirements regarding typed work.
- Be prepared for time constraints and unexpected interruptions.

Supplies

WVU HEPI will order books for your classes. We will seek donations and discounts from publishers. If you elect to make your own reader, keep a receipt so we can reimburse you. Also check with us about binding options.

Keep in mind as you prepare readers and course materials that we have a very limited budget. We appreciate your using the least expensive option, where possible. We will inform you as soon as we can if we are unable to provide for your class any item that is on your list.

Basics for Entering SCI Green

Check your email before departing to ensure classes have not been canceled (e.g. lockdown or bad weather). If you cannot make a scheduled class and have not made arrangements for a substitute, please email Amanda Gansor – amgansor@pa.gov.

All Volunteers Must

1. Complete a background security check to receive clearance to enter DOC
2. Be on time. Arrive *at least* 30 minutes before the start-time of your class
3. Do not bring a cellphone or any electronic device inside. You can lock phones in your car.
4. Do not leave anything in the facility. Do not take anything that is not yours out of the facility.
5. Review and abide carefully by the dress code (See below).
6. Sign the log at the front gate and show identification (e.g. driver's license) at each visit. Wear your state ID badge so it is visible at all times.
7. Limit what you bring in to absolute necessities. *Volunteers are always subject to search.*
The following items are not allowed past the front gate:
 - Any food or beverage
 - Cash over \$25
 - Cell phones or pagers, cameras, mp3 players, ipods, radios, other electronic devices
 - Keys unless they are your car keys and you are the driver
 - Tobacco products, matches or lighters
 - Chewing gum
 - Medicines without prior clearance
 - Weapons, guns, ammunition, explosives, knives, and the like
 - Anything other than ordinary teaching materials, unless you have prior clearance
8. Follow instructions of correctional staff

9. Do not accept responsibility that belongs to the correctional staff. Refer incarcerated people with questions unrelated to HEPI to the correctional staff.
10. There will be no discrimination among staff, volunteers or the incarcerated people on the basis of sex, race, creed, color, original language or national origin.
11. Walk across the grounds in groups, if possible. Never cut through lines of incarcerated men.
12. Have no physical contact with incarcerated people other than handshakes. (At times handshakes may not be permitted.) A student putting their arm around you may seem at the time like a gesture of friendship, but the gesture might be viewed differently by that student and others watching.
13. Never accept any gift from or trade with a student. Do not give students gifts.
14. Granting special privileges or showing partiality to a student is prohibited. Special needs or problems of students are to be referred to the counselor or other appropriate staff member.
15. Avoid and discourage fraternization between those incarcerated at, or working for, DOC. (Fraternization is discussed in detail below.)
16. Do not agree to keep secrets. Secrets confer power.

In addition to these general volunteer rules, WVU HEPI has the following policies

- Instructors are responsible for setting the tone of and maintaining a culture of respect for all persons. Your behavior and attitude are observed and serve an example for our students. Make it a positive one.
- Do not ask a student what they are serving time for. It sometimes happens that a student feels moved to share information about their crime in the course of a conversation about class work. We will let students know that if a student wants to do this, they should first request the instructor's permission to divulge the information. Not everyone feels comfortable hearing about students' offenses. If you believe knowing this information will compromise your relationship to the student or others, feel free to decline to receive the information.
- Always relate to students in a professional, respectful manner.
- Instructors shall make a good-faith effort to confront and resolve questionable student behavior through a clear, frank communication with the student(s). If students do not comply or alter behavior, you are required to report them to prison staff.
- Do not accept any written correspondence from students that is not academic in nature. Instructors are allowed to convey only student course work (papers, etc.) to other instructors, not correspondence of a personal or private nature.
- Conversation shall be of an intellectual, academic, or course-related nature. Coursework has priority.

Dress Code

From PA DOC: "Visitors are expected to dress appropriately and avoid clothing styles that are revealing or provocative. Women should wear bras; however, we advise against underwire bras because underwire may prevent the visitor from successfully passing through the metal detector, which would cause the visit to be denied. The following items are prohibited:

- Coats, jackets or other outer garments (excludes suit coats, sports jackets/blazers and/or cardigan type sweaters)
- See-through clothing
- Clothing that exposes private body parts
- Shorts or mini-skirts
- Sleeveless shirts or tank tops
- Spaghetti strings or shirts that expose the shoulder or midriff

- Halter tops
- Spandex or leggings
- Pajamas worn as outer garments
- Hoods of any kind
- Bobby pins, safety pins, decorative pins, hair accessories and/or jewelry items that do not successfully clear the metal detector
- Bathing suits
- Clothing that references obscene language, drugs, sex or violence
- Bare feet
- Boxer shorts
- Clothing with rips, tears or revealing holes that are in areas of the body that may reveal breasts, nipples, buttocks, genital area
- Pajamas or lingerie
- Knapsacks, bookbags, backpacks
- Wallets'
- Tight or form-fitting clothes, visible underwear, t-shirts with advertising or political slogans
- Expensive jewelry

Social Media

Do not mention the prison by name and never mention students' names.

Fraternization Policy

The success and longevity of our program depends on there being no suggestion of inappropriate relationships between our staff and our students. At issue is the potential of such relationships to undermine safety and security at the prison. The PA Department of Corrections takes fraternization very seriously, and so do we.

Behavior that the DOC takes as suggestive of fraternization includes correspondence between a student and instructor, an instructor carrying in resources (books, supplies) for a single student, an instructor spending disproportionate amount of time with a single student, and physical touching. Do not under any circumstances give your telephone number to a student.

Fraternization between employees or volunteers and incarcerated people is strictly prohibited because it is a threat to the security of all people in the prison. It is grounds for dismissal from WVU HEPI and being banned from DCC.

It would be easier to define and avoid fraternization if it referred to behaviors that were *obviously and always* offensive, wrong, and harmful. However, fraternization defies easy definition and identification.

Avoiding it is less a matter of avoiding friendliness, warmth, and mutual interest—after all, those attitudes are present in all good teaching/learning relationships—and more a matter of vigilant discernment of our motivations and intentions in for participating in the program, either as students or volunteers. Participation requires maturity and seriousness of purpose.

What is fraternization?

Fraternization refers to the development of any private, special, exclusive and/or privileged relationship between people who are free to come and go from prison and people who are not free. It can include any privileged friendships even where there is no interest in physical contact.

What does fraternization look or sound like?

Again, there's no clear answer to this, but the program and the prison will suspect fraternization is present when two people have a pattern of being together much of the time, spending more time with one another than with other people. Fraternization is *not* the same thing as being friendly, polite, concerned, respectful, or appreciative. The following list indicates the behaviors that will attract attention and scrutiny.

- ✓ Pattern of the same volunteer and student sitting or standing close together
- ✓ Pattern of same volunteer and student spending a disproportionate amount of time together, even in discussion of academic work
- ✓ Conversations about private matters
- ✓ Conversations in hushed tones so as to avoid being overheard
- ✓ Doing special favors for one person
- ✓ Favoritism
- ✓ Exchanging love notes, cards, or private letters (grounds for immediate exclusion from EJP)
- ✓ Unequal availability of an EJP instructor to all students
- ✓ Insistence of a student to work only with a certain tutor(s)
- ✓ Sharing and keeping secrets
- ✓ Flirtatious, teasing behavior

In sum, fraternization looks and sounds like ways of relating to each other that are deemed inappropriate in the workplace or the classroom. It is unprofessional behavior because it can undermine the conditions of trust, fairness and transparency necessary for a healthy learning environment.

How does fraternization threaten security?

When we become involved in an exclusive, special relationship with another, we become vulnerable. The more intimate people become, the more willing we are to take the risk of being fooled or manipulated on the journey of getting close to another person. We've all been there: we all tend to see and understand our special person in only the best light. When we pursue such relationships in this academic setting, we will give less heed to the risks of being in a maximum-security prison.

The development of intimate relationships in a prison is forbidden because it increases the risk of people using each other in ways that threaten the security of everyone in the institution. Privileged, special and exclusive relationships between students and volunteers easily make for situations where jealousy, envy, sense of unfairness, manipulation, betrayal, and guilt occur, all states of mind which do not tend to bring out the best in any of us, especially when also challenged by the prison environment. For this reason, WVU HEPI and DOC cannot allow the development of emotional or physical intimacy between instructors and incarcerated people.

Engaging in a liberal arts higher education at a correctional center, ironically, further complicates the task of discerning fraternization. The very nature of the transformative power of higher education—its inherent evocation of wonder, its empowerment of new ways of thinking, its liberating effects on human imagination and most of all, its contagious excitement are, ironically, part of the very interest and temptation for us to want to draw closer to students, instructors,

tutors, etc. Because our purpose is the pursuit and strengthening of higher education in this prison, we must walk a fine line in order to both maintain professionalism, on the one side, and personal regard for one another on the other. Both sides are necessary to higher education and for the flourishing of WVU at SCI Greene.

What everyone can do

If you are concerned that an instructor or student is developing habits of relating that suggest fraternization, tell them directly. Don't gossip. Remind them of the following choice and respectfully support them in choosing to either

- a) stop the unprofessional behavior, or
- b) end their participation (freeing them to continue the relationship without endangering the program and prison security)

Ultimate Consequences or What is at Stake

WVU HEPI and Greene have the same policy response to fraternization: volunteers (i.e. any WVU HEPI instructor or someone otherwise serving the program) will be dropped from HEPI and have their clearance withdrawn. Students will be prohibited from the program. In serious cases, the prison may also send the student to segregation and likely transfer him to another facility.

If the case is serious enough, DOC may elect to end the program.

7. Resources

Required, available in [Teacher Training Drive](#)

- A. Eddie Ellis, Open Letter on the Question of Language
- B. Berkeley Underground Scholars' Language Guide
- C. Rebecca Ginsburg, "Introduction," *Critical Perspectives on Teaching in Prison: Students and Instructors on Pedagogy Behind the Wall* (New York: Routledge, 2019)
- D. Malakki, "An Open Letter to Prison Educators," *Critical Perspectives*
- E. [*Feminist on Cellblock Y*](#)
- F. Michelle Alexander, "The New Jim Crow," *Ohio Law Review*
- G. Danielle Sered, intro and chapter one to *Until We Reckon*

Recommended, available in [Teacher Training Drive](#)

Jerrad Allen and Osvaldo Arma, "Learning Inside-Out"; Tessa Hicks Peterson, "Healing Pedagogy from the Inside Out," *Critical Perspectives*

Dwayne Betts, "Freedom Begins with a Book." *Journal of Higher Education in Prison* 1.1 (2021), 25-28.

National Alliance on Higher Education, *Equity and Excellence: A Guide for HEP*

Thomas Fabisiak, "On the Practice and Ethos of Self-Compassion for Higher Education in Prison," *The Long Term: Resisting Life Sentences, Working Toward Freedom*, ed. Alice Kim et. al.

Gillian Harkins and Erica Meiners, "Teaching Publics in the American Penalscape," *American Quarterly* 68.2 (2016)

Victoria M. Bryant, "The Prison Oppresses: Avoiding the False Us/Them Binary in Prison Education," *Critical Perspectives*

Erzen, T., Gould M., & Lewen, J. (2019). [*Equity and excellence in practice: A guide for higher education in prison*](#). Alliance for Higher Education in Prison.

James Kilgore, "Lock Em Up and Throw Away the Key," *The Long Term: Resisting Life Sentences, Working Toward Freedom*, ed. Alice Kim et. al.

Poem by Rayna Momen

Anna Plemons, "Beyond Progress: Indigenous Scholars, Relational Methodologies, and Decolonial Options for the Prison Classroom," *Critical Perspectives*

Maya Schenwar, "Beyond Survivor's Guild: Responding to a Sibling's Incarceration," *The Long Term*

Recommended Books

Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (law, politics, history)

Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name* (history)

R. Dwayne Betts, *A Question of Freedom* (memoir)

Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (novel)

Anthony Ray Hinton, *The Sun Does Shine* (memoir)

Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* (abolition)

Nathan McCall, *Makes Me Wanna Holler* (memoir)

Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages* (cultural studies, ethnic studies)

Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon* (nonfiction, restorative justice)

Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy* (memoir)

Megan Sweeney, *Reading Is My Window* (literary studies, cultural studies)