



Documenting the Effects of the COVID Pandemic on the Higher Education in Prison Community

Tuesday, May 5
9amPT/12pmET

COVID-19 Action Page: <https://www.higheredinprison.org/info/covid-19-action>
COVID-19 Archive, Documentary and Journalism Project Calls for Participation:
<https://www.higheredinprison.org/info/covid-19-documentary-projects>

This discussion focused on how to document the impact of COVID-19 inside prisons and jails. The discussion began with an overview of a range of projects that are working to ensure that the stories and experiences from inside are made public and that information from the outside is accessible to people who are currently incarcerated. We then invited participants to share the work of their program/projects as it relates to similar types of documentation and information sharing.

Projects Represented:

COVID-19 Prison Education Archive Project, Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, Rachel Sanders
Inside News, The Marshall Project, Lawrence Bartley
Mourning Our Losses and Prison Journalism Project, Doran Larson
Prison Legal News, Human Rights Defense Center, Michelle Dillon

1. Introduce yourself and describe your project(s):

- a. COVID-19 Prison Education Archive Project, Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison
 - i. Hudson Link has been doing this work for years, COVID changes everything - wanting to work with other programs to determine new approaches in this new era; desire to provide broader context, tools, resources to share students and alumni
 1. Archive project - empower incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people to investigate, document, tell stories, use higher ed as a bridge
- b. Inside News, The Marshall Project
 - i. New political focus on justice reform, Marshall Project has compiled list of their positions/platforms

- ii. PSA released today on tablets inside 141 facilities in 25 states
 - iii. To get inside news delivered to a facility email:
Lbartley@themarshallproject.org
- c. Mourning Our Losses and Prison Journalism Project
 - i. Mourning Our Losses - dedicated to large effort to document what's going on inside, particularly deaths - ability to put up notices, photos of those who have died inside of prison, staff and incarcerated people, call for essays up on Alliance site
 - ii. Prison Journalism Project - tied into Mourning Our Losses - call for essays
 - iii. The Mourning Our Losses project is not live yet but we'll be circulating a call for submissions to AHEP, the higher ed listserv, and other outlets once we have the structure and systems to support a large volume of memorials. You can also watch mourningourlosses.org which will hopefully be live by the end of the week.
 - iv. The American Prison Writing Archive:
<https://apw.dhinitiative.org/collection-description>
- d. Prison Legal News, Human Rights Defense Center
 - i. Financial exploitation - a lot of prison education projects and others working to provide info to people inside are cut off (libraries, labs, programming, etc.) - facilities are turning to corporations who have a history of profiting from mass incarceration (JPAY, etc.), trying to get costs under control, asking JTL/Inventive to lower costs of tablets, emails, etc.
 - ii. Wants input/collaboration from this community around the campaign - how to get students tablets without giving control to companies who have history of profiting from prisons

How is information getting in and out?

- Tension between needing to get news inside via tablets but not promoting power/control/popularity of companies that charge incarcerated people and their families for use/email/comms
- Hudson Link - using snail mail, hope to use program administrators to exchange information and curriculum - would provide academic cover for programs (less exposing the truth, more of an academic project around ethnography/archival)
- PJP - using JPAY for submission, already in place; also have a hard copy address to submit, APWA - submission rate is higher than usual, all about conditions inside with COVID

How to get material from those inside within constraints of DOC

- Utilizing connections of people who have come home to people who are still inside through friendships/friendly contact

Model of existing archive that people are using? Will these archives be online and immediately accessible or in a few years through another medium?

- MOL project - will be online, up as fast as possible, want to recognize deaths and conditions within facilities ASAP, want to link with Marshall Project and others
 - They will continue to use long term archive of APWA for longer term documentation of COVID experience, importance of documentation of this historically

Sustainability/longevity/where do these projects live? What is the future iteration or next steps?

- Hudson Link will use: CU archives, online archiving on platform not launched yet, and print book publication with people from community invited to be reviewers
 - Sees this as potential opportunity to connect with students during a time when credits aren't being offered
- Marshall Project - readers determine what goes into next issue based on letters they receive from the inside, don't know future direction yet until he gets that feedback
- PLN - JPAY etc. trying to position themselves as the good guy in all of this as opposed to GTL - can we use the tension to make GTL expose themselves without elevating JPAY too much?
 - Need to scope this, looking for help with that
- Access to Inside News - email Lawrence
- Andy - oral history component to archive, ongoing, people will be thinking about this for the rest of their lives
- Advocacy with states - make records public

What are other programs doing about documentation, archives - or are you thinking about doing that?

- documenting the voices of incarcerated people, but also the changes happening to the field of HEP and changes to the resources available to us (broadcasting systems within prisons, etc.)
- open ended journal throughout semester, content is now COVID related and feeling unprepared to provide feedback on emotional response content as an educator

- documenting what's happening inside has practical implications - raising public awareness, public defenders looking for essays/info to reduce sentences and as basis for future intervention or legal action
- I am improvising such an approach, ethnographic, in my current course. Asked students to interview each other and produce "verbatim theatre" scripts as part of their writing assignment.
- I run a visual arts program at 2 prisons in California and am wondering if visual art could be added to the writing - we are asking our participants to create work related to the pandemic. Perhaps we could even send in some of the writing to the artists to use as inspiration, in addition to the artists' own work?

Idea of documenting and making information public - how much information, how to make it public, what are implications of making it public - questions that have been in this field for years

- students writing letters or providing information as part of assignment responses to professors, program coordinators, written record from lived perspectives on the inside
- isolation - the isolation and forced social distancing has nothing to do with being incarcerated - cannot compare, must underline the fact that this is not prison or a refugee camp, students writing auto-ethnographies that take into account the context that goes into the person, circumstances etc.
- getting information through the family members of students or alumni on the outside who are having personal conversation with those on the inside
- be thoughtful about not requiring trauma narratives from students, make sharing their experiences optional, provide the space for them to share but not to give impression that they are required to share, and that we may not be qualified or prepared to respond to those trauma narratives; students may want to write about other things to escape.
- It is often overlooked how it feels even to be asked for those stories, when the ones doing the asking are the teachers and facilitators that we admire.
- We don't want to add to the harm in an attempt to witness and magnify voices.

One issue is the use of technology to get information in and out of facilities. How are your projects (or participants) addressing and/or being challenged by this issue?

- Colleges and universities can work directly with the DOC's to develop the technology required to bridge the obstacles created in this pandemic environment
- The best way to influence companies like JPay and GTL to change price models is to change policies that allow DOCs to take kickbacks from those contracts.
- It would be great to stop commissions/kickbacks, but so many prisons and jails have structured their budgets such that those commissions are what fund visitation and libraries--we need to fix those funding models, too.
- Also bypassing the tablet companies altogether is best practice. Colleges and Universities offer online courses everywhere. Real time lectures via zoom are common. Recording lectures via Capture are also easy and accessible if you have a lab that can/will whitelist a college learning management system.
- Policy change across the board is needed. The golden egg is figuring out what motivating factors we can leverage.
- The National Deaf Center can support online access
<https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/covid-19-information>
- <https://pen.org/press-release/prison-e-readers-and-tablets-should-be-free-during-coronavirus-outbreak/>