Introduction to OPEEP

Welcome to the Ohio State Prison Education Exchange Project (OPEEP)! We (the OPEEP team) are thrilled that you have decided to enroll in one of our unique, collaborative, and transformational courses this semester. This handbook will introduce you to the project and help you prepare to attend classes inside an Ohio correctional facility. Core to OPEEP’s work is the belief that education is a practice of freedom, and our project commits to anti-racist, feminist, and decolonial teaching and learning as frameworks for that practice. We believe that quality education is a right regardless of one’s background, identity, or status. We understand our work in expanding access to high-quality, social-justice oriented college coursework in correctional facilities as a key component of the collective effort to build safe, healthy, and liberated communities. At times, these learning settings are less than ideal, and you may feel discomfort at the everyday conditions of incarceration, but this collective work can also be a source of support, emotional relief, community-building, and mission-driven learning. OPEEP staff and instructors are here to support students as you navigate carceral spaces and engage in this transformational practice of collective knowledge production.

Learning in a prison facility is a unique experience and one that requires some consistent forethought and preparation on your part. This helps ensure the following of protocols and the longevity of your class and the overall project. Each of us who enters a prison facility for an OPEEP course acts as a representative for both the project and the Ohio State University, so it is always important to keep collective goals in mind. Please do not hesitate to ask your instructor or OPEEP staff members any questions you might have prior to or during the semester. Do not worry that a question might be too simple or the answer too obvious to ask; we want you to feel fully informed and confident in your ability to learn in an OPEEP class!

OPEEP Course Structure

OPEEP courses bring incarcerated students and OSU campus students together in prison settings to teach and learn in innovative and collaborative ways. Courses are primarily based around collective knowledge production, and facilitated through activities like group discussions, rather than relying solely on faculty lectures. “Education Exchange” is included in our title because our courses are designed to be just that — an equal exchange of knowledge and experience. OPEEP is intentional about disrupting hierarchies in the classroom, meaning that you will learn not only from your instructor, but also from your own experiences and those of your incarcerated and campus classmates, just as your instructor will learn from their students. Sustained engagement with other co-learners and partners in knowledge-building means that all students get to explore the unique and personal effects of oppression in their own lives and the lives of others. Students will also experience the power of learning and developing ideas together through a shared understanding that knowledge can spur action for change. The challenging and transformative nature of OPEEP courses illustrates the rewards of
engaging in intellectual projects through empathy and a shared commitment to recognize the dignity of all people.

Another pillar of OPEEP’s work is the belief that access to quality education is a right, not a privilege; therefore, all students enrolled in OPEEP courses earn college credits. Experiential, collaborative, and equitable learning is foundational to course structure, so course enrollments are split evenly between incarcerated and campus students (or as closely as possible). Class meetings typically occur once per week inside the prison facility, aside from the very first class meeting when campus students may meet at OSU to go through introductions and review important details about the course. All courses are taught by trained faculty members familiar with OPEEP policies and pedagogical values. Currently, OPEEP offers a growing number of courses across various academic disciplines, housed in five different OSU campuses, which take place in several central Ohio prison facilities. Many efforts to further expand course offerings are both already underway and planned for the near future.

Of course, each class is unique, so if you have additional questions or would like more details on your specific class, please refer to your syllabus or reach out to your instructor. For general inquiries about OPEEP, reach out to one of our program coordinators by e-mailing opeep@osu.edu.

Getting to the Facility

Transportation to the facility may vary across classes and locations, but in most cases, students will carpool together and alternate drivers. If a student does not have access to transportation, they can join a carpool or potentially ride with the instructor. If students are attending from different campuses, carpool groups will be coordinated based on campus location.

What to Expect upon Entering the Facility

When you arrive at the facility, students and faculty should enter the visiting area of the facility as a group. Pictures and communications are prohibited in the facility, so be sure to leave your phone in the car, and do not bring a tablet, laptop, or smartwatch with you. After you have verified with staff that you have only permitted items (see list below), you then must provide appropriate identification (see list below), which ODRC staff will keep during the duration of your visit. You will receive a visitor’s badge which must always remain visibly on your person while inside the facility. Your ID may be used as part of this badge worn around your neck or clipped onto your clothing. After you have been checked in, you will then go through a metal detector. If you set the detector off, you may have to undergo additional wanding (hand-held metal detectors used for more focused screening). Once past the metal detector, depending on the facility, a few people at a time will enter the crash gate, which is a small transitional area into the prison. The door must lock behind you before the next door can be unlocked, which ensures prison security. This process is typically quick, but can feel a bit claustrophobic initially, so it is
good to prepare yourself by being aware of all these steps ahead of time. If the prison does not have a crash gate, everyone will proceed together to the next area of the prison, where the door will close behind you. You will show your visitor ID badge to the officer at the desk in this area of the facility before being escorted to your classroom. As you progress through the semester, much of this will become second nature!

**Required items to enter the facility:**

- Valid ID/Driver’s License (must be a formal state ID, NOT a BuckID)
- For international students: Passport or Permanent Resident Card

**Optional permitted items:**

- CLEAR plastic water bottle
- Key fob/singular key (drivers only)
- Masks
- Pen and notebook paper
- Books/course readings

**Dress code:**

Correctional facilities can deny entry to visitors if they do not meet dress code expectations. Admittance is at the discretion of facility staff, meaning that some may enforce the dress code more strictly than others. BIPOC, women, and LGBTQ+ folks are, unfortunately, likely to experience more policing regarding their dress and appearance, particularly when entering a men’s facility (headwraps and hijabs are sometimes unfairly flagged and entail further scrutiny, for example). OPEEP recognizes that some regulations are inherently racist and/or cis-heterosexist in nature, so we encourage students to bear this in mind before entering the facility. It may be helpful for drivers (and other students) to keep spare hoodies, oversized shirts, and non-underwire sports bras in their cars in case someone is denied admission due to dress. To ensure admittance, it is best to follow these guidelines:

- Remove any jewelry, smart watches, etc. prior to entry (jewelry may set off the metal detector so be prepared to either remove heavier items, like bangles or necklaces, or undergo further wanding.)
- No open-toed shoes (sandals, flip-flops, etc.)
- No bandanas.
- Bras are required. We suggest wireless bras/sports bras if those are options for you. Underwires can sometimes set off metal detectors so be prepares for potential wanding.*
  - *The enforcement of this rules can vary widely due to different body types and breast sizes. We encourage and trust students to dress however they are most comfortable, but also ask that the possibility of this rule’s enforcement is kept in mind.
• Dresses and skirts must fall past the knee and be loose in fit.
• No tight pants/leggings.
• Shoulders must be covered.
• No low-cut or tight-fitting shirts.
• No rips/tatters in clothes.

Don’t hesitate to contact your instructor if you are uncomfortable with or have questions about any of these stipulations. Instructors are here to provide support and assistance!

Rules of the Facility

Given that prisons are highly regulated facilities, we must adhere to rules and policies as closely as possible to help ensure a smooth admissions process for each class meeting. This means that it is best to follow staff instruction, even if the reason may not be apparent at that moment. For example, if a prison lockdown occurs, outsiders will have to promptly exit the facility as directed by staff, even if class has not been completed. OPEEP courses are a privilege granted to us by these facilities, so it is important that students and faculty maintain a positive relationship with staff and do not intervene in their attempts to uphold facility safety.

Face masks are optional, but please wear a mask if it makes you more comfortable. With so many people living in close quarters, prisons are by nature at greater risk of spreading COVID-19. One positive COVID case can result in the quarantining of an entire unit for up to 2 weeks. This is damaging to the mental and physical health of incarcerated people and can also result in the disruption of class meetings until the quarantine is lifted. Hopefully, at this stage in the pandemic this is less likely to become an issue, however, please take COVID-related incidents and resulting precautions seriously.

Rules of Contact

One of the most heavily emphasized rules within the correctional setting is that incarcerated and campus students must maintain appropriate relationships. This rule is in place to avoid the potential victimization of incarcerated students as dictated by the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), but also to prevent any victimization or exploitation of campus students. These rules are also intended to ensure the confidentiality of inside students and what they are incarcerated for, which is a vital practice of humanizing incarcerated people. As mentioned earlier, all OPEEP students, instructors, and staff represent OPEEP, The Ohio State University, and perhaps even prison education at large in the eyes of some correctional staff. Failure to adhere to the rules of the prison facility, and the rules of contact especially, risks the continuance of your individual course along with the sustainability of the project as a whole. The rules of contact are as follows:
• **Use first names only.** This pushes back against the dehumanization experienced in prison in multiple ways: inside students are commonly referred to by their last name or number only, so using their first names can be refreshing and humanizing; using first names only prevents campus students from searching the offense histories of their incarcerated classmates; and lastly, it prevents incarcerated and campus students from contacting each other after the class is over.

• **No gift giving or accepting.** Prisons are resource-deprived places. It is not uncommon for an incarcerated student to ask for things that they do not normally have access to. Campus students are not permitted to bring in anything for incarcerated students no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, including such things as articles, pens, paper, and books.

• **No contact between incarcerated and campus students, including letters, telephone calls, emails, and/or visits.** These restrictions continue after the course is over, too.

• **No displays of physical affection.** You may not physically interact with any of your incarcerated or campus peers while in the facility. Handshakes may be permitted depending on the facility, but hugging is **not** permitted between any students, staff, or instructors at any point.

• **When in doubt, refer to the specific rules of your facility or ask your instructor.**

**A Note on Language**

Few of us are untouched by the carceral state, its prison systems, and policing practices that can lead to criminalization. Some of us may have family members who experience incarceration, who work in prisons and jails, and some of us may have experienced racial profiling, arrest, and/or incarceration ourselves. Punishment systems in schooling have shaped all of us, too. To push back against the far-reaching impacts of the carceral state and the internalization of its practices, OPEEP centers humanizing language. We emphasize counternarratives about incarceration as a practice to reshape common perceptions about people who are touched by the US criminal justice system.

Demeaning labels can be extremely detrimental to an incarcerated person’s well-being, often resulting in feelings of dehumanization and loss of identity. We ask students to pay attention to the collectively internalized language and norms around punishment and policing to challenge these notions and resist the spread of dehumanizing language. You can offer your peers new, positive identities when addressing them with person-first language, which can greatly impact their ability to reimagine themselves, even in dehumanizing contexts. For example, we refer to all students as students, and when we need to qualify their location, we use the phrases “campus students” and “incarcerated students.” We also refer to students as “insiders” and “outsiders.” While attending classes, trainings, or events inside prison facilities, you will most commonly hear staff (and on occasion, incarcerated people) use the terms “inmates” or “offenders.” We encourage you to avoid using these terms and to learn more about the perspectives of incarcerated people regarding such language.
Other terms to know:

- **ODRC** (or DRC for short) stands for the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. ODRC supervises adults in Ohio who have been convicted of a felony or felonies and who are sentenced to more than six months in a prison facility.
- **Wardens** are the executive managers of adult correctional institutions. Each facility Warden must grant permission and sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the facility and OSU for a course to be planned and held.
- **COs** are Corrections Officers, often colloquially referred to as “guards.”
- **Escorts** are prison staff, often COs or unit case managers, who will take your instructor and outside classmates to your classroom. You will enter through a “crash gate” which holds five to ten people maximum, so you will likely be escorted in two or more groups.
- **Count** is a scheduled time during the day when all incarcerated people in a facility must be in a designated place to be counted. Most facilities have count five times per day. OPEEP courses typically must meet before or after count times.
- **Lockdown** refers to a period during which incarcerated people’s movement is restricted, often in response to concerns around security, weather, public health, or staffing shortages. During lockdowns, incarcerated individuals are confined to their bunks or cells, and typically, entrance to the facility is limited to employees only. The expected lengths of lockdowns are often difficult to impossible to determine.
- **Reentry** denotes the transition between incarceration and returning to community life. “Returned citizens” are formerly incarcerated people who now live in their home communities.