

# HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON READING PROJECT



## WELCOME to the Higher Education in Prison Reading Project.

Since 2019, the Alliance has been selecting and reading, with the input of the Higher Education in Prison Community, a host of book titles of relevance and interest to the field of Higher Education in Prison. The full list of selections made since 2019 can be found on the Alliance’s website: [higheredinprison.org/info/reading-project](https://higheredinprison.org/info/reading-project).

Reading this handbook means you have at least heard of the program, and are, perhaps, considering participating. No matter what brings you here, welcome!

We anticipate that you probably have a few questions to ask before we get started, so let’s address some of them right here.

- ▶ **SECTION 1** addresses some commonly asked questions about the Higher Education in Prison Reading Project.
- ▶ **SECTION 2** includes all you need for your program/organization to get started!

## 1 Commonly Asked Questions

### Why A Higher Education in Prison Reading Project?

Reading has been an important part of the human liberation project for some time. As Higher Education in Prison Reading Project author Ibram Kendi (*How To Be An Anti-Racist*; forthcoming in 2020) has said, books have the unique power to dismantle what he has termed the “spurious legacies” of our common pasts. But for that dismantling to happen, Kendi adds, we need to read books that challenge us and ask us to grow and evolve. Especially now, as crisis upon crisis unfolds across the world, and as all of them adversely impact people of color in our community/communities and/or our communities of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students, reading has perhaps taken on a new, if not also counterintuitive urgency. Reading (unlike so much else) provides the time and space for reflection and reckoning in a world that often strips these important bonds of our common humanity away. Without reading, we lose the capacity we need to respond to the challenges ahead of us. More, we risk losing ourselves and our communities.

### How Are Books Selected? How Did the Project Start?

The project started when Alliance staff, excited to read and learn together, moved to create a culture of inquiry and discussion. Across the last half of 2018, Alliance staff started holding “Wednesday Discussions,” whereby staff members were invited to research and present on a topic of interest to the organization (abolition, wellness, the history of mass incarceration, the history

of higher ed in prison, etc.). While these discussions took place, the Alliance further recognized a need to not only better engage these discussions, but to do so with the broader higher education in prison community in mind. The Alliance turned to creating a reading list it would use to enhance its Wednesday Discussion. It then asked members of the higher education in prison community to read along with it beginning in early 2019.

Now that the project has grown and a viable body of titles has been assembled over time, the Alliance for Higher Education still solicits input from the Higher Education in Prison Community for titles to be featured in the project, both through direct survey and/or social media. As the Alliance first started considering and exploring what this project might look like or involve, members of the higher education in prison community were the first to highlight and recommend Danielle Sered's *Until We Reckon* as the first official selection in the project.

Your book suggestions are welcome: [alliance@higheredinprison.org](mailto:alliance@higheredinprison.org). When you make a suggestion, please use "HEP Reading Project" in the subject line.

### **What Does the Alliance Do Once Community Input Is Offered?**

The Alliance itself is an engaged community of readers and makes its own book recommendations, as well. Individual members of the staff, themselves with expertise and/or experience in the field, also advance recommendations internally, and these recommendations are also considered along with community-based recommendations.

The Alliance does thoughtfully consider a number of factors in making Reading Project selection. In every case possible, the Alliance balances a combination of factors in making its thoughtful book selections for the series. Selections always start with seeking input from the community. As that input comes in, the Alliance staff and network carefully consider and weigh the ebb and flow of current events, the terms of ongoing discussions in the field and across programs, the significance, relevance, or broader import of a certain project or book to the field, and other factors. Then and only then does the Alliance make its book project selections. Sometimes, it also turns to the field to host a vote through its social media channels. On at least a few occasions during the project, for example, results of votes hosted on social media have been determinative in picking the next title on the project list.

You, too, can get involved in this process by following us on [Twitter \(@allianceforHEP\)](#) and advocating for titles. On our Twitter account is where we are most active fielding recommendations, seeking input, and hosting our weekly book discussions under the hashtag [#HEPReadingProject](#) (Tuesdays at 9amPT/12pmET).

### **Does the Alliance Ever Change the Reading List?**

Once a title for the project is selected, it gets added to the project list, and periodically the Alliance updates its list to broadcast the series out to roughly a year in advance, sometimes more, sometimes less (as with a "Summer Reading List," for example). You can always get an update on what's upcoming on the list by reading the project reading schedule on the Reading Project website: [higheredinprison.org/info/reading-project](http://higheredinprison.org/info/reading-project). Again, all are invited into this process. Your input on next titles is welcome at any time, and we certainly welcome input if a book seems worthy of bumping up, or bumping down, on the list.

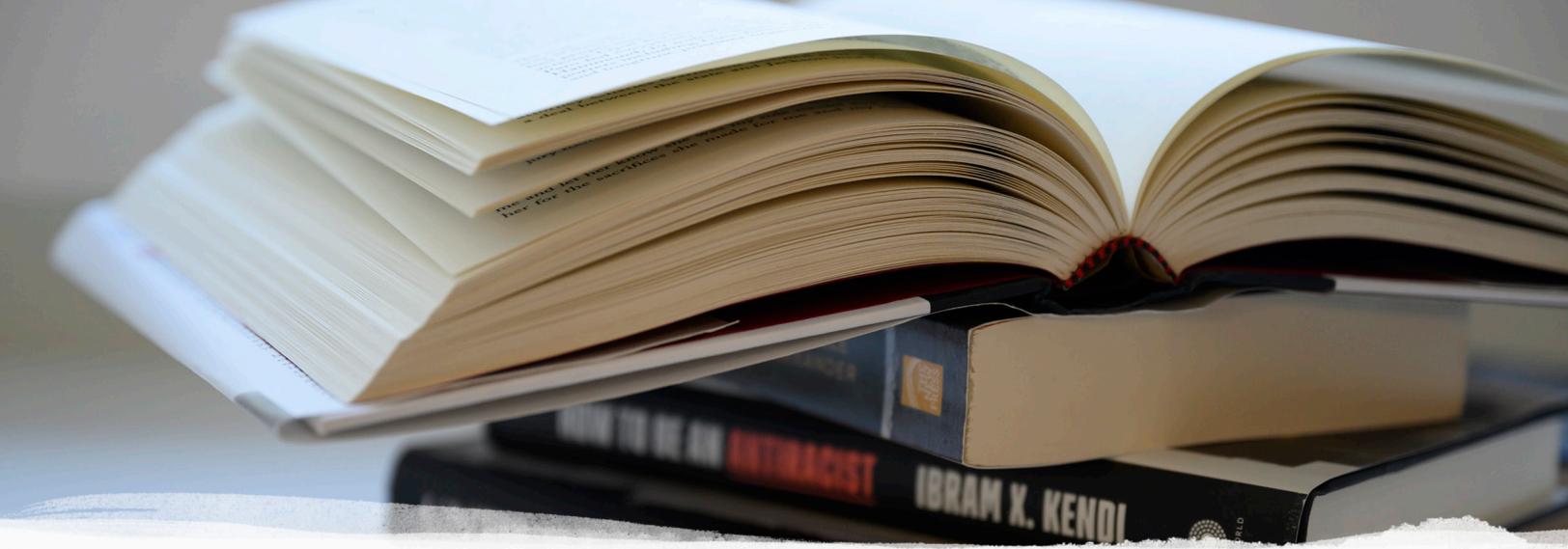
Sometimes, yes, the list may change. In a chaotic and often-unsettled world, the Alliance recognizes that too much forward planning for the series may not make sense. The Alliance may sometimes change the order of the reading list based, for example, on the turn of current events, or the publication of an especially timely or important project. Changes may also be a case of books not being accessible for one reason or another. The Alliance does reserve the right to make these changes, and will communicate the reasoning behind any of its changes to the larger community.

## **Do Alliance Staff Members Also Read the Books?**

Yes. Since 2019, the Alliance has provided its staff with both time and space for the dedicated reading of titles on the project list of up to an hour of paid time each work day. More than this, the Alliance also sets aside dedicated staff time for internal book discussions of at least one monthly discussion per book. During these discussions, all staff members (full and part-time, etc.) are invited and encouraged to participate. And, as you might already know, the Alliance also invites the broader higher education in prison community to join it in its collective reading project each week with a regularly-timed book discussion on its Twitter account (@AllianceforHEP) under the hashtag #HEPReadingProject

## **My program/organization's request for books was declined. Why?**

We are thrilled at the reception the Higher Education in Prison Reading Project has generated, as dozens of programs and organizations around the country requested hundreds of books for their staff with the launch of the project in July 2020. But resources for free books, unfortunately, are not limitless, and the Alliance has to exercise some discretion in selecting admissions to the project. Though the Alliance plans to continue to expand the program, we are starting with prioritizing staff members within higher education in prison programs involved in the day-to-day work of administering a higher education in prison program. Next to them, we are working to support small groups across the higher education in prison field, with an ideal request being for roughly 3-10 books at a time. As the program expands and grows, we hope to be able to include students, board members, and other program allies. Please continue following the Alliance for updates, and we do welcome everyone to make applications as new books are made available in the project and as our capacity expands.



## 2 Getting Started and Getting Engaged

We hope the opening section helped answer some of your likely questions as you get familiar with our program.

We assume that readers of this handbook will fall into two camps. Those: (1) hoping to learn more about the Higher Education in Prison Reading Project, and/or, (2) Those ready to join the project! Both, we hope, will also find this next section helpful.

### What the Alliance Provides

As Reading Project participants, programs and organizations across the Higher Education in Prison field are provided (for free) several basic kinds of resources with their requests to participate in the program. Programs and organizations can also use this list of resources as a checklist to make sure they have everything they need to get started.

1. **Free copies of the requested books** for higher education in prison program staff (full-time, part-time, volunteer, etc). These will be mailed to your office.
2. **A copy of this handbook.** Your feedback and input on this handbook, by the way, are also welcome. The Alliance welcomes any input from programs and organizations involved with the Reading Project, and will take that input into account. This Handbook may periodically change as this feedback is offered. Thank you in advance!
3. **A Resource Packet.** The contents of this resource packet may vary from book to book, but most books sent out will be accompanied by a packet of resources containing, for example: (1) A Recommended Reading and Discussion Schedule (2) A Bank of Higher Education in Prison Field-Specific Discussion Questions and (3) A “To Learn More” page that will contain information, links, and additional resources that will help augment your staff’s reading experience.

## How To Use the Materials in the Resource Packet

How you use and engage the free books offered in this project is largely up to you and your staff, though, as you will soon see, the Alliance does have some tips and ideas for some best reading practices you might also consider. For now, we would like to discuss how to best use some of the resources included within it.

- ▶ **Recommended Reading and Discussion Schedule.** When the Alliance gears up to read a book on the project list, a member of the staff makes a reading schedule that is designed to, in part, keeping the reading responsibilities week-to-week at a modest level, while recognizing that weekly or even month-to-month schedules may vary across organizations or even individual-to-individual. But in very practical terms, having a reading schedule helps. It helps the Alliance make sure that staff are ready to discuss the books at a certain time, as when, for example, they gather for their monthly book discussions or when, for instance, the Alliance engages books on its social media channels. Use our schedule however you like, but we do hope conversation is enriched by having all of our common readers relatively “on point” throughout the time the project is engaged with a book.
- ▶ **Discussion Questions.** While debate surrounds the reading habits of Americans today, consensus suggests a fairly dire situation. While the market seems to be rising for audiobooks and podcasts, it is also the case that, according to the Pew Research Center in 2019, roughly a quarter of U.S. adults reported not having read a single book either in whole or in part over the time span between January 2018 and January 2019. Non-readers also appear to have lower levels of educational attainment, earn less, and are over-represented among Black and brown communities. Many non-readers, meanwhile, readily acknowledge the importance of public libraries, but have not made their way to one in (in many cases) in their entire lifetimes<sup>1</sup>. The Alliance recognizes, then, that many staff members around the country will find it very unusual to be invited into a book discussion with co-workers and colleagues. We offer our discussion questions with one intent of making book discussion both more accessible and more rewarding. Another intent is to provide a thoughtful blend of open-ended and inclusive prompts that can be used both as conversation starters and as pathways to discovery and more sustained engagement, even lifelong learning. Talking about books can and sometimes should be hard. It can be uncomfortable. It can also be fun and even empowering. We’re here to help you through the hard conversations ahead. Take our questions and use them, or don’t! You may find it easier to simply build from ours and take them in your own directions. Whatever you decide, we will be excited to hear (and see) how the conversations unfold.
- ▶ **To Learn More.** Readers really start to engage their books when they start to seek out additional information motivated by the ideas they’ve encountered. And to help with that, the Alliance has also committed to providing each partner in the program with a bank of additional resources and materials for staff members to learn more, both about the books themselves and their authors, but also the themes and stories they address. Each resource list has been prepared again with care, balancing expert and community input, community engagement, and with the intent of providing future pathways to learning and discovery.

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Perrin, “Who Doesn’t Read Books in America?” Pew Research Center, September 26, 2019. Access here: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/26/who-doesnt-read-books-in-america/>

# Engaging the Higher Education in Prison Reading Project

Now that you have gotten an introduction to the project and all the resources and help available to you and your staff as you get started, how do you actually engage this program? It's a good question. We have some ideas!

- **Host a Group Staff Discussion**
- **Engage Virtually and on Social Media**
- **Make the Time and Space**
- **Reach Out!**
- **Read**

## HOST A GROUP STAFF DISCUSSION

The Alliance usually sets aside an hour of time bi-weekly/monthly (as schedules allow) to discuss the books on the reading list, and lately it has also been inviting community members to participate in/moderate the discussions as well. This can be a great team-building activity for your organization. We recommend it! As you get more comfortable and established as book discussants, you might also want to invite members of your community in. Outside moderators or experts in the subject matter of the books being discussed can be great at leading discussions for your team.

## ENGAGE VIRTUALLY AND ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The Alliance hosts regular discussions for the Book Project under the hashtag #HEPReading Project (Tuesdays at 9amPT/12pmET). If members of your staff or your organization itself would like to engage the reading with the Alliance and the broader higher education community, please join us! You are invited to send messages or dms to @AllianceforHEP; when a Tweet discusses some aspect of the book being addressed in the reading project, please use the hashtag #HEPReadingProject.

### What kinds of posts work best?

The Alliance has been routinely using a series of Tweet strategies in its book discussions that you and your team might also consider.

- Quotes from the books can be a great addition, so long as you (for example) quote the passage correctly “with quotations” and include page numbers for people to turn to.
- Often, we link to news items or stories that enhance the book somehow. For example, when historian Kelly Lytle Hernández waded into the nuances of late nineteenth and early-twentieth century immigration law in her *City of Inmates*, we turned to places like University Libraries, the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian, and PBS's *American Experience*, for example, to ensure that readers unfamiliar with this history have, for example, a usable crash-course to reference, along with relevant resources to learn more. Albert Woodfox, in *Solitary*, often referenced individuals that visited him or books that he read while he was in prison. In those instances, we tried to help readers better understand the references, etc. Sometimes we simply post photographs of members of the staff reading, or of their personal copies of their books. Illustrations and images certainly help when they accompany tweets. So do videos and other kinds of links. The point is: help people engage with the book somehow if you can. Consider using polls or specialized hashtags to drive conversation.
- We're also genuinely interested in your thoughts, your reflections, your critiques, and your reactions to the books. These can be great and often very personal inroads into the reading experience. It can be an inclusive strategy, too, since undoubtedly other readers have felt the same way or had similar experiences as they've made their way through the text.

- We do sometimes tweet directly at the authors or mention them in our posts, but you'll want to be mindful that this strategy can be overdone. Ultimately, our best interest is in having the authors know we are taking their work seriously. We can be critical readers, and we might even have criticisms of the books and their approaches, but it is not the intent or desire of this project to alienate our authors. Please be mindful of their time and energy and treat their work with critical, engaged respect.

## Other Virtual Options

Zoom or other conferencing software might also be great options for engaging the program with staff, especially while engaging social distancing.

## MAKE THE TIME AND SPACE

We also encourage incentivizing our reading program by setting aside on-the-clock hours for reading and engagement with the program and books. Reading takes time. Reading carefully takes even more time. But slow and steady progress over time can yield huge rewards, without sidetracking staff. From another perspective, staff will also become more conversant in the field's ongoing conversations, and enhance their own expertise.

## REACH OUT!

The Alliance and the Higher Education in Prison Community are growing so quickly. There is a large and engaged community of readers that are ready to talk about these books with you. Reach out! We're always happy to help you get in touch with names and organizations doing the work across the country.

## READ

As Lauren Michele Jackson, an English professor at Northwestern, recently explained in an essay for *Vulture*, the thing about being in a reading series is that everyone, well, has to read. "That's the thing about reading," she explained, "it has to be done." It really is that simple.

**To engage the project, read. The conversation will take shape from there.**

---

## THANK YOU!

We're thrilled to be reading with you! Thanks again for your interest in our program, and please consider regularly checking our social media (@AllianceforHEP) and website pages ([higheredinprison.org](http://higheredinprison.org)) as we'll be posting updates to the program there. If you have any questions in the meantime, do not hesitate to reach out: [alliance@higheredinprison.org](mailto:alliance@higheredinprison.org)

