

# UNIVERSITY OF UTAH PRISON EDUCATION PROJECT

FALL 2021 NEWSLETTER



## LETTER FROM THE CO-DIRECTOR

Dear UPEPers,

We hope this newsletter finds you and your loved ones in good health—physical, mental, and spiritual. Here at UPEP, we have continued our work of providing higher education to people incarcerated in Utah State prisons. Amidst racial, economic, and political unrest and a global health pandemic we have re-committed ourselves to ensuring that incarcerated people are central to the conversation of social transformation. While the Covid-19 pandemic put our program on pause for a few months, we are now operating in person in SIX facilities offering EIGHT classes to over EIGHTY students! We are grateful to UPEP students for their commitment to their education, and to our volunteers for their devotion to equity in higher education in prison. We are happy to announce that this fall we will offer our first ever for-credit courses to three groups of students! Thanks to the dedication of U of U Professor Chris Mead, and BYU Professors Chris Hodson and Matt Mason who have secured tuition funding through grants and donors, UPEP students will receive college credit for fall classes. We are beyond excited for this, and hope it is the beginning of a degree pathway for incarcerated people in the state of Utah. We are grateful to everyone who helped make this a reality. Finally, some personal news. This fall I will be starting a teaching position at Salt Lake Community College and stepping away from my position as Co-Director of UPEP. I have learned so much these past four years and am grateful to UPEP students, volunteers, and supporters for continually showing up for this program. Fortunately, I will not be far and am eager to think of ways to expand higher education programming and volunteer opportunities in the SLC community and beyond. Thank you!

In Solidarity,  
*Cindy Fierros*

# UTAH MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS TOUR

by Ashley Farmer

The UMFA enjoyed conversation and art-making with students via Zoom this past spring that focused on the museum's most recent visiting exhibition, *Black Refractions: Highlights from the Studio Museum in Harlem*. Museum educators worked with students to analyze images by the *Black Refractions* artists that included Barkley L. Hendricks, Kehinde Wiley, Chakaia Booker, and Meschac Gaba, among others. Following the virtual tour that incorporated slow looking, conversation, and personal responses to the images, students made their own works of art with oil pastels: each person created an abstract artwork that told the story of three distinct times in their lives. The discussions about the art were lively and thoughtful, with each person bringing their personal perspective to the discussion; similarly, the students' artwork represented experiences that were unique to each individual. We at the UMFA enjoyed spending time with this amazing group of students and look forward to discussing (and creating!) more art with them this fall.



# THE UPEP LIBRARY

by Taylor Aragon

In the Spring semester of 2021, Jenna Service and I worked on sorting, documenting, and organizing *over three thousand book donations* made to UPEP in the book drive. We sorted the books by genre and then split them between the different facilities we serve in the Utah State Prison. Finally, on April 20th, a large group of UPEP volunteers and interns

loaded up their vehicles and made the trip down to Draper. We split into two groups, each of us tasked with building shelves in our designated classroom, then unboxing the books into their assigned area. Since then, UPEP students have had access to an incredibly wide variety of books. Whether they want to read something nonfiction and scientific, or to escape through fictional fantasy, they can. COVID-19 has been especially hard on incarcerated people, so I am honored to have been a part of this process. Hopefully, the UPEP library will be around for many years to come and continue to grow exponentially in size.

# MIXED HONORS CLASS WITH OUR INCARCERATED STUDENTS

*by Professor Christopher Mead*

This Fall, with support from the Bennion Center and the Honors College, UPEP will be offering for-credit programming to our students for the first time. As the instructor for this course, I am incredibly excited about this important step in UPEP's development. As exciting as this news is, there is also more to share. In this semester-long introduction to critical reading and writing, UPEP students will share their classroom with students from the UU's Honors College. Unlike some models for combined classrooms, ours is a model that emphasizes the shared experience that all enrolled students will have as equals. For UPEP and Honors students alike, the course will involve ongoing opportunities to encounter, collaborate with, and depend on one another. These opportunities to build mutual understanding and trust—shaped over time and supported by a pedagogy that integrates lessons in reading and writing with ones in community formation—promise to exceed what is possible in an on-campus environment. In our classroom, students of diverse backgrounds and life experiences will engage with one another, testing their preconceptions and reshaping their mindsets as they develop important new skills together. This work can sometimes be challenging, but it also promises to be transformative, creating substantive and lasting links between previously unconnected people.



## BYU CLASSES THROUGH UPEP

*by Professor Matthew Mason*

I am a Professor of History at Brigham Young University, and taught a class on the US Civil War Era for UPEP in fall 2020. This class, “US History to 1877,” introduces students to what I take to be the most important themes and developments of roughly the first three centuries of American history. Those themes include the ongoing importance of religion, race, and slavery; and the disruptive and creative influence of the American Revolution. We will focus much more in class on ideas and processes of change than on names and dates, facts and figures. Of course, this does not mean that factual background is unimportant, for facts enable us to trace and interpret those changes. Instead of having a textbook, I will use the lectures to give background, supplemented and complemented by readings drawn from primary sources (sources from the time of these events).



# A WORD FROM OUR ALUMNI

*by Edgar Montero*

My name is Edgar Montero. I am a former UPEP student. I entered the program when it first started in the fall of 2017. I participated in this program for nearly three years. Throughout this experience, I participated in almost every class. My favorite class, of course, was Gender Studies taught by Professor Fierros. I really enjoyed the class because it helped me to see masculinity from a different perspective. We read different pieces of literature dealing with gender issues. One of my favorite authors from the class was bell hooks. I had never been introduced to that kind of thinking and ideas. One of my favorite pieces by her was *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*.

I was really blessed to be part of UPEP as a student. I was thrilled to participate in a program where I was appreciated and most importantly respected as a student and a human being. The community support was huge in my involvement with the program because our volunteers were awesome. I met people that really made a difference in the way I felt about being incarcerated. We read books and shared our perspectives with each other without feeling ashamed. It made me feel human.

Thanks to that experience I am in a better place in my life. I was released from prison three months ago after having served 16 years from when I was 18 years old. It hasn't been an easy transition. But I have had a lot of support from the program and I still maintain communication with them. Thankfully these people became a part of my life and I really appreciate them. UPEP is more than a college program...it is a community of friends who really care about our progress inside and out of prison.

# INTRODUCING RUBEN GOMEZ

## *UPEP's New College of Education Fellow*

Hi all, my name is Ruben and I am UPEP's new College of Education Fellow. I joined UPEP in January of 2020 after learning about the program in an ethics class at Utah Valley University. Since joining, I have crossed paths with many different incarcerated students, volunteers, program coordinators, and class professors. This in itself has been a valuable experience where I find myself gaining new perspectives on life, morality, the power of education, and even spirituality on a regular basis. My experience with UPEP has inspired me to return to school and continue my own educational pursuits. I look forward to continuing my support for UPEP's students, participating faculty, volunteers, and coordinators.



Nathon Taylor, Graduate Intern

## SUPPORT UPEP

As we expand programming, our need for books, supplies, and technology is growing. Please consider making a donation to support UPEP students. All donations are tax-deductible. You can donate directly at <http://upegp.utah.edu/donate> or through our [Amazon Wishlist](#).

Want to rep UPEP? You can support the work of quality higher education in prison and wear comfy swag by purchasing a #Collegenprison t-shirt with a minimum \$25 donation via our website: [upegp.utah.edu/donate](http://upegp.utah.edu/donate). Please indicate your preferred size in the comment box.

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