

Instructors Manual
Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP)
(Updated January 2025)

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Welcome!

Prison teaching is one of the most rewarding academic experiences you will ever have. Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP) teachers and alumni often stay connected with our program for years after participating in a prison course, and many have gone on to start other initiatives elsewhere after seeing the prison system at work for the first time via CPEP.

The purpose of this document is to introduce our program and to describe how to participate as a college educator inside the three prisons¹ where we work—all located within a 45-minute to 1-hour drive from Ithaca (Figure 1). We teach courses in all disciplines. Our students are incarcerated adult men who meet the qualifications to enroll in the Associate's degree program we offer through a partnership with Cayuga Community College. As you might imagine, the resources inside prisons do not resemble those on traditional campuses. Despite the constraints imposed on teaching inside prison walls, navigating those limitations is what makes teaching so affirming inside our CPEP classrooms.

Following this introductory section, the document is organized into two distinct parts:

Part I: Applying to Teach for CPEP

¹ Throughout this document and in NYS-DOCCS communications, "prison" and "facility" and "correctional facility" are often used interchangeably.

Part II: Preparing to Teach Your Course

If you are considering whether CPEP teaching is for you, start with Part I to get a sense of the mission and scope of our program; to find out if you are eligible to teach; and to get a sense of the students, the time commitment, and the application process.

If you have already applied and been accepted to teach for our program, read Part II carefully to make sure you understand the semester timeline and deadlines, the classroom technology and internet resources, necessary steps to complete your eligibility, and to whom you might turn with further questions.

Along with reading this document, whether you are thinking of applying or have already been accepted to teach, we strongly encourage you to visit our [website](#) and scroll around to familiarize yourself with our mission, history, students, and activities. In the “History” section, pay particular attention to an [essay](#) by a founder of our program, Professor Winthrop (Pete) Wetherbee, who describes not only the history in brief of higher education in prisons but also, perhaps more important to you as you contemplate teaching in prison, the dynamic between students and teachers inside the walls. You may also want to look at some of the [program videos](#) on the website, which feature past CPEP students, instructors, tutors, and TAs.

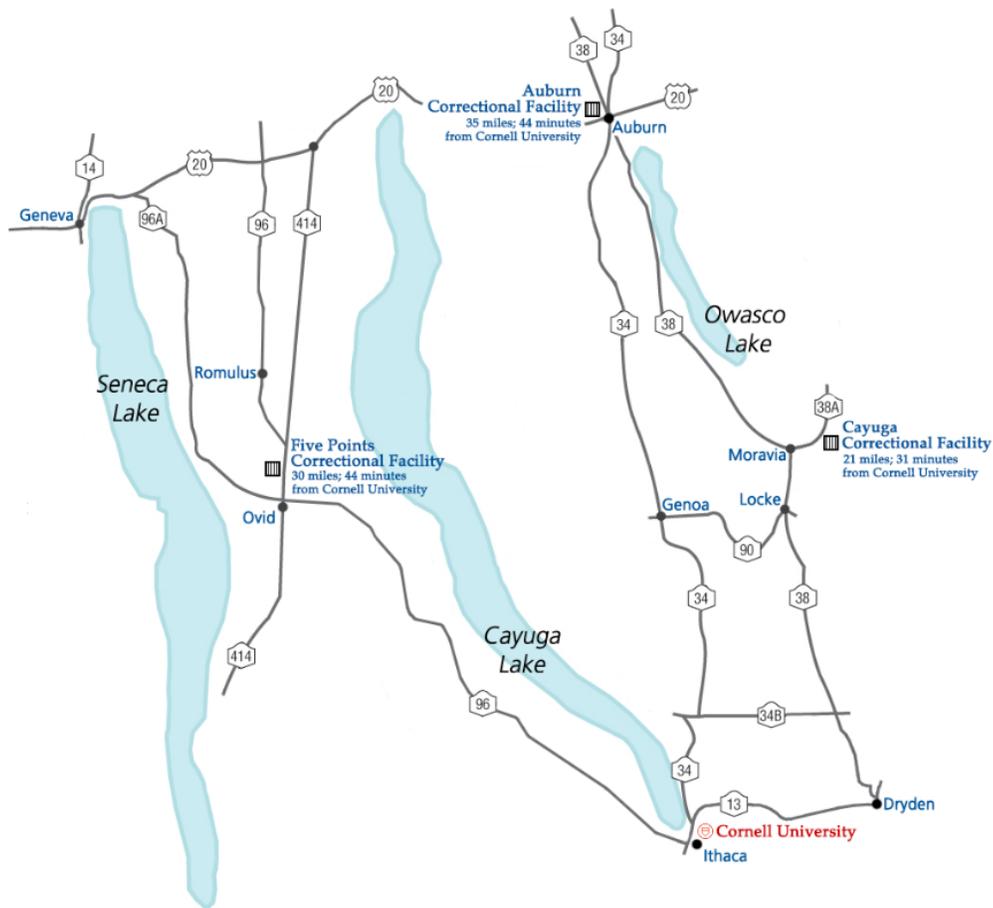


Figure 1: Location of the three prisons in relation to Cornell.

Part 1: Applying to Teach

Why Apply?

Thank you for considering prison teaching! For many volunteers in the program, serving as a CPEP instructor has been one of the most fulfilling parts of an academic career. It provides an opportunity to engage with our broader community and take our expertise beyond the walls of a typical higher education institution. There are many firsthand testimonies about why volunteers found this experience meaningful, and we encourage you to read and watch those, located on our [website](#). You will also join a community of teachers and scholars committed to developing a socially responsible pedagogy and increasing access to higher education, especially to incarcerated individuals.

Our College Program

The Associate's degree program is coordinated through Cayuga Community College (CCC) and students fulfill the requirements of the degree primarily through courses offered by CCC. Depending on the needs of incoming students, we also often require students to complete a non-credit college prep course before starting their CCC degree requirements. These courses emphasize study skills, basic writing, and critical thinking.

Graduate students and faculty from any institution can apply to teach CCC courses.²

CCC courses constitute the “core” of the Associate's degree. When teaching a CCC course, your syllabus is built upon a skeleton syllabus (concise description, learning objectives, assessment guidelines) designed by CCC. The instructor, however, has considerable latitude with readings, assignments, and classroom activities. We generally recruit instructors for the following CCC courses:

ANTH 101 – Introductory Anthropology
BIOL 101 – Essentials of Biology
BIOL 209 – Nutrition
COMM 201 – Media & Society
ECON 201/202 – Introduction to Economics I/II
ENG 101/102 – Freshman English I/II
ENG 201/202 – World Literature I/II
GEOG 101 – World Geography
HIST 103/104/105 – American History
HLTH 104 – Personal Health
MATH 112 – Contemporary Mathematics
MUSI 101 – Music Appreciation
SOC 101 – Introductory Sociology
PE 104 – Yoga
PHIL 201 – Introductory Philosophy
PSCI 102 – American Government
PSY 101 – Introductory Psychology



² The CCC requirements to teach one of these courses generally include at least 6 graduate-level courses (and/or Master's degree) in the relevant area.

For Cornell faculty only:

Cornell courses serve as elective courses for the Associate’s Degree. These courses, arranged through Cornell, do not have skeleton syllabi. When selecting Cornell courses, we consider the expertise of the instructor and the curricular needs of students.

Our Students

Our college program serves incarcerated students in state prisons in central New York. CPEP has a firm belief in the transformative power of intellectual development and a commitment to equitable access to higher education. Consequently, we accept all incarcerated students who are academically eligible for a college education, regardless of reason for incarceration or length of sentence.

We refer to our students as *students* rather than calling them “inmates” or “prisoners” – we aim to honor the difficulty of college-level study in the prison setting by granting our students their earned title. Students must pass an entrance exam developed by CPEP Staff to enter the program. These students must maintain good behavior in order to continue enrolling in our courses and often find the CPEP classroom to be both intellectual and humanizing spaces. In addition to academic coursework, our students have also had the opportunity to participate in guest lecture programs and co-curricular activities, including a debate society and *the Writer’s Bloc Literary Journal*.

Many people are still left with the question, “Is it safe?” Our college prison program operates under strict rules, many of which are in effect for the safety of instructors *and* incarcerated students. Movement inside the facilities is highly regulated, and you will receive extensive preparation and instruction on navigating the facilities during orientation. There has never been a single incident of violence in a Cornell classroom in prison.

Our students are generally among the most respectful and high-performing individuals at the facility. Most importantly, our students are ready for college-level work. We have confidence in our students and instructors to extend our track record as one of the highest-quality college-in-prison programs in the United States. If you have any remaining concerns, please reach out to any member of CPEP staff before applying.

Instructor Eligibility

Qualified graduate students and faculty are eligible to serve as instructors of our credit-bearing courses. Faculty and postdoctoral fellows are welcome to propose courses for the prison program with the awareness that we can compensate only graduate students at this time.

Doctoral students who have passed the ‘A’ exam are eligible to submit an application to teach a course in the prisons. We rely on volunteers to teach some of our classes, others are modestly subsidized at the rate of \$3,500 per semester-long course. When you apply to teach, you will be asked whether you would be willing to volunteer, or whether your participation will be contingent on a subsidy.

Graduate students in professional programs that have no ‘A’ exam (e.g., MBA, MFA) are welcome to submit proposals as well, but we recommend you reach out to [Keisha Burrow](#), Associate Director of Program Development & Operations first, to discuss the community colleges’ criteria for teaching approval for your discipline.

Application Process

To help applicants get a sense of timeline, we note the following benchmarks. We ask for applications **early** in the semester before you plan to teach because the process for

reviewing course materials is more extensive when teaching at a correctional facility. Please abide by the more specific dates and deadlines CPEP will circulate in its call for instructor applications.

Note: 2L and 3L law students interested in teaching for CPEP through [the law teaching practicum](#) should first contact Law Librarian and Adjunct Professor [Julia Mizutani](#) well before CPEP's application deadline.

If you plan to teach in the...	Fall	Spring	Summer
Applications Due	Early February	Late September	Early February
Application Decisions & Course Placements Released	Early March	Mid October	Late February
If Accepted, Syllabus & Course Materials Due	Mid April	Mid November	Early April

The CPEP Instructor application consists of the following items. Applicants should apply on the CPEP Website.

1. Current resume or CV
2. CPEP Statement of Interest
3. Copy of all graduate school transcripts

Final Considerations

While we hope that much of the material up to this point has helped get you excited about teaching in the facility, we also want to be transparent about the challenges related to teaching in prison. As you can imagine, the resources in the prisons do not resemble those on campus. Much of our work as a program involves navigating constraints stemming from prison rules/policies (e.g., instructors are generally not allowed to meet with or communicate with students outside of class time), managing the distance between Cornell and the facilities, and accommodating the complex regulations that govern federal and state tuition grants.

At the same time, for many instructors, the fulfillment of teaching for CPEP comes from providing incarcerated students with a robust, dynamic, and rigorous education despite these parameters. The CPEP community is collaborative and creative, so we encourage you to reach out to others when you encounter challenges.

Please reach out to [Keisha Burrow](#), Associate Director of Program Development & Operations, with any questions about the application.

Part 2: Teaching for the Program

DOCCS Clearance & Orientations

Congratulations on being selected as an instructor for our program! While you have been accepted on CPEP's end, there are a few more steps to be formally approved by NY-DOCCS.

1. **Complete the NY-DOCCS Volunteer Approval Process.** You will need to fill out the application form required for all volunteers in NY-State correctional facilities. Any questions about this application should be directed to the coordinator for the facility in which you have been placed to teach. As part of this process, you will need to provide a photocopy of a state-issued photo ID or passport.
2. **Tuberculosis Test.** All volunteers will need to submit TB test results to NY-DOCCS. Students can schedule a test at Cornell Health, and Cornell employees can schedule a test with Cornell's Occupational Medicine Department. We can also reimburse TB tests from the Tompkins County Whole Health Department. Be aware that a TB test usually requires two trips to the physician over three days.
3. **NY-DOCCS Volunteer Orientation.** Either late in the semester before you start teaching or in the weeks before the start of the semester you teach, you will be required to attend an orientation at a correctional facility. This orientation session introduces the rules and regulations for NY-DOCCS volunteers (not specific to CPEP). You will also be photographed and fingerprinted to create an official volunteer ID badge.
4. **CPEP Instructor Training.** In May (for summer/fall participation) and December (for spring participation), a 3-hour training is held to prepare you for teaching in the prison. This is required for all new prison instructors, developed by the CPEP librarian.
5. **CPEP Kickoff Orientation.** Usually, the Sunday before the CPEP semester begins, you will be required to attend an orientation with CPEP staff. This orientation will help contextualize the prison teaching experience and the protocols administered by NY-DOCCS for CPEP instructors.
6. **Liability Release Form.** You will be asked to sign a standard liability release form for teaching in the program.

Preparing Your Syllabus & Course Materials

As you begin preparing your syllabus and materials, it's important to keep a few things in mind.

CPEP has purchased a core collection of texts for intro courses that we rent out to students each semester. Please consult with your coordinator if your course already has a textbook assigned to it before you select course readings.

Our students have limited access to the Internet or email; course texts are usually restricted to textbooks and readers, and digital material in the CPEP computer labs. Instructors will not be able to add new books or articles to the reading list once the semester is underway. Large texts (books, readers) must be approved by the prison, purchased by the program, processed into the facility through the package room where they will be x-rayed to ensure that no contraband is included, and distributed before the start of classes. This may seem severe, but it is standard prison protocol that requires much coordination on the part of CPEP staff. To make sure that we have your materials

ready at the start of the semester, we ask for you to complete your syllabi and select course materials by the deadlines on page 5.

First-time instructors often have questions about how to adapt their course to the prison environment. You are welcome to reach out to your facility's coordinator and/or the informal mentors listed later in this document.

Instructors may also be asked to work with undergraduate Teaching Assistants to assist in your courses. Indeed, we strongly encourage you to consider working with and mentoring undergraduate TAs – undergraduate TAs often note volunteering with CPEP as one of the most important and meaningful experiences in their undergraduate careers. Instructors may also proactively request to have an undergraduate TA. While CPEP tries to honor all requests to have a TA, this will largely depend on undergraduate volunteers' schedules.

If you would like to connect with a CPEP instructor who has taught the same course to aid your preparation, please reach out to CPEP staff, and we can connect you if possible.

Transportation to the Prisons

Instructors and other volunteers generally choose to travel to the prisons in carpools. Your CPEP facility coordinator can connect you to other CPEP volunteers that are teaching or tutoring during your timeslot, if you would like to arrange to carpool. Prospective instructors who do not own a car should be aware that although our staff makes their best effort to link non-drivers with drivers, it is the responsibility of the instructor to ensure they can make it to class throughout the semester.

Dress Code & Personal Items

During your NYS-DOCCS Orientation, you should have received extensive guidance on dress code and what materials you can carry with you into the facilities. Please be sure to adhere strictly to this protocol every week, as CPEP instructors have been turned away in the past for lack of adherence. You are welcome (and encouraged) to ask your coordinators all questions about dress and personal items. The last thing we want is for you to get to the facility and be turned away.

Professionalism as a Prison Instructor

While prison education is a rewarding and meaningful teaching experience, the reality is that instructors must be especially mindful of professionalism in the prison environment. The facilities hold volunteers to higher standards in terms of professional behavior and dress than universities do, and even *perceived* divergences from these standards can have serious consequences (ranging from being turned away at the prison for that day to a permanent ban from volunteering in NY state prisons). Furthermore, perceived divergence from standards can have repercussions beyond those for the instructor, potentially impacting both our incarcerated students and the program as a whole.

To ensure that the program can continue its mission of providing transformative education to incarcerated students, we ask our instructors to be especially mindful when it comes to conduct (especially in 1:1 interactions with students) and dress. Instructors should avoid also avoid any perceived favoritism and strive to treat students equally. If a coordinator passes on "complaints" from facility staff about dress or conduct, we ask instructors to make adjustments and encourage you to not take personal offence or feel

guilty. It can be difficult to predict what will raise eyebrows in prison (e.g., skinny jeans or sitting on a desk), and what is acceptable in one facility may not be in another.

The professional standards volunteers are held to in prison include complete compliance with the directions/instructions of Corrections Officers (COs) while inside the facility, even if those directions/instructions seem unfairly punitive to students or volunteers. In the moment, we ask volunteers to follow the directions/instructions of the CO *and* to inform your coordinator about the incident as soon as possible after you leave the facility.

Classrooms and Technology Resources

Our college courses often occur in what are essentially multi-purpose classrooms amongst the other classrooms that are designated to specific teachers/courses by the NYS Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS). All facilities do currently have a CPEP offline computer lab that has Encyclopedia Britannica, math tutorial videos, a typing program, and Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Some labs may have access to additional resources.

There are usually chalkboards/whiteboards, and CPEP can provide chalk/dry erase markers. There are desks in some classrooms, and others have tables and chairs. It is important to leave these classrooms as we find them because they are often in use during other shift times when our classes are not in session.

Given the limitations with technology, we encourage instructors to be flexible about the format in which students submit their assignments. Your facility coordinator can clarify the frequency with which your students may have access to the CPEP computer lab. Our students are very resourceful: Some have their own typewriters in their cell; others use the computers in the CPEP computer lab; others hand-write their assignments.

Library Resources

The Cornell Prison Education Program is building a library program! Maddie Reynolds is the CPEP librarian. If you want help thinking through what to teach in your course or need assistance locating course materials at Cornell University Library, please contact [Maddie](#) to schedule a consultation. She can help you find books/articles and order materials through Borrow Direct and InterLibrary Loan if you're having trouble finding them. Maddie can also provide instruction sessions on how to come up with a research topic, how to analyze archival materials, how to evaluate and use sources in writing, and how to format citations.

Here are some resources we are working on providing:

- **JSTOR Access in Prison Initiative:** An offline index of the most popular titles on JSTOR. Students can search for articles and see the citation information and sometimes an abstract. If you are interested in using JSTOR with your class, Maddie can provide library instruction sessions on how to use the database, work with students on searching for articles, and print the full text for delivery to your class. We currently have JSTOR access at Cayuga and Auburn CF and are working on access at Five Points CF.
- **Print reference collections:** We are developing small print reference collections to be placed on book carts in our computer labs at each facility. The collections will contain encyclopedias, handbooks, and anthologies to support the core

classes CPEP teaches. Students can sign up for learning lab/ study hall to use the reference collection. These collections are in place at Cayuga and Auburn.

- **Creative Writing Publishing Project:** CPEP has a grant from California Rare Book School to publish a volume of student writing. Students have submitted their writing and the anthology will be printed in Spring of 2025.
- **Debate Teams:** **The library is currently helping to provide research for the Cayuga Debate team and is working on approvals to provide research for the Auburn and Five Points debate programs.**
- **Reference Service:** **The library will establish a reference service at Cayuga in Spring 2025. Students will have access to a reference form in study hall, where they can request information from Cornell University Library.**

Maddie looks forward to supporting you and your class!

Students' School Supplies

For each course, the Cornell Prison Education Program supplies students with a notebook (for notes), notepad (for assignments), and a folder (for class handouts) – so a student enrolled in three classes would receive three of each. Instructors should feel confident that their students have basic school supplies.

Students of Concern

You can think of your facility's coordinator as the academic advisor for all students at that facility. When you are concerned about a student, your first point of contact should be the Cornell facility coordinator. Because responding to student needs in the prison environment can be complicated, we ask that you notify your coordinator of any concerns promptly. It is much better to let your coordinator know about a potential issue early than wait until later in the semester when it may be harder to address.

Examples of concerns can include:

- Student absences
- Awareness of challenging circumstances
- Inappropriate note-writing between students and teaching staff
- Lack of engagement in class
- Missing assignments/deadlines

Adapting to the Prison Classroom

Despite their extraordinary capacities, many CPEP students have not had a rigorous or complete secondary education. Instructors should prepare for students with widely varied educational experiences and work to meet students where they are, with respect and confidence. You are welcome to reach out to CPEP staff and informal mentors to discuss strategies for teaching students with a range of backgrounds and skills.

Teaching in prison also requires us to be nimble. For example, classes may be unexpectedly cancelled by the facility, students may occasionally be prevented from attending class, and classrooms may be reallocated mid-semester. It's impossible to prepare for all surprises, so flexibility is essential. If you are finding these unexpected hiccups challenging, please reach out to your coordinator and/or informal mentors. We know this can be frustrating, so we are happy to support you in this process.

Finally, very few opportunities will exist to engage with students apart from collective class time; there are no “office hours.” Rather, instructors can build in weekly opportunities to check in individually with students during class (e.g., students spend the first portion of class working on independent or group work while the instructor takes time to meet with students individually).

Letters of Recommendation

Students may occasionally seek a letter of recommendation from an instructor for a parole hearing or another purpose. **Before responding to students’ requests for letters**, Instructors must reach out to Keisha Burrow for guidance on what can be included in such a letter and where it should be sent.

Additional Academic Support

Study Hall³ happens on a weekly basis in each prison in the same room that houses the CPEP computers. It is staffed by the Program Coordinator assisted by Cornell students, faculty, and community members who tutor on demand. It is a place not only to study, but also for our students to develop collegiality outside of a classroom setting. Attendance is not mandatory, but those who come regularly benefit from the chance to navigate an academic atmosphere with each other and with tutors. Students enter CPEP in cohorts after periodic entrance exams and often do not have opportunities other than study hall to meet as “a campus.”

Instructors can help promote study hall attendance by giving assignments that benefit from teamwork or consultation with a tutor. We encourage instructors to communicate closely with tutors about their assignments as many tutors want to keep up with readings to maximize their ability to help.

Study Hall is also the time when program coordinators will confer with students about long-term planning, transcripts, etc.

Class Cancellations

If you are ill and cannot make it to class, please let your coordinator know as soon as you can. Similarly, please let your coordinator know if inclement weather will prevent you from getting to the facility. Your TA **cannot** run class if you are not there. Your coordinator will also be in touch if classes must be cancelled due to issues at the facility or weather. After class is cancelled for whatever reason, your coordinator will reach out to you discuss to makeup options.

End of Semester Responsibilities

A standard 2-page evaluation form is used to collect instructor evaluations from the students at the end of the semester. Some instructors choose to prepare their own evaluations in addition to the required form, to get direct feedback for their own use.

Grades are due on time, generally a few days after your final class meets. In addition to providing grades, instructors are expected to provide brief narrative evaluations to students, due one week after the final class. These narrative evaluations are regarded as crucial pieces of feedback, both by the program and by students.

³ In various prisons, Study Hall may be referred to as Learning Lab, Tutorial, or Computer Lab by facility administrators, so keep that in mind when talking with correction officers (CO) in the educational wing.

Informal Mentorship for Instructors

For both first-time and returning instructors, it can be helpful to sit down with other instructors to debrief experiences in the facility and/or to brainstorm ideas for teaching in the prison environment. You are welcome (and encouraged) to reach out to the following instructors who have volunteered to serve as a resource for current CPEP instructors.

- [Mary Katzenstein](#)
- [Jan Zeserson](#)
- [Stephen Kim](#)
- [Tess Pendergrast](#)
- [Maddie Reynolds](#)

Your coordinator will also reach out to you roughly 3 weeks into the semester for a brief check-in and offer the opportunity to connect with one of our volunteer mentor instructors.

CPEP Staff Contact Information

Executive Director: [Rob Scott](#)

Main Contacts for Instructors

Associate Director of Program Development & Operations: [Keisha Burrow](#)

- Questions about application and recruitment
- Questions about payment or appointments

CPEP Librarian: [Maddie Reynolds](#)

- Questions about library resources for students

Auburn Correctional Facility Program Coordinator: [Sage Weber](#)

Cayuga Correctional Facility Program Coordinator: [Rachael Fieweger](#)

Five Points Correctional Facility Program Coordinator: [Susanna Hempstead Plevyak](#)

- Questions about interactions with correctional facility staff
- Questions about individual students (especially if they're students of concern)
- Questions about your instructional needs at the facility
- Your coordinator will loop in other staff as needed to answer your question / address your concern.

Additional CPEP Staff:

Associate Director of Student Services: [Betsye Violette](#)

Communications Director: [Jenna LaPietra](#)

Reentry Associate: [Sarah Cushman](#)

Research Associate: [Tess Pendergrast](#)

After reviewing this entire document, please reach out to [Keisha Burrow](#) with any questions.

Please keep this document for easy reference as you start to teach.