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“PLEASE READ”: CORRESPONDENCE ON RACE IN THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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“Please Read”: Correspondence on Race in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic bifurcated and disrupted the 2019 and 2020 academic years. Moving forward it seems clear that we will delineate our time in terms of “before the pandemic” and “after the pandemic.” This distinction resonates with faculty and alumni of the University of Iowa’s (UI) Liberal Arts Beyond Bars (LABB) college in prison program for reasons beyond the COVID-19 virus. On March 9, 2020, the Iowa Department of Corrections suspended all in-person volunteer activity and family visits for people incarcerated in the state of Iowa. Additionally, in May of 2020 new leadership was installed at the Iowa Medical and Classification Center (IMCC) prison. Under the prior warden the UI LABB program had access to a computer lab where students could log on to the browser-based University of Iowa Learning Management System (called ICON — Iowa Classes On-Line) and interact with their coursework, faculty, and LABB staff. This system of communication kept us connected, even when we could not be in the same physical space. This personal narrative exchange arises from themes mined from that specific correspondence between the authors from March 10, 2020, the first day after all visitors and volunteers were locked out due to COVID protocols, and August 18, 2020, when the college program’s computer lab was dismantled, and communication severed. Themes within this correspondence speak to the difficulties of communicating from a prison, especially during a global pandemic, as well as to the ways racism manifests in higher education in prison programs. Additional discussions about the challenges of maintaining mental health under the care of prison health providers and during the exacerbation of isolation and tension unique to quarantine are also presented [TRIGGER WARNING – this article contains references to suicide, trauma, and other issues of mental health and wellness.]

Throughout the 2019-2020 academic year students in the University of Iowa’s Liberal Arts Beyond Bars (LABB) college in prison program were able to access the University of Iowa’s learning management system (LMS), called ICON (Iowa Courses On-line), by virtue of a computer lab on the second floor of the Iowa Medical and

Classification Center (IMCC). The lab came into existence as many boons in the corrections space do, as a bi-product of the crossover of two related opportunities within the Department of Corrections: one for good public relations and one for profit.

Iowa Central Community College (ICCC), Iowa's original Second Chance Pell site under the U.S. Department of Education's Experimental Sites Initiative, launched in Iowa prisons in the Summer of 2015 and began drawing down Pell Grants for tuition soon after. Participation in this much anticipated education initiative brought positive attention to both the college and the Department of Corrections. As part of Second Chance Pell delivery ICCC provided refurbished computers at the IMCC prison and then enrolled students in their asynchronous on-line courses leading to an Associates Degrees for anyone interested and Pell eligible.

With approval from ICCC and the help of the IT lead at IMCC, the University of Iowa's ICON LMS was installed via an independent browser on the Iowa Central desktops through special permission called "white-listing." This access allowed students to log-in to their University of Iowa student accounts to view course-specific assignments, draw down readings, and communicate with instructors and program staff, as free world students do. There were inevitable challenges to this model, but for a moment in time the will of the college in prison program and the will of the prison's leadership and essential staff aligned to create what felt like an unprecedented level of access to opportunities for communication and student/college-in-prison staff collaboration.

On March 9, 2020, as the extent of the spread and threat of the Coronavirus pandemic was becoming clear, the Iowa Department of Corrections suspended all in-

person volunteer activity and family visits within its prisons but the computer lab remained intact and available for student use when units were not on limited movement due to lockdowns. The communication system enabled through the browser-based access to the University of Iowa LMS kept us connected, even when we could not be in the same physical space. However, in May of 2020 new leadership was installed at IMCC and that access would end a few short months later.

During those first months of lockdowns, quarantines, and isolation, communication between students and LABB faculty and staff enabled the continuation of courses in a modified virtual format. The ability to convey information from inside to outside, and vice-versa, was paramount for course completion, but also in keeping stress levels and anxiety, at least around learning, to a manageable level. We communicated frequently through course-based chats and ICON messaging (the university's internal email system.)

One result of this access was a continuing conversation between Heather Erwin, as the LABB Director, and Anthony Rhodd, a high achieving and highly motivated student and member of the Otoe-Missouria Tribe of Oklahoma, regarding ongoing racial dynamics within the LABB program, among a host of other topics. The following excerpts come from exchanges that began on the day LABB access — in fact all access for visitors and volunteers — was locked down due to spread of the COVID-19 virus and continue through the protests and outcries for justice arising from the murder of George Floyd. Anthony is a co-author of this article, and his contributions are indicated by italics.

Part One: Please Read

*From: A-Rhodd [e-mail]
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 8:46:36 AM
To: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]
Subject: A-Rhodd (CSI:1213:0011 Spr20 Special Topics I) just sent you a message in Canvas. Please Read*

Heather,

It just sucks sometimes. I needed to voice this, and it is not just LABB. EVERYTHING in this prison is geared around white people. All the groups are led by white people--Dog Program, MRT, New Directions, Pen and Paper, Inmate Council, AVP, Toastmasters, LABB, The Oakdale Choir, and even, now, Negative to Positive, and the Lifer's Organization.

It sucks. Dude, I have the heaviest workload in regards to credit hours per semester, however, I am the ONLY one EVER to help these guys with their homework. All day, all the time, people bother me. I don't need credit for this, but I do need to feel as if I belong, which I haven't lately.

When people talk about race and favoritism, I often (try) to stick up for you. I tell them that some of the issues you must confront have many ins-and-outs, and that inmates are not the easiest population to deal with. People are mad right now. Several people came to me yesterday and said they don't even communicate with you anymore, which sucks.

I KNOW that you are not racist. I KNOW that you have my best interest at heart. I KNOW that the decisions you make are hard ones, and that for each LABB student you include in an activity, you are excluding 10 others. I know this. But it also sucks sometimes to be part of a system which favors others over you, where opportunity is granted on skin color, or culture, or bill-ability. I'll need to let you know this sometime, so I don't resent you for it.

With that being said, you have always been there for me when I absolutely needed you to be. I will continue to help other students the best I can, and continue to stick up for you when others talk shit.

You don't have to respond,
A. Rhodd

From: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]

Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 2:16:52 PM

To: A-Rhodd [e-mail]

Subject: A-Rhodd (LABB Homepage) just sent you a message in Canvas.

Hi.

Thanks for all of this. It's really hard to hear, but I know it's also important for you to say. My first inclination is to stick up for myself and the program, but I also know how things appear. And also that what's on the surface isn't the whole truth. I also know there are definitely equity issues that exist within the program.

I agree that race is a huge issue, and racism is literally everywhere. We are all racist. Raised in a racist society, taught to over value white lives and expand white privilege. I struggle with how to be an ally without taking up spaces that should be occupied by others besides me.

I'm sure you've heard that volunteer access has been suspended indefinitely due to the coronavirus, so I'm not sure when I'll be allowed in again. We'll still have ICON up though and faculty are meeting on Friday to figure out what our options are. We will definitely make sure classes continue and are completed.

Will talk more soon.

Best,

Heather

From: A-Rhodd [e-mail]

Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 2:25 PM

To: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]

Subject: A-Rhodd (CSI:1213:0007 Spr20 Special Topics I) just sent you a message in Canvas.

I hope you are not upset about what I said earlier. I always get mad about shit, and then try to address it, and then immediately feel regret. Once again, they stopped my meds like a week ago, and I am hypersensitive to shit. I just got really frustrated. Please don't take it personally, you are not the problem.

A. Rhodd

From: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]

Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 4:08 PM

To: A-Rhodd [e-mail]

Subject: A-Rhodd (LABB Homepage) just sent you a message in Canvas.

It's okay. It actually is on me and I appreciate the things you brought up. All of what you said is important to hear and address. I think the conversation is a good template for a LABB Equity Committee.

I'm sorry they keep messing with your meds. That's got to be so frustrating, to never quite feel like yourself. I hope you're getting a chance to read and move around still.

Best,

Heather

From: A-Rhodd [e-mail]

Sent: Wednesday, March 11, 2020 9:42 AM

To: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]

Subject: A-Rhodd (CSI:1213:0007 Spr20 Special Topics I) just sent you a message in Canvas.

I'm going to approach this mental health thing a different way. I never used to be on meds, but after the suicide attempt, they wanted to make sure that I was okay. The

messed up thing is, I have requested to be taken off them. The psych here schedules appointments, but never tells inmates that they need to be seen. When my appointment came up last week, I was in Rhetoric, so nobody called me down to health services, and I never even knew I had an appointment until I went to pill-line that night. The nurse said, "You missed your appointment. Because you skipped your appointment, you have been non-compliant."

I can't keep doing this roller-coaster--this is what really fucks with me. Getting adjusted to the meds, and then being pulled cold turkey.

I know that race should be addressed, not just in LABB, but in IMCC, and the broader community. The thing is, EVERYONE is racist. Everyone contributes to the system, but, I don't know how to address it yet. I get angry sometimes, but I don't know how to voice these feelings constructively. You are, like, the only person I can talk to, about anything, so you get the brunt of my frustration. I can't talk about it with other students--I've already been labeled as the "race dude," and when I try to point out that white people get way more opportunities in LABB and IMCC, they call me a cry-baby. It really sucks. The minorities here don't really stick together like in other prisons--I am often billed as a "LABB" favorite also, and I think some of the other guys resent me also for this.

I don't know Heather, I am lost on this. The more classes that I am in the more I am going to try to engage this issue...right now, I don't think there are healthy avenues to approach this subject. Thanks for not being too mad.

A. Rhodd

Part Two: Too Much Protesting???

*From: A-Rhodd [e-mail]
Sent: Thursday, June 4, 2020 12:26 PM
To: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]
Subject: A-Rhodd (LABB Homepage) just sent you a message in Canvas.*

Hey

Are you still alive???

Too much protesting???

A. Rhodd

From: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]
Sent: Friday, June 5, 2020 5:33 PM
To: A-Rhodd [e-mail]
Subject: A-Rhodd (LABB Homepage) just sent you a message in Canvas.

Hello! Haven't been to the protests, as much as I'd like to. I'm afraid of coronavirus. There is graffiti all over the campus buildings downtown today. That makes me sad, but I'm glad there've been so many people turning out. It's crazy, and powerful. Trump is such a tremendously horrible president.

I've been doing lots of calls and planning for next semester and when we can finally come back in again. Worried about the new warden and how he's going to effect LABB stuff. I keep getting assurances that we're fine, so I'm going to stick with that.

How're you doing?

Best,

Heather

From: A-Rhodd [e-mail]
Sent: Monday, June 8, 2020 10:22 AM
To: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]
Subject: A-Rhodd (LABB Homepage) just sent you a message in Canvas.

Hey Heather,

I am glad you are working on shit, and I didn't really want to bother you. Yes, I am angry right now. But also, relieved. I have never been the kind of person that believes that violence is always a bad thing. Although the graffiti seems to be destructive, please see it as art--it comes from a place of frustration, and this frustration

is leading to change. I would love to see the graffiti, and I would take pictures of it, especially the most vulgar, lewd statements.

I would also protest. Violence in America is nothing new--the only difference NOW, are the ones who are expected to be passive have finally become aggressive. Violence is often overlooked when it comes from the hands of power. We ignore it, it does not make national news. However, let several Black men get together and yell, "Fuck the Police!!", and all the sudden, violence is deplorable. People are scared because they should be. Violence is scary, and people are finally getting a taste of what it feels to be a minority in this country. For generations Black kids have been taught that, regardless of who or what they become, when dealing with the police, there is a likelihood that things could get violent. Black kids are raised to be scared of a system that hates them.

The people who have been silent, those who have chosen to look away all these years, they do not get a voice in this. Their voice is no longer relevant. You can turn your head amid the violent onslaught of police brutality in America, then scream "foul" when the protesters begin to riot.

Heather, please do not hate me for saying this, but what is happening in America right now is long overdue, and it is beautiful. I do not wish death or injury on anyone, but it gives me the chills to see Black, White, and Brown people standing together to scream at the police.

A. Rhodd

From: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]
Sent: Tuesday, June 9, 2020 9:57 PM
To: A-Rhodd [e-mail]
Subject: A-Rhodd (LABB Homepage) just sent you a message in Canvas.

I love your take that the graffiti is art and beautiful because of what it represents. I agree that these protests and the change they will inspire and demand are long overdue. I would never be upset with you for voicing your opinion, and hope you would ask for mine as well. I have spent most of my adult life, at least much of both my

academic and professional careers, learning about the ways the world treats people differently, and why.

In law school I spent a summer working for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, I traveled to Thailand and the Philippines with my aunt's when I was 19 and worked with a Literacy Council as an undergrad in Washington DC. Most of the people I taught in DC were people of color, and I did lots of things wrong because I was young, and privileged, and naïve. In law school I worked as a research assistant on a book about Critical Race Feminism and got to attend one of the first Critical Race Theory conferences in New York. All of these experiences exposed my white privilege. It is hard to let someone rail at you and call you a racist without becoming defensive or upset by it, while also recognizing the truth of it. These are really hard concepts to both talk about and confront.

It's not hard to know how to be a good ally, but it's really hard to do the uncomfortable things that make you a good ally. Our experiences inform and shape each of us. I have never been arrested, but my brother, uncle, and two cousins have been, and my brother and uncle spent time in prison. My brother is white, and my uncle and cousins are Black. They had different experiences with the criminal legal system. Both challenging and less than fun, but also different because of the color of their skin.

I also love the camaraderie and solidarity of the people protesting all over the country. I love that in the face of Trump's fucking horrific rhetoric and scare tactics that people are uniting even more and supporting and protecting each other so that we who are watching see the extreme contrast. This is so long overdue. I hope we can create change that is meaningful and lasting. I hope our local, state, and federal government officials listen to what the people who voted for them are saying and act on behalf of all of their constituents. I worry that we'll lose momentum, but this also feels different. Like it's a true movement that's going to result in one of those quantum leaps of history. I really hope so.

Best,

Heather

*From: A-Rhodd [e-mail]
Sent: Thursday, June 11, 2020 3:16 PM
To: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]
Subject: A-Rhodd (LABB Homepage) just sent you a message in Canvas.*

Exactly,

The more I study racism and prejudice, and the more I think about it, I have come to the conclusion that we are all part of the same problem. We all, no matter who, or what we are, contribute, and suffer. To counter this, I am making myself extremely aware of the needs and feelings of others, (especially white people who feel horrible about racism), but also, I am trying to confront my sexism and toxic-masculinity by being hyper aware of the stupid shit I tend to say. I am not perfect, but I am getting better.

A. Rhodd

*From: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]
Sent: Tuesday, June 30, 2020 9:57 PM
To: A-Rhodd [e-mail]
Subject: A-Rhodd (LABB Homepage) just sent you a message in Canvas.*

I always feel safe having these conversations with you, even though they're hard and I always want to keep justifying myself, and asking for forgiveness, and explaining why I said or did something.... argh

Best,

Heather

*From: Erwin, Heather J [e-mail]
Sent: Friday, July 10, 2020 2:45:33 PM
To: A-Rhodd [e-mail]
Subject: A-Rhodd (LABB Homepage) just sent you a message in Canvas.*

Over 100 cases inside!

Best, Heather

From: A-Rhodd [e-mail]

Sent: Tuesday, August 9, 2020 8:35:12AM

To: Erwin, Heather [e-mail]

Subject: A-Rhodd (CSI:1213:0011 Spr20 Special Topics I) just sent you a message in Canvas.

I love music, donuts, art, mushrooms, and cats.

How are you this morning?

I'm not doing well. Super stressed, I think I got like 2 hours of sleep last night. I was thinking last night, sometimes the IDOC works in mysterious ways. If there is ever a time when I just disappear (get transferred), I would hate that I never got the chance to tell you how much I appreciate what you have done for me.

I remember when I first came to LABB--I had no clue what was going on, and I had just come to the prison. Nobody knew me, and I came from such a different environment. I remember being fascinated by some of the lectures in Speaker Series, in particular, Wes Shirley. I remember that you sat in the back of the classes, and I thought that you were an intern, (you look very young). What I found interesting, is how observant you were, as if, you were taking mental notes, on everything. You were really quiet, and I can't tell you how much honor there is in listening.

You approached me about my writing one day in the hall, and I had no idea that what I was writing was good, or bad. I just didn't know, because I haven't really been a "School" type dude, but you really gave me confidence in myself (some would say, too much).

When I get angry, it is not necessarily that I am getting angry at you. I know that you often worried about sounding "mom-like," and I've never pictured as you as this. However, for a guy like me, who has such passionate feelings about EVERYTHING, and has no idea what so ever how to voice these opinions in a constructive way, well, sometimes... I just need a target.

I never in a million years would have thought I would be good at college. Everything is such a struggle, but we are doing it. We are getting our degrees. All the bull-shit aside, we are winning because we are doing things people thought would never be possible.

If, for some reason, I never see you again (I hate to sound grim, I am not being prophetic), I just wanted to take the chance, right now, to let you know how much you have changed my life and way of thinking.

Sorry to unload.

A. Rhodd