ACLS Leading Edge Fellowship

Project: Right to Read in American Prisons
Organization: PEN America (New York, NY)
Location: Remote
Stipend: $60,000 per year, plus health insurance and professional development funding
Start Date: September 2021

ORGANIZATION DESCRIPTION

PEN America stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect free expression in the United States and worldwide. PEN America promotes social justice through its programs to defend free expression rights and its initiatives to amplify the voices and ideas of communities too often ignored or misrepresented. We produce original research, conduct advocacy campaigns, stage consequential public programming, and celebrate the literature of eminent and emerging writers. As one of the country’s leading literary organizations and with a long-standing program providing incarcerated writers with mentorship, awards, and access to literary audiences, PEN America is uniquely positioned to advance a proactive agenda on the right to read in American prisons. To learn more, visit https://pen.org/.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

With 2.2 million Americans incarcerated, the most significant book ban in America is not in schools or libraries, but in our prisons. Although the American Library Association has recognized a “right to read” in prisons, in practice, incarcerated people’s access to literature is often restricted by sweeping and arbitrary book bans. This project will produce robust research and advocacy on the issue of access to literature behind bars, building on our authoritative 2019 report Literature Locked Up: How Prison Book Restriction Policies Constitute the Nation’s Largest Book Ban and our role as a founder of the newly-formed Carceral Access to Literature and Learning coalition uniting advocates, books-to-prison providers, librarians, and academics. This issue has increasing urgency amid the expanding public debate on the impact of mass incarceration; the further isolation imposed by COVID-related restrictions; and the new trend of prisons introducing expensive e-readers as an alternative to allowing access to physical books.

The Fellow will join PEN America as a Research and Advocacy Manager to lead our work on the Right to Read in American Prisons project. Primary anticipated outcomes include a formal articulation of the right to read in American prisons; a comparative analysis of book bans and appeals processes by state; development of proposed “best practices” around access to literature in prisons; and the launch of an advocacy campaign that engages partner organizations, responds to prison book banning cases, and advances PEN America’s goal of securing the right to read in prisons. This is a full-time commitment for the fellowship year, including dedicated time for professional development activities.

Responsibilities and tasks:

- Wide-ranging research on prison book-banning practices and impact to ground PEN America advocacy
- Development of a campaign strategy, including through collaboration with partner organizations
- Production of advocacy materials, including policy and briefing papers, op-eds, calls to action, social media content, and testimony from incarcerated people and authors whose books have been banned

This position is only available through the Leading Edge Fellowship program. You may not contact the host institution to inquire about this position.
• Writing for publication on topics such as the racial equity aspects of book banning practices

Qualifications:
• PhD in any field of the humanities or humanistic social sciences. Read more about eligible fields here;
• Well-developed research skills;
• Demonstrated appreciation of the power of literature;
• Experience in project management and collaborative partnerships;
• Creative and solution-oriented approach to working on less familiar territory

APPLICATIONS
• Information on the Leading Edge Fellowship Program: https://www.acls.org/Competitions-and-Deadlines/Leading-Edge-Fellowships
• All applications must be submitted through the ACLS Online Fellowship Application System (ofa.acls.org)
• Application deadline: 9pm EDT, May 6, 2021