



THEI CULTURE & GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Tennessee Higher Education Initiative disrupts systems of harm and creates opportunities for autonomy and success through education, support, and advocacy with and for justice impacted individuals. While education is a vehicle we use to support our mission, our primary focus is to disrupt systems of harm. We hope that you will want to join our mission but understand that reading an organization's mission or even website does not give you the insight needed to affirm that you may want to join a team. We believe that we are better together and strive to create a team environment in our work. These Guiding Principles hope to give you an idea of some of our non-negotiables as you decide whether our team might be a good fit for you.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

At THEI we believe that words matter and that humanizing criminal justice vocabulary is a critical element of higher education in prison (HEP) work. We refer to our students as "currently incarcerated" and to our alumni as "formerly incarcerated." We intentionally do not use words like "inmate" or "felon" or "offender" to describe people who have had interactions with the criminal justice system.

We fundamentally believe that no person should be described by past conduct that may have violated the law because these labels do not describe the full breadth of a person's humanity. Our students are scholars, graduates, veterans, parents, friends, and human beings with both a past and a future. Our language works to honor this, and to dismantle systems of oppression that dehumanize people and communities.

STUDENTS ARE THE MISSION

At THEI, we foster hope in our students, many of whom may once have felt devoid of it. Our mission is to help the individuals we serve grow in all aspects as they strive to gain their education while incarcerated and beyond. We see the transformative and liberative power of education as a means to get more people free. On a daily basis, our students teach us about grace, restoration, and resilience.

As Bryan Stevenson once said, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." Regardless of position, our team members meet students where they are, which includes behind the walls of prison. We do not require our students to share their conviction history or story, and when a student chooses to do so, we act with compassion and not judgement.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IS A PRIORITY

Between our values and this document, we hope that you are gaining a sense of our identity as a team and organization. It is important to us that each team member shares our values and is eager to contribute positively to this culture. It is hard work but also heart work. We believe each employee contributes directly to the growth and success of THEI, and we hope you'll take pride in being a member of our team.

Our success depends on a culture of building relationships and connecting with our partners. We work to mitigate the effects of incarceration. We seek to engage with and build stronger communities. We build into our work opportunities to engage on a human level and practice self-care such that we can bring our best selves to the work.

CHANGE REQUIRES A DIVERSITY OF TACTICS

We create and foster a culture of calling-in others rather than calling them out. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader-Ginsburg once said, "Fight for the things you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you." We have seen first-hand how inviting others to see the world through our lens is the most effective way to solve problems. We focus on solutions rather than blame. Modeling harm reduction in all our actions and interactions requires us to live our values.

Our work engages with a wide landscape of stakeholders, each with different missions and backgrounds. We seek to acknowledge their vision and mission while furthering our goals of harm reduction. True, lasting change requires us to work with agencies that may have historically or currently contributed to these systems of harm, but we cannot do this work well without inviting them to a seat at our table. To find the best solutions to the systems we're trying to remove or even reimagine we continually ask ourselves, who else needs to be involved in this conversation? We engage with everyone as fellow humans - our students, our stakeholders, our partners at the Department of Correction, to name a few. Creating lasting partnerships and leveraging those partnerships to create lasting change is part of our ethos. Change requires a diversity of tactics

IN CONCLUSION

THEI is a grassroots, community organization committed to principles of harm reduction, healing, and centering the lived experiences of the people we serve. We engage in reimagining and building towards the world we want to see through systems work, direct service, and through the language and context through which we operate. If you've made it this far, we hope that means that you're excited to join the work that we do and ready to take the next steps in our hiring process!