

# Building an Infrastructure for a Jail Writing Community Partnership through Student Internships and Community Writing Projects

---

**Lara Smith-Sitton,**  
Kennesaw State  
University  
**& Brody Smithwick,**  
Lion Life Community

---

*Co-authored by a nonprofit administrator and an English Department faculty member, this contribution discusses the creation of a community partnership for jail-based education and writing projects. By starting small through student internships directly with the nonprofit, manageable, programmatic development followed that included class-based community writing projects, capstones, and onsite workshops engaging graduate and undergraduate students. Seeking to provide insights for new program developers as well as experienced leaders, this article reflects on the value of taking what Paula Mathieu describes as a tactical approach to partnership growth that begins with small-scale projects to maximize reciprocity and impact in order to first construct of a strong, sustainable foundation.*

*Through descriptions of the evolution of this partnership, best practices for communication, addressing challenges, and expanding projects are outlined. Insights about this partnership reveal possible student-engaged activities and assignments, as well as the complexities of jail and prison writing. Reflections by students and community partners affirm a range of opportunities and the value and impact of internships, service learning, and community-writing when working directly with nonprofits, rather than with jails or prison administrators.*

---

*I was able to build relationships rooted in trust. I believe trust is an essential ingredient in the transfer of knowledge, perhaps even more so with the incarcerated population.*

—Brody Smithwick

*I wanted to build a partnership that could grow slowly in order to create a foundation that was sound and able to expand deliberately in line with both community and the department's needs.*

—Lara Smith-Sitton

The State of Georgia places first in the nation for the number of persons “under supervision, be it in prison, jail, parole, or probation” (Jones 2018). Interestingly, while the Georgia Department of Corrections asserts that “ninety-five percent of offenders will one day return to society . . . [only] 30 percent of Georgia inmates have a high school diploma” (Hysen 2015). Recent studies draw direct lines between reduced recidivism and educational attainment. As Deborah Appleman (2013) explains, “if we choose to preserve the lives of human beings who commit serious crimes, we must have some interest in helping them preserve their humanity. And, if recent statistics can be believed, the more education they receive in prison, the less likely they are to reoffend” (29). This contribution explores how a growing nonprofit organization and the English Department of Kennesaw State University (KSU) used an internship program to build the foundation for a jail writing and GED-tutoring initiative at a county detention center.

The scholarship detailing the power and impact of prison and jail writing initiatives affirms the significance of their presence in literature, culture, music, and society. H. Bruce Franklin’s (1998) historical review of prison writing begins with the assertion that “one of the most extraordinary achievements of twentieth-century American culture is the literature that has come out of the nation’s prisons” (1). In the introduction to the 2018 edited collection, *Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers*, editors Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson go beyond the

deliverables and the authors themselves to emphasize the exigency for more prison-based literacy work in the twenty-first century: “The importance of prison writing and teaching writing in prisons cannot be underestimated as a contribution to social justice as the United States faces a dark period in its history” (2). While this contention is likely understood and affirmed by those currently participating in this work, for individuals considering the possibility of creating new jail writing programs, the “how-to’s” (and “how-not-to’s”) can be difficult to uncover and quite daunting when discovered.

Our hope is that through the narrative of our partnership, we will reveal ways other practitioners—particularly those who may be new to this work—can start or expand current jail writing programs through internships and small-scale community writing or service learning projects. There is an emphasis herein on the commonsensical and basic steps we took to build a partnership and program framework. We will explore three key facets from the growth of our partnership and project: how the partnership between a local organization and KSU was created and is addressing some of the institutional challenges of creating a viable and sustainable program; how the collaborative decisions made during the development of the project provided essential infrastructure for future growth; and how the partnership has impacted the community partners, students, and incarcerated individuals.

The authors emphasize the value of what Paula Mathieu (2013) describes as a *tactical approach* in project development—one that embraces “personal relationships, mutual needs, and a shared sense of timing” (23), which, when inherent in community writing and public rhetoric projects, can result in strong, reciprocal community partnerships. Considerations of the unique ways the outside organization in this partnership bridged the needed relationship between a jail and KSU provide opportunities for others to explore new projects or expansion of existing programs. We, as leaders of this collaboration, pursued this partnership in hopes of developing a strong, sustainable community partnership that could provide much-needed support for a nonprofit organization implementing these programs. We wanted to specifically respond to a desire of those within the jail to engage in more academic, writing, and arts

programs, and we hoped to connect college students to this work so that they could better understand how educational initiatives—especially those that focus on writing—can transform the lives of incarcerated individuals. An essential facet of our initiative was establishing a plan for scaling in line with the realistic goals we collaboratively established for our program—goals that were in line with the resources we had available.

## **MAKING THE CONNECTION: BUILDING A NEW PARTNERSHIP FOR JAIL WRITING AND LITERACY WORK**

Our partnership started by first considering the needs of Lion Life Community (hereinafter “Lion Life”), a 501(c)(3) organization founded by Brody and his wife, Amy. The organization is committed to serving the educational needs of incarcerated individuals both during and after time spent in jail through a range of classes, writing, and arts programming. Due to a desire for more help to lead classes and develop materials especially for the GED classes, as well as involve others in the work of jail and prison education programming, Brody reached out to KSU to initiate an undergraduate internship program focused primarily on proctoring pretests and tutoring. In the first year, the internship program thrived: eleven student interns from sociology, psychology, and criminal justice helped forty-six individuals obtain GED certificates. Building on this success, Brody wanted to expand course offerings to include creative writing workshops that could provide meaningful and challenging writing opportunities beyond just what was needed for the GED exam. He returned to KSU again, but this time Brody specifically sought to craft internships for English studies students who could grow as writers and teachers through jail-based writing and literacy work.

This was why and where our partnership began. Brody reached out to Lara, a professor he’d met as a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Professional Writing (MAPW) program at KSU. At the time, the English Department was expanding their internship program and seeking to establish more reciprocal partnerships that would benefit students, community partners, and society. The timing for this new initiative was kairotic because while Brody wanted to connect with college writers, Lara had a desire to start a jail writing initiative, but she was unsure where to start. Lara, while she was

generally familiar with programs established by other universities where faculty members and students participated in workshops, classes, and other writing collaborations, she found the literature overwhelming and just struggled to ascertain the needs and demands of this type of program. In addition, as the Director of Community Engagement for the English Department, she'd held cursory conversations with university administrators and other faculty who consistently reminded her of the complexities of moving students from campus to jails or prisons. Safety was a significant concern, but there were other issues as well, including adequate training to prepare students, transportation to and from sites, supervision of students while onsite, and the development of relationships with jail or prison administrative officers. There were also issues with university rules and regulations as well as legal issues surrounding this type of community-engaged work.

She wanted to build a partnership that could grow slowly in order to create a foundation that was sound and would have opportunities for expansion that was deliberately in line with both community and department needs. Also, Lara was committed to finding jail-based literacy projects that aligned with the interests of undergraduate and graduate students who loved writing and storytelling but that she could support in line with the time she had available to give to a new community writing project. A partnership offered a solution: the KSU students would intern with an experienced, nonprofit leader who had not only a strong relationship with a local detention center but also a commitment to carefully and thoughtfully building a program focused on reciprocity and establishing shared goals.

We understood at the initiation of our work together that universities can be uniquely positioned to support nonprofit organizations endeavoring to make inroads in reform arenas. Universities can provide financial resources, grant assistance, interns, volunteers, expertise, knowledge, and research support. What we learned was that nonprofit organizations are uniquely positioned to support universities developing partnerships with detention centers.

While we believed there would be advantages through collaboration, we were also aware of the unstable nature of jail writing initiatives.

Tobi Jacobi (2016) explains: “while education provides a path to better lives for incarcerated individuals, these programs can be canceled or not supported as they are sometimes viewed as extracurricular, privileged, and less rigorous/necessary/pragmatic/useful than maintaining physical and psychological control” (66). We did not want to start something and fall short of our shared vision for a long-term partnership that could provide powerful educational and writing opportunities for incarcerated individuals and college students. We were willing to be patient and deliberate in the growth of the partnership and program.

One of the biggest hurdles for starting a jail writing program is development of a community partnership with a detention center. While a desire for more educational programming may exist, jail administrators must reconcile the risks and rewards of opening doors to outside groups alongside of institutional priorities. Correctional facility employees have many responsibilities, and managing volunteers—including their prescreening, training, and supervision—can take away from the priorities of their jobs. Plus, questions about long-term sustainability can also dissuade jails from investing time in new partnerships. Also, because faculty members often do not have the opportunity to spend much time onsite interacting with jail personnel before starting a program, they may not have a firm grasp of how their vision for an impactful program could actually become a burden for the staff and administrators.

Another critical concern at the start of a relationship may relate to concerns about the intentions and approaches of the individuals interested in bringing community-based projects to jails and prisons. Sadie Reynolds (2014) recognizes these complexities: “well-intentioned, privileged individuals who help less fortunate people often do so without critically examining their motives. The blinders of privilege show up as an unacknowledged sense of superiority and condescending ways of communicating and relating with the people they are trying to help” (101). These issues can thwart the establishment of the needed relationships for viable university-jail literacy work. In the case of partnerships with universities, the students and faculty working with the incarcerated individuals may not have fully examined their own motives before approaching

projects where they interact with incarcerated individuals. This can also make jail personnel hesitant to respond to outreach efforts by universities' representatives.

Brody, an experienced jail-based educator understands these complex and complicated issues, and he explained to Lara that he had seen outreach efforts fail for precisely these reasons. Brody's nonprofit organization has a respected history of implementing successful educational programming. Brody knows the jail—its structure, leadership, employees, and regulations—and, most importantly, he is trusted by the jail administrators and the inmates. Thus, the partnership was created between KSU and Lion Life—a partnership that helped KSU to establish programs that better serve a range of stakeholders and participants and Lion Life to achieve its goals as well. Lion Life serves as the bridge between the university and the detention center. When Brody reached to the KSU English Department, he came with the knowledge needed to create a strong infrastructure for a jail-university literacy program that could support GED program needs and allow for an expansion of educational programming and jail-based class offerings.

Brody recognized that the success of the GED program was directly linked to the amount of time he was able to make himself available to the students. By showing up consistently each week, he was able to build relationships rooted in trust. He believes trust is an essential ingredient in the transfer of knowledge, perhaps even more so with the incarcerated population. While the number of graduates had increased, Brody also knew there could be even greater success if we were able to overcome the challenges of the physical layout of the jail. There are eight individual dormitories inside the jail that function as their own separate microcosms. With a restricted amount of access to each dormitory, he could only deliver consistent instruction and build trust-centered relationships with a limited number of students each week. The demand for new classes and more instruction was greater than the supply of instructors.

Brody's experience and knowledge allowed the English Department and Lara to ease into jail-based literacy projects. She could give students the opportunity to experience this important, impactful

work through internships prior to creating full-scale, onsite projects where she was navigating unfamiliar waters. Understanding the needs of the jail administrators, Lion Life takes the lead in prescreening, training, and course content creation. Students complete a prescreening facilitated by Lion Life, then the organization provides both formal training and discussion about jail-based literacy and writing programs that help students understand the purpose and significance of their commitment to this work. For the partnership to be a success, we wanted to “create mutually affirming relationships with incarcerated workshop participants” (Reynolds 2014, 102) and to help the KSU interns and volunteers maximize their experiences while providing much needed literacy and educational support for the jail.

## **GETTING ORGANIZED: COLLABORATIVELY IDENTIFYING GOALS AND NEEDS**

At the start of the partnership, Lion Life identified three main goals, and we collaboratively addressed how the English Department could support these critical needs:

- *raising public awareness*—the need for financial and staffing resources to produce and disseminate information that supports outreach efforts and support for Lion Life’s programming and mission;
- *developing written and published products*—the creation of class and workshop materials and editorial support for publication of creative works;
- *recruiting interns and volunteers*—access to professors and college students who can consistently support the work of the organization onsite at the jail.

Through the creation of these three goals we were constructing a framework for a student internship program that connected KSU students to Lion Life. From the beginning, we were open to seeing what could evolve. We embraced what Laurie Cella and Jessica Restaino (2012) explain in *Unsustainable*: “a good plan for community action is one that can be revised” (14). With this in mind,



we emphasized flexibility, improvement through communication, and frequent evaluation of goals and student contributions.

Students supported these goals first through internships and then later by engaging with a community writing project in a class. The English Department internship courses are available for undergraduate and graduate students where they can earn academic credit and receive faculty support during a semester-long internship. A range of internship opportunities can qualify for the courses, and an internship working with a nonprofit such as Lion Life would work well as it provides students an opportunity to put their writing and research skills in action. Students learn of the internship through Lara, who regularly shares information about available opportunities that she is aware of with inquiring students. The students must obtain the internship directly with an organization and then the organization directs the intern and the projects they complete. Lara then provides a pedagogical structure for the course using the internship as a subject for reflection, writing, and discussion.

To achieve the first goal we created, interns used their writing and research skills to support the advocacy work of Lion Life through the creation of outreach materials for community members, grant writing, and content creation under the direction of Brody. A desire to help college students understand the work of nonprofits pursuing social justice, advocacy-related projects as well as jail-based literacy, social justice, and educational programs underpinned this goal. Our second goal provided an opportunity for student interns to use skills and abilities acquired in their English degrees to assist in the production of materials used for GED and/or creative writing courses. Creating worksheets, reference guides, and other written documents are valuable contributions because the students bring unique perspectives as to how they might learn or teach others, and the individuals using the materials benefit from materials created by college students who consider their own educational experiences in crafting the teaching tools. While we anticipated challenges with the creation of consistent, effective, and pedagogically sound documents, through meetings with students throughout the semester, Lara could help students before final drafts went to Lion Life for shaping, revision, and finalizing. The course provided the space and time for

discussions that enriched what the students were learning directly from their experiences with Lion Life. This two-level approach allowed the two of us to collaborate about concerns and proactively facilitate improvement for projects that needed redirection. This type of work was truly a cooperative, team effort.

Finally, and most significantly, we wanted students to have the opportunity to engage onsite at the jail. Here, students would have an opportunity to receive a third layer of feedback through interacting with the individuals at the jail who were using the materials. We needed to recruit students who wanted to be a part of the project and get the word out about the new initiative, but we also wanted the inmates to feel comfortable and enjoy working with students from KSU. It was important that the students from KSU recognized that they were collaborating with the inmates to reach shared goals around the topics of writing and literacy. Lion Life wanted to provide support for more GED preparation as well as expand the number of other writing and arts courses and initiatives—the students helped make this possible. Lara would be able to connect student interns to Lion Life and design community writing projects that could be incorporated into courses. Because students would work with Lion Life rather than the detention center, Brody would be able to give them a substantial amount of training prior to being onsite. He was also able to discern what classes and opportunities would work best for the individual students and connect them to those opportunities. If students seemed hesitant about the project or being onsite, we could collaboratively provide extra guidance and preparation. This occurred due to the trusted partnership we had established and the commitment we had to talking with students and preparing them for their work. In addition, with both of us interacting with students, we could gauge how they were feeling about the project and their comfort and preparedness for onsite engagement. Frequent interactions about the student interns' work and close communication is essential to the program's success. While not necessarily unique within jail-university partnerships, we felt that what made this partnership strong was Brody's strong understanding of the jail and the needs of the inmates and Lara's clear vision about internship structures than can maximize student learning and community engagement.

While we envisioned how the partnership between Lion Life and KSU had the potential for impactful jail-based projects, as we moved forward, we also became cognizant of obstacles that could interfere with or derail our goals. In order to prepare for the challenges of a new program, we identified the three main obstacles we anticipated once the work began: (1) sufficient time to implement and grow a new partnership and project components, (2) an understanding of and delivery of adequate student preparation, and (3) sufficiently monitoring concerns of students, including their safety. We considered these concerns together, cooperatively seeking solutions because the partnership would be between the KSU English Department and Lion Life rather than between the university and the jail. In addition, we were both mindful of the challenges the students and inmates might face in developing relationships with each other for purposes of the onsite classes. We relied significantly upon Brody's experience with the individuals at the jail and deep knowledge about how to develop points of commonality and trust. His expertise was essential to lay the foundation for effective interactions and respect between all participating in the project—his knowledge and skill as a trainer and leader was essential to the project.

Another consideration of our program and the involvement of college students related to the differences between working within a jail, rather than a prison community. For example, the jail is operated by law enforcement under direction of a sheriff who values the programming that Lion Life brings, but should there be a change in county leadership the detention center's priorities could be adjusted, which might affect the classes offered by Lion Life, and the involvement of KSU students. In contrast, given that a prison setting is run by either the state or federal government, local or community political changes may not be as much of a concern. Another consideration is that the jail is located in a county close to the university with primarily short-term residents. This raises the possibility of our students crossing paths with individuals after they are released. So, while some individuals may remain incarcerated for several months awaiting trials or due short sentences, others may abruptly no longer be part of a GED or writing course because they have been released or moved to prison following sentencing. While Lion Life works to create courses that meet the needs of jail residents regardless of their tenure there, many of the individuals

that our students will interact with are likely quite uncertain about their immediate futures or know that they will likely be leaving soon. This can result in a jail environment that feels tentative, and some inmates may hesitate to engage deeply with the courses, but Lion Life's knowledge and proactive acknowledgement of these kinds of complexities has been important for the programmatic development of our partnership and projects. Understanding of the differences between the temporal nature of jails and the more perennial facets of prison has been paramount to preparing for possible interruptions and detours.

We both saw cooperative discussion of goals and anticipation of potential issues as an essential part of getting organized. We believed the project would prompt students to think more deeply about the powerful potential of prison reform. David Coogan's work (2014) aptly captured our hopes: "we assemble here to persuade and to be persuaded, to identify and to question identifications, to open ourselves to the possibility of change in jail and in society" (18). In addition, the goals aligned with Lion Life's mission and values, which focuses on how education, creation, and art can enrich the lives of individuals who are incarcerated and build strong communities. We both agreed, however, that the success of this partnership needed to also be committed to an understanding of reciprocity. Ellen Cushman (1996) describes this as "an open and conscious negotiation of the power of structures reproduced during the give-and-take interactions of the people involved in both sides of the relationship. A theory of reciprocity, then, frames this activist agenda with a self-critical conscious navigation of this intervention" (16). The respect for each of our roles, needs, and desires, while privileging our ultimate goal to support the writing and literacy needs of those within the jail, resulted in a project steeped in a commitment to mutual benefit.

## **STARTING SMALL: CONSIDERING THE VALUE AND IMPACT OF TWO INTERNSHIPS**

Paula Mathieu (2012) argues that there are "useful ways to *begin* a project: that individual people, whether a faculty member, graduate student, or undergraduate could develop a relationship with a community group and really understand their needs, a project *could* develop that way" (28). The first project responded to the desire

to have an intern to learn about and develop educational materials focused on the writing portion of the GED and possibly implement them onsite at the jail. Katherine, a senior English major and pre-law student, expressed an interest in an internship that could fulfill a practicum for her honors college thesis (a required capstone project). She hoped her experience interning with Lion Life would be a valuable part of her law school application statement and help her prepare for her legal career given that she was interested in juvenile justice and child advocacy work. She also believed that what she learned when she was developing her own skills in her English and writing classes could help her develop materials that were accessible and useful.

In her capstone proposal Katherine (Adamson 2017) articulated a problem faced by incarcerated individuals: “Education is important for both an individual and a society to thrive, but what happens to those that are unable to receive education due to incarceration?” Her initial plans for the project were described as follows: “I will use my writing and communication skills to create clear documents that will be used to help inmates prepare for and pass the GED. . . . This will enable me to understand the literacy and educational issues faced by inmates in North Georgia jails. . . . Not only will I be able to learn about those I want to represent, but I will gain a unique first-hand experience with them.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout the internship, Katherine created resource materials and led educational workshops that focused on GED preparation, most notably writing skills.

A reflective journal kept throughout the internship allowed Katherine to craft an autoethnography at the end of the internship as a part of the thesis itself. The value of the experience was articulated in her thesis:

What started as an opportunity to help inmates learn so they could pass the General Education Development (GED) test turned into a project more impactful than I could have ever imagined. I have seen women regain hope for their futures and witnessed the priceless look on a student’s face when she learned the news that she earned her GED. My life’s work, whether it be working as an attorney or helping people get their lives back on track, has been confirmed through this experience. (Adamson 2018)

Following completion of her thesis and then graduation, Katherine has continued to volunteer at the jail by tutoring students, supporting their writing, and leading workshops. Interestingly, while she was accepted to law school, Katherine decided not to attend; instead, she applied to a Master of Public Administration program that specializes in nonprofit administration. Approximately a year after her graduation, the experience of working in the jail revealed new professional goals to her: “I have observed what happens when someone’s free will is completely taken. Some days I leave so touched and humbled by the lives of the women I interact with; other days I leave mad, thinking how ridiculous it is that we have not made prison reform a stronger priority” (Katherine, personal communication, 7 April 2019). Though she originally planned to be a lawyer in order to help those in need of legal support, she now believes she can have a greater impact as a nonprofit administrator working to expand educational opportunities and advocate for prison reform. Through her experience working with Lion Life to develop and implement educational materials, she gained insights as to how she can continue this work in the future. The tutoring she did in reliance upon educational resources she developed with Brody was foundational in helping her see that she could come alongside of those in the jail and support their goals to obtain their GEDs.

The next student to intern with Lion Life was Diana, a graduate student in the MAPW program concentrating in the areas of creative writing and rhetoric & composition. She had no experience with jail-based literacy projects, but as the child of Ukrainian immigrants, she was interested in how language skills impacted the ability of incarcerated individuals to manage what she describes as a “dual cultural identity.” She explained, “I found jail culture very different than an average citizen’s life. I was shocked, taken aback by the noise—it was loud; the concrete caused echos; the culture was so different.” Able to speak Spanish, she worked with students on their English language skills while honoring their unique cultural backgrounds. Diana shared the significant value she placed on the experience, yet her interactions allowed her to forge deep and profound connections with the individuals she worked closely.

Diana, in an interview the spring after her summer internship, explained that she forged a unique connection with the individuals she worked with because many of her students at the jail also had connections to immigrants and family members in other countries. Diana described the impact of the internship on her graduate teaching career:

I learned how to communicate feedback more effectively in the composition classes I taught. I was able to help students focus on their learning needs because I could now better understand how to support students with a variety of skill levels in the same class. Before this, I could not do this as effectively. When you are in a jail setting, the individuals you work with have such a variety of backgrounds and educational levels. (Diana. personal communication, 7 April 2019)

The experience also influenced a facet of her master's thesis project. She became interested in crafting an autoethnography that included reflective and creative non-fiction elements along with research about a "dual cultural identity" as American and Ukrainian. The desire was to create a project that captured her graduate work in both the creative writing and rhetoric & composition concentrations. In her proposal (2018), she writes, "this capstone project will explore my literacy development as a Slavic-American emerging scholar by taking an in-depth look at the literacy experiences that shape my identity" (1). Diana made connections with how discourse communities, particularly those connected to literacy, shape identity.

When Katherine and Diana pursued their internships, the classes and work they were primarily focused on were helping implement a form of curriculum that fit the open enrollment component of Lion Life's classes. Through these two students, we were successful in addressing two of the primary goals: creating class and workshop materials and connecting students to the work of Lion Life onsite at the jail.

In considering the creation of the needed materials, the highly transient populations of county jails call for a unique approach to curriculum for the onsite classes. Katherine helped develop a rubric



for the essay portion of the GED that could be understood and followed by a volunteer with no experience in composition studies. These types of grading aids are important since volunteers and interns are transient as well. Katherine, as an English major, was comfortable with her writing skills and was able to reflect during the internship on what she found helpful when learning to write essays. Having systems in place that allow instructors to “plug in” with minimal training is essential to the success of Lion Life’s programs. Along the same lines, new volunteers and interns do not have the luxury of systematically working through a curriculum from point A to point B with students who possess similar levels of aptitude. To remedy this problem, we had Diana help develop worksheets that aid ESL instructors in teaching to three different skill levels simultaneously. While the impact on Katherine and Diana clearly had profound influences on their academic, professional, and civic lives, Brody’s interactions with some of the inmates also confirmed our efforts were impactful within the jail as well. Brody, as an experienced educator, had access to a range of educational materials; however, through the internships, new materials were created that were helping others get GEDs and explore writing in new ways.

## **EXPANDING THE PARTNERSHIP: COMMUNITY WRITING PROJECTS AND CREATIVE WRITING CLASSES**

Building upon the success of the first two internships, we expanded our collaboration to include community engagement projects in Lara’s professional writing course. Students in the course were given an opportunity to pursue an independent or collaborative community writing project in one unit of the course. The goal was for students to put their writing and research skills in action in order to see how their abilities could make an impact in the community. Working with Lion Life to create community outreach materials that could share the benefits of GED, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), creative writing, and entrepreneurship courses offered in jail settings was one of the projects selected by one of the students. While this was not jail-based writing, the student conducted research that provided general knowledge about educational resources and supported Lion Life’s need for raising awareness about the value and impact of educational initiatives. Prior to this project, the student was not familiar with educational programming in jails and prisons



or that there was a need or demand for these initiatives. This project created the framework for Lion Life to further develop materials that helped raise awareness of Lion Life's course offerings both inside and outside of the jail. Most of the Lion Life team is devoted to teaching the courses, leaving very little time to think about promoting the programs or drafting promotional material. Collaborations like this yield a precious commodity—time. The opportunity for a student to pursue a project of this sort is indeed a valuable service learning/community writing project. While the student was not onsite at the jail, she was learning about jail education programs and supporting the crucial work of Lion Life in the community. In addition, the scale of the project was small, which allowed us to consider how other class-based projects could be developed in future courses.

The following semester, another project introduced in a professional writing course considered the challenges faced by individuals who are released from jail and need to find employment. A group of four students were charged with developing ideas that could respond to this need. The students proposed making resume templates and leading two workshops—one focused on resume writing and another for interview preparation—at the jail. While the materials and workshops the students envisioned was something that Lion Life saw as valuable, the lack of expertise of the students and the challenges with the scope of the project did not allow for implementation of the workshops. The students found it challenging to complete the research, to understand the kinds of resources that were needed, and to create a focused proposal—their aims, while rich with excellent ideas, were too big for completion in the course. We recognized the value of the project but knew this project needed to be planned and executed over a longer period of time than in the one semester offered in this undergraduate course. We believe that having a workshop with resource materials that will help incarcerated individuals prepare to return to productive lives will be of significant benefit to those who participate because obtaining gainful employment with expediency is a must if they hope to escape the vicious cycle of recidivism. A program of this sort could help with preparations for obtaining a job before even setting foot outside of the jail, and the KSU students' engagement with the project would be welcomed.

However, though the project itself was not completed as we had hoped, it was still a very valuable project for the students—they learned about the complexity of planning and implementing realistic projects and used their research and writing skills to develop materials that provided a foundation for a future community-based project. What was also notable about this situation was that we, as program leaders and partners, communicated about the strengths and weaknesses of the workshops proposed. We explored how we could have approached the project differently in the class. Had we not had a strong relationship—one committed to effective communication practices—it may have been difficult to discuss the obstacles with implementing the workshop, and the failed project may have seriously undermined the partnership. Instead, given the collaborative nature with Lion Life, we could assess the challenges throughout the project and focus more on how to make it valuable for the students and build upon their insights to continue working on this project in the future. As Steve Parks (2012) asserts, when projects go awry, we need to consider “a revised conception of value” (55).

As we continued to develop community writing projects and internships for KSU students, Lion Life had a creative writing program that was gaining popularity within the jail and creating more opportunities for collaboration. Brody took the lead with the instruction and design of these courses. The creative writing classes are run in a workshop fashion one might expect in a fiction writing or poetry course; however, they are anything but typical. There is almost always a “first-timer” due to the open enrollment component. So, a brief overview of the importance of writing is given at the beginning of nearly every class. The students move through three modules: poetry, playwriting, and short stories. Each unit lasts from four to six weeks depending on how the group progresses as a whole. A short lecture on a specific element of the craft is given at the beginning of the class, followed by a correlating writing exercise. Then, students participating in the jail-based class read their work aloud either from the assignment or from the previous week’s out-of-class writing assignment. Each time someone shares, the entire room gives brief verbal feedback. Then students are given a prompt to work on throughout the week.

With fifty to sixty individuals participating in these jail-based classes each week, an enormous amount of content was generated. Brody needed additional support to help with these courses and to support the writing goals of the program. Interns and volunteers could help transcribe handwritten content into a digital format; those with some degree of creative writing background could give feedback to the incarcerated writing students. Having interns, particularly aspiring and working writers, engage with the written work of others could provide opportunities to explore a vast amount of creative output in genres and about topics KSU writing students may not be familiar with. In addition, these internships could help Lion Life explore how to support the incarcerated writers' craft and opportunities for dissemination.

In the first year of the creative writing program, 364 individuals participated in classes—it quickly became a dynamic and successful program in the jail. Full-length novels, countless poems, and numerous short stories have been written. One individual collaborated with his classmates on a one-act play assignment, ultimately creating a full four-act production. The students held auditions, cast the roles, and rehearsed for months before performing the play for members of the jail's upper administration. This presented opportunities for students in the MAPW program to become engaged with community writing and service learning projects, including helping to transcribe and format the handwritten pages of the script in printed and digital formats so that the play became more than an idea but a more developed creative project. As Lara was learning more about the needs of Lion Life, Brody was learning more about KSU students and opportunities for more collaboration and engagement. In addition, as our partnership grew and we continued to respond to the needs and desires of the nonprofit and the incarcerated individuals, undergraduate and graduate students were understanding more about the impact of writing and literacy on the lives of incarcerated individuals.

As we moved forward with the partnership, we felt student interns and those in the courses were learning while producing some useful materials. Lion Life's educational programming continues to expand. Currently, the course offerings at the jail include GED,

ESL, Creative Writing, Continuing Education Preparation, Freedom from Addiction, Entrepreneurship, and Music. The organization also operates an in-jail library. More drama-specific and visual arts courses are on the horizon. The organization is ambitious and hopeful in its efforts. Inspiring individuals to improve their lives through artistic mediums, Lion Life embraces the reflective, metacognitive qualities of creation—in whatever forms—to help individuals overcome challenges, gain new perspectives, self-regulate, and persevere in the world. We see engagement with these projects—and giving students an opportunity to support the work of Lion Life—will change people by “help[ing] them to see the interconnectedness of their lives and communities with people inside, giving them an insider glimpse of the prison industrial complex” (Reynolds 2014, 103).

In addition, the value of the initiatives has also been felt by individuals who have been released and have remained involved with writing opportunities led by Lion Life. One student, Keith, described how he perceived the impact of the GED class, stating, “it really opens up so many doors. The GED allowed me to land a job . . . I was homeless before I got that job. . . . [it has] instilled a greater work ethic in me, taught me how to set goals, and just made me a better person overall.” Also a participant in the creative writing workshops, Keith saw them as building the self-worth and hope of those who participated: “People would come into the class and you could tell that they thought they had zero talent . . . as they learned to craft stories, you could tell they began to believe they had some degree of talent . . . [they] began to gain hope again as they created art” (Keith, personal communication, 5 April 2019).

Another participant of the creative writing classes, Trey, shared how the classes impacted him:

The courses opened up an entire new world for me. They gave me something constructive to do while I was locked up. It became a way to escape a stressful situation. I had never thought of myself as a writer before and would not have discovered this talent if it were not for the classes. Now, I write through my problems. I wrote an entire novel while I was incarcerated and have written two more since I’ve been released. It has become a major source

of healthy entertainment for me. Creating fiction helped me put my mind on paper. I could then evaluate myself and the world in new ways. This exercise has impacted me in incredible ways. (Trey, personal communication, 6 April 2019)

## **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: BUILDING PROJECTS FROM A STRONG FOUNDATION**

Our goal is not simply to move college students to jail settings to engage in writing and literacy activities but to also raise awareness about the powerful need for and impact of education while revealing the depth of writing talent and rich stories incarcerated individuals can share. We want those involved to see the commonalities of being human regardless of where we sleep at night. We aspire to what Wendy Hinshaw and Kathie Klarreich (2014) observed through their program: “Outside students became advocates for inside partners” and for the nonprofits doing this important work (150). By moving slowly into project identification and development with the English department, Lion Life was able to continue growing their programs and thoughtfully consider how KSU might best engage while developing a sustainable, manageable, impactful program.

When those who are struggling the most in our communities are lifted up, empowered, and given a voice, everyone benefits. Perhaps the most essential need for a program like Lion Life’s is for the community at large to catch the vision. If inmates are released only to be forever stigmatized as “the other,” then Lion Life’s impact stays confined to the jail. Collaboration with a university allows for further reach into the community and can give those outside students-turned-advocates a platform to proclaim their message to the world. And developing the relationships thoughtfully and slowly with reciprocity and flexibility can allow for a strong and effective infrastructure.

The flexibility and insightful experience brought by a nonprofit to a faculty member responsible for developing community-engaged programs and internships resulted in building a framework for a jail writing program. Starting small offers the time and space for universities and community partners, particularly a nonprofit, to get to know each other, better understand goals and needs, and scale

programs that have valuable, impactful, and sustainable structures. It also gave us the chance to manage our project carefully and deliberately, revising projects, re-envisioning needs, and making needed modifications. This was essential. We had never worked together before, and while we both had a vision for our collaboration, Brody's expertise shaped the project and helped Lara to better understand the many facets of jail and prison writing initiatives.

## REFERENCES

- Adamson, K., 2017. "Capstone Proposal: Research, Writing, and Communicating in Community Spaces." Kennesaw State University.
- Adamson, K., 2018. "Capstone: Research, Writing, and Communicating in Community Spaces." Kennesaw State University.
- Appleman, Deborah. 2013. "Teaching in the Dark: The Promise and Pedagogy of Creative Writing in Prison." *English Journal* 102, no. 4: 24–30.
- Cella, Laurie. 2012. "Introduction." In *Unsustainable: Re-imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service Learning, and the University*, edited by Laurie Cella and Jessica Restaino, 9–21. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Coogan, David. 2014. "Assembling for Agency: Prisoner and College Students in a Life Writing Workshop." *Community Literacy Journal* 8, no. 2: 17–31.
- Cushman, Ellen. 1996. "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change." *College Composition and Communication* 47, no. 1: 7–28.
- Franklin, Bruce H. 1998. "Introduction." In *Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America*, edited by H. Bruce Franklin, 1–18. New York: Penguin.
- Hinshaw, Wendy W. and Kathie Klarreich. 2014. "Writing Exchanges: Composing across Prison and University Classrooms." In *Women, Writing, and Prison: Activists, Scholars, and Writers Speak Out*, edited by Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford, 137–151. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Education.
- Hysen, Deborah. 2015. "Georgia Expands Educational Opportunities for Inmates." *Correctional News*. Last modified September 22, 2015, <http://correctionalnews.com/2015/09/22/georgia-expands-educational-opportunities-inmates/>.
- Jacobi, Tobi. 2016. "Against Infrastructure: Curating Community Literacy in a Jail Writing Program." *Community Literacy Journal* 11, no. 1: 64–75.
- Jones, Alexi. 2018. "Correctional Control 2018: Incarceration and Supervision by State." Prison Policy Initiative. Last modified December 2018. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/correctionalcontrol2018.html>

- Lockhard, Joe and Sherry Rankins-Robertson. 2018. Introduction. In *Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers*, edited by Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson, 1–8 Syracuse: Syracuse U P.
- Mathieu, Paula. 2012. “Short Lived Projects, Long-Lived Value.” In *Unsustainable: Re-imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service Learning, and the University*, edited by Laurie Cella and Jessica Restaino, 22–35. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Parks, Steve. 2012. “Strategic Speculations on the Question of Value: The Role of Community Publishing in English Studies.” In *Unsustainable: Re-imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service Learning, and the University*, edited by Laurie Cella and Jessica Restaino, 54–75. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Prokopiev, D., 2018, “Capstone Proposal: Shaping My Identity as a Ukrainian American Emerging Scholar through Autoethnography.” Kennesaw State University.
- Reynolds, Sadie. 2014. “Good Intentions Aside: The Ethics of Reciprocity in a University-Jail Women’s Writing Workshop Collaboration.” In *Women, Writing, and Prison: Activists, Scholars, and Writers Speak Out*, edited by Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford, 95–117. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Education.



**Lara Smith-Sitton**, PhD is the Director of Community Engagement and Assistant Professor of English at Kennesaw State University. She teaches writing and rhetoric courses as well as oversees the graduate and undergraduate internship programs and supports departmental community engagement initiatives. Her research interests include community writing, engaged scholarship, internship program design, and 18th- and 19th-Century rhetoric. Recent publications include co-editorship of *Green Card Youth Voices: Stories from an Atlanta High School*, as well as articles in *Community Literacy Journal*, *Double Helix*, *The Journal for Global Initiatives*, and *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal*.

**Brody Smithwick** is the Founder and President of Lion Life Community, an educational organization that services the incarcerated populations of North Georgia. Currently, Lion Life Community offers GED, ESL, Entrepreneurship, Freedom from Addiction, Music, and Creative Writing courses and operates a library within the jail. Brody primarily teaches creative writing courses where his students have produced a rich body of poetry as well as full length novels and plays. His work can be found in *Red Plant Magazine* and as a guest blog for Andrea Lunsford's *Multimodal Mondays*. He completed his Master in Professional Writing at Kennesaw State University.