

FLC Final Report: Building Interdisciplinary Models for Sustainable Service-Learning Projects

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Compiled by Dr. Jessica Stephenson

Introduction

This FLC was designed to support faculty from COTA and RCHSS designing and implementing a three-year service-learning program with Common Good Atlanta and the 2018 NEH recognized Clemente Course in the Humanities to provide higher education for formerly incarcerated people in Metro Atlanta. Using the Downtown Class as a model, our FLC centers on three main topics: first, how to structure pedagogically sound student service-learning projects in line with KSU *It's About Engagement* and USG goals; second, discerning essential considerations for sustainable, impactful project design; and third, developing assessment tools leading to scholarship and grant funding benefitting KSU.

In order to fully prepare for a long-term service learning and community partnership, the members of this FLC sought to learn more about social justice-related service learning initiatives. To that end, the following questions shaped our cross-disciplinary FLC:

1. How will KSU's commitment to the QEP and USG initiatives to increase engagement of students in service learning projects create new opportunities and resources for impactful service learning projects, undergraduate research, internships and community partnerships?
2. Considering established service learning theories, practices, and pedagogies, how might the Downtown Class serve projects focused on social justice and re-entry education programs as well as KSU goals? What curricular structures and modes of engagement will benefit students, faculty, and community members?

3. When building service learning projects, Paula Mathieu (2013) emphasizes the need for a “tactical approach” —one that embraces “personal relationships, mutual needs, and a shared sense of timing” (23). How does this approach inform the partnership with Common Good Atlanta and cultivate reciprocity, ensuring that the work mutually benefits students, community partners, faculty and university?
4. What assessment metrics can be established to measure the quality of service-learning projects at the graduate and undergraduate level, and how might assessments tools benefit others in the form of research and scholarship?
5. How will the work of this FLC shape the long-term goals of the Downtown Class to support successful reentry for people who have been impacted by the criminal justice system and build structures for sustainable service learning programs?

Participants*:

Margaret Pendergrass, Senior Lecturer, Department of Theatre and Performance Studies
 Lara Smith-Sitton, Associate Professor, Department of English
 Tanja Link, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice
 Seneca Vaught, Associate Professor, Department of History and Philosophy
 Mack Curry, Lecturer, Department of English
 Jessica Stephenson, Associate Professor, School of Art and Design

*All participants attended over 80% of the scheduled monthly meetings

Summary of Activities

During the fall and spring semesters the 6 faculty members representing 5 disciplines convened monthly from August through June with guests invited to several meetings. In keeping with the focus of the FLC our first meeting in August featured invited guest Ryan Keese so that we could begin to address how best to develop sound student service-learning projects in line with KSU goals and programs. It became clear though that the most pressing area for exploration to address during our fall meetings related to planning for the Spring 2022 launch of the Downtown class. Hence, the September and October meetings focused on how best to develop feasible and impactful program design. For the October meeting Bill Taft and Patrick Rodriguez of CGA attended as guests to guide our planning for the spring CGA course launch. These planning meetings proved highly productive as the group, led by Margaret Pendergrass as site coordinator for the Downtown Class, worked through the logistical planning for the program. The November

meeting afforded the group time to begin to engage with the chosen texts to be read during the FLC, with an emphasis on better understanding our identity and role as instructors; the needs of CGA students; the classroom culture; curriculum; and KSU students. How do we better support our students? What type of questions can we ask? What are the rules of engagement for classes? What are the unique needs of returning citizens relative to developing educational course materials? How do we take care of ourselves/create boundaries? To begin to formulate best practices around these questions generated by the group the meetings held during spring semester turned to an engagement with the texts we chose to read. The impact of these texts on the the FLC is reflected in the individual reflections given below and proved impactful in addressing our 5th FLC question, in particular: How will the work of this FLC shape the long-term goals of the Downtown Class to support successful reentry for people who have been impacted by the criminal justice system and build structures for sustainable service learning programs?

Prof. Mack Curry Reflection

While working with my FLC group, I have learned a great deal about prison education reform, the impact personalized engagement can have on returning citizens, and the importance of allowing voices of returning citizens to be heard. I have taught a poetry and critical thinking course with Common Good Atlanta, and this course helped students to find a way into their own voice. One way of doing this was by creating the opportunity for an audience and a sense of belonging. Many of the students have spent significant amounts of time incarcerated with little to no outlets for expressing themselves, which is what made the course so impactful. I may be

showing instructional bias, but I would argue that having a consistent audience motivated some students to put their best foot forward with their assignments.

This experience also assisted me on a personal level with connecting more with my students in general. I was blessed to be given a Poetry Writing course for the spring 2022 semester and teaching my CGA course inspired some of the activities I developed for students. With prompts such as “I Remember” poems and “Past and Future Self” poems, I was able to learn more about my students while teaching them various poetic styles and formats. Teaching poetry with my CGA course assisted me in providing a blueprint for engaging and relatable activities and combining those works with my FLC has only expanded my knowledge for the future.

Another benefit of teaching the course was viewing and creating poetry that paralleled with educational resources. Being able to co-teach the *Odyssey* helped me to establish the necessary relatability to reach my students. Seeing the issues that Odysseus and other characters faced displayed as poetry demonstrated how the students could replicate that effort. Once the method was comprehended, Professor Pendergrass and I were welcomed into their thoughts, fears, and past experiences. Seeing and hearing their work showed me just how important it is to keep these opportunities available. It is one thing to hear about how incarcerated persons feel from others, but it’s another to hear it straight from them.

In addition to teaching the CGA course, working with the FLC introduced me to literature steeped in the importance of incarcerated persons having a voice. The works by Chaney, Berry, and Jacobi each spoke to how writing allows to a certain freedom, which is important for incarcerated persons and returning citizens to reestablish a sense of self. For instance, the Chaney text discussed counterstories and counterspaces as opportunities to hear and

develop their voices. Looking back, CGA creates these spaces and opportunities for stories through the courses we teach and concepts we implement.

With regards to stories, the Berry text mentions how literacy narrative in prison have been linked to healing, redemption, and freedom. This freedom is an important quality to offer in spaces such as writing programs, which have been deemed significant for returning citizens in preparation for the outside world. Lastly, the Jacobi text highlighted how writing in prison specifically impacts incarcerated women. The text describes how writing in prison is necessary for women to repossess who they are, come to terms with there they are, and survive. The text continues to say that being able to write also helps incarcerated women to develop bonds with one another while rehabilitating themselves through expression.

This information ties back to my work with my CGA course and the FLC committee by reiterating our purpose and mission. Our overall goal is to provide a platform for returning citizens to express themselves, and this helps me to grow as an instructor and course and program developer. We have been able to develop bonds with one another as colleagues while also bonding with returning students and cater to their collective needs.

Dr. Tanja Link Reflection

More than 600,000 people are released from federal and state correctional facilities each year, and our communities have a stake and responsibility in ensuring that these returning citizens “equitably reenter society educated, prepared for meaningful employment, reconnected with family and loved ones, and ready to resume or begin productive lives” (Addie & Loyd, 2021). However, reentry and reintegration is a long and complex process rather than a single, one-time event (Chikadzi, 2017). The issues faced by criminal justice-involved individuals, such as housing instability (McNeeley, 2018; Morani, Wikoff, Linhorst, & Bratton, 2011), persistent

poverty (Miller, 2014; Petersilia, 2001), lack of education (Harlow, 2003; Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan, & Blitz, 2005), experiences of discrimination (Agan & Starr, 2018), substance abuse (Belenko & Peugh, 2005; Van Olphen, Freudenberg, Fortin, & Galea, 2006), mental health issues (Mallik-Kane & Visher, 2008; Pogorzelski et al., 2005), medical problems (Morani et al., 2011), and under-employment (Petersilia, 2001; Visher & Lattimore, 2007), are all well-documented barriers to successful and sustainable reentry. Unfortunately, reentry and reintegration are an afterthought in too many instances. The barriers faced by criminal justice-involved individuals create criminogenic conditions that increase the likelihood of recidivism, even for the most motivated ex-offenders (Chikadzi, 2017). Ameliorating these conditions can be accomplished through targeted and intentional assistance at various stages of the reentry process, namely during incarceration, prior to release, during transition, and very importantly but often overlooked, continuing after return to the community (Hall et al., 2016).

It is well-documented in the academic literature that education is transformative. Specifically, education plays a vital role in easing an individual's reentry from jail or prison back into the community. A large study conducted by the Urban Institute found that 94% of incarcerated adults nearing release from state prisons identified education as a key reentry need. Likewise, a 2018 DOJ-funded RAND study concluded that incarcerated individuals who participated in high-quality correctional education were 48% less likely to return to prison within three years compared to those who didn't participate in educational programming while incarcerated. These are just two examples of a well-documented fact that researchers across academic disciplines have been studying, our current FLC included. Reintegration initiatives seek to address some of the known barriers of reentry in effort to reduce reoffending rates and make returning to society viable. Because we are in the 'education

business', our focus was to figure out a sustainable way to reach and serve this population in an effort to boost their chances at successful reentry.

This FLC experience has strengthened and shaped my vision of establishing KSU as the "Reentry University". Given the notoriously limited resources available (and accessible) for returning citizens and in light of the known barriers to successful reentry and our collective expertise and passion for teaching, the importance and associated opportunities of offering educational programming is obvious.

Why KSU?

Several other USG and non-USG institutions have established prison education programs in GA and are maintaining them successfully. However, we are the only university to offer classes to returning citizens who either want to complete the CGA/Clemente certificate or start classes after being released. KSU is a leader in online education, which is attractive for this population of students due to the flexibility it affords. At the same time, we can serve CGA students f2f at local transitional centers, which allows for additional contact points to establish relationships and assist with connecting students to needed services.

In addition, our approach is unique with respect to the engagement of KSU students as co-learners, interns, researchers, and co-facilitators. No other institution has the opportunities we do to involve students and break down barriers to the underserved population of CGA students. Since many of our students aspire to careers in a service industry such as law enforcement, education, government services, etc., engaged learning about the needs and obstacles CGA students face will meaningfully add to their academic classroom knowledge, lend them expertise

as future professionals who work with and serve our communities, and grow their humanity and compassion for this population of justice-involved citizens.

Additionally, KSU is uniquely positioned to fill this void due to its already established resources and centers. The new RISE Institute might offer the organizational structure needed to secure external grants and grow the programmatic course offerings to returning and returned citizens. We have excellent resources for marginalized students and those in need to services and resources (e.g., addiction counseling, homelessness resources, clothing drives, to name just a few). KSU's strategic plan underscores community engagement and service learning, both of which are central to this vision. We have a large faculty, staff, and student population dedicated to improving the lives of our neighbors and in our communities, and serving this population would fit the bill beautifully.

With the return of federal Pell Grants in 2023, more justice-involved citizens will be eligible to receive financial aid to further or finish their education and give them a fighting chance at viable reentry. The time to prepare for the potential influx in students is *now*, which is why it is crucial for us to garner unequivocal institutional support and start building out our vision without delay. To do so we will need university buy-in and institutional support to establish a sustainable and scalable structure. This includes, but is not limited to: compensation for faculty, either through stipends or integrating the CGA course into their teaching load; credit for CGA students; training for KSU students as peer mentors; and last, but certainly not least, consistent funding (need institutional help and backing to secure external funding).

I am honored to have been part of this fantastic group of forward-thinking and engaged scholars whose dedication to the mission and vision of community-engaged work is unwavering despite the constant obstacles and barriers, and I cannot wait to look back and marvel at the

opportunities we will build together for those most traumatized, underserved, and forgotten members of our communities.

Prof. Margaret Pendergrass Reflection

The major outcome from our Faculty Learning Community has been to launch a KSU-led cohort to deliver the Clemente Course in the Humanities for the Common Good Atlanta (CGA), a community partner dedicated to providing high-quality education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. As the site director for the CGA Zoom course for returning citizens, I have engaged at the center this effort: designing curriculum, leading recruitment, securing needed technology for CGA students, establishing connections with transition centers in the Georgia Department of Corrections, and producing the semi-public shared readings at the end of each eight-week course.

In a perfect world, we would have had the time and reflective space to engage in our FLC *in advance* of the launch, there is also something fruitful about taking the leap to say – let’s start and find our way. I wouldn’t have had the courage to do that without my FLC colleagues or with the four-year collaboration that I have had with our community partner, Common Good Atlanta. Step by (sometimes faltering) step we have practiced reciprocity in meeting the complex needs of our CGA scholars transitioning out of our carceral system back into the community. Current CGA scholars and alumni have been integral to its planning, recruitment, and growth. We’re learning how to do this together, and learning from others, including CGA staff and alumni who are system impacted and faculty from Emory, Clark Atlanta, and Georgia State University, who have provided classes for Common Good Atlanta in Georgia prisons for over a decade. Our KSU cohort is now stepping up to host Zoom class for returning citizens as part of a larger Resilient

Reentry Education Initiative. Securing wider institutional buy-in and KSU support from RISE and our respective Colleges, we aspire to make KSU the go-to university for providing excellent courses, supportive community, and pathways for returning citizens in Georgia to achieve their educational goals.

FLC TEXTS

Like Dr. Curry, I was drawn to the description of “counter spaces” and “counter stories” in the Chaney text and I look forward to deepening my research in both areas. Most immediately useful for me was the focus on literacy in *Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison* by Patrick W. Berry (2018). Creating space for system-impacted writers to share their words with others can be transformational for those CGA scholars who have been essentially invisible to the dominant culture. Berry describes how literacy narratives “provide a way to reverse the erasure that has been endured by those within the prison-industrial complex (21). Creating and holding this space has been central goal for me in shaping the culture of the class: from designing how we share works-in-progress in the Zoom classroom, to working with KSU interns to facilitate breakout rooms, to producing our invited reading series. I used the literacy narrative assignment in the Critical Thinking and Writing class that I taught for our CGA Zoom course in January/February, and I could see the power that this exercise had to help students (from CGA *and* KSU) name and claim their power as writers, learners, and active agents in their own worlds.

While we all have been consumed with our various disciplines. . . the collective wisdom and knowledge and collaboration of our cross-disciplinary cohort has been key to the initial success of the CGA Zoom class (formerly known as the CGA Downtown class). As site director for the class, I have been the one most involved in the day-to-day mechanics of delivery in the face of

the barriers that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people face. The most notable barriers that we have tried to help navigate are like the barriers so many of our KSU students face:

- Access to technology and reliable WIFI
- Competing with job hours
- Mental/emotional challenges
- Incomplete education – lack of tools and resources.
- History of complex trauma, including trauma in the educational system

LEARNING IN COMMUNITY

The year, I will admit, has been a little chaotic, particularly in serving as site director and initial instructor for the Clemente Course in the Humanities for the Common Good Atlanta Zoom Course for Returning citizens. Dr. Link and Dr. Smith-Sitton have helped me talk through dilemmas and strategies for building the program on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Dr. Vaught brought his unique view of ‘history as imagination’ and teaching through the lens of letters by incarcerated Americans for the US History section of the Clemente Course. Dr. Curry, in *The Odyssey: Finding Home* course last summer, introduced me to a whole array of exercises and contemporary poets that I have incorporated into another project in applied theatre with the Department of Juvenile Justice as well as my KSU course in Performing Personal Narrative. Dr. Stephenson, Dr. Keltner, and Dr. Vaught gave guest lectures in my Critical Thinking and Writing course to give students a taste of what to expect in the course as a whole. This co-teaching model has also shown me the potential (and need!) for cross-disciplinary teaching, learning, and collaboration to create a truly excellent academic experience in a hybrid learning environment.

While the books that we studied in our FLC have been exceptional, the most profound learning we have done has been hands-on/”on-the-job” training. When Dr. Curry and I began

The Odyssey course in Summer 2021, we had 3 CGA students and four KSU Interns (!); in our current class of Literature for the Clemente Course in the Humanities, we have 17 CGA students (14 of whom are still incarcerated in Transition Centers in Atlanta and across the state). We now have strong buy-in from the Superintendent of the Atlanta Transitional Center and I can teach the course from a classroom in that facility, where we have 11 committed students. Each evening I am there, I have at least two other residents inquire as to the next available time to join the class. I am confident that, with the right resources, we could sustain two or three classes within the transition centers around Atlanta in some hybrid form.

The potential for KSU to be the ‘go-to’ university for re-entry and returning citizens is enormous; I have seen firsthand the need and the hunger that CGA scholars have for access to higher education and life-long learning. Many have expressed interest in coming to KSU to complete a degree—either online or in person. Participating in the FLC has helped me how to begin to build and sustain this Resilient Reentry Education effort—and find the core collaborators with whom to do it.

Dr. Lara Smith-Sitton Reflection

What drew me to engaging in a year-long faculty learning community focused on service learning in connection with returning citizen education initiatives was the need to dig deeper into three areas: first, better understand the unique situations of formerly incarcerated citizens and how educational and literacy initiatives serve these individuals; second, the way that we can build a cross-disciplinary team that delivers The Clemente Course with the community partner Common Good Atlanta and includes KSU students; third, how we can align our work with the It’s About Engagement initiative in connection with service learning and our faculty workloads. What was also valuable was learning the different needs, opportunities, and interests of faculty

and students across KSU who might want to be a part of this project—and with this knowledge I could see where my skills and abilities could best serve this program and how we can collaborate with a range of stakeholders to re-envision a valuable, sustainable project with long-term goals and benefits for all. involved. I also noted that while my background is rooted in service learning, I realized that the building of the service learning component will be one that is iteratively built as we continue to expand.

The FLC gave me an opportunity to read our three texts and understand what is available to those working directly with system-impacted individuals. *Race, Education, and Reintegrating Formerly Incarcerated Citizens*, edited by John R. Chaney and Joni Schwartz, build upon my work with jail-based education initiatives to learn the unique needs of individuals who have transitioned or are preparing to do so. This text took us into a range of classroom settings and programs that showed the kinds of models that can be sustainable. In contrast, *Women, Writing, and Prison: Activists, Scholars, and Writers Speak Out*, edited by Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford, took me from the unique situation of returning citizens to envision how community-based writing initiatives with incarcerated women could be modified and implemented in our programs. For example, through the development of the curriculum focused on American History, there was discussion about a service-learning project that included letter writing between system-impacted individuals and KSU students; the chapter “Writing Exchanges: Composing across Prison and University Classrooms” by Wendy Hinshaw and Kathie Klarreich enabled me to see ways in the future that we could create projects from their model to serve our community partner and community members. Finally, *Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy in Higher Education in Prison*, edited by Patrick Barry, brought me back directly to my discipline of writing and rhetoric studies and my work with community engagement. Barry

articulates essential considerations for developing educational programming that carefully considers the individuals we are interacting with and a public that may not understand the value and impact of this work.

Beyond the texts, much of my knowledge during this FLC cycle was through interactions directly with individuals and students working on the initial phase of this project. In Fall 2022, I was invited to apply for funding through the Jewish Federation of Atlanta JEDI Project. Working with fellow FLC member Margaret Baldwin Pendergrass and Patrick Rodriguez at Common Good Atlanta, we identified priorities for funding and long-term goals. When Patrick shared that he wanted to see every student in The Clemente Course seeing a pathway to KSU, I realized that we have the opportunity to be a partner but also provide access to technology and resources that would enable us to “redefine” what mean by community. The community we are defining is one that includes system-impacted individuals and students and faculty at KSU. I was also given an opportunity to consider what kinds of workshops could support writers and worked to create a two-part workshop series in the fall focused on poetry and publishing. In Spring, I observed the Critical Thinking and Writing section taught by Margaret with a group of students. This enabled me to better understand what faculty might need to consider in developing the course and how we could also develop meaningful opportunities for all participants and stakeholders.

Finally, in working closely with FLC members, I was able to discern ways that we can align build this program by aligning the work with the returning citizens to faculty workloads, college/university goals, and student interests. This is perhaps the most critical outcome of this FLC. Building upon my background as a writer and project manager, I worked closely first with Margaret and Tanja to evaluate how research, scholarship, and service could provide opportunities for faculty to engage with the project productively and in line with our

responsibilities as faculty. The insights shared during FLC meetings and extracurricular conversations helped our group craft a vision for future directions and funding. This enabled an expansion of returning citizen education, a partnership with the RISE, and a range of service-learning and internship program development ideas.

The FLC was essential for me this year as I transitioned from the Director of Community Engagement in the English Department to the Director of Undergraduate Studies. As an active member of the USG HIPs Leadership Implementation Team and KSU QEP Steering Committee, I see ways to re-envision how to motivate student and faculty involvement in service learning and other HIPs initiatives. Time with faculty from different departments also affirmed the value of cross-disciplinary work and the strengths and benefits service learning for students and community members.

Dr. Jessica Stephenson Reflection

Participating in this FLC afforded me access to resources centered on education with vulnerable communities in spaces new to me. Historically my research has focused on arts creation by contemporary artists working within hyper-marginalized communities in Angola, Namibia, Botswana, and South Africa, many of whom are refugees. Time and again this work has called me to rethink my research agendas and methods of data collection, while seeking to practice cultural relativism in spaces far different to my own.

The literature chosen by the FLC along with the expertise of participating faculty and guests are already well-versed in working with incarcerated citizens afforded me access to new way to think about pedagogy and curriculum, in addition to raising broader questions pertinent to my personal research. The chapters in the Chaney text provided me with a macro-level

perspective on the draconian laws and physical reality of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated citizens, circumstances that gave me pause, indeed, made me question how to proceed with course design given my clear lack of a working knowledge of the prison system. The Chaney text chapters also provided road maps by which I could begin to conceive conceptual formats for productive work – specifically the notion of counter stories and counter spaces. I began to think through how these concepts might inform not only the classroom culture one needs to nurture within this specific context, but equally the question of curriculum. Counter stories and counter spaces map well onto art history, at least the art history that I teach, as transformative methods by which students may develop and share their experiences and perspectives. The texts by Berry and Jacobi focus on the impactful use of writing and text-based narrative as vehicles for fostering healing and transformation for students within the prison system. As an art historian, my work centers on helping students gain the visual and verbal skills needed to engage with visual images while transcribing a visual response into verbal or written communication. These two texts were highly informative as I begin to think through using art history as a vehicle by which the student may work through where they have come from, where they currently are, and where they are going, or wish to go in the future.

During the spring semester I taught one class in the Critical Thinking and Writing Course led by Margaret Pendergrass. My class focused on pushing back on received ideas of what art history is to embrace a viewer-centered framework and a broader visual culture approach to “what is art” - the goal being to open up a space for engagement with visual images uncluttered by the elitist discourses that all too often frame art history as a discipline. Students were tasked with selecting any image of their choosing and to then share with the class any perspective or engagement with that image – the idea being to empower the viewer as a creative agent in

meaning-making, rather than seeing themselves as passive viewers of visual products created by others. The image choices and accompany verbal narratives offered by the students were very powerful, indeed in many cases highly emotional and vulnerable, showing the impactful and transformative work that the CGA program strives for. This class was one of the hardest I have taught, it made me question many of my teaching methods and there is much still for me to work through and resolve before teaching in this space in the future.

On a purely practical note, this FLC served a critical role, as the reflections by fellow FLC members speaks to, for the much-needed planning and collaboration in the piloting of a new program. The past year was a “build as flying” reality and the monthly FLC meetings proved critical for planning, problem-solving and learning from each other.

Dr. Seneca Vaught Reflection

Years before this FLC, I had previously taught a class focusing specifically on the history of mass incarceration at the Lee Arrendale State Prison for Women. In that class, we worked through Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and Christian Parenti’s *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*. The class was coupled with a theater class but these courses were not integrated. In this class, the purpose of the curriculum was to help women understand the broader historical and political context that prisons had emerged and to specifically address questions about the morality of the existing order. The class was facilitated in a graduate seminar format. The class met weekly for a month or so as I recall. The class was largely facilitated as a graduate seminar where I gave a series of questions about the text and the women presented their own questions and reflection in a journal. Overall, the lesson that I learned from this experience is that many of the stereotypes that I had about teaching incarcerated persons were not accurate. Although people in the class had very different

backgrounds and skills, I found that the fundamental challenge was not that the readings were difficult but in that how could I make the course material relevant in a way so that each participant could see themselves reflected in the material in a way that would motivate them to critically and creatively engage the material over the duration of the class.

One of the challenges of this experience was that while there was a lot of institutional support through the non-profit I was partnering with, there were no structured opportunities to discuss pedagogy and to debrief with other instructors. Most of us were hobbling together chunks of time to drive down to the prison and to teach so we did not foresee the need for us to think and reflect collectively on the impact that the experience was having on us. Only after some time has passed between this experience and this learning community have I come to realize how important it is for faculty engaged in these kinds of community-engaged forms of public scholarship to spend time engaging in structured dialogue, planning sessions, and providing feedback for each other.

As I participated in this 2021-2022 learning community and prepared to teach a class at the Atlanta Transitional Center, I wanted something a little different that would speak to the needs of the Clemente course specifically. Students in this class were taking a course for college credit and that course needed to align more or less with what they would traditionally encounter in a history classroom. The course that I was assigned to teach was a survey in American history. The class covered major historical transitions from the Colonial Period, Constitutional Era, and Early Republic, to Western Expansion, the Civil War, and the Gilded Age. In addition to these historical periods, the class emphasized very familiar themes around slavery, indigenous Americans, capital and labor, and race.

What I chose to do differently in this course that I had never done before was to center the entire curriculum around the experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons in American history. The title of the class was “An Incarcerated History of the United States.” My rationale for this focus developed through a series of discussions in the faculty learning community around the logistics of what the Clemente course would entail, reconciling some of my previous teaching experiences with incarcerated persons, and out of the texts and readings we selected for the discussions.

One text in particular, *Race, Education, and Reintegrating Formerly Incarcerated Citizens: Counterstories and Counterspaces* resonated particularly with me. On page 15, Corey Feldman bemoaned there is a lack of research on how to attract and retain Black students in higher education after prison. Immediately I thought to myself that this was a much more complicated question. A history of incarceration certainly complicates these questions about retention in general but in my experiences higher education has struggled to retain male students from working class backgrounds, and in particular to retain and recruit African American men formerly incarcerated or otherwise. The book made me consider how the issue of retention is complicated by racial and gender characteristics of academia. Higher education is a very patriarchal space but paradoxically has been particularly unsuccessful in attracting and retaining male students from working class backgrounds and especially Black and Latinx ones. So through the teaching I hypothesized, if colleges were better at recruiting and retaining men from working class backgrounds and men of color in general, might this translate into better programs for formerly incarcerated persons that are largely represented in these demographics? What are some of the things that can be done to better cater to these particular groups that would or would not necessarily benefit formerly incarcerated persons? Or more pointedly, if higher educational

institutions did a better job addressing the needs and concerns of these marginalized populations, might that reduce the incarceration of these men?

I hoped that by addressing the “elephant in the room” that I might help the students think more critically about history and how the study of history should be something that happens for their benefit and not to them--restoring some agency through inquiry. I hoped that this would have a serious impact on the way my formerly incarcerated students saw themselves and their relationship to the story of the past. I wanted them to see history less as a string of unrelated events moving from one damn thing to another as most students tend to encounter historical subjects but rather I had hoped to help them see themselves in the narratives. I hoped that persons would understand a variety of experiences that incarcerated and unfree people have had in the history of this country but more specifically, I wanted them to move the experiences of incarcerated persons from the periphery and into the center of the making of meaning and the interpretation of whose stories are significant in American history.

The curriculum itself was based on several outlines that were developed in dialogue with Bill Taft and Margaret Pendergrass Baldwin. I was also very fortunate enough to have worked with an intern who was able to compile the readings into a physical book so that the students would be able to avoid technological disruptions that might prevent access to the materials. The outline of the course began with the coverage of the founding of the British colonies, I included selections that emphasized the role of penal institutions and prison reformers in the founding of the United States and Australia. We spent some time specifically looking at the role of Governor Oglethorpe, as an unlikely prison reformer and major figure in the history of the state of Georgia. We also explored the stories of incarcerated founding fathers, enslaved persons, debtors, Union troops, and others. The reader included insights into the experiences of more modern historical

figures Eugene Debs' 1912 campaign for the presidency as an inmate in the Atlanta Penitentiary, George Takei (of *Star Trek*) and the plight of Japanese American interned at Manzanar during World War II, Martin Luther King Jr and the Letter from a Birmingham Jail.

What changed from the last time I taught was a shift from discussion of the reading to more of a focus of various activities centered on lectures, discussions, and exchanges. Generally, I thought that the lectures were necessary to move through and connect themes for students but I also thought that my lectures were one of the least effective aspects of the class. From all of the classes, one of them best activities was a debate that we organized around the question: "Was the Constitution a pro-slavery document?" I think that the debate was successful because it allowed classmates to work cooperatively and competitively. As one of the observers noted, it allowed the students to work in teams and collaborate in a social academic environment that is seldom afforded to persons in correctional facilities.

Additionally, working with Margaret Pendergrass as a team also provided a useful learning experience for the reflection on my teaching in the Clemente project but also with the participating KSU interns and with my own classes. I usually think contextually about experiences in the classroom and tend to emphasize experiences that are narrative-driven, more or less lecture-focused, and spontaneously centered on specific prompts or themes. Working with someone from a theater background helped me to think more deliberately about how students may perceive these experiences and forms of engagement and interaction that center the learning experiences of students in more deliberate ways. For example, we decided together that the class would have some kind of public reading at the end where the students could share their work. The students read selections for letters that they wrote in response or in dialogue with primary source letters from incarcerated persons that we examined the class. Some of the major

themes that emerged. From my perspective, this meant an informal PowerPoint presentation but working with a playwright and a dramaturg allowed me to think more deliberately through the details of a public performance as having pedagogical value in itself. I learned that while spontaneity can be a useful approach, a bad presentation experience could detract from the learning objectives and the purpose of the course and create unnecessary anxiety. Learning from this team-taught course, I learned some very useful ways to minimize these tensions on the students so that they could get comfortable with the material and presenting their authentic selves.

I also gained a lot from the series of discussions on these texts as well as the logistics and challenges of the project. There were two levels to these conversations--the monthly meetings with other members of the FLC and the weekly meetings with Margaret following the class. Again, I underscore how important it was for us to spend time engaging in structured dialogue, planning sessions, and providing feedback for each other. These series of discussions revealed the layers of what we were trying to accomplish. On one level we were trying to integrate best practices that we learned about through prior knowledge and integrating experiences across the classes. Then we were also trying to constantly improve and give each other feedback based on more recent experiences. Finally, we were processing each of the students' individual needs and concerns so that they could better. Reading and discussing these texts in this community has given me useful tools and content that I will use in future iterations of the Clemente course but also in my courses at Kennesaw State and in my efforts to contribute to the retention and success of Black and Latinx students in my KSU classes.

