

Articles

Detention/Writing Center Campaigns for Freedom

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Abstract

This essay will focus on student campaigns to stop deportations at Krome Detention Center between 2013-2017 in Miami, Florida. This advocacy work shaped a letter writing project between my university writing center and a detention center. Writing in this context, then, is a collective act, challenging a prison industrial complex that impacts both the classroom and community. The work of student organizers can challenge our field to work beyond our disciplinary boundaries and help us find new possibilities for community writing in the classroom and writing centers.

Keywords

community writing, organizing, immigration, undocumented students, prisons, detention centers

I deal with cases. I'm part of also the Education, Not Deportation Team . . . you get a case and then we have to help the families try and get out from the detention center . . . He was a parent, a dad from Arizona. We heard about the case because . . . the daughter was an activist in Arizona, but for some reason they sent [him] to Miami. When we heard about the case, we did everything we could. We did vigils. We went to Krome detention center. I believe he was in Krome and then in Broward as well, in the BTC. And even though I did not know the guy, I had only seen him through fliers and pictures, and people had just talked to me about him, we were able to win his case. He came out of the detention center. When I finally saw him, I had never even met the guy, he just gave me a hug, a handshake and telling me how proud he was of us, he felt like we were his kids and we were his family, when he saw us and then I noticed that he was skinner I guess he wasn't eating as well they don't really eat much or like rice and beans, I think, that's it. So the first thing we did was we went to go eat, and so he was telling us about it. Like that got to me. It could be my dad or my mom too that could be detained. Somebody hopefully helps them out like I did . . . So that's something that I learned from that . . . — Francis Tume, Florida International University student and member of Students Working for Equal Rights

I really enjoyed the Broward campaign because that's the first time we put immigration on the defensive. They had to react to our allegations. They had to tell people that they're doing their job instead of us having to say you know it was a whole different spin and I think it's very rare that you're going to find any press release from ICE that mentions an organization and responds to their allegations and that's something we were able to do that was very—I mean it comes I think back to the thing of writing to an extent of, you know, we did our own internal investigation and put out the facts as to what they're doing. In their response, I think that gave a lot of credibility to our allegations and that would not have happened if it wasn't for us sort of manipulating the power of the press and our stories and using it for a greater goal beyond . . . —Mohammad Abdollahi, National Immigrant Youth Alliance and co-founder of Dream Activist

This was about families this whole time. This wasn't about what political party. This wasn't about any of that. It was always about the families—our community, the kids, the parents—that's what it's always about.—Viridiana Martinez, National Immigrant Youth Alliance and co-founder of NC Dream Team

Francis, Mohammad, and Viridiana, like youth organizers around the country, work on campaigns to get people out of detention centers. And as depicted in the documentary *The Infiltrators*, Mohammad worked with Viridiana and Marco to infiltrate the Broward Detention Center (BTC), located a few miles north of Miami. The documentary shows how they presented themselves to immigration authorities and purposely tried to get arrested. Since they were community organizers with the National Immigrant Youth Alliance, they wanted to get inside BTC and find out who was being held. Once inside BTC, both Viridiana and Marco collected stories and then did media interviews over the phone. They called for a full review of the cases at BTC. They discovered that there were hundreds of people being held without a criminal record, including people eligible for DACA. Most likely, no one would have known about these cases unless they were publicized. After their media interviews, Viridiana and Marco suddenly were released the next day (Sweeney). Because they were able to publicize their story and other people's stories who were being held in a detention center, they gained power through their actions. Once they were no longer invisible, the detention center released them. Mohammad helped with the organization of this project from outside the detention center and continues to work on campaigns for immigrant rights. As Mohammad notes, the rhetorical moves of “manipulating the power of the press and our stories” help people gain freedom.

These young organizers' work at detention centers shows that the struggle for immigrant rights isn't just about the right to an education. These leaders were addressing issues of mass incarceration and assisting other immigrants, some of whom were not receiving adequate medical care, including “a woman taken for ovarian surgery and returned the same day, still bleeding, to her cell, and a man who urinated blood for days but wasn't taken to see a doctor” (O'Matz). Therefore, this work with imprisoned

immigrants contrasts with some of the traditional work of providing literacy classes inside prisons.

Immigrant rights organizers challenge the incarceration of immigrants and use complex rhetorical moves to work within a system to challenge it. Such advocacy speaks to a need for community writing projects that do more than provide a writing class/tutoring session or express solidarity with someone. Although there is a growing body of scholarship about teaching writing in prison (Jacobi, Berry, Cavallaro, et al.), these initiatives often struggle between focusing on individual rehabilitation and working toward changing the incarceration system (Plemons). The advocacy work of student organizers highlights the need for writing to make visible what the public sphere has left invisible. For those incarcerated in detention centers, their stories and cases often are silenced by an immigration system that does not provide them legal representation and limits their communication with the outside world. In essence, their imprisonment presumes their guilt and creates an almost impossible rhetorical situation, particularly for the majority who do not have access to legal resources. Such imprisonment has a direct impact on students, their families, and the community. In addition, their imprisonment reflects a fractured democracy where millions are disenfranchised from the political process and lack the same legal rights as documented people because of their immigration status.

This essay will discuss how neoliberal policies limit the public sphere and help to create a system of mass incarceration. In response, the dominant models of prison literacy initiatives often are marketed to the prison as rehabilitation for participants, which sometimes can conflict with goals of challenging a system of mass incarceration. In contrast to traditional prison literacy classes/tutoring, student advocacy campaigns focus on stopping deportations and releasing people from detention centers. The essay will focus on Education Not Deportation (END) campaigns at Krome Detention Center between 2013-2017 and how this advocacy work shaped a letter writing project started between my university writing center and a detention center. Writing in this context, then, is not just a personal letter expressing sympathy or support; this writing is a collective act, challenging a prison industrial complex that impacts both the classroom and community. The work of student organizers can challenge our field to work beyond our disciplinary boundaries and help us find new possibilities for community writing in the classroom and writing centers. This essay is part of a longer work that focuses on how volunteering with student organizers in the immigrant rights movement shaped my pedagogy. I am not advocating for one pedagogical approach for all writing centers, because my own positionality as a white male citizen shapes and limits my perspective. However, I argue that the rhetorical skills of student organizers need to be more central in the writing classroom and writing center, including the work of immigrant rights organizers in challenging a racist, exploitive immigration system.

Public Imprisoned

Neoliberal policies have changed our relationship with the public sphere and placed limits on participation in it. As Tony Scott and Nancy Welch argue in *Composition in the Age of Austerity*, “From schools to garbage pickup to prisons, we have seen over the past forty years a sea change toward privatization and the economization of public services, and this change is often called neoliberalism” (7). This emphasis upon private enterprise is guided by a belief that “[g]overnment best achieves the greater public good by serving private interests and privatizing government functions” (Scott and Welch 7). Examples of such policies include legislatures diverting funding from public schools to private charter schools and Congress hiring private corporations to run detention centers. And this movement affects academia with a growing market-like emphasis upon rankings and performance even as government funding decreases. As support for social programs decreases, government policies favor corporations, contributing to a shrinking of the public sphere. Democracy, then, becomes more of a place for private sector economic policies and less of a place for representative democracy. With unrestricted campaign contributions to candidates from corporations, it seems, super pacs control the discourse on media channels in support of certain policies.

It is difficult, then, to enter the public sphere when the physical space and media are controlled by a few corporations. As Nancy Welch argues, many public spaces have become private spaces, and free speech zones limit when and where people can share their ideas: “[f]rom the malling of suburbia to the vertical integration of radio, television, cable, film, music, and print outlets into a few media monopolies—we face dramatically shrinking material and virtual space . . .” (“Living Room” 474). Susan Wells discusses this broken public sphere as a “prison visiting room,” a metaphor used by German scholars Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge: “The visiting room allows communication between inside and out. It represents the prisoner’s participation in both worlds” (“Rogue Cops” 335). Therefore, when we write, it is an “exchange between the private, the domain of production, and some approximations of the public sphere” (335). And in this prison visiting room for communication, “[b]oundaries are put in play for both prisoner and guest” (335).

And in the context of immigrant rights and the writing classroom/center, this prison visiting room is more than just a metaphor. As more people are placed in prisons/detention centers, immigrants are physically restricted in their communications with the outside world. Visitation is closely monitored and regulated, and private corporations charge fees for the use of a phone. In addition, raids on immigrant communities and imprisoning people in detention centers reflect neoliberalism’s “reliance on crisis” (Scott and Welch 8). As the state and private corporations place immigrants behind bars, immigrants’ rights are taken away as they are criminalized. As Jennifer Wingard notes, “[I]CE has developed an evolving threat matrix where anyone can move from a misdemeanor to a felon in one step” (Wingard 54). In addition, as Tobi Jacobi points out, “Many universities are inextricably tied to the prison industrial complex through everything from investment in Corrections Corporation of Amer-

ica (CCA) market shares to UNICOR (Bureau of Prisons) dorm furniture contracts” (“Austerity Behind Bars” 108).

The prison industrial complex’s restrictions on communication are significant, particularly since the United States has the highest rate of imprisoning its people, more than any country in the world. Starting in 1972, the U.S. prison population has increased from 350,000 people to more than two million (Alexander 8). In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander emphasizes the problems with the system:

One way of understanding our current system of mass incarceration is to think of it as a birdcage with a locked door. It is a set of structural arrangements that locks a racially distinct group into a subordinate political, social, and economic position, effectively creating a second-class citizenship. Those trapped within the system are not merely disadvantaged, in the sense that they are competing on an unequal playing field or face additional hurdles to political or economic success; rather, the system itself is structured to lock them into a subordinate position. (Alexander 185).

Similarly, the immigration system reflects this “birdcage with a locked door” that puts people—because of their ethnic and racial identity—in “a subordinate position” (185). As Partrisia Marcías-Rojas argues in *From Deportation to Prison: The Politics of Immigration Enforcement in Post-Civil Rights America*, the system profits off criminalizing immigrants: “Immigration has surpassed drug violations as the leading charge that sends people to prison . . .” (18). Detention Centers have a long but changing history in the United States. Ellis Island in 1892 was the first detention center that kept immigrants “between a few days and several weeks” (AIJ 5); however, the U.S. “largely did not detain immigrants in the past” (AIJ 5) compared to the practices now. Detention started to grow with legislation like the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2010. This bi-partisan 2010 bill, often using private prison companies like GEO Group, requires at least 33,400 beds be filled with immigrants.

This system has been supported by administrations from both sides of the aisle, and when Donald Trump became president, prison companies CoreCivic and GEO’s stock prices soared. In 2017, GEO gave \$1.7 million to politicians in their lobbying efforts (AIJ 6), and the number of immigrants imprisoned increased:

On a given day in August 2019, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) held over 55,000 people in detention – a massive increase from five years ago when ICE held fewer than 30,000 people. Unsurprisingly, the United States has the largest immigration incarceration system in the world. (AIJ 2)

The mass incarceration of immigrants was a \$3 billion industry in 2018, and Florida, where my university resides, has a large number of immigrants imprisoned. According to Americans for Immigrant Justice, “As of April 2019, Florida had the sixth-largest population of people detained by ICE in the United States” (2). The conditions of detention centers are dangerous, including “inadequate medical and mental health

care, lack of accommodations for and discrimination against individuals with disabilities, and overuse of solitary confinement” (AIJ 2). In addition, imprisoning children is part of this system. For example, there is an immigrant prison for children in Homestead, which is about thirty miles from FIU, which can imprison over two thousand immigrant children requesting asylum (Kennedy). And as children are separated from their families, “The trauma that unaccompanied children experience pre-migration, during migration, upon arrival to the US, and within communities can threaten their short- and long-term health and well-being” (Linton et al. 129). Incarceration can affect an entire family. Immigrants imprisoned in detention centers do not have the right to an attorney and have limited communication with the outside world.

As a result of neoliberal economic policies, the detention center is a space regulated often by private prison companies. Visitors must be approved for their visit, arrive at least an hour or more before the scheduled time, go through security, and place all personal belongings in a locker. A visitor may not even have a pencil or piece of paper for fear it could be used as a dangerous tool. The conversation between the visitor and the imprisoned immigrant is through a telephone as they see each other only through a protective glass barrier. And of course, anything they say can be monitored and perhaps recorded by guards. Immigrants must pay fees to use the phone to call someone outside the center and can only earn money—\$1/day at Krome and other centers—to work various jobs at the center. In this space, the public sphere has no freedom, and immigrants’ ability to see other people, communicate, and work is controlled by a private company or ICE.

In response to this mass incarceration and neoliberal environment, writing teachers have often focused on prison education, including writing courses/writing centers (Jacobi; Berry; Cavallaro; Hinshaw; Plemmons). Over the past decade, the Prison Studies Project has created a directory of prison education programs (<http://prisonstudiesproject.org>) even though Pell grants for prison education programs ended under the Clinton administration in 1994 (Pettit, “Ending Ban”), making the sustaining of such programs difficult. In *Beyond Progress in the Prison Classroom: Options and Opportunities*, Anna Plemons discusses how the “liberatory” goals of education can contrast with the realities of a prison system, showing “[t]he tension between complicity and confrontation . . .” in prison education programs (10). A prison writing course, for example, often includes the transformational narrative where writers talk about how they have worked to become a better person. However, as Plemons notes, there are problems with such an assignment: “A program that presumes a writer’s highest goal to be individual transformation requires incarcerated scholars to produce texts that exemplify individual meaning-making, thereby foreclosing a critical examination of the wider enterprise” (Plemons 49-50). Although there are different approaches to teaching writing classes in prisons, this dominant model of a writing assignment places blame and emphasis upon the individual writer to transform and ignores the larger social factors of the prison industrial complex. Our writing assignments, then, can be shaped by neoliberal policies and replicate an ideology of individ-

ual responsibility rather than an examination of the private sector's profit motive in criminalizing more and more people.

Prison writing scholarship explores that tension between how to teach a course justified as rehabilitative by the prison system and the goal of challenging neoliberal incarceration. For instance, Tobi Jacobi sees such writing as “[p]art of a collective voice and social movement that demands viable alternatives to incarceration” (Jacobi 52). Cavallaro et al. “[r]eject the idea that our work in the prison classroom is aimed at reforming or saving our students . . .” And Patrick W. Berry questions when people turn to “[e]ducation and literacy as the answer to a myriad of social problems” like mass incarceration (11). However, Plemons argues we need a shift in our thinking about prison education, favoring a decolonizing approach and pointing out, “Much of the scholarship on prison education highlights the struggle among academics to transcend colonial logics when describing the value of literacy in prison” (Plemons 52).

Similarly, university/community writing centers also have engaged with prisons, focusing often on educational initiatives of individual writers. In *Rhetoric of Respect: Recognizing Change at a Community Writing Center*, Tiffany Rousculp discusses how community writing centers can consider a mission of “change” (91). Rousculp’s Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center, for example, includes writing projects inside jails. In addition, University of Miami and Goucher College’s prison initiatives have featured a writing center where university tutors give individual writing consultations inside the prison. Some of these projects are started by non-profits like Exchange for Change in Miami, where faculty from Florida International University and other schools volunteer to teach creative writing courses (Hinshaw). Like the writing classes critiqued by Plemons, such projects are constrained by a neoliberal system that continues to place more and more people behind bars for profit and restricts their ability to communicate beyond the prison yard other than these educational initiatives.

What’s even more striking is that such educational initiatives are not even allowed in a detention center like Krome, located near my university in Miami. First, a writing class or writing center partnership with a detention center is not allowed by ICE. Theoretically, a detention center is supposed to be a temporary imprisonment for immigrants as they resolve their immigration cases, so authorities deny education even though many immigrants are imprisoned for years as they challenge their deportations. Krome Detention Center only offers detainees the ability to watch anger management videos or attend a religious meeting.

Writing classes, as described by Jacobi, Berry, and others, might find some interested participants in a detention center, but the political/economic reality of a detention center complicates such a pedagogy. Unlike a prison where people have received their sentences, immigrants in a detention center are stuck in a legal limbo as they await a decision on their ability to stay in the country. They often lack legal representation and have few rights. There is no pretense that the detention center is striving to be rehabilitative like a prison. There are no positive public relations and news stories like there can be about prison education; instead, detention centers want to make immigrants less visible to the public. Jennifer Wingard comments on this strat-

egy of creating fear from perceived threats: “Therefore all citizens of the United States must be aware that there are invisible enemies who are waging invisible wars against us who must be stopped, even though we cannot see them” (59). Making immigrants invisible reflects neoliberalism’s emphasis upon crisis grounded in fear. Therefore, a traditional prison literacy initiative conflicts with such neoliberal policies and doesn’t address the immediate needs of immigrants contesting their deportations.

Project Background: FIU and Krome, Nine Miles Apart and a World Away

Calle Ocho is the street of Little Havana, where Cuban immigrants made their home after escaping Castro’s communist regime in the 1960’s. From Little Havana, go further west and there’s Florida International University. Started in 1972, FIU was built on what was once an airport, and now has become the university that awards the most bachelors and master’s degrees to Hispanic students in the country. There are over fifty thousand students representing at least one hundred countries. Fifteen minutes further down 8th Street, before the alligators of the Everglades, there’s Krome Detention Center, where immigrants are detained—imprisoned—for weeks, months, and years. Only nine miles separate Krome Detention Center from FIU, and there’s no sign pointing to the long gravel road leading to a giant prison security gate there in the Everglades. Inside there are often five hundred to six hundred immigrants imprisoned because of their citizenship status. The name of this place has so much negative power. In a conference with one of my students, the word “Krome” is mentioned, and my student starts to cry because she remembers a family member’s prolonged stay there.

The placement of Krome—both its physical location and historical context—reflects policies that attempt to make foreign policy and immigrants invisible to the public. First, Krome Detention Center was a nuclear missile base during the Cold War. According to Jana K. Lipman’s historical account, residents of Miami were largely unaware at the time that there were nuclear missiles within a few miles of downtown (Lipman 119-20). After the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States installed a missile launch center in South Florida (National Park Service, “HM69 Nike Missile Base”). At first, the missiles were conventional weapons but were replaced with nuclear missiles in 1965 (Lipman 118). Because the missile site was in the Everglades, they built it above ground because it was a swamp. The soldiers guarding the base experienced tough living conditions, particularly because of the plentiful mosquitoes that still persist today. After the last missiles were removed in 1979, the military base became a place for refugees (Lipman 118-19). According to Lipman, there was not much public discussion about transforming a nuclear base into a camp or prison for refugees, but when thousands of Cubans and Haitians fled persecution in their home countries, the United States government decided to use Krome as one of the places to house them.

The 1980 Mariel Boat Lift had brought Cuban immigrants wanting to leave Castro’s regime, and at the same time, thousands of Haitian immigrants were escaping Duvalier’s regime in Haiti. Cubans were treated mostly as political “refugees” because

of the United States' Cold War relationship with Cuba. However, Haitians making the journey to the United States often were treated as if they were only leaving the island because of economic reasons, even though the brutal Duvalier killed and tortured many Haitians. Edwidge Danticat's powerful memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying*, tells the story of her elderly uncle traveling to Miami because of the violence in Haiti. Her uncle had a travel visa, but because he mentioned the desire for temporary asylum at the airport, he was arrested and sent to Krome. Without his proper medication, he died a few days later. This violent treatment has continued. In 1982, thirty-three Haitian women held a hunger strike to protest their conditions, and Krome force-fed some of them (Jaynes). In the 1980s and 90s, there were widespread reports of guards physically abusing and raping detainees at Krome (Bach). Now an all-male facility, Krome continues to abuse.

Besides refugees seeking asylum, Krome is a place where a resident without the right papers can end up. A man moves here when he is four years old, grows up and graduates high school or college, gets a job, but he never is able to become a citizen because of a racist immigration system that prevents many people from becoming citizens. He's now forty-something years old, and at a traffic stop, or some other run-in with the law, he is arrested. Or it could be someone who is a college student but isn't able to become a citizen. When it's discovered that these community members are undocumented, they can be given an order of deportation and sent to a detention center like Krome.

A visitation project affiliated with a national group called CIVIC—now named Freedom For Immigrants—started in 2013. To end the isolation at this all-male detention center by talking to someone for an hour, the local group—Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees—organizes visitations. Such a project requires approval by the detention center, and it always has the threat of being ended or suspended. The initial tour of the facility took place in October 2013. As volunteers walked from the parking lot to the entrance, we could hear the sound of gunshots in the air from the nearby firing range. Then inside, we got to see where the men—usually five hundred to six hundred—slept and ate. There was a room with padded walls where guards can lock people up when they have mental breakdowns. Men were dressed in different color prison uniforms: blue, orange, or red. The color indicates how serious the offense is. Of course, the offense that everyone has made is not having the right papers. Although a blue uniform is supposed to represent someone whose only offense is not having the right papers, and someone dressed in red means they were accused of committing a felony, the colors aren't always accurate. Some men at Krome had lived in the U.S. for many years but their countries of birth included Cuba, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, El Salvador, England, Mexico, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and Haiti. During weekly visitations from 2013-2017, detainees discuss participating in hunger strikes and other forms of civil disobedience at Krome. Similar to what happened in the 1980s, a judge ruled in 2015 that Krome officials could use “nasal-gastric tubes” to force feed refugees from Bangladesh who went on a hunger strike to protest being held for years in detention (Alexandra Martinez).

Usually all communication is through a glass barrier and phone, but on that first tour, as we walked through the facility, a man wearing red handed us a letter and asked for help. Wally was born in Mexico but had lived in the U.S. since he was fourteen years old. He had an eleven-year-old son who was a citizen. In February 2012, Wally was arrested at his house in Bradenton, near Tampa, because he was undocumented. He had no criminal record. The only reason he was being detained is because he overstayed his visa and then re-entered the country four times to be with his son. He crossed the desert in Texas, near Brownsville, and spent four days and four nights trying to get back to his eleven-year-old boy. Wally nearly died from lack of water and exhaustion.

Even though he didn't have a lawyer, he was fighting his case and representing himself. He read up on immigration law with whatever resources they had at the detention center, and he was doing everything he could to stop his deportation so he could return to his son. He said the men called him the "jailhouse lawyer" as he helped them with their cases too. He wanted the help of student organizing groups like Students Working for Equal Rights (SWER), Dreamactivist, or United We Dream who conduct END campaigns to stop deportations.

Francis, a member of SWER and whose words begin this chapter, along with other students, agreed to help, because Wally wanted to go public and use the press to share his story and connect with the community. Students spoke with Wally's family to implement an END campaign that included various actions, including a call-in campaign, social media, press releases, rallies outside the detention center, and an op-ed. SWER leaders planned and held a rally outside a detention center where Wally's brother made a speech in front of the media. Wally wanted a petition, and he asked his brother to send a photograph that could be used. In this collective effort, student organizers from SWER and I worked on drafting an online petition and posting it on change.org (please see appendix A). This petition has a rhetorical strategy of emphasizing the person's connection to family and the community, invoking Americanisms as part of its argument. Wally is a father, and he wants to pursue his education and career. Also, he is a member of a church. Part of the argument is discussing American ideals and stressing that the person is a valuable member of the community. And besides asking people to sign, the petition encourages them to call ICE and support the person and use their Alien Registration Number (A#). Importantly, the purpose of telling Wally's story is not a story of transformation that might take place in a literacy class. The purpose is not to share his story with a university class to create an exchange between people on the inside of the prison and on the outside in the classroom. The purpose of the petition is to take action—to raise the profile of a case.

As the campaign progressed, there were conversations between Wally, the pro-bono lawyers, the family, and the organizers. In these conversations, the END campaign sets a strategy about how to go public and to what extent the campaign is private or public. As he appealed his deportation, court dates were set and the call-in campaign intensified. Then in November, he was transferred to another detention center in Wakulla County, outside of Tallahassee, as his case/appeal was pending. This move shows how the detention center system continues to disrupt detainees'

lives. When people are transferred to a new detention center, they often lose contact with family and friends who are able to visit them. And if they do have a lawyer, then that lawyer would not be able to visit them in-person. Their court case would likely be conducted through video conferencing. In consultation with Wally's family, the SWER group made a plan to call ICE, plan protests, contact representatives, and involve members of Wally's church (please see appendix B for SWER email). This call to action includes specific ICE targets for the campaign and the use of social media hashtags to raise the visibility of Wally's case. In addition, congressional representatives were contacted to see if they could help. In December of 2013, The Progressive Media Project (PMP) welcomed an op-ed to tell Wally's story and how it connected with many other immigrant parents. With help from SWER and other groups, the petition gained nearly five thousand signatures, and the op-ed was published in several newspapers around the country. People wrote online comments from different states and countries in support of Wally. After the op-ed was published, the call-in campaign continued in January and February. The campaign reflected a collective effort combining writing and action to advocate for Wally and his family. Because Wally was imprisoned inside the detention center, he lacked access to participate in these advocacy events. Neoliberal policies of incarceration make it extremely difficult for immigrants facing deportation to participate in the public sphere at all.

Then in March, Wally was transferred back to Krome and tried for a final stay of removal. The next week, the online detainee locator (locator.ice.gov/odls/) indicated that Wally was "not in custody." Wally's family members called to confirm what it meant: Wally was deported in March 2014 after being held in detention for two years and one month. Since Wally had re-entered the country after being deported, his offense was treated as a felony. He wore the red uniform, not the blue. Wally had not committed a crime other than wanting to be with his son. At the next SWER meeting on campus, students discussed the campaign for Wally and shared how deportations affected their own families. One student shared how he and his brother had to live without their mother. He continues to attend college, and he wants to change the laws to make it possible for his mother to return to the United States. Even though the campaign wasn't successful, organizers continue to work on ending deportations.

The project was led by community organizers and did not have any direct link with a particular class or university department. However, student organizers' rhetorical skills combined with action give a different framework than traditional prison literacy initiatives. Although Berry, Jacobi, and other scholars discuss the tension between teaching a rehabilitative prison literacy course and social activism, this project focused more on organizing and connecting people for campaigns to escape incarceration. Instead of teaching writing, this student-led project challenged neoliberal incarceration policies. The goal for such a project is to make visible what the public sphere makes invisible: the incarceration and deportation of immigrants. Although the campaign to stop Wally's deportation wasn't successful, student organizers have achieved many victories with other END campaigns throughout the country. These organizing efforts inspired a letter writing project between our writing center and Krome Detention Center.

Writing Centers, Social Justice, and Letters

The letter writing project between our university writing center and Krome focused on connecting imprisoned immigrants to resources and groups that would advocate for their release. In addition, when given permission by incarcerated immigrants, the media could be contacted to profile cases. Instead of organizing a literacy class, which was forbidden by Krome, this project aimed to follow some of the activist rhetorical approaches of student organizers.

In many projects, letter writing with those who are incarcerated often begins with a goal for greater understanding and sympathy from those on the outside. Amnesty International has a letter writing campaign every December to show solidarity with people who are imprisoned and whose human rights have been violated. Wendy Hinshaw discusses letter exchanges between writing classrooms and those incarcerated in prison as part of the Exchange for Change program: students on the inside (the prison) and students on the outside (the university classroom) write about similar topics and have a conversation through writing letters to one another, using pseudonyms. She points out that such exchanges can help “build community through listening” to one another (69). Another example of letter writing with imprisoned people, Detainee Allies, is an organization started by several San Diego State professors. They have created an online collection of letters from immigrant detainees (Pettit, “Begging”). The purpose of the project is not to “solve” the issue, but to “document” what is happening (Pettit, “Begging”). A project called “Vision From The Inside” turns letters written by detained people into art. The goal of their project is to publicize what many immigrants are experiencing inside detention centers and how people are coping. Such projects have value in creating conversation between those incarcerated and those on the outside, a way to end isolation and show solidarity. Some detainees have not had direct contact with family members or friends for years, and several commented how they valued and were thankful for receiving a letter in the mail, including those from the volunteers in the visitation program. In addition, sometimes detainees write back about their desire to go to college and what they would like to study, asking for books that they can read while they are confined. The tutors at the writing center, for example, donated novels, dictionaries, GED preparation books, and atlases. However, besides showing solidarity and responding to these requests, we wanted to add an activist component to this letter writing project and help challenge incarceration policies. Most letters from the detention center focused on people’s frustration with why they are being imprisoned and also their need for legal help.

The project started with volunteers who visited Krome Detention Center composing letters to those they had visited. With support from the writing center director, Dr. Paula Gillespie, FIU-affiliated visitors could use the writing center mailbox to send and receive mail to the detention center. More letter writers, who did not visit Krome, volunteered to help when the project was discussed during a writing center staff meeting and during my class. The organizers of Friends from Miami Dade had a list of people who wanted visitations at the detention center, and once we had their A#’s, then we could write a letter. Student volunteers and I composed letters in English, Spanish, and French to detainees, telling them about the hotline started by the

advocacy group, a four-digit number they could use to call their families that was free and therefore wouldn't charge money that many don't have. Students would write the letters by hand in the writing center, or I would type them in my office. Also, letter writing events encouraged others to correspond, including an action with the Mass Story Lab hosted by the University of Miami in February of 2017. This traveling project aims to raise awareness through featuring five-minute stories from people who are directly affected by mass incarceration. FIU's chapter of Student Alliance for Prison Reform, which has coordinated a variety of activities on campus to raise awareness about the prison system, also joined the project and set up a letter-writing table in the FIU student center (please see appendix C for sample introductory letters). Students and I then followed up these introductory letters with more personal letters based on the responses. Also, some men would share their stories when people would visit them at the detention center. But in the process of writing letters, there's a possibility of not getting a response and the letter could be returned for various reasons—the person could be transferred to another center or deported.

After these initial letters, we tried to connect detainees with people who could help. The letter writing project became more than just writing to show solidarity; it became part of different kinds of action modeled by student organizers. The FIU law school was one resource with its immigration clinic and represents some detainees pro-bono, as many cannot afford legal representation. In their letters, detainees would sometimes ask someone to attend their court hearing that takes place at the detention center. In some hearings, for example, there was no one in the courtroom other than the judge, prosecution, defense attorney if the detainee has one, and the detainee. Having a family member or friend present is a show of support from the community and lets the court know the person is not alone. Also, if family members couldn't be present, the letter writing project sometimes meant speaking with their family members and passing along or relaying information to them. One man worried about his access to HIV medication if he was deported. Other men feared that if they were deported back to their birthplace that they would be killed because of their political beliefs or other aspects of their identity, including their sexual orientation.

In responding to some of these cases, student organizers from SWER assisted in crafting and sharing petitions about detainees and contacting the media. For example, in July 2015, Nina Agrawal, a reporter for the local NPR station (WRLN) received permission to bring in a camera and recording equipment, and ICE officials gave consent forms to detainees for an interview, three of whom were people we had been visiting for several months. There was much concern about the consent forms, because at Krome, signing something can have great significance, including agreeing to one's own deportation. The men signed the forms after analyzing them closely, but right before the interview, two of the men were suddenly released who had been held for several months. Therefore, the men were not interviewed, because they were freed from Krome. The power of the press or going public gave them freedom; their stories were no longer invisible. At the interview, several ICE officials, including the director of Krome, greeted us in the lobby. NPR was able to interview two detainees, including

a man profiled in the story who was being deported to Brazil after living in the States for twenty years.

Arranging such media visits is a bureaucratic challenge, and so student organizers and I drafted petitions for other men, including those requesting asylum from Bangladesh and Ethiopia who waited sometimes years in the detention center for a decision on their case. For example, in January 2017, Abdul was released after being incarcerated for fifteen months. We had created a petition for him, telephoned ICE, and connected him to a pro-bono attorney. However, the work of student organizers shaped this letter writing project into something different than many traditional prison literacy efforts. The rhetorical and advocacy work of student organizers in assisting people who are imprisoned in detention centers shows a sophisticated use of media. Such campaigns often require publicizing a case so that people can speak out and pressure ICE and/or their elected representatives to act. This letter writing project was shaped, then, by the work of student organizers and found a connection with our writing center and other interested student groups on campus.

Conclusion

Making visible what the public sphere has made invisible may be a guiding principle for such advocacy work. Instead of being in the shadows, people gain a power through using a public voice. Doing so is difficult, particularly when confronting a neoliberal system of incarceration that profits off of immigrants being behind bars. In addition, neoliberal policies are often fueled by the fear of the unknown, creating a perpetual sense of crisis and threats with the rhetoric of elected leaders demonizing immigrants as invaders.

Such work raises questions about community writing projects. Writing partnerships can be effective in showing support of a group and engaging in an educational initiative like teaching a class or conducting a writing center inside a prison. At the same time, though, such partnerships can be limited and sometimes not permitted by a system that incarcerates and exploits immigrants. As Shannon Carter, Deborah Mutnick, Stephen Parks, and Jessica Pauszek comment in *Writing Democracy: The Political Turn in and Beyond the Trump Era*, “[c]ommunity engagement work—despite the best of intentions—too often underscores the problem of supporting social justice movements absent a critique of systemic inequality, escalating state repression and surveillance, and a rapacious market indifferent to human suffering” (13). A writing project connected to a detention center, then, is encountering a system of mass incarceration that exploits immigrants. Community writing becomes less of an opportunity for participants to become “better” writers. Instead, this kind of community writing combined with advocacy has goals that extend beyond our disciplinary boundaries. Letter writing is being guided by community organizers who enact campaigns to challenge deportations. In addition, letter writing can be a way to share contact information of the law school and other pro-bono attorneys that can help navigate this system. Such work pushes us to think beyond our discipline and recognize writing as one tool for community organizing. By foregrounding student voices, the

writing classroom and center become spaces where students can have a conversation and engage with projects that focus also on organizing rather than just volunteering.

Not all campaigns and petitions succeed, as seen with Wally's case. In addition, some letters didn't lead to an activist campaign, because there wasn't enough time before the person was deported. At one point, the hotline was suspended. These institutional barriers are increased even more by anti-immigrant policies passed by the Trump administration and the suspension of in-person visitation during the coronavirus pandemic. Although petitions and media campaigns continue to be tools for challenging incarceration, organizers continue to adapt their tactics and strategies. For example, in 2019 *The Infiltrators* received premiers in various film festivals across the country, including Sundance. As the film about how undocumented people organized within a detention center gained notoriety, one of the detainees who helped the youth organizers inside Broward Detention Center, Claudio, was deported to Argentina shortly after the premier. Such an act by ICE shows the complex and dangerous landscape of immigration in the United States seven years after the action at Broward. Publicity and rhetorical advocacy work can make such a big difference in helping to stop deportations; however, the anti-immigrant system continues to marginalize and exploit people and strategies must adapt as more change is needed. As García Hernández comments, "The United States should shut down its immigration prison system. The federal government should redirect the billions of dollars it spends jailing migrants—\$2.7 billion alone in 2017 for ICE's detention system—to helping them navigate the labyrinthine legal process."

If universities and writing programs/centers can engage in community organizing initiatives, we can challenge a system of incarceration that exploits people. This work moves us beyond the prison visiting room metaphor of public discourse and engages with different ways of participating in the public sphere. Advocacy groups like Dreamactivist.org and United We Dream can be good places to learn about immigrant rights campaigns, including END campaigns. However, on our own campuses, there may be student groups that can connect directly with the writing center and classroom. In addition, this work connects with our mission as educators too. This kind of work can represent university community engagement that challenges incarceration. For instance, the night that Abdul was released, he walked down the isolated road from the detention center, and when picked up, he asked if he could see FIU. He had heard talk about FIU for several months through visits and letters. That night he was released was rainy, but we drove around the campus and looked at some key buildings, and he commented on the beauty of the campus. We saw the giant palm trees lining the front entrance, the towering library at the center of campus, and all the new buildings built on this place that was once an airport. After gaining freedom and joining his family in the northeast, Abdul plans to attend college.

Appendix A

Petition:

Please stop the deportation of Wally, a father who wants to take care of his 11 year-old son.

Wally is currently being held in the Krome Detention Center in Miami.

Wally came to this country for a better life. In 1990, Wally left Guanajuato, Mexico when he was 14 years old. He earned his GED and studied air conditioning repair at Manatee Technical Institute in Bradenton, Florida. He has worked in construction. He is a Christian and a member of Vida Nueva Church in Bradenton.

Wally has spent 14 months in two different detention centers and fears he will be deported soon. Wally has no criminal record. The only reason he is being detained is because he overstayed his visa and then re-entered the country four times to be with his son.

Because of the psychological stress of his father being away, Wally's son has gotten sick. Missing his father has affected his son's schoolwork and mental health. He even wrote a letter to the deportation officer asking for help to bring his father home. He goes to sleep at night wanting to see his father again.

In February 2012, Wally was arrested at his house in Bradenton, Florida because he was undocumented. And the last time he saw his son was July 24, 2012.

Wally says that the reason he keeps coming back to the United States is to be with his son. He crossed the desert in Texas, near Brownsville, and spent 4 days and 4 nights trying to get back to his 11 year-old. Wally nearly died from lack of water and exhaustion.

Wally wants to become a civil engineer like his brother and father. His son is a U.S. citizen. His brother is a U.S. citizen. Give Wally a chance to be with his son.

Take action: SIGN the petition and call ICE @ 202-732-3000 or 202-732-3100!

Sample Script: *"Hi, I was calling to ask that ICE stop the deportation of Wally: A#XXXXXXXXXX. Wally has been living in the U.S. since 1990 and has an 11 year-old son. Please don't deport Wally!"*

Appendix B

Good Morning everyone,

A family needs your help!

Wally came to this Country when he was 14 years old. Harvey, Wally's 11 year old U.S. Citizen has become sick waiting for his father who has spent the past 14 months at a detention center. Please help us bring back Wally back to his son!

You can take action by:

1) Calling ICE and asking for Wally to be released and be reunited with his son for the holidays.

Numbers to call:

Acting Director, John Sandweg **(202) 732-3000**

AND

Assistant Field Office Director (Detention): Conrad C. Agagan

Assistant Field Office Director Line: **(407) 440-5100**

Script:

"Hi, My name is _____ I am calling to ask that ICE stop the deportation of Wally: (A#XXXXXXXXXX). Wally has been living in the U.S. since 1990 and has an 11 year-old son who needs his father Please don't deport Wally and let him spend the Holidays with his 11 year old son.

2) Posting his picture and script through social media to get the word out.

Hastags: #Not1More #ENDOurPain #StopICE

*Picture attached below

We Thank you for your support!

Appendix C

Spanish Sample First Letter

El 14 de agosto, 2014

XXXXXXXX (A#XXX-XXX-XXX)

Estimado Señor XXXXXXXX ,

Le escribo para mandarle un saludo. Siento mucho que se encuentre en esta situación tan difícil. No soy un abogado. Soy un voluntario para el grupo, “Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees.”

Cada semana, nosotros (con “Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees”) visitamos a los hombres en Krome. Para hacer esto, se necesitaría que usted diera permiso y firmara la lista para aprobar visitantes que Krome le provee (“Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees”). La lista está en tu pod (donde tú vivas).

Si quisiera, “Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees” provee una línea telefónica en la cual usted se puede comunicar con una amistad o familiar. Es gratis y el número es *9233. También, usted puede escribir una carta a mi dirección..

Le deseamos lo mejor.

Atentamente,

English Sample First Letter

August 8, 2014

Dear XXXX (A#: XXX-XXX-XXX),

Hello. My name is _____. I am not a lawyer, but I am a volunteer for the group, “Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees.”

Each week, we visit men in Krome. If you would like for us to visit you, please sign our visitation list. The list is in your pod.

Also, we have a free hotline (*9233) that you can call to leave messages or to connect with family members and friends. The phone call does not cost you anything.

I hope things improve for you, and I hope to talk to you soon.

Sincerely,

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