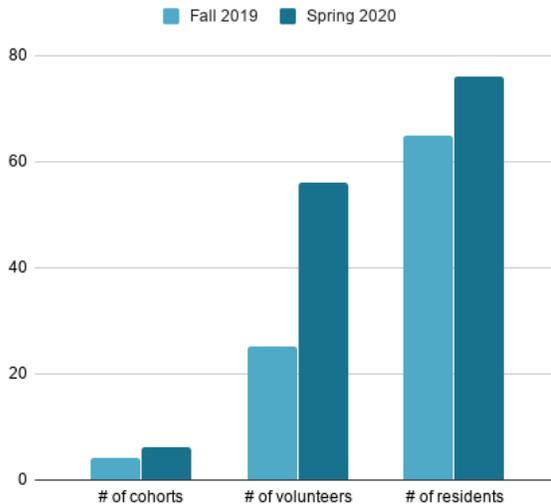




# Spring 2020 Impact Report

Writers in Residence teaches creative writing to youth who are incarcerated in jails and prisons; fosters a genuine, long-lasting relationship with our residents; and frees their voices through the distribution and showcase of their creative writing in our published chapbooks shared with the community.



## Impact Statement

The Prison Policy Initiative reported 2,200 youth incarcerated in Ohio's jails and prisons. Most of our community partners at juvenile facilities indicated that many of their volunteers who mentor the youth are adults.

Writers in Residence's student volunteers peer-mentor the youth through weekly creative writing workshops by closely relating in age. "We find it particularly noteworthy that mentored youth often have benefited in more than one broad area of their development (e.g., social and academic)" (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, Valentine, 2011). This proximity in age allows our residents and student volunteers to foster a genuine, long-lasting relationship that improves their social behaviors and academic performances.

This Spring 2020 Impact Report only highlights Writers in Residence's impact on our student volunteers because of COVID-19. However, Writers in Residence's impact on our student volunteers and residents exponentially increases as we expand and develop more cohorts across Ohio. Along with fulfilling our mission, we will also continue to educate our student volunteers about the criminal justice system. Despite the pandemic that suspended our program halfway, we still recorded 630 direct service hours compared to 440 direct service hours in the fall of 2019. The Independent Sector estimated that a volunteer's worth in 2019 was \$25.43 per hour, which calculates to a \$16,000 evaluation from our student volunteers' direct service.

“ I had a really enjoyable, cheerful and rewarding time working with the residents. They were for the most part friendly, jovial, and connecting with them - especially ones that took a little time to get through to - was very powerful to see and be a part of.

— Student Volunteer, John Carroll University

— Student Volunteer, Hiram College

WIR gives the opportunity for college students and incarcerated youth to connect, realizing the things that connect us as humans, and learning from the things that make us different.

“ Without a doubt, the residents we worked with and their accompanying stories and responses were extremely meaningful to me, and helped me reevaluate my own life each week.

— Student Volunteer, John Carroll University

— Student Volunteer, College of Wooster

I learned a lot about my biases and worldview that have shaped my life and are very different from those of the residents.

We took these quotes above directly from a survey administered to our student volunteers. The quotes reflect Writers in Residence's impact on our student volunteers by providing them with an opportunity:

- To foster relationships with a marginalized population.
- To reflect on systemic issues of race, education, geography, and socioeconomic background.
- To cultivate empathy for human beings deserving dignity and justice.

100% of our student volunteers that completed the survey strongly agreed and agreed that the creative writing workshops impacted them, which affirms that Writers in Residence educates and transforms our student volunteers to be mentors and advocates for our residents through creative writing workshops.

A student volunteer from Oberlin College echoes the benefit of our program as "a unique opportunity to try and positively impact the lives of incarcerated youth through creative expression." They continue: "The residents of these facilities not only benefit from the coaching on writing, but the interactions they have with volunteers who are close to them in age, but often have lived very different lives. Ideally, it shows them that they possess the tools to make a change in their life by allowing them to express themselves, and demonstrating the value of their expression to them."

## Testimonies

"My first semester, I made a quick and strong bond with a writer. Every week he'd ask me if I'd be coming back next week, and every week I told him, "Where the f\*\*\* else would I be?" We got to be really close. He wasn't always keen on participating, but I did my best to remind him of what he already knew: that he's a writer at heart, and a good one. One week, he didn't enter with the other residents. When I asked about him, they told me he was "shipped," transferred to another facility for some less than ideal behavior. The whole situation reminded me of the fragility of any relationship. A lot of what happens to us is not dictated by our preferences. That's a lesson I learned the hard way."

– Student Volunteer, John Carroll University

"I learned that all of the residents have dealt with intense trauma in their lives—it's not just a statistic that you hear, it's the truth. However, I also learned that they all have the capacity to learn and reflect and grow, and many of them genuinely want to do those things. I learned that the juvenile justice system is deeply flawed and honestly feels incredibly dehumanizing to me. It broke my heart that one resident, every week asked us, 'what's the weather like?' not because of small talk, but because he hadn't been outside since coming to JDC. Even though there are regulations in place to keep the residents safe and healthy, they are often at the mercy of the guards. . . . It makes absolutely zero sense to me that in a time when we should be teaching these kids responsibility, we are giving them absolutely zero control over their lives."

– Student Volunteer, Hiram College

"During a session a while back, an individual who is normally in our cohort did not show up. We found out a few moments later that he had attempted suicide. A session, that was supposed to be lighthearted and comical, fell deathly silent as the tears of residents and John Carroll students alike started falling upon the table. As the leader of the Cohort, I had no idea what I was called to do in this moment. I felt so uncomfortable and indulged in a deep sadness myself. At first I wanted to do the session immediately to redirect, but then I thought that that wouldn't validate our sufferings. I often find myself trying to fill up places of silence. Ultimately though, I allowed myself to sit in the un-comfortability, and simply be present with each person in our group. It was so difficult to surrender my responsibility to God, but I learned so much in that moment about the deep necessity to sit in the silence and recognize one another's sadness. The individual is now home with his family and has been working so hard. I am so proud of him. In this particular moment, I watched as suffering transcended our divisions and solidarity built us back up again."

– Student Volunteer, John Carroll University

## Goals for Fall 2020



Education



Training



Facilitation

To maintain our successful impact on our student volunteers this fall, Writers in Residence intends to adapt and implement three changes to our operations: more education, interactive trainings, and updated facilitation techniques for remote programming.

We want our student volunteers to learn more about the criminal justice system before service. Our student volunteers will also be trained to facilitate creative writing workshops with additional simulations and a standardized set of policies and procedures. Finally, Writers in Residence will prepare student volunteers for remote creative writing workshops, which will result in more direct engagement with the residents than before.

Read the results of our Spring 2020 Student Volunteer Survey by clicking [here!](#)