

## WNC JAIL PROJECT – PROJECT NARRATIVE

The Western North Carolina (WNC) jail project was inspired by the collaborative research between two Western Carolina University faculty members. (Ellern, Gillian (Jill) D, & Mason, Karen, “Library Services to Inmates in the Rural County Jails in Western North Carolina” *North Carolina Libraries* v 71, no 1, 2013). <http://www.ncl.ecu.edu/index.php/NCL/article/view/365/478>.) The subject of this study was better suited to Prof. Jill Ellern’s personal research agenda (outreach and community engagement scholarship in librarianship). After the article’s publication, she has been focused on working more in-depth with the public librarians in the WNC area to recognize the needs in the region’s jails. Her effort has helped motivate some innovative programming in the WNC public libraries that has improved the library services to inmates by focusing on adequate reading materials in the region’s detention centers.

The WNC jail project received a great deal of press by the local media in the past year including newspapers, radio, and posts on the NC State Library’s blog. A list of links to these press releases are available from Prof. Ellern’s blog “Books in Jails in Western North Carolina” at <http://jailswnc.wordpress.com/>. The blog contains a record of the partnerships progress and outcomes. The project’s work with Fontana Regional Library (Fontana RL) has just received the NC Public Library Directors Association (NCPLDA) Service Innovation Award which included a display of the program at their annual awards meeting.

The publicity gained by the project has helped create a bounty of local and state support to improve the materials in the region’s jails. A large amount of private book donations (550+) were received at Fontana RL in Sylva and more continues to come in. Fontana RL staff have committed many hours into cataloging the current collections in Macon and Jackson jails into an online web-based catalog at <http://LibraryThing.com>. This unlimited catalog account was donated to the project by the web company after learning about the use of the account.

Western’s students and faculty have also gotten involved with the WNC jail project. A criminal justice class did a service learning assignment and a film class did a class video for the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration on the project. A criminal justice faculty joined the group of librarians and reporters when they visited the jail in Haywood County making it possible to begun to form alliances and connections there that might benefit her students and teaching in the future.

Jail administrators and sheriffs have welcomed Prof. Ellern as she introduced them to their county’s public library staff as they toured the jails, often for the first time. Prof. Ellern has been most successful in helping to form partnerships between Macon and Jackson County Detention Centers and the Fontana Regional Library (Fontana RL) and between Haywood County Detention Center and the Haywood Public Library (HCPL). The detention centers have welcomed librarians and have given them full access to help them with their book collections.

So far, the publicity for WNC jail project has been able to get private donations of fiction and popular current non-fiction for Jackson and Macon jails. As predicted by the research, targeted non-fiction on subjects that might be a catalyst for inmate life improvements were not among the titles donated. Books on such topics such as education, life enrichment, literacy and resources for job seeking, as well as re-entry into society after being jailed, mental and physical health, and self-education were absent from the donations. Funding for addressing these needs have yet to be identified. However, progress

has begun by creating a bibliography of those items in a “wish list” in LibraryThing.com and an awareness by the public librarians in Fontana RL that we need to do more.

Plan of activities, objectives, and outcomes:

Prof. Ellern’s current objective in her research has been focused on working with Fontana RL in looking at grant possibilities; furthering the creation of a targeted bibliography of titles that might be of interest to outside funding groups for placement in the jail libraries; and to continue publicizing the successes of the project to the public, civil organizations and the library community. Grant funding has always been a part of her research goals, but it has been difficult to identify monies for this specialized underserved group (i.e. inmates or detention centers).

Prof. Ellern is requesting the assistance of graduate student to support the WNC jail project and money for a small targeted non-fiction collection to continue this work. The research assistant will help to publicize the work of the WNC jail project presentations and communications to potential granting groups and to begin studying how these targeted books are used by the inmates and the libraries.

The duties of a Graduate student would include:

- Helping to identify potential granting agencies
  - Local and state businesses’ grants (for example, there might be some community grant possibilities from the nations chain stores, civic service groups, etc.)
  - More in-depth searching into grant databases and resources
  - Talk with NC State Library about other funding ideas
  - Communicating with potential donors
- Assisting the librarians on writing the grants for sustained funding
  - Collecting statistics and demographics on the project for those grant proposals and presentations
- Expanding the current wish list of titles covering the targeted non-fiction needs
- Purchasing books on the wish list
- Set up the parameters for studying the use of targeted books in the jails
- Working with Fontana RL librarians and the Hunter Library librarians to get the purchased and donated books in the online catalog in LibraryThing.
- Assisting on the presentations for future library conferences

The WNC jail project is a good example of how scholarship by a university faculty member can engage the community into actions that have direct benefit to the citizens of their region. That is the goal of an engaged university. In conclusion, it is appropriate to quote the original research that started this project that was published in the *North Carolina Libraries* article cited above, “These collections could do so much more to provide much needed opportunities to enhance the lives of these citizens and help them to use their time in jail more productively. If we value reading and literacy and recognize the importance of reading for a healthy community, we owe it to ourselves to provide these citizens with more substantial reading materials than these jails currently provide.”

Thank you for considering this proposal for this award.