The Prison Creative Arts Project of the University of Michigan

MISSION STATEMENT
The Prison Creative Arts Project of the University of Michigan is committed to original work in the arts in Michigan correctional facilities. Our purpose is to enhance creative opportunities for inmates and to bring them the benefits and skills that come with each art. We attempt to provide the best possible and most positive programs and we work closely with each facility to ensure that this happens.

The Theater Workshops:
Into the theater spaces that our presence makes possible we bring complete respect for everyone involved, we bring a full belief in the ability of everyone to work together and create a play, and we bring a strategy of discovery, using warm-ups, games, exercises, improvisations, and discussion to arrive mutually at the stories that are told through theater. We build our plays through improvisation (a method of figuring out plot, character, and themes together and developing them as we go). Original music sometimes accompanies the plays. By participating in the workshop, the inmates gain skills in the conceptualizing, dialogue, casting, and blocking of a play, and they gain skills in working together, in creating ideas and images and putting them
together, and in speaking publicly before an audience. And the attention and praise of the audience, as well as the week by week growth in their ability to perform and work together, add to each participant’s sense of his or her own possibilities. The themes vary considerably, but nearly every play centers on efforts to reestablish and form communities and reconstitute families, and on the effort of prisoners to have successful lives when they return to their communities; these plays often reflect the hard realities many prisoners have known, and they reflect the search for solutions, solutions which the actors consciously offer to their peers in performances. This reconstitution of community and family reflects both the desires of incarcerated people and the close-knit process of creation that leads to the plays.

The Art Workshops:

In the art workshops we create an environment in which participants can learn technical skills and create works which are personally meaningful. We bring in as much reference material as we can to provide examples and inspiration. This includes books, magazines, and hand-outs on topics such as perspective, drawing the head, and color-mixing. We work with a combination of structure and individual exploration. There are lessons on such things as color, portraiture, and shading. Also each participant is encouraged to work on their own individual project. Often these projects are inspired by the material we bring in. Sometimes an inmate comes in with a specific project and we work with him, discovering what skills and additional knowledge would be helpful.

The art workshops provide an environment that is conducive for both private introspection and shared appreciation of each other’s work. We have seen wonderful examples of progress in artistic growth, and many of the artists from our workshops have participated in our Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners at the University of Michigan.

The Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners:

We understand this exhibition not only as a quality exhibition for the Ann Arbor and larger community, but as an event that breaks stereotypes and demystifies prisoners, revealing their talents, their perspectives, and their rich range of themes. We understand it as an annual event that encour-
ages men and women in prison to develop their abilities as artists, and so in selecting the art our goal is inclusion without sacrificing quality. We also understand the exhibition as an event that connects two separated groups in the Michigan community. Visitors to the gallery encounter the work of the artists and biographical statements by the artists, and at the opening reception they meet both family members of the artists and volunteers who have interacted with the artists in the prison setting. The artists have more limited encounters with those outside prison: they receive a video tape of the opening reception which includes speeches, crowd shots, and images of each of the works on exhibition; they also receive copies of fliers and reviews and a copy of all the comments in the visitors’ book; they often correspond with members of the team preparing the exhibition.

**The Creative Writing Workshops:**

We bring the same respect, belief, and process of discovery to the creative writing workshops. In these workshops, participants learn to develop their creativity and skill as writers, they learn to deepen their thinking and knowledge through writing about what they know, they learn to give and take honest and supportive criticism, and they learn to read aloud with the clarity and drama that can hold an audience. The revision and fine honing of their work and performance of readings held in the facility at the end of the workshop, which bring attention and praise, add to each participant’s sense of their own possibilities.

**The Dance Workshops:**

We bring the same respect, belief, and process of discovery to the dance workshops. In these workshops, working closely with trained dancers from the University of Michigan Department of Dance, the participants learn to appreciate the range of their bodies’ abilities to move, they learn to work together to choreograph original dance pieces accompanied by traditional, modern, or original music and sound or accompanied by the reading of poetry or creative prose. They learn to give and take supportive criticism, they learn the virtues of rehearsal and repetition, they learn to stretch themselves. And the act of refining a work until it can be performed along with the act of performance and the applause it receives, adds to each participant’s sense of their own possibilities.
Training and Responsibility:

The student volunteers who come through the courses of Buzz Alexander and Janie Paul and other volunteers who work with us must interview to be in our courses or to work with us, they are carefully screened, and they are carefully trained. Our orientations on campus rival facility orientations in their strictness about rules and regulations and appropriate behavior at the facility. We work with complete respect for institution rules, needs, and personnel. We regard that as essential. Before our volunteers go to a facility for the first time, not only have they received an orientation at the facility, but they have received several weeks of training and grounding from us. Every volunteer who works with us must meet on a weekly basis to discuss the workshop and to receive supervision, either from Alexander or Paul or from other volunteers who have worked for a considerable period in the prisons.

We also maintain close links with the facility staff to whom we are responsible. We maintain a spirit of friendliness, respect, and cooperation with corrections officers, recreation, athletic, religious, and special activities staff, and with assistant deputy wardens, deputy wardens, and wardens. Our work is open and positive, and we are responsive to any queries or requests for documentation a facility may ask of us. We are proud of our work and of our collaboration with each facility, and we do everything we can to enhance and improve that work and that collaboration.
Because the official mission statement that Dan Bolden demanded in 1999 didn't get at the heart of our work, we developed our own mission statement and list of core values during the summer of 2000. It was ratified by the full membership that fall and now appears in our brochure and other documents.

**Mission Statement**

The Prison Creative Art Project’s mission is to collaborate with incarcerated adults, incarcerated youth, and urban youth to strengthen our community through creative expression.

**Our Core Values**

We believe that everyone has the capacity to create art. Art is necessary for individual and societal growth, connection, and survival. It should be accessible to everyone. The values that guide our process are respect; collaboration in which vulnerability, risk, and improvisation lead to discovery; and resilience, persistence, patience, love, and laughter. We are joined with others in the struggle for social justice, and we make possible spaces in and from which the voices and visions of the incarcerated can be expressed.
**PCAP Statement of Commitment and Understanding (draft)**  
**(Summer 1999)**

1. **More than workshops**

I understand that I am not merely joining PCAP in order to do a workshop in the arts in a prison or other institution. I understand that much more is involved.

2. **Social justice**

I understand that PCAP is an organization whose vision is based on a commitment to social justice. PCAP members are hurt, offended, outraged by the massive incarceration of Americans, by the disproportionate incarceration of poor Americans and Americans of color, and by the profit-making that is tied to this.

3. **Strategy**

I understand that PCAP operates according to a particular value system, methodology, and strategy. We do not go into the workshops as teachers from above. We bring skills, exercises, and knowledge to our workshops, and we are able and eager to share these. But we do not dominate the workshops with our skills, exercises, and knowledge. We don't go with the purpose of implanting or “teaching” what we know. Our main purpose is to establish a space that is open, trusting, honest, respectful and exploratory, where those inside, including ourselves, can find out what it is we want to say through our art, music, dance, writing, and theater.

There are other viable strategies: classes can be taught in prisons, prisoners can be lectured to and examined, prisoners can be considered students and can be given texts and instructed on how to perform someone else’s play or to write in specific styles. But those aren’t our strategies. Those who prefer to use them should find other routes into the prisons.

4. **Supervision**

I understand that PCAP workshops are supervised. This supervision happens in the give and take of weekly PCAP meetings and in other planned
meetings. I understand that I am expected to attend PCAP meetings and that if those meetings happen the same time as my workshop, I and my partner will make arrangements to meet on a weekly basis with another member or members of PCAP.

I understand the importance of this supervision. Our work is sensitive and vulnerable. Much is at stake. If we fail to obey the rules and regulations at our sites, we may lose our workshop and PCAP workshops could be entirely closed down. We exist in a conservative climate and under a very conservative legislature which constantly takes rights and privileges away from prisoners and narrows their options for communication, growth and creativity. We must do everything we can not to make mistakes that the forces hostile to our workshops can seize upon. This takes vigilance, and we must be cautious, polite, grateful, non-confrontational. We need to talk with others in PCAP about our workshops so that others may hear us and pick up on vibes we may not be recognizing. We need to check in when we have a problem or when we are harassed or when we have made a mistake that could be problematic, so that we can get advice, support, and troubleshooting on our behalf. We cannot be out there alone doing our workshops: too many prisoners and incarcerated youth and their families are dependent upon our being in touch and knowing what we are doing. That is the bottom line.

I understand that if I do not participate in this mutual supervision, PCAP will no longer sponsor or take responsibility for my workshop and will notify the staff at my site that this is the case.

5. PCAP activities

I understand that PCAP has many activities. I understand that it has the goals of witnessing and speaking its experience and knowledge to the public and of demystifying prisons, prisoners, prisoner families and communities, and the economic forces behind American punishment and prison expansion. I understand that I am expected to assist where I can with activities beyond my own workshop.

6. PCAP relations

I understand that PCAP is an organization of collaborators and friends, that we support and back each other, that we engage with each other, that
we attend each other’s performances and presentations, that we celebrate each other and celebrate together, that we feed each other and find occasions to check in and relax and generally just plain party together.
Prison Creative Arts Project: Member Statement of Commitment and Expectations (Fall 1999)

As a member of PCAP and a workshop facilitator, I will:

- Establish a space that is open, trusting, exploratory, honest, and respectful in my workshop.
- Go in as a facilitator, not a teacher.
- Participate in mutual workshop supervision by attending weekly PCAP meetings or other regularly scheduled meetings.
- I will follow institution policy, including dress code policies, and manifest procedures.
- In the facility/school I will be cautious, polite, grateful and non-confrontational.
- I will communicate about my workshops. This includes its joy, but also when I have problems, when I am harassed, or when I have made a mistake.
- I will strive to be a member of the PCAP community. This includes celebrating together and supporting other people’s work.
- I will recognize when, for whatever reason, I am not meeting the expectation of a workshop facilitator, and I will actively seek solutions.
- I will maintain contact with my site liaison.
- I will attend all scheduled workshops at my site, except in cases where my absence has been discussed and agreed upon.

As a member of PCAP and a workshop facilitator, I can expect:

- Occasional “skills nights” to learn new games and exercises.
- A thorough orientation to working in a prison, juvenile detention center, or high school.
- A supportive community who will hear me when I need to talk about my workshops.
- A regular opportunity to problem solve with other workshop facilitators.
- An opportunity to discuss the larger personal and political issues underlying my work.
- Chances to engage in other PCAP activities beyond my workshop. These include: annual art exhibitions for prisoners and incarcerated youth, speaking engagements and planning and management.
**PCAP Structure and Policies**

**Executive Committee**

In the summer of 2000 we generated a proposal for an executive committee. Anna Clark, Pilar Horner, Ariella Kaufman, Kristen Ostenso, and Janie Paul were elected in September and became a vital, wonderfully contentious first committee. Administrator Jesse Jannetta and I as founder served as ex-officio members. Several years later, we began to hold staggered elections at the start of the fall, winter, and spring/summer terms in order to guarantee that we always have seasoned committee members.

The five elected members now have specific duties. Three are new member coordinator and trainer, Speakers Bureau coordinator, and coordinator of the bi-weekly full membership meetings. A fourth assists the administrator and edits the PCAP Weekly, an e-mail news letter which consists of updates, upcoming events and performances, reports on executive committee and full membership meetings, job opportunities, and articles and reports that are food for thought. The fifth meets with members proposing new projects—in 2008, for instance, the new annual *Review* of prisoner writing—and helps them think through the energy, resources, and timetable that are necessary.

We meet every second Wednesday. The first hour is a closed dinner meeting, which allows committee members to work efficiently and intimately and to deal with sensitive matters concerning members or sites. The second hour opens to all of PCAP (with shared dessert). In both hours we discuss proposals for new activities, new or evolving policies, ideas for the general PCAP meetings, and other business. Any major issue goes out to the entire body.

**General Meetings**

All members meet from 6:30 to 9 pm alternate Wednesdays. At the first meeting each semester we creatively introduce new members and hold elections. In the meetings that follow, two PCAP members lead a program from 6:30 to 8:00. We interact with a speaker or respond to a film, share creative ideas and exercises, discuss the implications of our work, seek ways of deepening our practice, and look at larger economic and political issues. In the
summer of 2008 we discussed a theme—the United States phenomenon of sentencing adolescent offenders to natural life.

From 8:00 to 9:00 we break into small groups of 4 to 6 teams which remain constant throughout the term, to talk about ongoing workshops, listen carefully to each other, and give advice. This is a continuation of the course team meetings and is essential. PCAP currently has 55 members. They come from the community or from the courses at different times and are together as a whole body only three hours a month. We work hard at communication, trust, and deepening relationships, but it is not easy. And so the intensive small group discussions are where rapport is most frequently developed. Any workshop can be a struggle, any facility can raise unexpected challenges, any team may fail to recognize what is happening. Each group has veteran members who can identify dangers and help a team move forward and who themselves are open to guidance.

And so the general meetings are mandatory. If someone misses two meetings, one or two members of their small group contact them and arrange to meet. If they miss three meetings, two members of the executive committee meet with them. The goal is to enable them to return to PCAP, to welcome and embrace them, not to castigate and purge. Recently an older member who had graduated from the MFA Program in Creative Writing and was working full time felt that the young members of PCAP had little to offer her. Three of her group members met with her, listened, urged her to think of herself as someone with a lot to offer to the membership. She came back, is now very engaged, and has taken on a new project which has everyone very excited.

If the absent member cannot attend or has a casual attitude toward the meetings, we ask them to leave PCAP. In these cases the workshop either closes—a situation we wish to avoid at all costs—or the other partner, permitted to go in alone for two sessions only, must find another partner. This policy constantly has to face new challenges.

**Other Policies**

You cannot join PCAP without our formal training. If you come in without the benefit of the courses, you receive a PCAP host and mentor and are required to shadow two other workshops before you begin. Your partner may not be another new member. When outside guests come to your
performance, you inform them about dress and behavior. If you have an incident, you immediately notify the PCAP leadership and, when appropriate, the authorities at the site. When you host formerly incarcerated youth (especially) and adults, no alcohol, no campus parties, and no identification of youth as formerly incarcerated. Because of the sensitivity of our work, we carefully review other organizations’ requests for endorsement for participation in their activities. We decide what publications we will appear in and have our own publication policy: we check in to be sure we haven’t jeopardized our work and haven’t been insensitive to the voices and experiences of the incarcerated. To avoid proliferation of group e-mail messages, information goes to the member in charge of the PCAP Weekly unless timing makes it necessary to get out a message immediately (and even then, we usually check in for approval).

All PCAP policies derive from our mission and values. The youth and adults we work with need us to be responsible. We have a high turnover of university students who have many needs, situations, and issues: they need us to stay on top of things. They need our structure to bring them opportunities for leadership, personal and group power, creativity, community, and growth. We are eager for input from members and from the incarcerated. Our policies are both set and welcoming, both firm and open to discussion and revision.

Note: Additional resources and supplemental materials are available at www.digitalculture.org/books/is-william-martinez-not-our-brother. Additional information on the Prison Creative Arts Project can be found at www.lsa.umich.edu/english/pcap.