

Southern Lit Alliance Internship
Chattanooga, TN

This summer I interned at the Southern Lit Alliance, gaining experience in marketing and social media and nonprofit management. The Southern Lit Alliance is a literacy based nonprofit serving the Chattanooga area that strives to bring the literary arts into the community.

Established in 1953, they host a variety of programs – from bringing writers in classrooms to hosting literary initiatives in local country jails to revitalizing the library at the local mental health hospital. They also work closely with the Fellowship of Southern Writers, acting as their umbrella organization and helping coordinate many of their programs. To boil it down, So Lit strives to bind together their community using the literary arts and creates spaces to celebrate the written word using unique outreach programs.

My duties as their intern varied from office tasks – making copies and stuffing envelopes – to crafting press materials and interacting with potential sponsors and community members. Day to day, it was my responsibility to run the So Lit social media accounts – Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. I had to create professional but attention grabbing posts that engaged our audience and also remained relevant to our brand. I also crafted blog posts for the Southern Lit Alliance blog to build transparency and gain traffic to our website. We were also preparing for the smART silent auction fundraiser, where they auction off art (both 2D and 3D) crafted by local artists. With smART, I worked with crafting ask letters and working through the kinks of Bidding for Good, their new online component that took donations from local businesses to auction off in a more traditional silent auction way.

Southern Lit Alliance gave me the opportunity to learn a range of skills that I hadn't even considered before. Going in, I assumed I would be doing a lot of office work and getting involved more with social networking (which I did), but I was also presented with the challenge of organizing volunteers and crafting press releases for our various events. Perhaps the most striking experiences I had within the organization were the ones where I was physically present for the event as opposed to being simply involved in planning. As part of our Revitalibrary Project, Southern Lit Alliance took on the challenge of redoing the library for the Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute in Chattanooga, one of three state mental health facilities in Tennessee. The library itself hadn't been updated since the 1980s and it served more for agitating allergies than it did as a service for the patients. Partnering with a few of the therapists there, we gathered a frankly unprecedented number of volunteers to clean up and clear out the space to make room for new and updated books. I was given the task to be So Lit's eyes and ears, coordinating the volunteers and organizing them during the event. Having never experienced a leadership role like that, I was somewhat hesitant, but ended up finding it incredibly rewarding and enjoyable. Instead of sitting back and watching, I found myself engaging with them and working together towards the goal, leading from the inside rather than as a supervisor. We were also able to meet much of the staff working there as well as a couple of the patients who have jobs involving the library and were able to work with them on how everything would be organized and put together. While much of their programming takes place during the spring and summer, I was able to make the connections between what we did in the office and how So Lit makes a difference for the Chattanooga community.

The experiences I had working with the Southern Lit Alliance taught me how working with a nonprofit happens on all levels. My supervisor was amazing in that she took me through

the meetings and through the actual programming, showing me how everything fit together to create this community resource. I was able to learn things both from instruction – my supervisor sitting with me and taking me through how Wix worked or how to send a mass email – to finding things on my own, like what sort of tweet gathers the most attention and how certain Facebook posts gain more attention than others. The importance of social media, I found, was incredible. The sheer amount of volunteers didn't come in until Facebook posts started being uploaded to the page. Conversely, for a virtual open mic we did, we didn't start getting poetry submissions until a mass email was sent to our So Lit mailing list. It was interesting to see how certain kinds of people respond to various kinds of content. Working with So Lit allowed me to begin to see those trends and to become very mindful of how social media works in today's world. There is a very deliberate and formulaic way to approach it – from a business standpoint – that runs the fine line between engaging and acting as pure advertisement.

I was also able to hone in on my technical writing, which was something I definitely felt that I lacked. Where I was confident in my academic writing, technical and professional writing styles seemed to elude me, and I constantly found myself staring down the barrel of the metaphorical gun when forced to write a proposal or professional sounding email. At So Lit, a large portion of my job was writing these professional emails and creating content to go out in newspapers or online publications. I was also able to gain more confidence in networking and meeting new people. Where I had been a little more shy and awkward before, I eventually got so used to constantly meeting new people (and a not inconsiderable amount of alumni) that a firm handshake and talking about my major (which was most people's question, if I was going to be a teacher, or not, as an English major) that it became like second nature. I've already noticed

changes in the way I approach talking to others, feeling more sure and able to come up with coherent and intelligent responses.

As for my own career goals, my time at So Lit has opened my eyes to the amazing career opportunities I do have. While most think of teacher when they hear English major, that's not the only possibility. The nonprofit work I did with So Lit was incredible, but I also found myself fascinated with the marketing aspects my work. Working in the field of marketing would be amazing and I'd love to continue finding ways to maximize creating both useful and interesting content for social media. While I may not have a specific career in mind yet, my work with Southern Lit Alliance has given me the avenues to explore as I continue my college experience.