Blurred Lines: Tying Recreational Reading to Research in an Academic Library

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Introduction

Listening to patrons' ideas for collection development is not a new practice, but it often focuses on books that students need for research or for class rather than their personal interests. An analysis of our text message service and the students' demand for popular literature spurred the idea to expand a small set of leased popular reading materials into a popular reading collection at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) and to integrate those readings into curricula and the academic setting in a meaningful way. "Listening" to what students asked for via text messages, we found that a large percentage of questions inquired about current, popular books and that we were largely unable to fill these requests without Interlibrary Loan. With this in mind, we applied for and were awarded a Back 2 Books grant from the Illinois State Library and Secretary of State for the purpose of increasing students' access to print materials for both pleasure and informative reading, as well as to encourage reading through engaging activities.[1]

While researching the grant, we read that 41% of high school graduates in Illinois are not prepared for college-level reading.[2] We also read, however, that providing students the opportunity to self-select reading materials for class could remedy the lack of college preparation and motivate reluctant readers.[3] We used the grant amount of $5,000 to purchase novels, graphic novels, and popular nonfiction titles to ultimately serve two purposes—satisfy those who have already developed a love of reading and inspire those who have not yet done so. We displayed and promoted the popular reading materials in the library to see if we could improve students' access to, use of, and interest in popular books.

College Students' Reading Habits

Do students enrolled in college and university courses read for pleasure? Some studies show that reading may be declining among this age group. In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) reported a statistically significant decline in literary reading in the 18-24 year-old range—a decrease of 17 percentage points from 60% in 1982 to 43% in 2002.[4] A 2006 survey of American freshmen indicated that more students reported spending zero time reading for pleasure than freshmen did in a similar 1993 survey.[5] The decline in reading for pleasure may be attributed to students' enrollment in college courses. A 2009 longitudinal data set showed that 31.8% of graduating seniors surveyed spent no time reading for pleasure in a typical week in the past year compared to only 18.6% of that cohort as freshmen.[6] The NEA also reported in 2007 that those in the 18-24 year-old range read fewer books not required for school or work.[7]

There is evidence, however, that reading for pleasure is one way college students spend their time. The 2008 NEA findings showed a turnaround

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with this age bracket increasing its reading more than any other age group so that there were 3.4 million additional readers.[8] Even the studies that point to declining trends show signs of reading behavior. In the 2006 survey mentioned previously, 81.3% of female students and 68.5% of male students read for pleasure at least a little in a week.[9] The 2009 survey mentioned previously showed that 63.3% of graduating seniors and 71.4% of them as freshmen read anywhere from less than an hour to five hours per week.[10]

Students' interest in reading might be more relevant to academic librarians than students' actual reading behaviors. A 2011 study at a small, private liberal arts college found that 93% of students enjoy reading but find it hard to do so because of required course reading and the desire to socialize and spend time in other ways.[11] Students responded that it would help if libraries provided larger popular reading collections, more displays, recommended book lists, and possibly even incentives for reading.[12] In addition, some students joked that librarians could tell professors to lessen the coursework load.[13]

A mixed methods study at a Southwestern public liberal arts university found that on average students spent 4.24 hours a week on extracurricular reading.[14] The researchers, when interviewing education students, found that their interest in reading increased due to their instructor's influence.[15] They concluded that students benefit from mentoring with regard to reading and that infusing reading into the classroom motivates students.[16] In addition, professors of pre-service teachers can model the behaviors that help instill a love of reading so that their students can then pass that on to the children they teach.[17]

Academic Librarians' Reading Promotion

Several librarians have written about their experiences monitoring reading habits on campus and testing new services to increase reading interests and behaviors. Prompted by low reading behaviors ascertained by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), librarians at the University of Dayton started a Porch Reads program in partnership with the university's Department of Residence Education.[18] Incentives, such as free books and the opportunity to discuss them in informal settings, enticed those already interested in reading.[19] As part of strategic planning to engage students, the Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries created a book swap service, a "Book Happenings" bulletin board to highlight programs and services, and a summer reading program.[20] The Cuyahoga Community College Library partnered with the local public library to create a popular reading collection that was housed on campus but was largely supported and maintained by the public library.[21]

Elitism, Curriculum Concerns, and Other Barriers

Several barriers hinder or even prevent academic libraries from offering popular reading programs and services. A survey of academic library directors and deans found the following to be major impediments (in order of prevalence): budget constraints, staff constraints, perception of lack of student interest, and a belief that extracurricular reading does not fit the library's mission.[22] This perception that popular reading detracts from the mission of the academic library reduces the opportunities available to engage students with the library and to create lifelong learners instead of "just-for-my-coursers."

A large body of research shows a connection between reading and academic achievement, critical thinking, and improved literacy.[23] Promoting reading and providing access to popular materials supports student success but with benefits that extend beyond their time at the university. We wanted to bring the worlds of popular reading and academics together to show how they can interconnect to further students' lifelong learning. Helping students select and access reading materials for both personal and academic purposes could then encourage them to become regular users of libraries before and after graduation.

Connecting Popular Reading to Scholarship

Academic librarians can blur the lines between recreational reading and research using several approaches, from passive to much more active. Passive methods, such as book displays and readers' advisory, require planning but tend to allow students to engage with the services on their own time. Active methods that include book clubs or embedded instruction, on the other hand, require more extensive coordinating. Teens who regularly visited public libraries before attending college may have encountered passive programming, including readers' advisory, because young adult librarians have used these methods to engage them in novel ways in recent years.[24] Since we were piloting our popular reading collection, we focused on passive methods with plans to build up to more active programs in the future.

Selecting Materials

Librarians may feel daunted by selecting popular materials if they think in terms of the difference between these items and subject-specific materials required for the curriculum; however, they may follow the advice of public library selectors and rely on user and staff recommendations.[25] Wanting to select materials based on user needs and a wide range of interests, we first reviewed chat and text message transcripts to identify titles users have already requested. Next, we set up a suggestion box—and a bowl of candy—at our reference desk to solicit student input. We discussed possible purchases with students as we intercepted them asking about popular reading materials at the Information Desk, at campus events, and during library instruction classes. For example, during a library instruction session for freshmen researching genetically modified foods, we collected students' input on books they would like to read on this topic and other food-related topics. Students appreciated follow-up e-mails when items they chose were then added to the collection.

Displaying Materials Physically and Online

The ability to bring scholarship and recreational reading together through physical and online displays of-fers a wide range of creative possibilities. Librarians can arrange physical displays both in the library and around campus. We ordered several display units and placed them near a seating area directly behind the Information Desk on the first floor. We also watched for campus events that related to our collection. For example, we brought books related to cooking and DIY projects to display at the student center for Campus Sustainability Day to engage in conversation with students. We used tangible methods to promote online displays and research guides by leaving flyers, bookmarks, or other promotional materials with the display or within each book.

We created a "Popular Reading @ SIUE" Lib-Guide to showcase items online and to link students to read-a-likes, review sources, bestseller lists, and other reading tools. Each week, we highlighted three top picks—a fiction, nonfiction, and graphic novel title. We perused the subject headings for each title to pinpoint related books that we could then link students directly to in the catalog. For example, when we chose *The Walking Dead Compendium* as an August top pick, we provided a link to a search for "zombies" in the catalog. The search linked to many scholarly books, including some that related to neuroscience, folklore, film narratives, history, and sexuality. These scholarly titles can be displayed with the popular items, thereby offering passive readers' advisory that relates to scholarship and the curriculum. Another idea would be to display zombie fiction and scholarly titles in September for Disaster Planning Month and feature the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Zombie Preparedness project.[26]

Implementing Other Passive Methods

Librarians can incorporate passive programs into existing library services, events, and programs in order to save time and money. For example, we mixed popular reading in with the promotion of scholarly materials during our annual Open House. While most tables promoted databases, research guides, and other academic content, we incorporated one table dedicated to "Fun Stuff." On a table next to our popular

reading collection, we offered blind dates with a book to encourage students to choose titles they may not have considered before.[27] This common public library program was successful enough that we could expand this idea into a social gathering combined with more blind date book options for a Valentine's Day event.

Another passive method of promoting popular reading is to include it in pre-existing instruction sessions. During information literacy courses where students often have difficulty choosing topics, we illustrate the process of searching with an example based on a strong interest in a particular book or TV series. We show how to take that topic and expand it to an academic focus. Besides making topic selection less daunting, this has increased student interest in the popular reading material. One student commented when asked about the most helpful part of the library instruction, "How to look up books. I didn't know that college libraries had fun books to read for leisure. I thought they only had research books that were a snooze fest. Good stuff."

We also use Facebook to promote both popular and scholarly reading. We post a "This Day in History" entry and highlight a historical event and related books; when possible, we incorporate popular reading posts, such as the release date of *Game of Thrones*. Students value social networking sites as tools to communicate with others and to search for information; however, their use of these sites competes with time spent reading for academics and pleasure.[28] Librarians can help bridge this gap by using social media as a tool for readers' advisory and passive programming. Posing questions about current reads, linking to reading lists, or asking students to share "shelfies" (pictures of or with their favorite books or bookshelf) could stimulate ideas for student reading.[29] Librarians can host a Facebook book club, choosing a title and sparking conversation from all followers, or simply encourage students to do this on their own.

Taking an Active Approach

Active programming requires more planning, investment of resources, and possibly buy-in from faculty.

We hope to organize book clubs, including a Major Discussions book club. Led by students and faculty within a particular major each month, it would invite students from other majors to learn more about a topic they may not have thought about before. Example topics might include the philosophy behind a popular TV show and climate change fiction (cli fi). Other possibilities for active programming include movie/book tie-in programs or those related to other campus events, including art shows, job fairs, community gardens, etc.

A future worthwhile endeavor would be to work with faculty in assigning popular reading—fiction or nonfiction—in their courses. While this often occurs naturally in the humanities, it is not so widespread in the sciences, pre-professional majors, and other disciplines. Students in nursing, education, exercise science, and other pre-professional majors report reading less for pleasure than do humanities majors, and they are more likely to report they have enough reading for class.[30] Thus, infusing more reading into these types of courses would increase reading—and its associated benefits—among these students and provide them more time to read. A nursing instructor who also struggled with too little time in lectures incorporated 10 minute readings from children's books in her courses, a technique that aided students' memory, reminded them about the importance of humanity to their profession, and inspired them to become great nurses.[31]

Several other instructors have written about the benefits of assigning additional books beyond the typical textbook in their courses. Assigning Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* and Sandra Steingraber's *Living Downstream: A Scientist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment* in organic chemistry courses helped students' apply course content to real life, learn how to structure an argument, and increase their enthusiasm about their studies.[32] Pairing Dean Hamer's *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes* with a scaled-down version of the study described in the book increased nonmajors' understanding and

interest in genetics.[33] The use of manga in biochemistry courses enhanced students' memory of the course content and captured students' interest.[34] Instructors who incorporate extracurricular reading into the curriculum benefit from more engaged students, the engaged students benefit with increased learning, and librarians benefit by having the opportunity to work with all involved to select books and related activities to encourage reading as a lifelong learning behavior.

Assessing Efforts

To assess our pilot project, we considered three outcomes: that SIUE undergraduate students would have increased access to popular reading materials, that they would increase their use of popular reading materials, and that they would increase their interest in recreational reading. We added 373 books to our collection that we displayed in a visible area on the first floor. Due to this expanded collection, we had an additional 211 checkouts in five months. The books were not added all at once, so checkouts may have been higher had all materials been available from the beginning. Assessing students' interest levels was more difficult because we relied on surveys linked from bookmarks and few students opted to take the survey. The survey results and anecdotal evidence suggests that students did read more now that the popular collection was so readily available. Comments included "I'm glad there are finally some fictional books that are being encouraged," "Sometimes purchasing new books is difficult, especially on a student budget, and having them available at the University library makes reading more accessible," and "Love, love, love the new addition of the best sellers! They are readily available and easy to access."

Due to previous studies in the literature indicating student preference for novels over popular nonfiction or non-major academic books, we were surprised to find that the 90 nonfiction books we purchased had 61 (29%) checkouts. Some titles with a four-week checkout period, including Steven Johnson's *Ghost map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic--And How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World*, Susannah Cahalan's *Brain on Fire: My Month of Madness*, and Malala Yousafzai's *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* circulated three times in the five months. Subject liaisons with collection development responsibilities may want to consider purchasing popular nonfiction titles that will draw readers in and engage them in subject matter they can apply to their personal and professional lives. Experimenting with displays and read-a-likes could also draw more interest.

Conclusion

By blurring the lines between recreational reading and research, academic librarians can attempt to increase students' critical thinking, college preparedness in reading, reading behavior, and the likelihood of continued use of libraries beyond graduation. In addition, academic libraries can more precisely meet the needs of their wide range of patrons--whether they are heavy or reluctant readers or somewhere in between and whether or not they need to overcome barriers to read more.

Luckily, supporting reading on campus can be a flexible process using either passive or active measures and ranging in resource requirements. Librarians who take the effort to investigate students' preferences, experiment with new services, pursue a mix of ideas, and work closely with instructors will find satisfaction in knowing they did their part to encourage reading as an enjoyable and transformative lifelong learning pursuit.

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