

Building a “Town and Gown” Collaborative Partnership to Promote Diversity and Literacy: A University Library’s Involvement in the National African American Read-In Chain Literacy Initiative

Grace Jackson-Brown

Introduction

This paper describes a successful partnership of academic librarians working with persons from within the university and from outside to build a collaborative team to promote diversity and literacy. The team, consisting of representatives from five institutional partners—Missouri State University, Drury University, the Springfield-Greene County Library District, the Springfield Public Schools, and the local chapter of the NAACP—launched an inaugural city-wide African American Read-In celebration in February 2010 in Springfield, Missouri, and sponsored related pre-events during autumn 2009. The former can be described a “town and gown” united effort to promote diversity and literacy within the community at large.

The historical origin of the term “town and gown” is summarized by scholars Lawrence L. Martin, Hayden Smith, and Wende Phillips, this way,

In the United States hostility toward universities was initially born out of geographical isolation. Universities were often located in rural (frequently remote) areas far removed from the economic and social problems of the broader society. Universities promoted themselves as elite bastions of information

and knowledge. Professors and students attired in their academic gowns were as distinct from town folk as university campuses were from surrounding architecture. This separation is captured in the often invoked expression ‘town and gown.’¹

The disposition of some American colleges and universities began to change in 1862 with the passage of the Morrill Act and the establishment of land grant colleges that were required to conduct some public service in exchange for federal aid. Missouri State University originated first as a teachers’ college that was founded in 1905, and has grown into the large, comprehensive university with a student FTE of about 23,000 that it is today. In 1995, the Missouri legislature recognized MSU’s role in teaching, research and service as distinguished by a statewide public affairs mission.

Nationwide, by the mid-twentieth century, relations between many American universities and local surrounding communities became more congenial as more colleges and universities began to embrace a civic engagement philosophy.² Likewise, as the years progressed, more academic libraries and librarians began to recognize the benefits of collaboration with school and public libraries in the education of children and

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the recruitment of young people into colleges, as well as their later matriculation from colleges and universities.³

The African American Read-In (AARI) is a national initiative that was founded in 1989 by the black caucus of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) to promote literacy and black authors (<http://www.ncte.org/actio/aari>). The NCTE upholds a pedagogical philosophy that sees literacy education as a process of teaching students to read, to write, and to think critically (<http://www.readwritethink.org>). The black caucus of the NCTE supports the same philosophy and has also developed an outreach initiative that combines a campaign for literacy with a component of diversity education. For the last 22 years, more than a million readers from across the United States have gathered together to read the works of African American authors during AARI celebrations held in February, which coincides with Black History Month. The read-in has been held collaboratively with some college and university entities, but it has been more widely held in elementary and secondary schools, and public libraries, and sometimes in churches, civic and recreational centers, and even in private homes.

Organizers for the 2010 Springfield AARI and their supporters sought to encourage the reading of African American literature as a beneficial community enterprise for the city's youth and the general population as a whole. The Springfield AARI established for itself two goals: 1) To promote black authors, and 2) To build a community of readers.

Overview of the Project

I, the author of this paper, was the participant/project leader of the collaborative partnership that organized the Springfield AARI in 2009–2010. I believe MSU, my parent institution, supported me in this capacity because of its strong commitment to its public affairs mission. In my role as Chairperson of the Springfield AARI, I recruited a steering committee or team of about ten persons from other institutions who were committed to the ideas of the city-wide AARI and who worked collaboratively to make it happen.

Scholarly literature covering academic librarian partnerships with local public libraries or school libraries and other community entities is sparse. However, in one of the scholarly articles on the topic, Tina Schneider observes that interactions between academic libraries with their surrounding communities is of-

ten based on three factors: whether a need is expressed from outside the academy, whether the academic library sees its mission as an invitation to pursue an action on its own accord, and whether the academic library constructs a form of outreach in response to a specific problem or need.⁴ All three factors were present in the development of the Springfield AARI.

The MSU Libraries have a history of dedicated involvement in literacy programs for children and youth. The MSU library faculty members have been involved in assisting in or providing leadership for such programs as 1) The Children's Literature Festival, a locally originated program that brings together hundreds of fourth through eighth grade students with children's book authors for small group presentations and autograph sessions during a one-day event; 2) The national Big Read program; and, 3) The Mark Twain Award and other Missouri reading award programs for K–12.

The AARI literacy initiative has been celebrated in Springfield, Missouri and the surrounding area in small isolated spots such as a middle school in Springfield and in another Green county middle school in a neighboring town named Willard, both of which are in predominately white school districts. Based on the AARI National Report Card that is published annually on the World Wide Web, in 2009 and 2010 the AARI in Missouri was mainly celebrated in school districts with more diverse student bodies and in metropolitan school districts in cities such as St. Louis and Kansas City, Missouri. Why, then, is it a significant positive development that communities such as Springfield and Willard celebrate AARI?

Through reading persons learn about other peoples and cultures. African American children and youth who live in an area where they are a minority can build a stronger ethnic cultural identity, and build stronger self-esteem through exposure to positive images of African Americans in books. Communities as a whole can learn by reading the stories, fiction and nonfiction, that show the perspectives and legacies of African Americans to the building and shaping of American society.

Reading and writing are active behaviors that foster learning. Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, authors of a classic work titled *How to Read a Book*, make an analogous reference to the role of a writer of a book to the sender of a communication and to the reader as the intended receiver of the com-

munication. They then compare the role of writers of books to that of batters or pitchers and the role of readers of books to that of catchers or fielders in the game of baseball.

Catching the ball is just as much an activity as pitching or hitting it. The pitcher or batter is the *sender* in the sense that his activity initiates the motion of the ball. The catcher or fielder is the *receiver* in the sense that his activity terminates it. Both are active, though the activities are different. If anything is passive, it is the ball. It is the inert thing that is put in motion or stopped, whereas the players are active, moving to pitch, hit, or catch.⁵

Results of the Springfield AARIC, 2009–2010

The Springfield AARI actions followed principles of collaboration and team building outlined in library literature, e.g., see the American College and Research Libraries (ACRL) “Collaboration Bibliography,” <http://www.ala.org/mgrps/divs/acrl/issues/info-lit/bibliographies/collaboration.cfm>

Collaboration is described by author Toni Buzzo, in her book *The Collaborative Imperative: Librarians and Faculty Working Together in an Information Universe*, this way,

In collaboration, the partners have a prolonged and interdependent relationship. They share goals, have carefully defined roles in the process and plan comprehensively.⁶

The Springfield AARI received funding support from each of its five organizational or institutional partners that covered program expenses. The Springfield AARI partners agreed not only to sponsor community read-in events that were educational and generally open to the public, with certain age parameters when appropriate, but also to offer these events with no admission charges. Through funding from the five Springfield AARI partners the two pre-events in the autumn of 2009 and the two-day celebration in February 2010 featured multiple guest presenters, as well as librarians, teachers, and volunteer assistants working together to promote literacy and diversity.

Publicity for the AARI events contained the logos of all five co-sponsors or partners. During the planning phase of the AARI in 2009–2010, a Facebook fan

page was started. AARIC audiences were generated by the AARI steering committee and their respective institutions. For instance, the AARI worked closely with the public school system’s Language Arts Curriculum Program Office and the school district’s Diversity Office to distribute information about upcoming events in the schools. Some AARI event participation was garnered through distribution of information in the city’s traditional news media outlets (newspapers, radio, and television) as a result of the work of one AARIC steering committee member who served as publicity chairperson.

One of the MSU partner offices, the Office of Multicultural Programming and Student Diversity, provided college student volunteers to assist with registration tables at pre-events and with other areas as needed. Some student volunteers agreed to be readers along side high school poetry readers and other performers during the AARI finale Poetry Reading Performance. The MSU Libraries provided the venue for the pre-events in the main university library, and the library staff supported this undertaking, which opened the doors of the library to children, teens, and their families thereby giving them a positive experience on a college campus in an academic library. During the two-day AARI celebration in February, events were held at various locations throughout the city. One of the AARI project steering committee members, a university education professor, led some of her students in providing an interactive storytime for children and their families at a city homeless shelter. Also, during the two-day celebration in February, the librarians at twelve public library branches provided reading and other cultural events for children and persons of all ages. In addition, one of the larger public libraries served as the host for the finale AARI Poetry Reading Performance that featured stage presenters from high schools, colleges, and community adult mentors.

Approximately 90 persons, primarily local community children and youth, participated in the two pre-events of the AARI, A Young Writer’s Workshop for middle school youth led by award-winning author Patricia McKissack on October, 17, 2009 and a storytelling session and book signing by Master Storyteller and new author Gladys Gaines Coggsell on November, 15 2009. Qualitative evaluation surveys were distributed at both pre-events; however, completing the evaluations was done on a voluntary ba-

sis. An announcement was made at the end of each pre-event program asking and urging participants to fill out the evaluation forms that they had been given. Headcounts were made at the beginning of each of the pre-event programs for attendance, but that number fluctuated over the duration of the pre-event programs so total number of participants at each program is listed as an approximation. The attendance or number of participants was approximately 40 persons at the Young Writer's Workshop, but the number of returned evaluations was 26 (65 percent). The number of participants or attendees at the Book Talk/Storytelling and Book Signing was slightly higher than the first pre-event (approximately 50 persons), but the number of returned evaluation forms was less (21 or 45 percent returned evaluation forms). Nonetheless, feedback from the evaluations at both pre-events was overwhelmingly very positive (See Appendix A and Appendix B).

The evaluation forms used in the two pre-events were different and asked different questions. But there was one question that was similar on both evaluation forms that demonstrates the extremely high level of satisfaction that the attendees or participants had in the programs. The participants of the Young Writer's Workshop were asked "if the workshop is offered in the future" would you "recommend to ...friends," and all those who answered the questionnaire unanimously said "yes." The 21 evaluation respondents of the Book Talk/Storytelling and Book Signing event were asked "Would you recommend this program to friends or family," and all of them said "yes," except one who gave no answer.

Attendance during the finale AARI events held on February 21 and February 22, 2010 numbered more than 350 persons. No questionnaires were distributed during the two-day celebration events on February 21 and 22, 2010, but documentation from media and co-sponsor partners after the final events was extremely positive. (See Appendix C for the finale news story titled "Rhythm in the Words, with Meter and Volume, with Humor and Sorrow, African-American Poetry Draws a Diverse Crowd").

Conclusion and Recommendations

One major reason that the Springfield AARI was such a great success was because it was truly a collaborative effort. The AARI Steering Committee was made up of representatives from key segments of the university

and local town communities who could draw upon a particular target group or audience that was desired. The number of representatives, approximately two from each of the five partner institutions or organizations for a total steering committee of about ten was manageable and not unwieldy. Each of the members of the steering committee chose or accepted a responsibility over an area or tasks for which they were particularly adept. The steering committee members also had a pool of people who they could call upon to assist them. As Project Director my major responsibilities were coordination and communication. I coordinated the actions of the committee once the overall goals and objectives of the Springfield AARI were agreed upon. And concurrently, I kept communication constant and ongoing throughout the process between committee members and among committee members.

Programming, such as the projects of the Springfield AARI, requires resources of people, time, and money. The Springfield AARI in 2009–2010 was fortunate to have sufficient quantities of all three types of resources. In the tough, recessionary times that we are now experiencing in the United States it will be difficult to tap into the three areas needed because budgets are thin and librarians of all types, as well as faculty members at universities and colleges, and teachers and other personnel in elementary and secondary schools are being asked to do more with less time, staffing, and money. Nonetheless, it's more probable that librarians can accomplish the literacy and educational goals that we desire, and in many cases that we are required or mandated to do, if librarians across the spectrum of types of libraries—school, public, college and universities—pull together and work more collaboratively.

Notes

1. Lawrence L. Martin, Hayden Smith and Wende Phillips, "Bridging 'Town & Gown' Through Innovative University-Community Partnerships," *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, 10, no. 2 (2005) 3.
2. Loomis Mayfield, "Town and Gown in America: Some Historical and Institutional Issues of the Engaged University," *Education for Health*, 14, no. 2 (2001) 231–240.
3. Jo Ann Carr and Ilene F. Rockman, "Information-Literacy Collaboration: A Shared Responsibility, Academic Librarians Must Work With Their K-12 Colleagues in Enabling Students to Succeed in College," *American Libraries* 34(2003) 52–55; Kathryn Tvaruzka, "Warning: Children in

the Library! Welcoming Children and Families into the Academic Library, *Education Libraries*, 32, no. 2 (2009) 21–26.

4. Tina Schneider, “Outreach: Why, How and Who? Academic Libraries and Their Involvement in the Community,” *Reference Librarian*, 39, no. 82 (2003) 199–213.

5. Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* (New York: A Touchstone Book, Simon and Schuster, 1972) 5.

6. Toni Buzzo, *The Collaboration Handbook* (Columbus, Ohio: Linworth Publishing, 2008) 30.

Appendix A

Evaluation — Young Writers’ Workshop

Featuring Patricia McKissack — Oct. 17, 2009

Total Number of Participants = 40 approximately

Total Number of evaluations = 26

Optional Information Given:

Males = 4

Females = 22

High School/Middle School = 14 5th& 6th Grade = 6 College Student = 1 Teachers or Parents = 3

Race: Black = 5 White = 15 White & Black = 1 Hispanic = 2 American Indian = 1 2 = no answer

1. What is your impression about the time and length of the workshop?

Just right = 18

Too Long = 4

Too Short = 4

Sample Comments:

- “Its nice time limit not too long and not too short, I think you got great information in that length of time”
- “It was good; I didn’t even know time was passing”
- “I thought the time & length were good. I wish there was more time.”
- “My impression is speaker’s vigorous voice and she introduces her writing experiences”
- “Just enough time, very good workshop, parents seem to enjoy it also”
- “Good amount of time for the author to say everything she has to share, but perhaps a bit too long for the younger kids.”
- “Just right for kids; but I wish we were coming back for a part 2 afternoon”
- “I’ve been touched! The two hours flew by.”
- “Long—but worth it”
- “I think it was a pretty good length. Maybe more time to share our stories and ask questions”
- “The time was just about right. Maybe 30 minutes more could be used for questions and comments.”
- It was very good—I could have listened to Patricia McKissack for much longer!
- “It was very worth it”

2. Tell us what you like best about the workshop. (summarizations)

- The stories that she read and storytelling = 18
- Explanations of writing technique = 10
- General ideas she shared = 9
- Refreshments = 1

3. Tell us what you liked the least about the workshop. (sample comments)

- “The time was longer than I thought”
- “I think it would be all of us having to sit in the 3 front rows”
- “Talking about fiction”
- “I liked it all”

- “Speaker introduces her three books”
- “The cold temp of the room”
- “One or two readings of her stories were good for examples, but three was too many”
- “I liked it all”
- “Not enough interaction”
- “I didn’t like that the donuts were cold”

4. Tell us what you would like to see improved about this workshop. (all comments)

- “Let us read our stories”
- “More people need to come to these types of things”
- “I would like to see more people coming even though you can’t help the outcome of showed up it would be cool to see more people.”
- “More time on non-fiction”
- “Maybe some talk about poetry”
- “More visual and physical activities”
- “More time and interaction one-on-one talking with the author”
- “I think there should have been more things we could have done to improve our writing skills, like the verb exercise.”
- “More time to close would have been helpful to both the author and students”
- “Time to read poems”
- “The interaction time, more of it”
- “More people”

5. If this workshop is offered in the future, I would...

Attend as long as I’m qualified, yes = 26 no = none

Recommend to my friends, yes = 26 no = none

6. What is your overall impression of the workshop? (all comments)

- “Very fun”
- “I liked it a lot”
- “I loved it”
- “That it was wonderful and very interesting”
- “It was fun and very educational”
- “I liked it very much”
- “Speaker is beautiful voice to introduce her books”
- “I loved the workshop. I brought my two boys out to learn more about writing and reading. Something else besides sitting in front of the TV. I want my boys to continue to read and enjoy reading also. I was glad to offer my children something besides sports!”
- “How much we learned from it”
- “I was very impressed. Ms. McKissack is a wonderful speaker with a lot of wisdom to share. Thank you for the opportunity.”
- “I thought it was a wonderful workshop”
- “Inspiring!”
- “Terrific!”
- “I think that over all it was really good”
- “Good”
- “Very interesting and helpful for young writers”
- “It was very pleasant and I learned a lot”
- “I really enjoyed it, and it inspired me to write more.”

- “This workshop gave me a new perspective on writing and how to make characters and settings fit.”
- “It was very helpful”
- “Wonderful”
- “Very cool”
- “I loved it...broader look at African American authors [successful]”
- “I enjoyed it. I liked how Patricia shared things about her life, childhood, and herself.”
- “... Very helpful; I learned a lot of things that could help me in my future writings.”

Appendix B

Program Evaluation for Book Talk/Book Signing – Stories from the Heart

Presenter: Gladys Cogswell

November 15, 2009

Total Number of Participants = 50 approximately

Total Number of Evaluations = 21

Program Met Expectations:

Excellent = 12 Good= 6 Satisfactory = 1 Fair= 1 Poor=1

Program Content:

Excellent= 15 Good= 3 Satisfactory= 2 Fair= 1 Poor=

Ability of presenter to communicate content:

Excellent= 16 Good= 3 Satisfactory= 1 Fair= 1 Poor=

Area in which program was held:

Excellent= 13 Good= 6 Satisfactory= 1 Fair= Poor=

Convenience of program day/time:

Excellent= 8 Good= 11 Satisfactory= 1 Fair= Poor=

Overall how would you rate the program?

Excellent= 12 Good= 8 Satisfactory= Fair= Poor= One no answer

If you answered “poor” or “fair” to any of the above please indicate your reasons:

It just didn’t get me, I don’t hear too well and could have used some amplification

Would you recommend this program to friends or family?

Yes= 20 No One no answer

How did you hear about this program?

KSMU, I heard a great storyteller and a great program, MSU staff member, church announcement, library email, home school email, through church and flyers, NAACP, longtime friend and Springfield newspaper, newspaper, newspaper and grandmother, newspaper, newspaper, newspaper, radio, a friend, multicultural leadership program, MSU Multicultural Student Services, classroom

What changes, if any, would you make to the program?

Longer, not one thing, nothing because it was excellent, none, I wouldn't make any changes, consider a location that is easier to get to and with better parking or public access, could you make this a weeklong or weekend workshop, loved the stories from childhood and would have liked more, make easier for older folks to hear, tell a few more stories, excellent as it is

Do you have any suggestions for future programs?

I hope we have another one, more intimate setting, I wouldn't make any changes, more than one storyteller, indicate if it's appropriate for adults and/or children, It is very necessary to preserve cultural background of blacks and whites, more folklore, invite her (Gladys Coggsell) back

Additional Comments:

- It was a great program
- It was fun coming to this and I hope to come again next time
- Nice audience
- Wonderful stories! Thank you so much
- Very informational, I learned a lot
- I love Gladys! Bring her back more often—she's incredible!
- I enjoyed the presentation; would enjoy reading the book
- Would like to have heard Mrs. Coggsell tell more of her childhood stories
- This program was without a doubt an excellent opportunity

Appendix C "Rhythm in the Words" Final News Story



Rhythm in the words

With meter and volume, with humor and sorrow, African-American poetry draws a diverse crowd

By Kathryn Wall
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There may have been one or two seats left open at Monday night's African-American poetry reading at the Springfield Library Center — but just one or two.

The reading, titled "The Rhythm is Keeping Us Alive" and part of the national African-American Read-In, drew people of all ages, races and backgrounds.

More than 100 audience members packed the library auditorium for the event, which didn't follow normal library rules. It

was rhythmic and at times loud, by turns humorous and sorrowful.

The performances sought to sum up African-American history, not just with the words, but with the emotion of the events described.

"In terms of the collection we came up with, it has sort of a movement as well," said Jon Herbert, director of the event and instructor of theater arts and dance at Ozarks Technical Community College. "I think it's a pretty good representation of

See Poetry, Page 3A

Poetry/Reading draws diverse crowd

Continued from Page 1A

African-American poetry, from the beginning to now." Poems came from a mix of local poets, famous names and young hopefuls.

The reading had a rhythm of its own. It started slow and serene, with three songs performed by Alexander Kofi. The first was mostly a drum beat.

"It's used when someone is fighting and you don't even know why they're fighting anymore," Kofi said of the Nigerian tribal song. "It's to rush out negative energy so new energy can come in."

A collection of readers, sometimes speaking in unison, read more than 49 poems from authors ranging from Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes to local, young artists like Tausha Burton and Dallas Duncan.

Topics skipped from a new take on the story of

creation to love to abortion to fear.

Some of the poems drew cheers, some "amens," and others merely a nod.

One of the poems that received a strong response was "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" written by Gil Scott-Heron.

The poem discussed how the images often televised and attributed to a revolution are not where revolutions start or how change happens.

"The revolution will not be televised. There will be no highlights on the 11 o'clock news," Herbert read.

Another poem, "Strange Fruit" by Abel Meeropol, described the sight of a hanging:

"Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,

"For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,

"For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,

"Here is a strange and bitter crop," read Christine



Alexander Kofi plays a drum while singing a Nigerian song during "The Rhythm is Keeping Us Alive - A Celebration of African-American Poetry" at the Library Center on Monday.

NATHAN PAPES
NEWS-LEADER

Photo gallery: View additional images from Monday's event at the Library Center.

Peoples.

The event was part of a string of performances and events from Feb. 20 through 23 as part of a nation-wide read-in.

Last year, Drury University had a single event at one middle school in the

area, but collaboration with Missouri State University, The Springfield-Greene County Library District, the NAACP Springfield Branch and Springfield Public Schools allowed for the larger, public event.