

# Capturing your Community: Partnering with Local Booksellers for Collection Development and Events

*Emily Anne Hamstra*

## Abstract

In the past few years, libraries have focused their attention on creating library spaces similar to those found in bookstores, yet they have rarely explored the collaborative opportunities provided by local independent bookstores. When librarians at a large academic institution partnered with a local independent bookstore, they invested in their local economy and provided a model of collaboration that supports collection development and events programming.

Leisure reading collections are common among academic library collections, especially as libraries adopt bookstore models for space, design, and service. College and university libraries are quickly catching on to what bookstores do well for service provision and space. When the Shapiro Undergraduate Library at the University of Michigan created a new space for students to study and collaborate, it seemed fitting that the leisure collection should be moved to this new space to create a bookstore atmosphere. As librarians began planning to grow the leisure reading collection, local booksellers were called in to lend their expertise. Local booksellers have made a business of knowing what the community is reading and or not reading. The survival of their businesses depends on their attention to literary trends. The library found that partnering with a local, independent bookstore allows an academic library to build a vibrant leisure reading collection and opens the door to dynamic programming opportunities, while investing in the local economy.

## Literature Review

For over a decade, libraries have kept a close eye on trends in bookstores. A fiery series of articles in the late 1990s stirred debates as to why students were choosing to study at mega-bookstores instead of their college libraries. The most compelling of these articles is Renee Feinberg's "B & N: The New College Library?" Feinberg interviews students studying at Barnes and Noble Stores about why they choose to study there. One student said, "To me, the library says, 'focused research.'" This same student was able to write his paper using books he found on the shelves at Barnes and Noble.<sup>1</sup> Other students comment that their libraries were "too academic" and aesthetically unappealing. One student describes her library as "clinical" and "sterile." Another student comments that he came to Barnes and Noble to explore books for his non-academic interests.<sup>2</sup> Feinberg writes, "The book stock, no matter how wonderfully presented with fresh copies, book jackets, and convenient shelving, certainly falls short of a library collection." She later adds, "We must recognize that our students are savvy customers. We will lose our audience if we continue to frustrate them and fail to provide information in a timely manner."<sup>3</sup> Libraries need to balance providing what students want with what the students need to complete their academic work.

Some libraries have explored working with bookstores for collection development. The University of New Mexico worked with a local bookseller to cre-

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*Emily Anne Hamstra is Learning Librarian at Shapiro Undergraduate Library, University of Michigan, e-mail: ehamstra@umich.edu*

ate a special New Mexico Collection. This collection included authors from New Mexico, as well as books set in the state.<sup>4</sup> Librarians Joiner and Lewis realized that their local bookseller, Tasha Mackler of Tasha's Paperback Books, was particularly immersed in the local literary scene, and would be able to provide the library with both popular and uncommon titles. Joiner and Lewis provide an honest account of working with a local bookseller, including the mechanics of the collection development plan for the New Mexico collection, and the payment. Joiner and Lewis recommend thoroughly explaining the limits of your collection before partnering with a bookseller for collection development, as well as plainly explaining the structure of the business side of a large academic library.<sup>5</sup>

Librarians at Colorado Christian University and Marshall University have experimented with purchasing materials from bookstores for their collections. In both cases librarians made trips to the bookstores to select materials. In the article "Out of the Box and Into the Bookstore: Non-Traditional Use of the Bookstore" Gray and Brantz explain the advantages and disadvantages of using a chain bookstore for collection development at Colorado Christian and Marshall Universities. Advantages include paging through a book before making a purchasing decision, a shorter time period between when the book is purchased and when the book appears on the shelf, and discounts comparable to those of book jobbers.<sup>6</sup> Colorado Christian University found an additional advantage when they included faculty in their buying trips.<sup>7</sup> They found the main disadvantage to be that "bookstores are not designed to deal with the volume of requests and all the requirements that libraries place on their book vendors."<sup>8</sup>

Libraries have partnered with bookstores not only for collection, but for events as well. Western Kentucky University partnered with their neighboring Barnes & Noble to create the innovative program "Faraway Places." The program, sponsored by the Western Kentucky University Library, was a speaker series where the speaker presented on research conducted in a particular location.<sup>9</sup> The program brought together the community and the university community, while encouraging sales at the store and a positive public image for the library.<sup>10</sup> Illinois State University has partnered with a local bookstore during Banned Books Week, for readings of banned books at the bookstore. The bookstore approached the library about the idea

for cosponsoring the Banned Books Week event after selling books at library events for many years. The bookstore and the ISU library now cosponsor author visits to the library.<sup>11</sup>

Many bookstores have benefitted from partnering with libraries for events. The article "Bookstores and Libraries Working Together" in *Bookselling this Week* provides numerous examples of independent booksellers partnering with public libraries. The bookstore Skylight Books partners with a Los Angeles Public Library branch to sell books at author events. In return, Skylight Books "allows customers to purchase books for the library at a ten percent discount." Susan Fox of Red Fox Books in Glen Falls, New York often partners with her public library as well. "Any time we have an event we think is bigger than our store," Fox said, "Red Fox teams up with the library, which has room for more attendees." Red Fox Books sells books at the event. The article recommends that booksellers get to know local librarians in effort to explore partnerships. Fox comments, "It's really just getting to know the individual or a couple of people."<sup>12</sup>

By partnering with independent booksellers rather than chain booksellers, libraries make an important investment in their communities. The Liveable City report prepared by Civic Economics lays out the financial impact of an independent bookstore and an independent music store versus a chain bookstore in Austin, Texas. Throughout the report, Civic Economics compares the impact BookPeople, an independent bookstore and Waterloo, an independent music store, have on the Austin economy compared the chain bookstore Borders. Independently owned businesses do not report to a national headquarters, and are more likely to leverage the strengths of the community. BookPeople is apt to carry books by Austin writers, while Waterloo is apt to carry albums by Austin artists. Civic Economics found, "National chain stores stock few such items." Having no national headquarters also means that the independent stores are able to keep more of their profits in the community by buying from local artists, advertising locally, and hiring people who live in the area. The people who work in these stores live and shop in Austin.<sup>13</sup> Civic Economics reports that if residents of Austin spent one hundred dollars at Borders, thirteen dollars would stay in the local economy, nine of these dollars accounting for employee earnings. If residents of Austin spent one hundred dollars at either BookPeo-

ple or Waterloo, forty-five dollars remain in the local economy, with as much as thirty dollars accounting for employee earnings.<sup>14</sup> When libraries partner with independent bookstores for collection development and events, they have an opportunity to make a significant investment in their local economy.

### Beginning a Partnership

In 2006 a small group of librarians met to envision changes for the University of Michigan Shapiro Undergraduate Library collection. One of these recommendations included working with a local bookseller to purchase non-textbook books commonly used in courses for the collection. This recommendation came to realization in 2008 when the Shapiro Undergraduate Library underwent a small renovation to create a more community-oriented space for students to learn and collaborate together. The Browsing Collection, the library's leisure reading collection, was given a new home in this space with plans for expansion. Instead of working with a local bookstore to acquire course related books, it was decided a bookstore would be well suited to help the library expand the Browsing Collection.

The Undergraduate Library reached out to an independent bookseller near campus. The bookseller was eager to assist in creating a leisure reading collection for the library. He worked with the librarians to create subject-based sections for the Browsing Collection. The subject-based sections helped to promote a bookstore atmosphere in the space. New shelving and signs were purchased, and books were shelved by these subject-based sections to encourage easy browsing. The majority of these books were paperbacks, so students could easily be drawn to a book by a cover and a publisher's description. Bookstands were also purchased to create eye-catching displays. The bookseller quickly transformed the collection by providing books on topics of interest to undergraduates, and many bestsellers. However, the bookstore supplying the books went out of business, and the library was unable to continue to partnership after the first few shipments of books.

In the fall of 2009, the librarians at the University of Michigan reached out to another independent bookseller in Ann Arbor; Nicola's Books. As an Undergraduate Learning Librarian leading collection development efforts for the Browsing Collection, the Undergraduate Library Director asked me to take the

lead role in working with Nicola's Books for the collection. The Undergraduate Library Director, myself, and the University Library's Director of Programming and Community Engagement met with Nicola Rooney at Nicola's Books to talk about purchasing materials for the Browsing Collection from Nicola's Books, and partnering with the store for events. This meeting was the beginning of an exciting partnership.

### Partnering for Collection development

The Shapiro Undergraduate Library had a small leisure reading collection for over a decade, maintained largely through lease programs, purchases made through vendors, and trips made by librarians to a nearby chain bookstore. Librarians began to worry that the books received through the lease programs and vendor purchases were not meeting the leisure interest of undergraduates. Local independent booksellers have helped the Undergraduate Library grow and revive the collection.

To set up guidelines for collection development with Nicola's Books, we were clear about the scope of the Browsing Collection. The Browsing Collection consists of fifteen subject-based sections:

- Test guides, Scholarships, and Careers
- Cooking, Crafts, and Hobbies
- Travel
- History, Current Events, and Social Studies
- Science and Math
- Psychology
- Religion and Philosophy
- Audio Fiction
- Audio Non-Fiction
- Media, Music, and the Arts
- Graphic Novels
- Literature, Drama, and Poetry
- Mystery and Suspense
- Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror
- Romance

The Browsing Collection is located in a high traffic area of the Undergraduate Library, and therefore aimed mainly at undergraduate students. The materials for the Browsing Collection are selected with the undergraduate user in mind, though it is understood the collection circulates to graduate students, faculty, and staff as well. The goal and purpose of the collection is to support learning and exploration outside of the academic classroom. Materials in this collection encourage students to explore new ideas, prepare for

a career, cook a meal, or to take a break from their studies.

To begin, I determined in consultation with Nicola's Books staff the Undergraduate Library would receive 50–75 trade paperback titles monthly. The majority of the books in the Browsing Collection are trade paperbacks. Early in the process, Nicola's Books staff made it clear the Shapiro Undergraduate Library would be given a twenty percent discount on all orders. To select titles for the collection, I work closely with Nicola's Books staff. Nicola's Books staff pulls together a list of fiction and non-fiction trade paperback titles that fit within the categories of the Browsing Collection. The fiction list is generated by publication date, and is generally the longer of the two lists. The non-fiction list is limited to books that would be interesting to undergraduates. The reason for the selectivity of the non-fiction list is both the amount of non-fiction published, and higher circulation rates of fiction among the undergraduate population. The combined fiction and non-fiction lists, containing anywhere from 200–500 book titles is faxed to the Undergraduate Library. I go through the lists, reading reviews from Amazon.com, *Publishers Weekly*, and IndieBound.org to select a total of 50 to 75 titles for the Browsing Collection. I also check the library catalog to make sure the book is not already in the Browsing Collection. Going through the list is time consuming, but assures that the library does not receive any books that are duplicates or outside the scope of the collection. When I am finished going through the list, I fax the lists back to Nicola's Books.

Nicola's Books then adds mass market paperbacks to the order, selecting those books on approval for the library. The library receives mass market paperback novels in each of the genre fiction sections, for a total of twenty mass market fiction paperbacks monthly. Each month the library receives books in several genres: Romance, Mystery and Suspense, Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror. These paperbacks favor urban fiction, crime, suspense and thrillers, science fiction, paranormal romance, and romance. Nicola's Books staff include novels that are selling well in the store, novels by popular authors, and novels part of bestselling series. Novels excluded from the approval are cozy mysteries, novels from more obscure series or series the library would not collect in whole or could not stand alone, and other novels that would not fit the interest of undergraduate students.

The Undergraduate Library also places special orders for books for the Browsing Collection. These orders are placed on the Nicola's Books website. Orders are placed once or twice a month. To avoid confusion and keep contacts consistent, I am the only librarian who places these orders. These orders are often recommendations from library staff and students, hardcover bestsellers, or other books of special interest. Placing orders for books online allows the library to order bestselling hardcover books and to get the books on the shelf more quickly than if the books were purchased from a vendor.

The library receives one shipment of books monthly from Nicola's Books. The books from the faxed list, the mass market paperbacks, and the website orders all arrive at the library at the same time. This allows for less confusion for the ordering, receiving, and technical services departments, and Nicola's Books. When all books for the Browsing Collection arrive at the same time, they can all be processed and labeled at the same time. The Browsing Collection orders are smaller than the orders ordering, receiving, and technical services are used to, and often contain more irregular items such as mass market paperbacks, hardcover books that are to keep their dust jackets when they go out to the shelf, and graphic novels. The normal workflow of these departments is slightly disrupted by Browsing Collection order, so it helps immensely to keep these books together through cataloging and labeling. In addition to cataloging and labeling, one invoice per month makes the financial transaction easier for both the library and Nicola's Books.

### Partnering for Events

In the fall of 2009, Nicola's Books also began to partner with the University of Michigan Library for events. For this portion of the partnership, Nicola's Books staff work mainly with the library's Director of Programming and Community Engagement. Nicola's Books began selling books at the many events held at the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library. These events included University of Michigan Press authors, authors brought to campus by the University of Michigan Library, and other special events. When speaking at library, many local authors have asked the library that Nicola's Books be allowed to sell books at the event. The University of Michigan Library has begun to invite other bookstores to sell books at library events as well. The library cycles through the area

bookstores, allowing each store a turn at the events.<sup>15</sup> This increases book sales for the author presenting, and for the local independent bookstores. Having Nicola's Books and other bookstores at University of Michigan Library events advertises for the stores, and gives a good public image of the library as a supporter of independently owned local bookstores.

The first year of the partnership has been more focused on the collection than on partnering for events. In the future, the partnership between the University of Michigan Library and Nicola's Books for events has great potential for growth. The library could easily incorporate Nicola's Books into annual Banned Books Week events in September. In the past, the library has hosted a career fair for students in the Humanities. Perhaps sometime during this fair any of the independent booksellers from the area could be invited into the library talk to students about owning and operating a bookstore.

### Reflections on the Partnership

The partnership between Nicola's Books and the University of Michigan Library has been a great success. Both Nicola's Books and the University of Michigan Library provide public goods to the Ann Arbor, Michigan and University of Michigan communities, and these public goods have increased through this partnership. Though the time for selection of materials for the Browsing Collection can be consuming and may cause changes the workflow for technical services units, the benefits of a thriving independent bookstore are indispensable to a library and the community. University faculty and staff have complemented the University of Michigan Library's efforts to work with local booksellers, and students are delighted with the selection of books available in the Browsing Collection. As one student commented, "I look forward to looking through the Browsing Collection's books. It's cool how many bestsellers are there. It saves me a lot of money!"<sup>16</sup>

### Notes

1. Renee Feinberg, "B & N: The New College Library?" *Library Journal* 123 (1998): 49.
2. *Ibid.*, 50.
3. *Ibid.*, 51.
4. Carol Joiner, et al, "Albuquerque Alliance: Library/Bookstore Collaboration for Collection Building," *Library Journal* 118 (1993): 75.

5. *Ibid.*, 76.
6. David Gray and Malcolm H. Brantz, "Out of the Box and Into the Bookstore: Non-Traditional Use of the Bookstore," *Against the Grain* 15 (2003): 38.
7. *Ibid.*, 40, 42.
8. *Ibid.*, 38.
9. Uma Doriaswamy, "Faraway Places," in *Librarians as Community Partners: An Outreach Handbook*, ed. Carol Smallwood, (Chicago: American Library Association, 2010), 163.
10. *Ibid.*, 164-5
11. Toni Tucker, "Partnerships Beyond the University Campus: Community Connections that Work," In *Academic Library Outreach: Beyond the Campus Wall*, ed. Nancy Courtney (Westport, Conn: Libraries Unlimited, 2009): 187.
12. Sarah Rettger, "Bookstores and Libraries Working Together," *Bookselling this Week*, 14 July 2010, <http://news.bookweb.org/news/bookstores-and-libraries-working-together>.
13. Civic Economics. *Liveable City*. December 2002. <http://www.civiceconomics.com/html/library.html>.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Karen Jordan, email message to author, January 4, 2011.
16. Interview with author, Helen Zaharopoulos, January 10, 2011.