

Connecting with Patrons Through Business Reading Programs

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As the business librarian at Northern Illinois University Libraries, I work out of the library and serve patrons in the College of Business (COB). Because the COB is located across campus from the library, finding new ways to connect with patrons is challenging. I had quickly built a presence in the COB during my first years in the job by cold calling faculty to offer my bibliographic instruction services, cross-selling them on instruction and course guides when they called with unrelated questions, and conducting on-site reference. However, a few years into my job I realized that I had exhausted all my resources for finding new leads.

To help create new connections with business students, I began conducting reading programs in the COB. These programs have strengthened my connections with COB students, faculty, and staff, and have also proven beneficial to NIU Libraries.

Connecting with Business Passport

In 2014, I was struggling to find innovative ways to build new relationships with my business student and faculty patrons. In addition to wanting to be more involved with the COB, I missed the joys of creating and hosting library programming as I had done in my previous job as a public librarian – something I was still doing as a volunteer at my local public library. I decided that the best way to fulfill both objectives was to try hosting reading programs at the COB. Because my position affords me a great deal of flexibility with my time, preparing for and hosting the program would not be a problem. However, outside of bulletin board fliers, announcements during instruction sessions, and word of mouth, I did not have an effective way of marketing these programs. An encounter with the administrators of the COB's Business Passport program would give me the opportunity I needed to implement my programming.

To graduate, undergraduate business students from all COB majors and departments (Accountancy, Finance, Management, Marketing, and Operations Management & Information Systems) must participate in the Business Passport program. Each student must attend at least one activity or program from each of the seven "continents." The seven continents are Business Communications, Career Development, Ethics, Experiential Learning, Global Awareness, Leadership, and Service. Faculty, student organizations, and alumni are encouraged to submit program ideas, and the Passport program helps organize and promote the events.

Towards the end of the Spring 2014 semester, a COB associate dean and the director of the Passport program reached out to me to see if I had any ideas for ways in which the library could support Passport. They explained that the program was having problems with a small number of seniors scrambling to gather credits during their final weeks in college, and wanted something easy to implement, like a book report. I agreed to create a bibliography of recently

published books on the subject of business and innovation, but I also used the discussion to up-sell them on my idea of offering public library style reading programs to business students. After numerous emails and meetings in which I explained my ideas for the programs and answered their questions, we finally agreed to give one of my programs a try.

Short and Sweets and the Business Book Club

The first program I offered was *Short and Sweets*. Students would read and discuss a short article or story, while eating sweet treats provided by Passport. This program is modeled after a program of the same name conducted at the Julia Hull District Library in Stillman Valley, Illinois, and was used with permission from the library's director. At first, I was asked by the Passport administrators to curate the stories and articles to coincide with continents on which students were having difficulty completing credits – Ethics and Business Communications. Later, all *Short and Sweets* programs were considered Business Communications unless there was a specific Ethics or Global Awareness component in the readings.

Thirty students attended the first session of *Short and Sweets*, and we had a vigorous discussion about an article by Malcom Gladwell. After the event, the Passport director informed me that the student reviews were very positive, and I was invited to host and develop more library-related programming.

In addition to offering *Short and Sweets* every year since 2014, I have conducted several book clubs. Some I have done on my own, and others I have co-hosted with a faculty member from the Department of Marketing. Although not nearly as well attended as *Short and Sweets*, the book clubs have always led to rewarding discussions – except for the time I hosted a discussion of George Orwell's *1984* and several students attended, but none of them read the book (they didn't get credit). To prevent a similar situation from happening again, I now make it clear in the announcement that students must read the article or book prior to the meeting. Although no one topic seems to attract more students, I have found that with both *Short and Sweets* and the book clubs, non-fiction draws more participants than does fiction.

The Benefits of Library Programming

In addition to being personally rewarding (and adding extra lines to my annual service report), offering programming to the COB has served its purpose by promoting my services as a subject specialist librarian, specifically instruction. Having a direct relationship with the Passport director helped to open lines of communication. When the current Passport director also began teaching an introductory business course, she invited me to visit her class and deliver a library instruction lecture. When the Passport offices were moved to a new office suite shared by the directors of the Experiential Learning Center (ELC) and BELIEF ethics program – who also teach the same introductory business courses as the Passport director – I was invited to lecture in their business courses and to ELC student consulting teams.

The relationship I built with Passport has had an unexpected, but certainly welcome, benefit to the NIU Libraries. Along with my colleague Beth McGowan, NIU Libraries' Associate Professor and English Subject Specialist Librarian, and with the help of the NIU Libraries' Programming and Promotion committee, I created the NIU Libraries' Research and Artistry Series of Lectures in late 2019. The purpose of the Research and Artistry Series is to give NIU faculty a venue to share their research and artistry accomplishments with a wider audience within the University and the community. In order to help build attendance at Research and Artistry series events, I asked the Passport director if students could get Passport credit for attending our events when the topics discussed were related to one of the Passport continents. She agreed, and a large portion of patrons who attended our early Research and Artistry programs were business students.

This relationship was especially important when the library moved to virtual programming in September 2020 because of Covid-19. We needed to rebuild our programming attendance after losing momentum from the campus closure during the Spring and Summer 2020 sessions. The Business Passport director helped us to promote the program, and business students made up almost half of our virtual audience.