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Article

College Book Clubs: Collaborating for Success

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Abstract

Book Club programming not only adds to the value of the college library, but serves as an excellent marketing and outreach tool for librarians as well. This article describes collaboration between the Women's Studies Program and E. H. Butler Library at Buffalo State College to establish a Women & Gender Book Club and outlines a model which can be extended to a variety of contexts.

The Women & Gender Book Club

What are some innovative ways that librarians can enact the learning mission of their institutions? How can librarians, whether they have faculty or professional status, inspire a lifelong passion for learning and extend their influence past the limitations of library instruction classes and the reference desk? By organizing and leading book clubs, librarians can do more than simply provide access to information or teach students how to utilize resources; dynamic programming such as this can support the professional growth, intellectual exchange, and cultural enrichment of the entire community.

Buffalo State College has been part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system since 1948, and is the largest comprehensive college in the SUNY system, with an enrollment of approximately 11,695 students. Librarians at Buffalo State College are involved with a variety of committees across campus. In 2009, I joined the Women's Studies Program Committee, a multi-disciplinary group established to support gender and diversity issues and promote the Women's Studies minor across campus. It was as a member of this committee that I suggested establishing a book club for students interested in issues related to women and gender.

At the time I joined, the Committee was planning a visit from Lynn Peril (whose work examines gender messages in popular culture) to deliver the keynote address for Women's History Month. In one of our meetings, I suggested that we organize a student group that would read one of Peril's books, *Pink Think*, in preparation for her visit. My idea was initially received with skepticism from veteran committee members, who stated that they had tried organizing book clubs in the past but that student interest was less than ideal. However, Women's Studies Program Coordinator and fellow committee member Jenn Hunt was open to the idea and agreed to join me as co-facilitator on the project. This collaboration was key to the success of the club: we could directly market the club to Professor Hunt's students; we could make use of both Women's Studies Program resources and personnel; and E. H. Butler Library could provide both a physical meeting space as well as useful archival and reference materials for our book club discussions. With these shared marketing and structural resources, we quickly discovered that students were eager to participate in a book club—especially one which could provide them the opportunity to meet a nationally recognized author writing about the same issues they were discussing in their Women's Studies classes.

During the first semester of the book club, thirteen students actively participated in the group. We met three times before Lynn Peril's visit. As a librarian, I was able to draw upon library resources discussed in Peril's book and incorporate relevant materials into our discussion. For example, we were able to illustrate our discussions on gender stereotypes with mid-20th century etiquette handbooks for co-eds that I was able to find in our collection. Students reported that these examples had a tremendous impact on their understanding of the material discussed in Peril's book. During Peril's visit, a special meeting was arranged with book club members at which students were able to discuss the book and ask questions of Peril in an informal setting. Student feedback from the experience was so positive that we decided to make the book club a permanent activity of the Women's Studies Program.

In the fall of 2010, we continued with our second book selection, *Girl Power* by Marisa Meltzer, with nineteen students participating. Meltzer's book focuses on women in popular music, with emphasis placed on the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s. While we did not have the opportunity to meet Meltzer, we were able to arrange innovative programming which provided students with a richer understanding of the material. For example, after reading Meltzer's account of Ani DiFranco, we arranged for the club members to attend a local performance by DiFranco. For many of the club members, this was their first introduction to Ani DiFranco's music—or politically-themed art of any

sort. Following our attendance at DiFranco's show, we discussed the tendency of Riot Grrrl artists to produce zines (self-produced and distributed magazines) as a vehicle for information about their music and third wave feminist issues in general. With some examples drawn from personal archives and Internet resources, I then led the group in making their own zine, which included essays, poems, lyrics, and collage. Students received no extra credit, but were very inspired to engage in creative work that was also socially and politically relevant. The zine allowed students to safely express their experiences and views, and it has since become a lasting addition to book club activities.

Starting Your Own Book Club

It's important to keep abreast of events happening across campus. What authors or speakers will be visiting campus? Once you discover programming that is already taking place, it is just a matter of meeting with the coordinators of the event and suggesting a possible reading selection. What committees are you involved in, and what possibilities exist for a book club based on the activities of that committee? What are student clubs doing across campus, and would it be possible to collaborate on a book selection that corresponds to student club activities? The appeal of collaborating with other organizations on campus is that you have an instant (and often enthusiastic) base of support, as well as members who are eager to participate. Often times the experts on a committee or club will have suggestions for the book selection as well. Keep in mind that you want your reading selection to be accessible and interesting to your market audience—as well as fun! Gather together a few potential members and ask them for suggestions prior to making your final reading selection.

Once you have identified your collaborators and chosen your book, you can start advertising to potential book club members. A traditional flier, designed with your target audience in mind, is a great way to distribute information in classes and at the reference desk. You will need to plan ahead a bit and list your scheduled meeting dates on the flier, as well as any special events (for example, "Save the Date: Ani DiFranco in Concert!"). Additionally, we advertise the club on the library's blog and in the campus online newsletter. The student newspaper has also covered the activities of the club and helped us spread the word. Once you have a list of committed members, you can use Facebook to develop a sense of community prior to your first meeting. Consider asking members to introduce themselves, contribute something to the Facebook wall or discussion forum, or assign a relevant activity for completion prior to meeting in person. Be sure to keep an up-to-date roster including members' contact information and meeting attendance. Facebook is also an excellent tool to remind members of the reading schedule, meeting dates, and special events.

Collaboration is Key

The key to the success of the Women & Gender Book Club is the strong ties developed with the Women's Studies Program. As a committee member, I had already developed a working relationship with Program Coordinator Jenn Hunt prior to establishing the book club. Together, we were able to focus our marketing efforts to Women's Studies

minors (while the club is open to all students on campus, the majority of our members are students from the program).

We also collaborate with Residence Life to market the club to students in the residence halls. While we have been fortunate to receive funding from campus grants, Residence Life has offered to purchase books for students residing on campus. When looking for funding to support your book club, consider alternative resources like Residence Life. If you are having limited luck with campus resources, is it possible to arrange a “deal” with your local bookstore? Often times, local bookstores will provide a discount on book club selections, especially with visiting authors.

Outreach & Marketing

When collaborating with campus partners, outreach and marketing come naturally. In our case, members of the Women’s Studies committee help spread the word in their classes and respective departments. Events are advertised on the library’s blog, on the campus online calendar, on the Women’s Studies Program website, and on posters distributed across campus. Our most successful outreach tool is Facebook, as it allows us to post reminders and other information, and provides a venue for members to network, ask questions, share relevant links, and contribute to discussion forums.

The book club also serves as an excellent librarian outreach tool. Through the activities of the book club, I have made lasting connections with students I would never have had the opportunity to meet. A few students have confided in me that “before the book club, I never went to the library” or “I used to be afraid to talk to the librarians.” Not only does the club bring students into the library, but students get to know a librarian outside of the reference desk, and they are not afraid to ask for me by name for non-book club related research!

Meeting Activities

Group size plays an important role in planning club activities. We’ve found that a size of fifteen to twenty students is ideal for our club’s focus: small enough to be intimate and to encourage lasting connections among club members, but large enough to include various perspectives (which keeps things lively!).

Our meeting activities have revolved around informal discussion, while always incorporating hands-on examples, whether online or in print, which correspond to our book selection. When preparing for our meetings, I keep notes on each chapter, and select library items (books, journal articles, video or music clips) that might be relevant to the topic. Students have especially enjoyed the primary print sources I have been able to bring to the meetings, such as books about dating published in the 1950s. We also rely on our members to contribute items and anecdotes from their own experience relevant to the reading. We have asked students to create collages that demonstrate the meaning of “Girl Power,” bring in examples of their favorite pop culture moment, and share their top Riot Grrrl music picks. Asking members to share their own experiences has

been critical in establishing both interest and camaraderie among group members. Our most successful example of this has been in the creation of our book club zine. Remember, book club activities don't have to be elaborate or cost a great deal of money to initiate. Our zine costs us only a couple of packs of paper to produce. The most important thing is to provide a positive group experience which encourages participation and creativity.

When planning your activities, do not overlook special community events that could bring concepts in your book selection to life. Examples of these events could be a talk at another school or local agency, a concert, community service opportunity, an exhibit at a local gallery, or public library program. Not only is it beneficial to get students involved in the community, but it provides new opportunities for future collaborations as well.

And So It Continues...

Even the most enthusiastic among us feels spread thin these days, and running a book club may seem like an overwhelming task to add to your to-do list. But through our collaboration we've discovered a few guidelines that help to sustain the momentum of the club. These are things that we believe have secured the success of this book club where others have failed before.

- **Incorporate active learning.** When planning out your sessions, make it easy on yourself and don't create an entire lecture based on the reading. Instead, consider what activities you can plan for the group to complete during your meeting. Examples of this include asking members to communicate specific experiences, create group projects, or share media which supports the discussion.
- **Give members a voice.** When it comes to choosing a book and developing programming, be sure and give students a real voice. Once your club is established, it's easy to ask for opinions, preferences, and ideas from members.
- **Become an active member yourself.** When you are leading a group, you may feel like it's not your place to contribute to discussions and activities. We've found that students really appreciate it when we are also active members who join in on the discussions and contribute to group projects. Not only is joining in fun, but it also helps build unique connections with students.
- **Bring it all to the table.** As librarians, we have an endless supply of resources at our fingertips. What unique resources can you share which will contribute to student learning? Don't forget to investigate archival materials, along with photo, art, and music databases.
- **It's all about community.** What other events on campus or in the community might be relevant to your book club? In our case, there is no shortage of events to explore for Women's History Month. What about concerts, poetry readings, community lectures, or art openings? Scheduling diverse activities can help make the club more interesting and keep members involved.
- **Facebook is your friend.** Communicating with members can be really time consuming (and we all know that many students don't respond to e-mail). A Face-

book fan page is a great way to send reminders, post events, and encourage group discussion.

In spring 2011, we continued the Women & Gender Book Club with a visit by author and magazine editor Andi Zielser, whose work focuses on feminism and pop culture. Once again, we had approximately twenty students participate in the club. Students were thrilled to meet the author and have the opportunity to discuss concepts of the book in an informal setting. The Women & Gender Book Club is now a permanent component of the Women's Studies Program, and is noted across campus for its contribution to the Women's Studies Program and to diversity education.

Lisa A. Forrest is an Associate Librarian for SUNY College at Buffalo and the founding member of the school's Rooftop Poetry Club. She is the recipient of the 2008 Excellence in Library Service Award from the Western New York Library Resources Council. Lisa's scholarly writing has appeared in a variety of publications, including *American Libraries*, *A Leadership Primer for New Librarians* (Neal-Schuman Publishers), *Thinking Outside the Book* (McFarland), *Urban Library Journal*, *Writing and Publishing: The Librarians Handbook* (ALA Editions) and elsewhere. A 2007 and 2008 Pushcart Prize nominee, Lisa's creative writing has been featured in many small press publications. She is the recipient of the national Public Radio News Directors Incorporated (PRINDI) Award, June 2009 for her radio commentary. Lisa's first collection of poems, *To the Eaves* (2008), is available from BlazeVox Books. She was named "best poet" in Artvoice's Best of Buffalo Awards (2011).

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