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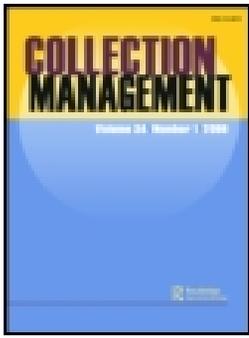
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Creating a Culture of Readers through Collection Development and Outreach

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ABSTRACT

Children's literature collections in academic libraries present a unique opportunity for librarians to develop engaging outreach programs for students, faculty, and community members. The Curriculum Resource Center at Bowling Green State University's Wm. T. Jerome Library has developed several popular events that both promote the collection and the central mission of creating a culture of reading. In this case study, three of the most successful endeavors – Mock Caldecott, April Madness, and Sneak Peek – are highlighted to provide insight into how we integrate our carefully developed collection into programs that inspire excitement and build community around reading.

KEYWORDS

children's literature;
outreach; academic libraries

In a survey conducted by Pew Research in 2019, 27% of adults indicated they had not read a book in twelve months. Similarly, studies point to technology and other distractions possibly contributing to a decline of “recreational reading” among the younger generation. In their 2011 article, *Reading, Risk, and Reality: College Students and Reading for Pleasure*, academic librarians Julie Gilbert and Barbara Fister wonder if academic libraries actively discourage reading outside the curriculum. Ultimately, they conclude that college students enjoy leisure reading – if granted the opportunity. Therefore, academic libraries must rise to meet that challenge.

This call to action is central to our philosophy in the Curriculum Resources Center (CRC)¹ at Bowling Green State University, where we work primarily with the teacher education programs to foster a culture of reading among students, faculty, and area community members. In fact, it is at the very heart of everything we do, from our displays to our instruction sessions and the outreach programs that we host. We want to ensure that every teacher educator is part of a larger community of readers and

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leaves the university feeling invigorated by and knowledgeable about literature for young readers.

The CRC collection is critical to our efforts, and it has a direct relationship to every service we provide. We use our collection development policy to guide our work, and we monitor reputable book review sources, a wide range of award recipients, and publishers who give voice to the LGBTQ+ and BIPOC experience. Given our primary audience, it is also essential for us to talk with faculty regularly, to support the teacher education curriculum, and to be aware of changes to the content standards developed by our Ohio Department of Education. In this case study, we highlight three of our most successful outreach endeavors that illustrate how we use our carefully honed collection to ignite excitement and community around reading.

Outreach program 1: Mock Caldecott

During the Fall semester of 2017, we began working on our goal of creating a culture of reading among university students, faculty, staff, and community members. We decided to bring a nationally popular public library program to the university: the Mock Caldecott. The Caldecott Medal is awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) to the most distinguished American picture book for children. Like most literary award committees, the members of the Caldecott committee operate in strict confidentiality, and non-committee members can only speculate on what books are under consideration for the illustrious award. To that end, many public and school libraries host Mock Caldecott programs in an attempt to guess which book might take home the prize.

For the debut of this program in our academic library, we were less interested in following the standard rules the Caldecott committee employs and instead focusing on developing book discussion skills. Because of the sheer volume of picture books published in a given calendar year, we curated a list of fifteen titles and created basic evaluation sheets for participants. The titles were divided over four discussion periods from late October to early February.

We were delighted when our first discussion netted about a half dozen attendees, all faculty members. Though we had hoped for more students, having faculty present was a major bonus: they could bring what they learned to their students, hosting similar discussions in class, and promoting the program by encouraging their students to attend. The semester progressed with roughly the same faculty members attending throughout. Though we enjoyed ourselves and the discussions were lively and exciting, the target audience, teacher education students, remained missing. That

signaled to us that something was awry with our marketing and promotion in targeting the student population. To remedy this for the 2018 program, we developed a social-media driven marketing campaign aimed at students, and we started planning the program mid-summer in order to begin promptly when students arrived on campus in late August. Additionally, we promoted the program on digital screens within the library, and we visited the children's literature classes early in the semester to drum up interest.

We also decided to more closely follow the Caldecott committee process, though we tailored it slightly to meet the time constraints students face. We spread the discussion over five meetings, one a month, from September to January, with an extra day in January built in for final balloting and discussion. We also increased the number of books to four for each discussion. Unfortunately, this tactic did not work in our favor in terms of student engagement. We netted almost exclusively faculty members and one member of the community. Still, we found our 2018 program successful enough that we wanted to give it another shot. Plus, we came awfully close to guessing the winner.

In addition to our strategies the previous year, we started our marketing even earlier in 2019, and encouraged faculty who joined us for previous Mock Caldecotts to entice their students to join. We created book evaluation sheets that reflected the award's criteria, set firmer standards for book discussions, and chose titles that represented a broad tapestry of diversity and age ranges. We retained the number of meetings, but increased to five books a month due to the overwhelming number of quality titles released that year. It seemed to work: seven students joined us for our first meeting in September and participated actively in the discussion. Unfortunately, as their coursework became more daunting, their participation declined. By the final couple meetings, only faculty and community members were present.

Still, we weren't willing to jettison the program – especially because this iteration of the Mock committee correctly guessed the winner and one of the honor books. The pandemic of 2020 presented a major problem for us: previously, the Mock Caldecott meetings were held in person. After much debate, we decided to keep our format from the previous year – same number of books, same schedule – but settled on an all-virtual book discussion. We still wanted our target audience to be students, especially those enrolled in early education programs.

We actively campaigned faculty in the early education program to help us promote the Mock Caldecott, and we further enticed students by promising the first ten students to attend at least two consecutive meetings with a prize: a bag of materials that would help them start their own classroom

libraries. Before the first meeting, sixteen students had registered. We believe several reasons factored into this increase of participation: the pandemic freed up time in their schedules or left students yearning for more social interaction; the prize was both meaningful and valuable; the format was appealing because the program was virtual and the sessions were recorded; participants could cast ballots electronically. Therefore, the program was far more adaptable to students' busy schedules.

To date, this has been our most successful iteration of the program. We've hosted three meetings this semester, and more students than faculty have attended and participated in the Mock Caldecott program. Additionally, two librarians from out of state stumbled upon our Mock Caldecott LibGuide and requested to join, despite having no affiliation with the university. This was surprising and it seems likely that we will continue with a virtual format in the coming years if it means attracting more people.

Outreach program 2: April madness

After getting the Mock Caldecott firmly rooted into our program offerings, it was time to look for other outreach programs to continue spreading a culture of reading. April's National Library Week provides a solid foundation for outreach opportunities. The challenge many university libraries face, however, is that this week-long celebration falls deep in the semester when many students' attentions are focused on their studies and impending final exams. It was critical for us to plan an outreach activity related to National Library Week that did not require a large time commitment and was a lighthearted distraction from schoolwork. Once again, we decided to draw on a program that tends to be popular in school and public libraries: a "March Madness"-style bracket that pits books instead of basketball teams against each other.

2018 & 2019

In April Madness's overly ambitious debut, we chose to focus on Caldecott-Medal winning books. Rather than select a handful of titles, we decided to pit all 81 winners against each other. The major challenge here was making a bracket for that volume of entries. This should have been the first clue that the project was veering toward the unmanageable. Still, we persevered, seeding books based on their average review on Goodreads – an endeavor itself that took far too much time, both in planning and execution. It became clear, too, that the event would take longer than a week to hash out, which was initially a concern. As the program proceeded,

though, the overwhelming bracket seemed to create more tension and excitement among students rather than less.

We began a social media campaign a week prior to the event and visited several children's literature classes to drum up interest. The day before the kickoff, we set up the first round of books in the library, each book paired with its seeded competition and a ballot for the pairing. The work that went into this set-up paid off tremendously: when the first round of books was displayed on Monday morning, 400 votes were cast by the end of the day. The following day saw similar numbers.

By the time the top eight titles were contending, students, faculty, and library staff not only came to the library to cast their votes but actively lobbied their friends to vote for particular books – much in the way an election can be swayed by grassroots efforts. When the dust settled, Chris Van Allsberg's *Jumanji* remained.

The anecdotal feedback we received indicated that this was a popular program. The scope of bracketing 81 books, though, was untenable: we spent hours each night counting ballots, tallying votes, and creating the next day's ballots. We knew we wanted to scale back the event to fit into a "workweek". This would guarantee student presence on campus, Monday to Friday, with the bonus of creating less work counting ballots each night.

Therefore, in 2019, we created 32 seeded slots instead of 81, and filled them with picture books that had been released in 2018. We paired off the competitors alphabetically by title, which cut out the extra grunt work of consulting Goodreads for user review scores. As an added incentive, we entered students who voted every day of the event into a drawing for free books. We chose three winners at the week's end, but this ultimately proved to not be an effective draw for audiences outside our typical patrons.

Still, the program was successful: a total of 1,500 votes were cast in five days, with Jessica Love's *Julián is a Mermaid* taking the number one spot at week's end. The smaller number of votes over the course of the week merely reflects the fact that we had brackets for 32 books rather than 81.

2020

Like most higher education institutions, Bowling Green State University shuttered its doors and moved to online instruction at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, we wanted to continue engaging with students, even if we were restricted to an online environment.

Because of the success of the past April Madness programs, we didn't want to forego the program entirely. However, we were presented with two significant challenges: what platform would we use for the program and

how would participants be able to cast ballots if they couldn't look at the books? All public libraries in the state of Ohio had temporarily closed their doors, so participants couldn't visit their community libraries to peruse titles.

While researching possible solutions, we stumbled upon a list of the 100 best children's books, created by the New York Public Library. The list, a mixture of picture books, early chapter books, and middle grade novels seemed perfect: except for a few titles, most of the books were "canonical" children's literature. Therefore, we assumed that most individuals, regardless of whether they considered themselves "readers", would be familiar with the books. We combed through the list of books and selected 32 titles that were either wildly popular (e.g., *Where the Wild Things Are*) or were contemporary classics that would have, at the very least, name recognition (e.g., *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*). Like the previous year, we seeded the books alphabetically by title.

The next hurdle was figuring out the ideal platform to launch the event. Instagram proved to be ideal. We combined daily images of the books in our Instagram Story and added the polling function to each pairing, which automatically tabulated votes. This eliminated the need to count votes every night, and ballots for the winning titles could be created quickly every morning before we rolled out the day's pairings.

We were concerned that we would have less participation than the in-person program, and this indeed proved to be true. Perhaps through word of mouth, however, more people began to participate as the week progressed, and soon we had more visits to our Instagram page than we ever had before. The numbers weren't quite as staggering as previous events, but we were satisfied with the turnout. The winning book, *Charlotte's Web*, won by the narrowest of margins, and it was enjoyable seeing participants chime in with their thoughts each day.

Outreach program 3: Sneak peek

Our latest outreach effort to promote our collection and to continue to create a culture of reading took place in February 2020 with our inaugural Sneak Peek program. This was a half-day workshop that we hosted at our library. We gave a formal presentation during the first hour, delivering book talks that highlighted dozens of our favorite titles published within the previous year. We also promoted two publishers who specialize in diverse literature: Denene Millner Books and Reycraft Books. We chose Denene Millner due to an article in *Horn Book* that highlighted her desire to publish books for children that "speak to the everyday experiences and humanity of black children and families, outside of racial struggles, strife,

and overcoming” (Parker and Gershowitz 2018, p. 78). We featured Reycraft Books because an alumnus of our teacher education program works there and has remained engaged and interested in making sure our students and community patrons have access to diverse and inclusive children’s literature. He had donated dozens of titles to a former faculty member of his who, in turn, donated them to us so that all student could have access to these titles through the library. After the presentation, attendees were invited to browse through the hundreds of newly acquired purchases and publisher donations from our collection.

This program was a collaboration between the CRC and the Northwest Regional Library System (NORWELD) which serves 25 counties in Northwest Ohio. NORWELD is one of four regional libraries in Ohio that provides shared resources and educational opportunities to public, school, academic and special libraries. We partnered with them because they have established and effective communication strategies to promote events and they served as the fiscal agent to accept registration fees to cover the cost of light snacks. The staff at NORWELD have a solid understanding of the professional development needs in the region from years of experience with providing online and in-person continuing education on timely topics. By partnering with them, we were able to register 15 librarians from the region to attend. Given the circumstances of winter weather and the impending pandemic shutdown, we were happy with this turnout. We also promoted this among our students and faculty but had no takers. As with previous efforts, we speculate that this was just too big of a time commitment for our campus community members.

We had several goals in mind when we created this program. It enabled us to fulfill our promise to publishers to get the word out about the titles they donate to us. We also wanted to promote the use of our collection as a resource for area librarians to preview titles. We often have early access to titles because of our connections to publishers, and our collection policy prioritizes the purchase of award winners and titles that are inclusive of LGBTQ+ and BIPOC communities. By hosting the event onsite, it was a way to remind our colleagues about our collection priorities and invite them to preview titles to which they might not have access. Most importantly, we wanted to create an event where all of us could simply unplug for a few hours to build community, engage in conversation, and foster excitement around books for children, middle grade readers, and young adults.

Though this program is in its infancy, we received extremely positive feedback from attendees who expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the format of the day. In the future, we hope to offer this twice a year and we will look for ways to make this available online and in-person. We also plan to try different marketing efforts to entice our students and faculty to

join us. Helping our future teachers to interact with school and public librarians is of particular interest.

Final thoughts

These outreach programs were possible because of the deliberate work that went into building a robust collection. We originally designed these programs to spark curiosity and excitement about both our collection and leisure reading, chiefly among our college students. Because our primary audience are students in teacher preparation programs, we want them to graduate feeling empowered, comfortable, and knowledgeable about literature for children and about working with librarians. These pre-service teachers wield a great deal of influence over connecting children with libraries, librarians, and books! But we underestimated their busy schedules and what little time they have to devote to activities outside of their classes. Our different attempts at modifying these programs and the pandemic have taught us a few lessons. First and foremost, experimenting with different modes of delivery and utilizing technology to engage participants is critical.

Another major takeaway from the outreach programs, especially the Mock Caldecott, has been to be patient. Most outreach programs will not be successful at first attempt, and being willing to adapt, adjust, and reboot are essential. Furthermore, building relationships take time. Faculty themselves are busy and not always attuned to library programming that might benefit their students – that is, they might not be aware how strong the connection of the outreach program is to the content they're teaching in class. The lack of buy-in may initially be demoralizing, but perseverance can yield successful outcomes. We also learned that we had to commit to planning the programs far in advance.

These outreach programs were designed to spark curiosity and excitement about reading. But more than that, they created community and shared conversation around literature for young people. As professionals, it is important for us to do programming like this to highlight the gems in our collection and to keep our own interest and engagement with the collection fresh. It allows us the opportunity to pause and remember why we chose our profession.

Note

1. The CRC is one of four specialized collections at Bowling Green State University, a mid-sized, doctoral granting public institution located in northwest Ohio. It is a stand-alone collection and consists of approximately 50,000 items in three primary sections: juvenile literature, lesson planning and activity books, and hands-on educational kits and manipulatives. There are four permanent staff.

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