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Book Nook for All: How Library Partnerships Can Grow Advocacy

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Abstract: “Town and gown” partnerships—i.e., partnerships between universities and the communities in which they operate—are growing in popularity and strength, and libraries should be leaders in creating these partnerships. In the spring of 2018, Courtright Memorial Library (CML) and Westerville Public Library (WPL) joined forces to bring a shared browsing collection to their local constituents. This article will examine the process, outcome, and continued work of developing and marketing this collection. It will also explore the partnership that developed naturally between these two libraries of different types during the creation of the shared browsing collection, specifically the cosponsoring of a collaborative author event. Finally, it will consider future possibilities for collaboration between the two libraries going forward and provide suggestions to other libraries for how they can begin similar projects with partners in their area. This article will be relevant to those who are interested in generating collaborative community partnerships, jump-starting new projects, and creating marketing campaigns to reach a broad audience.

Keywords: marketing, advocacy, partnerships, town and gown, popular fiction

Public services in the academic library are consistently evolving to meet the needs of users. This evolution includes the expansion of “town and gown” partnerships between universities and their local communities. Libraries can be leaders in these partnerships. Courtright Memorial Library (CML), serving Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio, is in the unique and fortunate position of being less than a mile from the highly rated Westerville Public Library (WPL). In brainstorming ways that CML could expand its partnership with WPL, staff took inspiration from neighboring Columbus State Community College’s Delaware Regional Learning Center and its partnership with the Delaware County Public Library (DCPL). Columbus State Community College’s Delaware location had a collection of books and DVDs from DCPL that were available for students, staff, and faculty to use (Columbus State Community College, n.d.). This innovative collection policy seemed an ideal way for the two uptown Westerville libraries to serve the community. The development of a browsing collection held in a partner library would

spread awareness of local public library offerings, promote visits to the hosting library, and encourage students, faculty, and staff to read beyond their academic disciplines. According to Blick (2015), “studying popular culture can tell researchers and the world about major shifts in values, morals, and ambitions of inhabitants of a specific region or even worldwide.” Not only would this project increase outreach and access to popular fiction, it also would align with the library’s five-year strategic plan; one major facet of that plan was outreach to other campus constituencies, including staff and the broader Westerville community.

Otterbein University is a four-year private liberal arts institution in central Ohio. The university has two schools, the School of Professional Studies and the School of Arts and Sciences, and eight graduate programs. Enrollment is currently around 2,400, and students tend to be traditional college students. A high percentage of students live on campus, so university services tend to be offered widely and frequently, including a diverse range of programming and services from CML itself. However, new and best-selling fiction is not part of CML’s standard collection-development policy, and so there has historically been a gap in our services for leisure reading. Through collaboration with WPL, CML has been able to quickly and easily begin offering its patrons popular fiction through a “Book Nook,” a browsing collection of fiction that comes from WPL. The Book Nook offers immediate access to hot fiction and makes it easy to check out, read, and return items. This encourages students, faculty, and staff to pick up novels for leisure reading, which not only sparks reading for enjoyment but can inspire discovery of ideas and information relevant to academic study.

According to a study by Odess-Harnish, the literature showed mixed findings on the offering of popular fiction in academic libraries (2002). However, positive outcomes were shown with a browsing collection for popular fiction established at Sam Houston State University; survey results reported that 97% of college students wanted to read for fun but did not expect the library to provide leisure materials (Mueller 2016). CML’s hope was that, by bringing the books to the library, we would make it easier for leisure reading to occur. By using the materials from a partner public library, CML would not bear the budgetary cost of purchasing these materials.

Fortunately, some neighboring institutions paved the way for these types of partnerships. In addition to the partnership in Delaware, Ohio, described above, CML researched methods of tackling this project by holding conversations with the Ohio State University (The Ohio State University, 2016) and Baldwin Wallace University (Baldwin Wallace University, 2012), two schools with public-library partnerships. These partnerships varied in their methods and application, but the general idea was to provide college communities with easier access to popular public library materials.

Getting Started

After generating initial meetings and involving all relevant parties, first steps toward making this project happen included determining how CML users would check out WPL materials. Sierra is the library management system that both libraries use. Staff originally

thought that CML could use a visiting-patron function in Sierra, but because the materials belonged to WPL, that option would not work. The solution was to create a persistent WPL Sierra instance on a laptop that would be available at the Customer Service Desk at CPL. This laptop was to be used exclusively to check out Book Nook materials. In working extensively with WPL's operations director, the laptop was prepared and installed at a centralized location. Stickers were designed for the front cover, so students and staff would be alerted when checking in and out WPL materials. Students and staff who worked at the desk and might handle Book Nook transactions were trained.

The Book Nook collection was sourced from older hot fiction items that WPL highlighted when first published. These items were leased through a private leasing company and, after WPL had them for a period of time, they were brought to CML and made available to users in our designated Book Nook area. Currently, the items are browsable only in person or via a printed list for two reasons: to avoid cataloging the items in CML's system and to allow WPL to retain check-out statistics for the materials. A printed list available in the Book Nook area, and a link to the list is included in CML's News and Events LibGuide. The unique browsing experience for this special collection brings users to the library and lets them have interactions with the physical materials. And, as Mueller states, "knowing patrons spend time on-campus and at the library[,]...recreational reading materials provide a convenience which promotes reading and supports the library's mission of lifelong learning" (2017).

The physical location of the Book Nook brings attention to the CML-WPL partnership and creates opportunities for marketing. Event and promotional materials for both libraries are on display in the vicinity of the Book Nook, and a nearby marketing table is aimed at encouraging Otterbein students and staff to become members of the WPL. Local branding and marketing also help the Book Nook create a mutually beneficial partnership for both libraries.

Marketing

Marketing the Book Nook has been a collaborative process and is ongoing. Since the launch in January 2018, social media has been the primary source of promotion. Collaboratively, both institutions have used Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to cross-promote a reception and opening. The hashtags #BookFaceFriday and #rainydayreading have been used to expand the reach, and the #BookNook hashtag is used any time the collection is mentioned. CML has used various channels on campus, including campus-wide e-mails, governance assembly announcements, targeted messaging, banners, and LibGuides. In addition, a campus-wide student services survey highlighted and asked about the Book Nook. The marketing committee at CML has used the online graphic-design program Canva to develop designs for website promotion and print materials, including a Book Nook logo, a reception flyer (for e-mail blasts), a LibGuide highlight, and website banners. This consistent branding for the Book Nook helps solidify its presence in the building and on campus.

Plans are under way for marketing campaigns to push the Book Nook in the next fall term. These will help make new and incoming students aware of this unique feature of their

college library and, at the same time, will help them discover the local public library. Additionally, WPL advertises its events with printed brochures at the Book Nook in hopes of promoting library membership among the Otterbein community. This cross-promotion creates loyalty and awareness across library lines and helps inform patrons in the community about library offerings.

Ohio loves library consortia, and during the process of the Book Nook development another large public library consortium, the Central Library Consortium, officially joined SearchOhio. This expanded the access to public library materials even further. Coinciding with the Book Nook launch, this also created an opportunity to publicize both services and increase awareness of them. Through marketing the launch of the Central Library Consortium into SearchOhio, CML could also highlight and feature the Book Nook with its connection to the consortial sharing.

Growing Partnership

Prior to the Book Nook, WPL and CML had an existing relationship that extended into libraries' decision-making bodies. One of CML's librarians worked with the Westerville Library Foundation. Additionally, a WPL librarian was a member of The Friends of the Library and an Otterbein alumna. These connections contributed to staff investment in the community and their respective libraries. They also created a myriad of readily available growth opportunities. The Book Nook made sense as a next step for collaboration and advocacy.

During the American Library Association's National Library Week in April, WPL and CML collaborated on a Meet the Author event that tied in directly to the Book Nook. The author selected for the event had written numerous best sellers that were available through the Book Nook. These titles were prominently displayed and were accompanied by flyers noting the upcoming author visit. Marketing of the event involved a variety of tactics for both libraries. CML and WPL each created their own flyers to advertise the event; Otterbein University had specific posting requirements, and having their own flyers allowed CML to make the community aware that they were cosponsoring the event with WPL. Otterbein faculty, staff, and students also had access to a small pool of free tickets, so having a personalized flyer for the campus drew attention to the ticket code to use. Information about the event was sent through campus-wide e-mails and newsletters. Social media was also used extensively, including the creation of a Facebook event that was cross-posted by the two libraries. Otterbein University also gave its approval for allowing the event to fulfill certain general education requirements for students; the university's Integrative Studies (IS) courses, which all students must take, require attendance at a certain number of events outside the classroom. By getting the collaborative author event IS-approved, it guaranteed that more students would be invested in attending. The English Department also advertised the event to their faculty, staff, and students.

The April collaborative author event had additional marketing opportunities, as the CML Friends of the Library sponsored the event as well. A postcard was sent to all Friends members in January that included advertising for the author event. In March, during the Friends' yearly

benefit, they handed out more flyers about the event. This had the advantage of reaching an even wider audience, since the benefit attendees were not limited to Otterbein members or people who had signed up for WPL's mailing list. As the event approached, an e-mail blast was also sent to the Friends' mailing list to remind members to get their tickets.

Finally, the CML library programming chair went to offices on campus, handed out flyers, and personally invited people to attend. This gave individuals the opportunity to ask questions about the event that they may not have had time or energy to send through e-mail. By putting a face on the event, buy-in among campus constituents was developed; it can be harder to skip an event to which one has been personally invited. Overall, the author event brought about 200 people to Otterbein's campus—more than any of CML's previous author events. The audience was composed of several different constituencies, including members of the public; long-time WPL supporters; and students, faculty, and staff from Otterbein. The event also had special guests: the Jay Jordan OCLC/IFLA Fellows attended, as they had visited CML and WPL in the previous weeks. The opening remarks referenced the work of both libraries and the hopes of continued, deeper collaboration for the future.

Current and Future Developments

As of spring 2018, the Book Nook was offering its first round of book selections. In April, a new selection of materials was delivered as part of the launch and promotion of the National Library Week celebration. This featured highlights of the new items, as well as a push for summer and vacation reading. On social media, the Book Nook was promoted in connection with National Library Week as well as Otterbein's own LGBTQIA and Feminist Pride Week; the latter focused on female authors in the Book Nook.

The Book Nook saw checkouts from a wide variety of users from among the university's students, staff, and faculty. A brief survey for all members of the community who used the Book Nook was planned for the fall of 2018, almost a year after the launch. This survey aimed to assess overall impressions of the service and available materials, as well as collect feedback, which is of utmost importance as staff try to enhance the user experience. The library will continue to brainstorm and develop ways to increase new users and repeat checkouts.

Now that the Book Nook has launched, a range of possibilities exist for future growth. Incorporation in the curriculum is one possibility; we could encourage faculty to use or teach materials available via the Book Nook. A mobile Book Nook cart could increase access to staff around campus. Halverson and Plotas (2006) have suggested that college and public libraries come "together for community outreach services, information literacy projects, grant collaboration, shared bibliography creation, and library program advertising." Moving in a broader direction, a collaborative Town and Gown Advisory could be established on campus to grow partnerships throughout the community and expand to organizations beyond the library. Otterbein has strong ties and involvement in the community, and CML aims to be a part of that continued growth.

Collaboration starts with a conversation, and conversation was how the WPL-CML partnership developed. For those who are interested in generating similar projects in their own libraries, reaching out is the first step. Exploring similar relationships and existing projects in the greater Columbus vicinity helped shape the way CML approached the Book Nook. Communication with these libraries was vital as CML sought insight, feedback, and ideas for getting the Book Nook off the ground. As mentioned before, the Columbus State Community College and Delaware Public Library were part of the inspiration for the Book Nook. All these libraries are on the SearchOhio system which allows greater borrowing across libraries all over the state.

The Book Nook project was a learning process for the libraries involved, but the close partnership that developed in the process was worth the effort. Users have more access to materials they want and need; libraries are sharing materials and collaborating on marketing and events; and the Westerville community is brought together with continued town-and-gown collaborations. Advocacy is generated through greater knowledge and visibility in the community, and the Book Nook has successfully provided both for its public and academic libraries.

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