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***At Your Leisure* Pilot Project: Providing Leisure Reading Materials to a University Community through an Academic and Public Library Initiative**

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Abstract

Leisure reading collections were once as integral to academic libraries as they currently are to public libraries. This article examines the results of a partnership between an academic and a public library to provide access to leisure reading materials to a university community through a one-year pilot project. Data were collected using circulation statistics, gate counts, and comment cards in the form of book inserts. During the pilot, gate counts increased by 6%, and 91% of participants indicated that they would continue to use the collection often or sometimes. The pilot was officially adopted as a new service at the end of the one-year trial period.

Key Words

leisure reading; academic libraries; public libraries; partnerships; declining budgets

Introduction

Leisure reading collections were once an integral part of academic libraries (Dewan, 2010; Rathe & Blankenship, 2006; Zauha, 1993). According to Pauline Dewan, “the war years took their toll on library budgets, and, as the century progressed, popular reading collections in academic libraries simply fell out of favor” (2010, p. 45). Today, shrinking library budgets and the rising cost of electronic resources have exacerbated the situation, leaving little room for academic libraries to indulge in the acquisition of non-academic collections. It is therefore not uncommon for some academic librarians to struggle with justifying the purchase of leisure reading collections in the face of declining departmental budgets and the already restricted storage capacity of existing buildings. It is frequently suggested that students who are seeking leisure reading can instead be directed to a public library (Dewan, 2010; Diers & Simpson, 2012; Elliott, 2007; Rathe & Blankenship, 2006). Despite these observations, there is ample evidence to support the provision of a leisure reading collection within an academic library (Bosman, Glover & Prince, 2008; Dewan, 2010; Elliott, 2007; Fleet, 2003; Gilbert & Fister, 2011; Hallyburton, Buchanan & Carstens, 2011; Hsieh & Runner, 2005; Rathe & Blankenship, 2006).

The benefits of leisure reading to the individual are many and include lifelong learning, increased literacy, benefits to mental health, and reading for the simple pleasure of reading (Bosman, Glover & Prince, 2008; Elliott, 2007; Hsieh & Runner, 2005). According to Pauline Dewan, “reading for pleasure provides opportunities for the focused and sustained reading that students are doing with less frequency since the advent of the Internet” (2010, p.50). Lorena O’English, J. Gregory Matthews and Elizabeth Blakesley Lindsay contend that it is the responsibility of academic libraries to provide “resources for students and others in the academic community who are looking for reading material not only to enhance their scholarship or teaching, but also to enjoy for personal pleasure and recreation” (2006, p.175). Bette Rathe and Lisa Blankenship (2006) assert that “recreational reading collections in academic libraries promote the value of this activity for their students in a readily accessible manner” and cite several studies which demonstrate that “recreational reading promotes better reading comprehension of academic texts, higher order reasoning skills, and civic participation, desirable attributes for college educated adults” (p.82). Equally important, however, are the benefits that libraries realize from providing access to collections that are reflective to the needs of their patrons, such as increased circulation, the view of the library as place, and the promotion of literacy and lifelong learning (Dewan, 2010).

Public librarians, on the other hand, have long recognized the value of providing their patrons with access to leisure reading collections. Not only are they providing readers’ advisory services, “they are adopting an arsenal of new strategies to promote leisure reading” (Dewan, 2010, p. 53). According to Julie Elliott (2007), it goes without question that “greater communication and cooperation between public and academic libraries would help both to better serve patrons’ needs” (p. 39).

Academic libraries play an important role in supporting the research and recreational needs of their patrons (Dewan, 2010; Elliott, 2007; Gilbert & Fister, 2011; Hsieh &

Runner, 2005; O'English, Matthews & Lindsay, 2006). Despite the perception that there is a decline in reading among students, a survey by Gilbert and Fister (2011) found that students enjoy reading for pleasure. "Clearly, our students feel that the reading they do for classes competes with voluntary reading, but their enjoyment in reading and their expressed desire to read material of their own choosing indicates that reading is, in fact, thriving" (p. 490). By partnering with public libraries, academic libraries will be better positioned to foster the growth of the individual as a whole person and encourage students "to turn to reading as a pleasurable activity, one that will educate their minds, stimulate their imaginations, and inspire their spirits while simultaneously fostering the communication and critical skills they need to succeed in school and the world beyond" (Dewan, 2010, p.51).

This study is based on the results of a one-year pilot project to provide leisure reading material to a university community. Recognizing the opportunity to collaborate and provide a new service, representatives from St. Francis Xavier University (StFX) and the Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library (PARL) met in the fall of 2015 to discuss the implementation, marketing, and benefits of circulating leisure reading material from the Public Library within the University Library. It was agreed that working together was mutually beneficial to both parties. This initiative would increase the circulation and public awareness of the public library collection, while providing direct and ready access to a leisure reading collection for the university community.

About the University and the Surrounding Community

Antigonish, Nova Scotia is located in the northeastern part of the province. The Town and County have a combined population of approximately 19,000 residents (Statistics Canada, 2017). The town is home to StFX University, a primarily undergraduate university with an enrollment of approximately 4,900 full and part-time students (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2016). The Angus L. Macdonald Library is centrally located on the campus and officially opened in July 1965. The Library provides seating for approximately 900 students and averaged 24,000 visits per month in 2015-16 (St. Francis Xavier University, 2017).

The People's Place, Antigonish Town and County Library is one of seven branches in the PARL system and the only branch in Antigonish County. The People's Place opened in May 2011, replacing a much smaller facility that had extremely limited resources. Located centrally on Main Street in Antigonish, and only 550 m from StFX University, the People's Place is the busiest of PARL's branches. Visits to the People's Place average roughly 600 people per day (in comparison to 600 per week in the previous location.) Offering free meeting space for non-profit organizations, a MakerSpace, public access computers, and a variety of programs for all ages, the People's Place embodies the modern public library (Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library, 2016).

At Your Leisure: How Does It Work?

Prior to launching the *At Your Leisure* pilot project, the Manager of Access Services for the University Library was consulted. Access Services staff from the University were informed of the project and were provided with training on how to process the leisure reading collection. To facilitate the tracking of reading materials on loan from the Public Library's collection, the University Library became an institutional member of PARL.

Each month an assortment of 30 to 50 items, including books, magazines, graphic novels, and audiobooks were selected from the Public Library and transported to the University Library. The items were displayed at the Angus L. Macdonald Library on a specially marked shelf located at the library entrance. Selected items offered a mixture of genres including fiction, bestsellers, high-interest non-fiction, biographies, sports, audiobooks, and more. Specific themes and seasonal content often guided the selection process. For example, books about camping and hiking were highlighted in the summer, while a selection of challenged books was displayed during Freedom to Read Week.

Every four to six weeks the collection was refreshed. When a new batch of items was received, Angus L. Macdonald Library staff members added the items to the Library's integrated library system (ILS) using the quick catalogue function. For the purpose of this study, a new item status was created specifically for use with the leisure reading collection. This item status was assigned to each item as they were added to the collection.

A book insert, in the form of a comment card, was employed to capture patron feedback, assess quality control of the project, and to provide input on material selection that was reflective of patron needs (See Appendix A; Figure 1). Angus L. Macdonald Library staff added a book wrapper (See Appendix B; Figure 2) to each item to indicate that it was part of this collection.

Figure 1. Book Insert

Figure 2. Book Wrapper

A student assistant was assigned the responsibility of maintaining a current list of available items using *LibraryThing*, an online cataloguing tool. A link to the collection was advertised to faculty, students, and staff through the university listservs, and both the academic and the public library's social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram).

The *At Your Leisure* collection was intended for browsing; therefore, it was not searchable in the library catalogue, nor was it available through interlibrary loan. Items circulated as long as they were on display and each item could be borrowed for up to three weeks.

The People's Place Library notified Angus L. Macdonald Library staff when a new selection of books was ready to be delivered. Items not checked out were removed from the display and subsequently deleted from the ILS and returned to the People's Place Library. A note was added to items on loan, during the time of the collection-refresh, asking borrowers to return materials to the Manager of Access Services. Access Services staff would then remove the items from the ILS and return them to the Public Library. The Manager of Access Services, in coordination with the People's Place Librarian, periodically cross-referenced the list of outstanding items on loan. University Library staff contacted patrons regarding any items that were overdue.

Measuring the Effectiveness of the Service

Methodology

The study was primarily descriptive in nature and used both quantitative and qualitative data to gauge the effectiveness of a partnership between an academic library and a local public library to provide a leisure reading collection to a university community. Research ethics approval for the study was received in November 2015 from StFX University. The pilot was officially launched on December 1, 2015 and ran until November 30, 2016. It was decided to offer this initiative as a one-year pilot project and to use this time to obtain feedback and establish best practices for the program if it was to continue. During the pilot period, data were collected using circulation statistics, gate counts, and patron input from comment cards in the form of book inserts.

Participants were asked to deposit their comment cards in a clearly marked box at the front desk of the University Library. If the books were returned in a book drop, the comment cards were removed by the University Library staff and inserted into the collection box. The authors collected and reviewed the comment cards at the end of every month.

Results

Circulation Data

Circulation data were used to measure usage of the leisure reading collection. In the first month, 30 items were put on display. Early comment cards indicated patrons' preference for an increase in the number of displayed items. As a result, monthly displays were increased from 30 to 50 items except for May, June, July, and August. During the first quarter, a total of 44 items were borrowed from an offering of 130 items (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Circulation statistics of the Leisure Reading Collection from December 2015–February 2016.

In total, 500 items were provided from the Public Library. As expected, circulation of the collection dropped significantly over the summer months due to the departure of undergraduate students. Usage of the collection resumed with the return of the undergraduate students and the commencement of a new academic term (See Figure 4).

Figure 4. Monthly circulation activity compared to number of items on display.

In total, 114 items circulated during the period of this pilot project. A total of 47 items were renewed and 99 items were returned. Eleven items were lost and four books were

in circulation at the time these results were collected (See Figure 5). This represents a circulation rate of 22.8% ($n=114/500$) of the leisure reading collection. By comparison, the circulation rate for the general monograph collection during the same time period was 7% ($n=13,537/191,066$). Moreover, the circulation of the general monograph collection at the University Library dropped from 13,537 in 2014–15 to 12,843 in 2015–16; representing a 2% ($n=694$) decrease during the period of the pilot compared to the previous year.

Figure 5. Circulation statistics based on the usage of the leisure reading collection from December 2015–November 2016.

Gate Counts

Gate counts, already collected for other purposes, were used to estimate increases in the physical use of the University Library during the period of this pilot project. Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (2016) enrolment statistics reveal that enrolment at StFX University for full and part-time students dropped very slightly from 4927 students in 2014–15 to 4924 students in 2015–16. Although it is difficult to establish a direct correlation between the leisure reading collection and increased traffic to the library, during the period of this pilot project, student enrolment did not increase and gate counts improved by 6% ($n=31,099$). Gate counts increased from 265,549 annual visits in 2014–15 to 296,648 annual visits in 2015–16 (See Figure 6). Furthermore, as mentioned previously, the circulation for the general monograph collection decreased during this period. In mid-September 2016, nine months after the launch of the pilot project, the StFX Writing Centre joined the Library. Although gate counts increased in September and November of 2016, they dropped slightly in October 2016. Overall, traffic in the Library increased by 1.074% ($n=8062$) from September–November 2016 compared to September–November 2015. As such, the relationship between the leisure reading collection and increased visits is a potential area for future investigation; particularly in relation to other factors which may have influenced patron

traffic, such as library workshops, special events, and non-traditional library services such as IT Services and the StFX Writing Centre.

Figure 6. Comparison of Gate count activity for the year before and during the pilot project.

Comment Cards

Comment cards, in the form of book inserts, were included in each item. Five short questions were collected from patrons who volunteered to complete a brief survey. A total of 33 comment cards were completed.

Question one asked participants to indicate how many books they had read for leisure during the last 12 months. Forty-nine percent (n=16) indicated that they had read between one and five books for leisure, while an additional 45% (n=15) of respondents indicated that they had read more than five books for leisure. Only 6% (n=2) of respondents indicated that they had not read for leisure in the last 12 months (See Figure 7).

Figure 7. Question 1

When asked how often participants thought they would take advantage of the collection, an impressive 91% (n= 30) indicated that they would use the collection often or sometimes (See Figure 8). Nine percent (n=3) of participants indicated that they would never use the collection.

Figure 8. Question 2

Sixty-one percent (n=20) of participants indicated that access to this collection would encourage them to read more for leisure. In addition, 27% (n=9) indicated that access to the collection might encourage them to read more. Twelve percent (n=4) of participants

indicated that access to a leisure reading collection would not affect their reading patterns (See Figure 9).

Figure 9. Question 3

Question four sought to engage participant feedback on how to improve the service. Initial feedback was very promising, *"This is great!! I was so excited to hear about this!"* However, a review of the first month's comment cards revealed that the size of the collection needed to be increased: *"This is awesome! Increase the collection size"*, *"Please make a larger collection, I have already read most of the available books"*. Other suggestions for improvement included a request for a better space for the collection with an area to sit down and read while browsing the collection. While a number of participants indicated that the collection was *"Perfect—keep as is"*, two participants did provide negative feedback, *"I don't think it will be used during school, we already have a lot of readings"* and *"More hours in the day, need 35 hours"*.

The authors felt strongly that for the leisure collection to be a success, the collection needed to reflect the expectations of the university community. Question five, therefore, sought to engage input with reader's advisory. Comments received were found to be very helpful when selecting items for the monthly displays. Suggestions included *Heather's Picks*, mystery, classics, fantasy, travel, current best sellers, and more. Only two participants indicated that they would not have time to read for leisure: *"I don't have time for leisure reading"* and *"No one reads anymore, too many screens and texts"*.

Observations & Discussion

During the pilot period, the following issues were identified and resolved when possible.

Transportation

Transportation of materials became problematic when the collection size was increased from 30 to 50 items per month. The first collection was delivered in boxes but this was difficult to manage. Two durable bins with wheels were purchased to facilitate transportation. One bin remained at each location. As a new set of books was ready to be delivered, the other set was packed and ready for pickup. To further simplify transportation, Angus L. Macdonald Library staff were notified prior to the pickup, and arrangements were made to transfer bins at the delivery entrance.

Circulation

Although circulation of the collection was tracked through the ILS, the authors did not track in-house usage of the collection.

Lost Books

Some books went missing and were unable to be retrieved. As the collection was displayed near the front entrance of the Angus L. Macdonald Library, it is believed that these books were borrowed without being checked out. In an effort to avert loss, security tape was placed behind the book wrappers. Therefore, books not checked out triggered the security system, alerting staff and borrowers to the need to have these items properly checked out. Some of the lost books were easily replaced using donated copies; others required the purchase of replacement copies.

Marketing

Because this was intended to be a browsing collection, it was not searchable in the University Library catalogue. This limited usage to patrons already in the Library. Attempts were made to engage the university community through announcements on listservs and social media; however, participants had to come into the library to view the collection.

Labeling

Book wrappers were initially placed around the front cover of each item. Participant feedback suggested that it took away from the aesthetics of the display and made it difficult to identify items. As a result, the wrappers were then placed on the back cover of each item.

Conclusion

The leisure reading initiative was regarded as a success by both StFX University and the Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library. In December 2016, both parties publicly announced that the service would continue. Although usage and demand were two of the main factors that lead to this decision, collection enrichment, continued collaboration, and literacy promotion were also guiding influences.

The Public Library helped the University Library address gaps in its collection; specifically, the provision of leisure reading materials for which no money was budgeted. Meanwhile, the Public Library was able to market its collection and services to a wider audience and engage new borrowers. Staff at the Public Library noted new patrons requesting library cards because they had been accessing books from the *At Your Leisure* display at the University Library. Facilitating access to library collections on limited budgets, continued promotion of leisure reading, and working with new colleagues, all contributed to a successful program.

Preliminary results of this project were presented at the 2016 Atlantic Provinces Library Association Conference, the 2016 Nova Scotia Library Association Conference, and online through the Partnership's Education Institute. Since then, two other academic libraries, one in Nova Scotia and one in Prince Edward Island, have collaborated with their local public libraries to adopt a similar service based on this model. The authors conclude that leisure reading, despite current budgetary constraints, still holds a place in academic libraries.

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Appendix A: Book Insert & Comment Card

Angus L. Macdonald Library
StFX University

Pictou-Antigonish

Are working together on:

At Your Leisure

An initiative to bring leisure reading materials to you!
Find more books by visiting the People's Place: Antigonish Town and County Library or check out our website www.parl.ns.ca

Please fill out the questions on the **back** of this card and return it to us when you return your book.

Your participation in this survey is 100% voluntary. No personal information will be collected. Information collected will be used for quality assurance and purposes related to this project only.

Figure 10. Book Insert

1. How many books have you read for fun in the past 12 months?
☐ 0
☐ 1-5
☐ 5 or More
2. How often do you think you will use this collection?
☐ Never
☐ Sometimes
☐ Often
3. Do you feel that this initiative will encourage you to read more for leisure?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Maybe
4. Please suggest ways this service may be improved

5. Please suggest other titles or genres that you would like to see included in this collection?

Please **RETURN** this card to the
Front Desk of the
Angus L. Macdonald Library

Find more books by visiting the People's Place: Antigonish Town and County Library or check out our website www.parl.ns.ca

For more information please contact:

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Kristel Fleuren-Hunter
Antigonish Librarian, PARL
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Figure 11. Comment Card

Appendix B: Book Wrapper

Angus L. Macdonald
Library
StFX University

Pictou-Antigonish
Regional Library

Pictou-Antigonish
Regional Library
Antigonish

Are working together
on:

At Your Leisure

An initiative to bring
leisure reading
materials to you!

PLEASE RETURN THIS
ITEM BY THE DUE DATE
TO THE ANGUS L.
MACDONALD
LIBRARY.

DATE DUE:

Figure 12. Book Wrapper