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Growing Adult Readers: Promoting Leisure Reading in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

This article provides an introduction to the recreational reading promotion tools at VCU Libraries, including a book review blog, book swap, and bulletin board, as well as the libraries' involvement with VCU's summer reading program and Richmond's citywide "One Community One Book" initiative. Policies and operating procedures will be examined, and these services will be discussed in the context of other libraries' offerings. We will also discuss why there is a need for these services—which have traditionally been the purview of the public library—on a college campus. Reading among American adults is in dramatic decline, and the academic library is a natural setting in which to combat this trend. The Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries' literacy outreach efforts serve to promote and strengthen lifelong learning and student engagement, two goals outlined in the VCU strategic plan.

Keywords: adult literacy, leisure reading, college students, academic libraries, lifelong learning

Introduction

Virginia Commonwealth University is an urban public university and Virginia's largest research university, enrolling almost 32,000 students in Richmond, Virginia. The VCU Libraries include the Tompkins-McCaw Library for the Health Sciences on the Medical College of Virginia (MCV) Campus and the James Branch Cabell Library on the Monroe Park Campus.

In February of 2006, Virginia Commonwealth University adopted a new strategic plan: [*VCU 2020: Vision for excellence*](#). Part of the Strategic Planning Commission's charge was "to find a way to integrate an institutional focus on

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research, scholarship and creative activity with a decided focus on the student experience” (p. 13). The charge was precipitated by several environmental factors, including a rapid growth in enrollment, the transition to a more residential campus, and an infusion of new state funds (p. 4).

During the strategic planning process, and in anticipation of a renewed focus on the first year experience, the James Branch Cabell Library created a new position in the fall of 2003, the Undergraduate Services Librarian, to develop programs that enhance the undergraduate library experience at VCU and advance University efforts to recruit and retain undergraduate students. In 2004, the library hired two Undergraduate Services Librarians to design, promote and assess library reference services that further undergraduate teaching and learning initiatives on the Monroe Park Campus.

In the fall of 2005, Cabell Library introduced a series of recreational reading services designed to engage students and to improve the undergraduate library experience. It may seem a great effort to implement leisure reading initiatives in an academic library, and some may view such programs as being outside the purview of the academic library but literacy outreach services promote and strengthen lifelong learning and student engagement, two goals outlined in *VCU 2020: Vision for excellence* (p. 16). These services can also be an integral part of the evolving nature of the library space, both physical and online. A variety of efforts cater to the needs of student users, including Book reMarks, a book recommendation blog, the Cabell Library Book Swap, participation in Richmond’s Go Read Richmond city reading programs and VCU’s University College Summer Reading Program, displays, and browsing collections.

The purpose of these programs is to encourage students to think about the campus library in a new way. Of course there will always be those students who love being in the library and who succeed in navigating its physical and online spaces. For those students, our hope is that they will expand their use of the library to include their recreational reading needs as well as their academic pursuits. However, for many students the library represents stress, anxiety, and deadlines. Creating spaces and services both within the library walls and online to promote leisure and relaxation is one way to overcome the perception that the library is a stressful place. Through its endeavors to emphasize and direct students to leisure reading materials, the library hopes to serve students in a new and unexpected way. College campuses are often insular communities, and students find it difficult or too time-consuming to leave campus to go to a public library. As a result, academic libraries can foster the idea of the library as “third place” (Oldenburg, 1997), a location separate from home and work (or school) for people to congregate or relax. The VCU Libraries mingled this goal with the goal of encouraging recreational reading among students while online, in the University Student Commons, and in the library building itself.

Academic libraries’ literacy outreach efforts vary in type and intensity from institution to institution. Types of literacy outreach that libraries currently practice include book review blogs, book exchange bookcases, browsing collections, display

cases/bulletin boards, and university sponsored reading programs. To judge from promotional materials and library websites, not all libraries use all of these methods. In most cases, library literacy outreach efforts are presented as services the library offers, sometimes in conjunction with each other, but not necessarily. A survey of randomly selected academic library websites showed that few if any colleges or universities cross-promote their outreach efforts, or present these separate efforts as part of a unified plan.

This article will explain the origins and motivations behind the VCU Libraries' outreach efforts, as well as describe literacy outreach efforts in general at academic libraries.

Literature Review

In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts released [*Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America \(2004\)*](#). This report documents a decline in literary reading (defined as novels, short stories, plays and poetry) among all age groups, but the rate of decline among 18-24 year-olds is 55% greater than that of the total population (p. xi). This is cause for concern, as the report states that readers are more active in their communities; thus the decline in reading "parallels a larger retreat from participation in civic and cultural life...[affecting] volunteerism, philanthropy, and even political engagement" (p. vii).

In his study of both first-year students and those in upper-level writing classes, Gallik (1999) links recreational reading with academic achievement, finding a positive relationship between grade-point average and pleasure reading time. He states that recreational reading habits are formed fairly early in life and have been shown to decline during the middle school years. It is unknown whether this is a permanent drop, the implication being that it may be possible to reverse this trend during the college or young adult years. Similarly, in Goodwin's study of aliteracy, defined by Harris as the "lack of reading habit in capable readers" (as cited in Goodwin, 1996, p. 4), all the psychology students chosen for individual interviews did not identify as leisure readers, and they often did not read the assigned course text. These students who were uncomfortable with their reading abilities also had negative attitudes toward academic reading.

Aliteracy among college students is also discussed by Duchein and Mealey (1993) and Hendel and Harrold (2004). Duchein and Mealey's examination of aliteracy among college students also observed the drop in recreational reading during the teenage years. Surveyed students were assigned a novel as part of a developmental reading course, and despite most participants' initial negative or apathetic reaction to the assignment, 49% reported at the end of the study that they now wanted to read more, and 88% said they would recommend the novel to a friend. This very positive experience enjoyed by the students raises questions about their initial negativity. The students' retrospective journal responses chronicled a drop in reading experiences during the later school years due to the perception that

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reading no longer appeared important in the classroom, or an aversion to the assigned texts that they were “forced” to read in school, and to time constraints due to extracurricular activities (p. 22).

Student leisure time is examined by Hendel and Harrold (2004), who analyzed interest surveys from 1971 to 2001 and found significant decreases in all four reading-related categories: reading books, newspapers, weekly news magazines, and literary magazines. However, the decline in reading is matched by a massive rise in student use of computers, which Hendel and Harrold do not evaluate in terms of whether or not this constitutes literacy (particularly with regard to online newspapers, literary magazines and blogs), and to what degree.

While there are numerous studies that examine the reading behaviors of college students, literature concerning the promotion of recreational reading and examples of literacy outreach resources are scarce, particularly those that frame these services within the context of the campus library as the “third place,” regarding both its physical and online space. Thornton and Carroll (2006) discuss an innovative partnership between Cleveland State University and Cleveland Public Library to create CPL@CSU, a small “branch” library of CPL within the university library’s Library Connection Lounge. Cleveland Public Library selects and purchases materials that are housed within the renovated space equipped with lounge furniture and coffee tables to create an inviting atmosphere. The partnership has been well-received, with both students and staff praising the accessibility and convenience of the collection.

Greater accessibility is also a factor in Reisberg’s (1999) article about the distribution of both national and local newspapers on college campuses. After Pennsylvania State University began to stock dormitories with copies of three different newspapers, a survey of students showed that nearly 75% of students read at least one of the papers daily, compared to 8% who read *The New York Times*—and fewer students who read *USA Today* or the local paper—before the program began. The newspapers were not “free” (students were charged an additional \$13 per semester in housing fees), and Reisberg does discuss some negative aspects of the distribution system, specifically greater competition for campus newspapers. Still, the article demonstrates how greater ease of access contributed to the spike in readership.

In their 2007 article, Gauder, Giglierano, and Schramm discuss the University of Dayton’s “Porch Reads” program to encourage recreational reading among students. The program targeted sophomores, a group considered by many at the university to be an underserved population, and was sparked by the 2005 National Survey of Student Engagement, which showed that University of Dayton students were reading less than their counterparts at other institutions. The Porch Reads pilot instituted small-group book discussions for sophomores, led by faculty members. A grant enabled the project to provide books and refreshments to all participants. Email and word of mouth were sufficient marketing tools for obtaining a sizeable number of voluntary participants. However, most students were already moderate to heavy readers, with few nonreader participants. Still, each book in the

program attracted more returning readers than the previous book, and the program successfully met its objectives.

Browsing Collections

There are several examples in the literature of browsing collections, groups of materials set apart from the rest of the collection for the explicit purpose of leisure reading, at academic institutions. Zauha (1993) states that today's browsing collections have "less of the didactic agenda" of the past and focus on "the newest attractive book," including fiction, biography, and books on hobbies and travel (p. 58). Morrissett's (1994) survey discusses leisure collections with "mini-collections" of paperback, book rentals, magazines, and videos, as well as items from Friends organizations, gift books, and materials from the regular collection (p. 123). The selection of materials from the regular collection is explicitly mentioned by Zauha as a benefit, since no separate materials budget would be needed for the collection (p. 59). While Cabell Library does not currently have a browsing collection due to space and resource considerations, many libraries showcase new books and newspapers; Davis Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill features books reviewed in *The New York Times* Book Review. Faculty-authored works also often comprise the browsing collection, such as at Perkins/Bostock Library at Duke University.

Bibliographic access for browsing collections can vary, as a little more than half of Morrissett's respondents (55%) stated that their libraries' browsing collections were fully cataloged; this number presumably encompasses the 37% of libraries where the browsing collection was culled from the regular materials. The seven collections (18%) that had no bibliographic access at all were either rental programs or were termed browsing collections, but in scope were more closely aligned with VCU's Book Swap program.

The browsing collections spaces in Morrissett's survey ranged from the aforementioned uncataloged display racks of free paperbacks to alcoves with comfortable seating to separate lounge areas. Zauha's use of the term "browsing room" implies an enclosed space, "those alluring spaces ...where the reader may shut out the flood and clamor of information" (p. 57). While the rooms often seem hidden and not well "advertised" (p. 59) on library maps and Web sites, an attractive browsing room is an ideal space for programming targeted to alumni, Friends groups, and the community, and holds potential for marketing the library. The University of Wisconsin-Parkside Library boasts a beautifully furnished browsing room constructed and furnished with funding from the Friends of the Library.

Blogs

[Book reMarks \[http://blog.vcu.edu/bookremarks/\]](http://blog.vcu.edu/bookremarks/) is a blog started in August 2005 with the purpose of highlighting the VCU Libraries' collections and identifying leisure reading materials for our students and faculty. It is a twist on the traditional "staff recommendations" area commonly found at bookstores and public libraries. The project was initially envisioned as a creative way to provide this service despite the absence of a "new arrivals" or browsing section at Cabell Library. Like many academic libraries, the majority of the physical collections are arranged by the Library of Congress classification system, which means that the stacks are not conducive to serendipitous discovery of appropriate leisure reading materials. In addition, book jackets are removed before new items are shelved, and many titles have library binding, lessening the options for attractive materials suitable for display. The blog serves as an alternative, virtual display and the online format addresses these challenges and the reality that students often are not coming to the library to browse, but rather for an express purpose: to study, look for specific materials, ask a research question, or attend a class. Book reMarks is a different way to reach out to students who may be hesitant to approach our reference desk (the sign for which advertises "research assistance") for reader's advisory services that are outside the scope of their coursework.

Virginia Commonwealth University offers blog templates and hosting for all campus departments, organizations, and individuals. A University template was used as a starting point for Book reMarks, though some features were changed, including the addition of the blog logo, placement of images, and the inclusion of StatCounter, an invisible web tracker. Statistics are also available via the Urchin software used by the University to monitor web usage.

Once the blog was established, we sought ways to increase site traffic through links on our Web site and promotion in the library. Online reviews are linked within the catalog records as well as from a "Podcasts and Blogs" section of the VCU Libraries homepage. Book reMarks content is also placed in a rotating lineup of "featured blogs" highlighted within the Undergraduate Research Toolkit. Print promotional venues include occasional spotlights in "The Bottom Line," our by-students-for-students bathroom stall newsletter aimed at undergraduates. In addition, reference desk staff often use this resource as a starting point when answering readers' advisory questions.

Book reMarks also helps draw attention to components of our collection with which users may be unfamiliar, including children's literature, graphic novels, and the collection at the Community Health Education Center. A notable example of how this has been effective is during the VCU Libraries celebration of Black History Month. Since its inception, Book reMarks has highlighted African-American-themed works in fiction, non-fiction, drama, short stories, biographies, and children's literature during the month of February. A recent edition of reviews commemorating Women's History Month written by members of Sigma Lambda Upsilon/Señoritas Latinas Unidas helps meet the goal of using library outreach

services as an innovative way to foster dialogue with patrons. A previous move to enable comments on the blog has had modest success, and soliciting actual content from users expands on this. This also has the advantage of spreading the review workload while increasing user buy-in and reaching out to the community. However, depending on the quality of the comments and of students' reviews, more staff time is sometimes required for editing.

Indeed, one of the biggest challenges of this project has been staffing. Book reMarks is managed by one librarian, though any staff member may submit reviews of items in the Libraries' collection. This model ensures that a wide variety of material is featured and viewpoints expressed. There have, however, been several changes in administrative rights to the blog due to librarian turnover and reorganization of responsibilities, and it can also be difficult to solicit enough reviews from busy library workers to ensure a steady stream of fresh content.

Book reMarks has been deemed a success within the library because of its usefulness in readers' advisory and as an outreach tool. In the last week of May, 2008, the blog received an average of 1,141 hits per day. Since statistics started being kept in January of 2006, the blog has received 1,288,475 hits as of June 2, 2008. Readers have accessed it via links on the Libraries' Web site, from online searches for specific books, and using RSS readers. They come from domains around the world, and they find the blog using various search engines.

Administrative issues to consider have included transfer of passwords, adding and removing individuals' access to Web accounts, instruction about local blogging protocols, recordkeeping, and transferring over the relationships with outside stakeholders. Each time, a small amount of promotion has been necessary to inform staff throughout the library of the changeover. This promotion, usually in the form of staff emails, doubly serves as a reminder to staff who may wish to contribute content. Other email reminders are sent before Black History Month to encourage staff participation. The scope of Book reMarks was also expanded to generate more reviews; while it originally focused on books, the site now includes films and a category for music and audio.

The book review blog is not unique to VCU Libraries, as many libraries use this format for a similar purpose. Many factors about these blogs vary substantially, from where they are located online, to who the reviewers are, to what types of reviews are available. In general, these reviews are of items that are either in the library's collection, or that can be added to the library's collection. Hosting options chosen include the library's web site, the college or university's web hosting, or an independent platform of some kind, such as Blogger or WordPress. These blogs serve a promotional function for the library, as well as an extension of the traditional reader's advisory function.

The book reviews on some blogs are written by reviewers both on the library staff and from the patron base. [The Grinnell College Libraries Favorite Books and Book Review](#) is a very active blog soliciting reviews, lists of titles, or individual titles from "[a]ll members of the Grinnell College community, [including] students, staff, faculty, alumni, and friends" [<http://grinnellbookreview.blogspot.com/>]. In

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other cases, reviews of library books are incorporated into the library's general blog. While this does not solely focus on the collection, it presents the advantage of being able to direct readers simply to "the library blog" in order to see current reviews, instead of requiring them to navigate through several pages. Harvard's Kennedy School Library hosts a multipurpose blog that serves as a "[s]potlight on library, research and information news," promoting select new titles with thumbnail images of dustjackets, as well as descriptions of some new resources [<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/library/blog/>].

Cabell Library Book Swap

As the library worked to develop creative ways to engage students, the Undergraduate Services Librarian put forward a proposal to create an informal browsing collection on the first floor of the Cabell Library. The first floor is a high-traffic location as it features the reference desk and collection, almost 100 computer workstations, the circulation desk and a Starbucks coffee shop. Just outside of the coffee shop, the library developed a lounge area with low tables, comfortable chairs and sofas and easy access to our Current Periodical collection. The concept was to place the bookshelf for the Cabell Library Book Swap in the lounge and to encourage leisure reading in conjunction with a visit to the coffee bar. Library faculty and staff initially populated the Book Swap with donations from their personal collections, as well as remainders from previous book sales. A sign above the bookshelf provides simple guidelines: "If you find a book you would like to take, simply leave another book you've enjoyed in exchange. All books are welcome, with the exception of textbooks, technical manuals, and proselytizing literature."

As with [Book reMarks](#), the Book Swap is promoted on the Undergraduate Research Toolkit, "The Bottom Line," and at the reference desk. On average, roughly 100 books are available on the shelf with a 10% turnover in the material per week, and occasional spikes in usage up to a 30% turnover per week. These numbers indicate that the shelf is both well-utilized and replenished, as opposed to simply depleted. One to ten books per month appear on the shelf that do not fit Book Swap guidelines, and these books are given to Collection Management to be considered for the collection or for the annual Friends of the Library book sale. While the inventory does tend to fall over time, it swells with regular infusions from students, staff, and faculty who bring in from one to dozens of books at a time. Periodic e-mails to library staff have resulted in increased donations in the months following, increasing the book count by as much as 280% in one case. Types of books that appear on the shelf include everything from Regency romances to contemporary literature to hobby handbooks. As many of these items are often outside our scope as an academic library, the Book Swap is a creative solution for additional offerings beyond our circulating collections.

As at VCU, many libraries have a bookcase that is designated for patrons, staff members, or the general public to take and leave their own books that they

wish to trade. A variety of factors go into the institution of a book swap. Will the books be cataloged? What sorts of materials will be allowed on the bookcase? Many libraries have some sort of written policy about what should or should not go onto the bookcase in terms of content. The physical quality of the books may also be relevant, as some book swaps are almost entirely the province of clean, fairly new novels or popular nonfiction books, whereas others accommodate anything that patrons bring. Restrictive policies allow for a more targeted range of books, but require that the shelf receives more attention from staff so that unacceptable materials can be effectively weeded. Examples of book swaps can be found online, from Georgia Tech [<http://weblog.library.gatech.edu/news/2006/08/23/book-swap-%E2%80%93-bring-a-book-take-a-book/>] to Drury University [<http://libguides.drury.edu/content.php?mode=preview&pid=745&sid=7220>].

Displays

An autumn 2007 addition to VCU Libraries' literacy outreach is a glass-enclosed bulletin board on display near the Book Swap bookcase. Entitled "Book Happenings," this bulletin board is designated for the promotion of local literature-related events, including lectures, readings or performances, and for creative writing activities. Postings thus far have included a list of local events updated monthly, fliers for select events, and multiple postings for a campus literary journal. It is hoped that this board will also attract notice both to Book Swap and, via printed advertisement, to Book reMarks. Preliminary focus group feedback indicates little or no awareness of Book Happenings among undergraduates. In view of the physical collocation of the two resources, perhaps repeated visits by patrons to Book Swap, in combination with more eye-catching postings, will increase the usefulness of the bulletin board.

Many libraries use displays of one kind or another, whether to promote their library collection or for other purposes. Some use large glass cases that can accommodate books from the collection. Others use bulletin boards and post book covers or other similar material, or they promote community activities, which may or may not include literacy-related activities. Individual displays may be created by library staff, other librarians at the institution, or patrons or other community members.

Level of administration varies significantly from institution to institution. The Information Commons at Northwestern University Library, for instance, maintains a bulletin board "as a place to exhibit announcements of campus and other events of interest to the Northwestern community," allowing for approved postings of a wide variety of university-related events [<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/ic/bulletin.html>]. Central Michigan University Libraries, by contrast, reserves a portion of their bulletin board for official business, but allows general postings elsewhere on the board, so long as they are timely and respectful [<http://www.lib.cmich.edu/policies/display.htm>].

Reading Programs

GO READ Richmond was a five year (2002-2007) community reading initiative in the city and surrounding counties. Prior to 2005, GO READ programming, such as book discussions and an author reading and discussion, was primarily concentrated in public and school libraries. In 2005, in collaboration with representatives from Off Campus Student Services and the Student Commons, the VCU Libraries promoted GO READ by advertising city-wide events and hosting similar events on the VCU campus. Within the VCU Libraries, funding was provided to purchase several copies of that year's book, *Charming Billy* by Alice McDermott. The library populated a large display case with information about the author and book, as well as previous GO READ books.

To promote involvement with the citywide program, a VCU Libraries Undergraduate Services Librarian joined the city's Go Read Richmond steering committee, which was the guiding force behind the initiative. The university's representation at meetings allowed for communication and cross-promotion of campus and city events and because of this partnership, many students participated in city events and community members attended campus events as well. The university's programming attracted significant local attention and was featured in *Style Weekly*, Richmond's alternative news weekly [<http://www.styleweekly.com/article.asp?idarticle=11193>]. Campus events held in the student commons were centered on weekly book discussions that focused on different themes. Halfway through the fall semester, a prominent professor from the Medical College of Virginia Campus was invited to discuss alcoholism and families, which is one of the book's major themes. The final event, held at the Student Commons, featured a local Irish band and traditional Irish foods. Both of these special events were exceptionally well-attended by both students and members of the community. This demonstrates the relevance of these programs which attract people who may otherwise not have much exposure to the library and the services it offers.

In 2006, VCU Libraries partnered with the University College to develop the inaugural Summer Reading Program. Launched in 2006, the University College is "a central home for university-wide programs and resources that help to advance students' undergraduate experience" (*About the UC*, ¶2). The program is a requirement for first-year students, but it is also marketed to the entire university community. To foster awareness of the program, the VCU Libraries designed a Web site to serve as a portal to reviews, author interviews, and other resources [<http://www.library.vcu.edu/uc/reading.html>]. First-year students received copies of the book at summer orientation and were expected to read it before the beginning of the fall semester and to participate in a book discussion during Welcome Week. Also, a number of freshmen classes used the text "as a point of discussion" during the students' first year. The University College purchased 125 copies of the title to

provide easy access for others interested in participating in the program. The books were part of an attractive display near the entrance to both libraries and were available for a seven-day loan period to ensure quick turnover and continued availability. In addition to the Libraries' provision of resources for the program, many librarians volunteered to lead discussion groups during Welcome Week.

The Libraries' successful collaboration with the University College developed into an annual partnership that also serves to strengthen the Libraries' goals of outreach and service to undergraduates. Its role has expanded with the appointment of library faculty members to the 2007 and 2008 selection committees. It is encouraging to note that VCU Libraries is not alone in its involvement with this type of program; May Rodney's article detailing the One Book, One Community project at Winston-Salem State University is one example found in the literature, and Western Kentucky University partners with the Bowling Green community for One Campus-One Community-One Book [http://bgonebook.org/ococob_about.htm].

Conclusion

Recreational reading services are a creative and effective way of marketing academic libraries to both frequent users and novices. Programs such as blogs, browsing collections, book swaps, and reading programs have the power to increase the use of your collections and facilities, and highlight hidden gems, new additions, or interesting materials. Research libraries are often intimidating and confusing, especially for new users. A student's level of comfort and familiarity with the library is a factor that we consider critical to academic success. Therefore, it is useful to position the library as a place not only to study and conduct research, but also as a place to relax and to enjoy leisure reading.

Web-based literacy outreach efforts such as blogs serve to connect students to the library through a medium with which they are likely comfortable. Ideally, this comfort with online literacy resources could translate into confidence to identify relevant materials in both the library's online and physical spaces. Bulletin boards, browsing collections, display cases, reading nooks, and book swaps foster leisure reading and relaxation for those users who visit the library building. These resources help create a welcoming, warm atmosphere that is more conducive to relaxation (not to mention more appealing to undergraduates) than the austere and intimidating environment students often expect to find in academic libraries.

Reading programs in conjunction with public libraries, citywide reading programs, or campus-wide initiatives can help bring the library presence out into the campus community and will attract users that otherwise may not have any exposure to or interest in traditional library resources. By offering a mix of new technology and classic promotional tools, VCU Libraries hopes to foster student engagement and academic success by encouraging patrons to look beyond the traditional scope of our research libraries.

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