

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Publications and Research

Borough of Manhattan Community College

---

2017

### **New Outreach Initiatives at a Community College**

Sharell Walker

*CUNY Borough of Manhattan Community College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/bm\\_pubs/153](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/bm_pubs/153)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)



## New Outreach Initiatives at a Community College

Sharell L. Walker 

A. Phillip Randolph Memorial Library, Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY,  
New York, NY, USA

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the development and initiation of new outreach programs by the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) Library department after the hiring of a new librarian. The literature review will address current research that was used in the decision making process whilst putting together outreach initiatives and literature used to develop future ideas. The article discusses the development of these outreach initiatives, the problems encountered during their initial implementation, the outcomes of the programs that were offered, feedback, and the future goals of the library department.

### KEYWORDS

Outreach; academic librarianship; community college; college students

### New outreach initiatives at a 2 year college

In August 2018, Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), a 2-year City University of New York institution, hired a new librarian to join their workforce. Sharell L. Walker was hired on the level of Instructor and Reference Librarian. Upon hiring, Professor Walker became tasked with developing new ideas for the libraries continued outreach initiatives. The purpose of these programs was to attract users to the library sources and services outside of the classic connotations. The events were meant to show the library as not only a place of scholarly activity but one of enjoyment for the student population. Recent changes to the library administration urged the idea of connecting to the student body on a more relational level rather than a strictly academic one. By making student outreach a bigger part of the library mission the hope was that more students would be attracted to the idea of spending time in the library, engaging with the library collections, and communicating with the library staff. This article examines the new initiatives put forward during the spring 2018 semester and their subsequent effect on future outreach initiatives.

**CONTACT** Sharell L. Walker  [shwalker@bmcc.cuny.edu](mailto:shwalker@bmcc.cuny.edu)  A. Phillip Randolph Memorial Library, Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY, New York, NY, USA.

Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC © Sharell L. Walker.

## Literature review

During the initial development phase of the spring 2018 outreach calendar, the ALA online guide for promotional ideas titled “More Ideas Too Good Not to Share” (ALA 2009) was consulted for creative and new outreach initiatives. The online guide gives a sampling of different promotion strategies used by academic libraries around the country, including Carleton College (Northfield, Minnesota) and Columbia College (South Carolina) among others. Suggested events include multicultural outreach initiatives, various exhibits, ways to conduct programming and collaboration, and ideas on how to reach out to students. (ALA 2009). The Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) library staff modeled some of the events described on that webpage for their own outreach activities. These events included a poetry reading and a research essay contest. Other events in the future may also be inspired by this work.

Another article consulted during the deliberation period was the conference paper by Heidi Blackburn and Claire Chamley. Blackburn and Chamley discuss the “Color Me Calm” event at University of Nebraska Omaha. After coloring for adults became popular, the University decided to implement the strategy to help students relax during stressful midterms and finals week. Blackburn and Chamley state “Criss Library held an event titled ‘Color Me Calm’ during the last week of October 2015. The event coincided with midterms...to promote stress relief” (Blackburn and Chamley 2016, 3). Though there is little medical evidence in coloring as art therapy, the staff at Criss Library believed the coloring event would be a stress reliever to their students during the often stressful midterm’s week. The event was so successful the decision was made to also allow student’s access to coloring pages “during the week before Finals Week, an event known as ‘Destress Fest’” (Blackburn and Chamley 2016, 4). They concluded that “while not accepted by the medical profession as a prescribed method to reduce stress, students seemed to leave a little bit happier” (Blackburn and Chamley 2016, 5).

Additional support for art in the academic library comes from Megan Lotts and Tara Maharjan in their article “Outreach, engagement, learning, and fun in 60 seconds” (2018). Lotts and Maharjan discuss an activity commonly used in the library for artistic events... button making. The article states “Although button making may be found more often in public libraries, many academic libraries use the tool as a means to educate students to help them relieve stress [and for] ‘stress buster’ events during finals week” (Lotts and Maharjan 2018, 365–366). Various images were selected for students to turn into buttons with the use of a button machine purchased by the library. Lotts and Maharjan state “these events provide library patrons an opportunity to take a short break, stretch their creative

muscles with hands on learning... all while making a button” (Lotts and Maharjan 2018, 367). The button making served as a great stress reliever for students during the finals stretch and helped them engage with the library as well as their peers.

In his article “Onward and Upward: Reflections on Community College Library Leadership”, Kenley Neufeld (2014), discusses the interesting challenges community colleges, such as BMCC, face regarding outreach and services. Community college libraries often have smaller staffs and smaller budgets than larger Universities. One way Neufeld addressed this issue was to build better connections with the faculty. Neufeld hired an outreach librarian who was asked to “visit every department chair and introduce herself at as many department meetings as possible ... as a result of these face-to-face outreach efforts, the library experienced growth ... Once the faculty relationship was established, the students began to appear in droves” (Neufeld 2014, 430–431). Neufeld describes the benefit of building interdisciplinary relationships had on the library. Once faculty understood the dedication of the library staff and the services offered, this understanding trickled down to the students.

## **Discussion**

The literature and previously gathered requests from students were taken into account to put together the calendar of events for spring 2018. Event feedback forms from prior years were used to gauge student interest in outreach initiatives. Many students had requested that more artistic events be held in the library. With this in mind, the library added art space events that combined painting and crafts to appeal to this request. In addition, based on the literature read, events such as poetry readings, research contest, and movie nights were added to the agenda. It was also decided that the library would continue with a bi-annual guitar recital done in conjunction with the BMCC guitar classes and club. These outreach initiatives did not always go smoothly and were not always met with approval. There were obstacles and resistance from both outside and inside the library.

## ***Limitations of the literature***

While the literature proved effective in generating ideas for the academic outreach programs there were some limitations to their usefulness. Many of the events were designed for 4-year colleges, especially colleges with students living in dorms. BMCC is a 2-year college with only commuter students. This obstacle was not covered in all of the literature. Commuter students proved harder to attract to outreach events. Neufeld (2014)

discusses some of the hardships faced by 2 year community colleges in regards to their funding and limited staff. Neufeld briefly describes the different types of students that are typical at community colleges. Neufeld describes students “unprepared for college-level coursework [taking] college level coursework out of necessity... students who struggle to write a article or research a topic... advanced students preparing to transfer to the University” (Neufeld 2014, 430). These students are very common at BMCC. In addition, since our students are all commuter students, meaning they do not live on the campus where they take classes, it becomes difficult to urge students to stay on campus during their free time to attend a school event. Students need to be drawn into events with incentives, whether the incentive be course related or food related (which has proven very useful). More information is needed on how to attract commuter students to outreach initiatives.

### ***Issues and obstacles***

The new outreach initiatives were met with some reluctance and faced various obstacles during the spring 2018 semester. One of the largest issues faced was the process of marketing. Various avenues were tried in an attempt to determine the most effective way for telling students about upcoming events. One of the first marketing tools put in place was a section of the library webpage dedicated to an events calendar, now found here: <http://lib1.bmcc.cuny.edu/events/>. Previously, events were not always publicized on the library webpage in a central location. A library events page was created so students could find information about future events at all times. In addition, students could be directed to the website or shown the website during various information sessions conducted at the library. The library calendar was created by using the LibCal section of LibApps, a Springshare service paid by the library. Once the information for upcoming events was finalized, they were added to a calendar on LibCal. A widget was then created to be added to the WordPress site that houses the BMCC library website. Initially, most students failed to realize the event page had been added. After its initial introduction the events page has yet to prove its significance to outreach attendance. Though the library events page has yet to prove its value, events were also publicized on the BMCC events page found at <http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/calendar/>. Though attendance did not increase significantly, it was noticed that more students went to the reference desk to ask about events they saw publicized on the BMCC events page.

The second marketing issue was in terms of signage. The library has a budget to create posters to showcase pertinent library information, this

includes advertising for upcoming events. Posters were created for events and placed in various places around the library. One poster was also placed at the entrance of the library for students to see as they walked in to the space. The posters proved largely ineffective at attracting the attention of students. Upon questioning, most students admitted they failed to see the poster or read what it said. The poster did help in designating the spot for the actual event but failed to draw the attention of students. Flyers were also used to market events. Flyers were created and placed in areas of the library densely populated by students such as they study areas and student carrels. These flyers initially proved to be ineffective. Staff members also considered the flyers to be clutter. The next idea was to put flyers on student cork boards around the entirety of the BMCC campus that are often used to advertise books and services for sale as well as events given approval by the Student Government Association (SGA). The flyers were stamped with an official SGA sign and placed on flyer boards around the campus. This proved to draw some additional student views. Students were observed regarding the flyers on the corkboards but student interaction still failed to increase.

Issues also came from internal disagreement. The idea of outreach proved to be a contentious conversation during departmental meetings. Many people have different ideas on what academic libraries should do for outreach. One prevalent idea is that academic outreach should be limited to only academic activities, such as studying or research help. Artistic events were not deemed necessary to the student population. There was concern that we would demean the intelligence of our students by having them do things such as coloring and playing games. In addition, artistic events were seen as outreach specifically for public libraries rather than academic institutions. Public libraries, who cater to a wider range of ages including children, have strong success with artistic outreach events. In opposition to that idea, it was argued that artistic endeavors help stimulate the mind and put students in a relaxed mood to better approach their school work. The Blackburn and Chamley (2016) and the Lotts and Maharjan (2018) articles, provided evidence that artistic outreach programs, especially during finals week, proved to be very helpful to increasing student success and retention. In the end, the spring 2018 semester contained a mixture of artistic and academic events designed to reach every student and appeal to all ideas of outreach.

### ***Outreach events***

Over spring 2018, BMCC Library hosted/coordinated a variety of outreach events. Our events included: Art Table, Book Speed Dating, Poetry and

Haiku Reading, film screenings and panel discussions (in partner with the Criminal Justice program), and de-stress fest activities. The events were geared to attract a variety of student interests and to highlight library collections. Unfortunately, attendance proved to be a greater obstacle than initially planned. Outreach events were often sparsely attended by students. Those who did attend the events often happened upon the event by chance and thought it would be interesting to stay, rather than having planned to attend. This indicates that the BMCC students, and perhaps commuter students in general, are more likely to engage in spur of the moment activities that they see happening rather than plan to attend an event. This idea is confirmed by the event feedback form that indicated most students did not plan to come to the library for an event despite their ultimate attendance.

In an effort to increase attendance, the library began partnering with different departments and programs for student incentives. The first collaboration was a film screening of “Crown Heights” with a panel discussion involving criminal justice professors. Various professors agreed to offer their students extra credit if they attended the event. A sign-in sheet was provided for students to indicate what course they were from and their professor’s name. 60–80 participants were projected to attend. In the end, the event had a total of 19 attendees. This amount was an increase from previous outreach events but significantly lower than expected. The event was still deemed a success as the attendees found the event enjoyable.

Another collaboration event was a Poetry reading and Haiku contest. Students and faculty were invited to the library to read their own original poetry. Students were able to take part in a Haiku contest that was funded by the Asian Heritage Committee, which puts on events during April in celebration of Asian Heritage Month. The poetry event proved to be a very successful event. Like previous events, few students planned to attend but happened upon the event already underway. This particular event was held in the hallway space directly in front of the library. Students coming in and out of the library or making their way down the hall saw the event taking place and were beckoned to come and participate by the librarian in charge. In addition, cookies were offered as incentives for participation. These elements combined helped to increase student participation.

The most controversial event that takes place in the library is the guitar recital. The guitar recital event first occurred in spring 2016 as a jazz set of performing BMCC professors. It was since changed to include students involved in the guitar class and guitar club. Every semester, during de-stress fest, the guitar classes and the guitar club are invited to play soothing music in the library for 45 min. The event is controversial for both student and faculty alike. Event feedback forms were used to gauge, staff, and faculty reaction to the event. There are faculty and student members of the

community who feel that the library is not the correct venue for a guitar recital. However, the negative comments are largely outnumbered by the positive comments. For this reason, the library continues to offer the guitar recital every semester. The event is advertised beforehand with both posters and flyers around the library that indicate where students can move to if they find the guitar music distracting. While a large number of viewers do not come to the library for the guitar recital, most of those already in the area enjoy the soothing music the recital provides.

The last major outreach event is de-stress fest. De-stress fest is organized by BMCC administration and faculty to help students reduce stress in preparation for their final exams. The library sets up tables, in the hallway space directly in front of the library, with various activities for 4 h a day during the 2 weeks of de-stress fest. These activities include chess, jigsaw puzzles, connector puzzles, and coloring. Once a week a special event will be offered such as painting or button making. Button making proved to be very popular with the students. The students greatly enjoyed the invitation to create their own button. Cute images of baby animals were provided as well as blank button circles for students to create their own image. Many students chose to draw their own image to turn into a button. Some librarians view the more artistic endeavors, especially coloring and button making, as inappropriate for an academic library space. To help strengthen the argument as to why artistic endeavors should be included in de-stress fest various research was consulted about the importance of art to academic success. With these arguments in hand the library included art in de-stress fest activities. Like other activities, few students planned before hand to attend but happened upon the event by passing by. The tables were often full of students playing chess, trying to solve the puzzles and coloring in beautiful pictures. After de-stress fest ended, students returned to the reference desk to ask for the chess set so they could continue playing.

## **Conclusion**

One large takeaway from this investigation was the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration. Librarians needed faculty professors and other staff members on their side to make outreach events as successful as possible. Incentives to participate in events given from teaching professors can help significantly increase the number of attendees to an event.

The attendance for the “Crown Heights” event was significantly more than other events. This increase can be attributed to the professors offering their students extra credit to attend the screening and panel. Attendance was taken and sent to the professors as proof of which students attended.

This also proves that interdisciplinary and interdepartmental collaboration is incredibly useful to outreach.

The main conclusion learned from this endeavor is that academic outreach is a labor of trial and error. Some events will succeed and others will not. Outreach librarians must be prepared for events that do not go as well as hoped. They must also be prepared to evaluate what elements did not work, go back to drawing board, and revise their outreach strategies. However, much of outreach is still left to one factor that is extremely difficult to control: student engagement. The promise of student engagement is not always there. The lessons learned, while useful to BMCC students, may not be the same at other institutions. It is best for outreach librarians to tailor their events to their populations, as the BMCC library is on a quest to do.

One of the largest future outreach plans includes an Open House between the BMCC library and the Learning Resource Center. The two departments are often confused with each other due to their proximity and the similarities between services offered. A joint open house was suggested for incoming students to become familiar with the two departments and what services are offered. Another collaborative event being planned is a One Book/One Film event that is shaping up to cross multiple BMCC departments. Many previous events will be repeated for semesters to come. De-stress fest and the Guitar recital have become semiannual events and will continue to be conducted based on student responses. Future publications and announcements will be made in regards to these initiatives.

## ORCID

Sharell L. Walker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8161-6354>

## References

- American Library Association (ALA). 2009. More Ideas Too Good Not to Share. Accessed September 19, 2017. <https://www.ala.org/ala/pio/campaign/academicresearch/moregoodideas.htm>.
- Blackburn, H., and C. E. Chamley. 2016. Color me calm: Adult coloring and the university library. *Kansas Library Association College & University Libraries Section Proceedings* 6 (1):1–11. doi:10.4148/2160-942X.1053.
- Lotts, M., and T. Maharjan. 2018. Outreach, engagement, learning, and fun in 60 seconds: Button making at the Rutgers university libraries. *College and Research Libraries News* 79 (7):364–79.
- Neufeld, K. 2014. Onward and upward: Reflections on community college library leadership. *Journal of Library Administration* 54 (5):426–34. doi:10.1080/01930826.2014.946784.

Copyright of Community & Junior College Libraries is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.