
Extracurricular Reading

Creating and Sustaining On Campus Book Clubs

Martin Goldberg, Guest Columnist

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Readers' advisory services continue to expand into the academic world in a variety of ways. In past *RUSQ* Readers' Advisory columns, Julie Elliott has explored the opportunities and challenges to providing extracurricular reading assistance in campus libraries (see "Academic Libraries and Extracurricular Reading Promotion," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2007): 34–43; and "Barriers to Extracurricular Reading Promotion in Academic Libraries," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (2009): 340–46). Readers' advisory services can offer academic libraries the opportunity to reach new readers, promote library resources in new ways, and build a feeling of community on campus. Here, Martin Goldberg looks at the opportunities to be found in library-sponsored campus book discussion groups.

Martin Goldberg is Head Librarian at the Beaver Campus of Penn State University, Monaca, PA. He has participated in many diversity-related committees in the university as well as in the American Library Association and the Association of College and Research Libraries. Marty's presentations and writings have focused on diversity-related issues, as well as Holocaust studies. Several of his articles have appeared in *American Libraries*.—Editor

Mirror, mirror, mirror on the wall, what's the greatest book club of all? Perhaps Snow White's stepmother, the nasty Queen, had a discussion group she regularly met with to talk about some terrific books, but many would say Oprah indeed has the best book club of all. The American Library Association went so far as to cite Winfrey: "Through her Book Club, [Winfrey] has done more to revitalize and promote the importance of reading among American citizens than any other public figure in recent times."¹ Bernard Schlink's novel *The Reader* was chosen as one of Oprah's picks. He wrote,

The Oprah Book Club makes people read and that, I think, is a great thing. It is so great that I don't care too much about the criticism that I sometimes hear smart people raise in a smart way. I don't expect someone in Oprah's position to always pick great books. But as little as I can follow her selections, many of her books are really worthwhile and they are also books that make you want to read more.²

Book groups are a great activity for librarians—not only can librarians talk up their resources and collections, but many book groups will create book displays, offer advice on building library collections, grow into dedicated book

borrowers, get active in friends-of-the-library clubs, and some may eventually become library donors. Hollands, in *Fellowship in a Ring*, wrote, "For a small investment of staff time and money, libraries gain much from book groups."³

Book discussion groups gained popularity in the late 1800s as women looked for intellectual opportunities and social interaction through study groups and culture clubs. McGinley and colleagues wrote that "such groups often provided women with a means to discover the eloquence of their voices and the strength of their convictions; and very quickly these literature study circles became a forum for addressing more public issues of progressive reform and democratic life."⁴

Book clubs come in all shapes and sizes (estimates run as high as 50,000 book clubs in Britain and a half-million in America) with a huge array of special reading interests.⁵ More recently, One Book, One City reading campaigns have proved to be immensely popular in all sizes of cities, often having corporate sponsorship. While many book clubs meet only a few times, many others exist for years because of great book picks, interested readers, and effective discussion leaders. Some people feel they're too busy to read, but a book group gives them a focused need to complete a book or to read books they normally wouldn't think of. Others look at book groups as intellectual stimulation and social interaction.⁶ In 2009, Reading Group Guides, a web-based reading group resource, conducted a survey of book club members, receiving almost 8,000 responses. The survey indicated that 83 percent of the groups read both hardcovers and paperbacks, 65 percent would love to have authors join their discussions, 72 percent wanted a place online to find out what other clubs picks are, 71 percent rely on recommendations from friends for titles, and 37 percent complained their book club doesn't always stay focused on the book.⁷ Most books were chosen from local newspaper reviews as well as from the *New York Times*, the Oprah show, morning talk shows, and NPR. Top categories were bestsellers, general fiction, classics, award winners, historical fiction, mystery, biography, memoirs, and books adapted for movies.

The digital world has not passed over book clubs either! Some libraries have organized online book clubs via the library's website. To get the group started, the publisher will e-mail the first few chapters of the book and create an online discussion list. The library supplies copies of the complete book to the members.⁸

The book club movement also has spread on academic campuses across the United States. Recently the campus student activities speaker series at Penn State University, Beaver County Campus hosted Loung Ung, author of *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* and *Lucky Child: A Daughter of Cambodia Reunites with the Sister She Left Behind*. Her memoirs relate the reign of terror in her homeland during the Khmer Rouge reign in the 1970s, as well as conditions there today. Our Center for Academic Excellence and the library staff networked with our student diversity club to form a diversity reading group with Ung's book as our kickoff title. From that experience, I learned a lot about what really makes or breaks a reading group.

A multicultural, multigenerational group of five females and four males met in the campus' special-events dining room to kick off the new diversity reading group. After some brief introductions and some tasty pizza (always a sure draw for always hungry college students), one of the students became a discussion leader describing the origins of the group as well as her experiences in a similar reading group the prior year. She gave some examples of what they read last year, gave a brief description of our inaugural books, and said the author was coming to campus in two months as part of the campus speaker series. I joined in the lively discussion, suggesting we relate the types of books we enjoy as well as what interesting titles we might have recently read. We touched on science fiction, romance, action, and biographies, and some students even mentioned recent films they enjoyed. The discussion facilitator then passed around a sheet with four books we should consider for future readings: Robin Bowman's *It's Complicated: The American Teenager*, a photographic essay of a five year journey portraying the wide diversity of the teen generation; Deandre Pearson's riveting novel about gangs titled *Diversity*; Steve Robbins's *What If? Short Stories to Spark Diversity Dialogue*; and *All She Wanted*, Aphrodite Jones's investigation into the life and death of Brandon Teens, which was the basis for the movie *Boys Don't Cry*.

Before Ung's appearance, it was decided to divide into two reading groups to better meet the students' busy class schedules. Both groups were rather small—mine had five, including one other adult staff person. Our discussion leader posted a wiki of some questions about the history of Southeast Asia and some things to think about when reading the book. Once we met, we immediately discussed the first few chapters and all seemed to enjoy the author's writing style. We tried to understand what was going on in that region during a chaotic time, as well as the personal feelings of Ung's family. We all shared stories of what the Vietnam War era meant to us personally or how it affected family members and friends. At the conclusion of our hour-long chat, we all pledged to complete the book before Ung was to appear on campus. Our book talks were always interesting and fast moving—it seemed that no one was timid—everyone gave their opinions on most any topic we raised. Some of us quickly read through Ung's second memoir *Lucky Child: A Daughter of Cambodia Reunites with the Sister She Left Behind*. David Chandler's *A History of Cambodia* provided a great overview of the long history of the region. At our next reading group meeting, I gave a brief presentation on events that led to the Vietnam War as well as Ung's return to seek out her Cambodian family.

Before we knew it, Luong Ung was appearing before several hundred students. Her presentation was breathtaking—you could almost hear a pin drop as she related her experiences through that most horrific era and her crusade to eradicate the use of land mines. Following her program, the diversity book club was invited to have lunch with the author and was requested to sit at her table. During the luncheon, Luong Ung was introduced to a young couple with an infant who visited her presentation—the mother had immigrated

from Cambodia and was so happy to meet a fellow Cambodian as well as to share some good wishes with each other. The book group members had all kinds of questions about the author's family, what she does when she visits her homeland, the political and economic climate in Cambodia, the similarities between the Jewish and Cambodian holocausts, the current living conditions in her homeland, what she was able to keep from her childhood, the strong ties between family members, and the Cambodian educational system. There was much discussion about Ung's work and travels to bring awareness of the terrible aftereffects of landmines in her homeland. A number of students were so moved that they started a campuswide collection in support of charities that were concerned with improving conditions in Cambodia, while others decided to focus an English term paper on Luong Ung's writings. The library staff expanded the exhibit we had on efforts to remove landmines throughout the world—some of our faculty loaned artifacts and photos from their own research trips around the world that related to Ung's visit. Students were actually not only stopping to look at the exhibit, they also were pointing out photos and maps to other interested students. Our handout of how to locate information and suggested websites on related topics was a hit with students interested on what they could do to keep connected with Ung's work. Our dining hall even rolled out a week of various Asian cuisines, which has become very popular.

The challenge for us was how to sustain our momentum to keep the reading group going. In an effort to see how we might be able to keep our reading group together and focused, I set out to research what makes for successful book discussion groups. Lauren Zina John provides good advice on how groups can choose books:

A blackboard is great to create a list of topics and specific books mentioned. Investigate the titles to see if multiple copies are available through the library or for sale at local bookstores. You may be also surprised that some of the authors are on tour so you could in attending an author talk with your group's choice.⁹

When it comes to nonfiction, John suggests avoiding overlong books, and she recommends memoirs because they usually provide a good reading attachment to the author.

Ellen Slezak gives some pointers to keep reading groups moving: (1) group leadership should often be changed to avoid any members from controlling the discussion; (2) be open to everyone's suggestions; (3) keep the discussion focused on the book and not on the weather, traffic, etc.; and (4) listen to everyone in the group because some of the most thoughtful observations come from the quiet members.¹⁰ Jenny Hartley says there are four factors that make for great discussions: the choices of books, the diversity of opinions of the reading group, the experiences and knowledge the readers bring to the group, and the rapport of the group.¹¹

Your book group can even have special events to keep interest going. Attend the movie version of the book or rent

the DVD. Attend a local appearance of the author (many publishers provide book tour schedules of authors). Invite spouses, partners, and friends to the group meetings for different opinions. Invite a local academic to talk on the topic or author. If nearby, plan a day trip to the author's home town or areas depicted in the book.¹² Our campus reading group decided to have several pot-luck lunches featuring Southeast Asian cuisine, which also attracted additional interest from several dozen students who found the food to be tasty and the topic of our readings interesting.

You don't need to be a voracious reader to suggest books to the group. Often, you can locate great discussion guides, especially for bestsellers, by searching Google (enter the book title and book discussion guide). The Library of Congress maintains a great website (www.loc.gov/index.html) for recommendations including The Center for the Book. Elizabeth Ellington and Jane Freimiller offer an excellent book that provides titles for every month, including information about the author, questions for discussion, Internet links, readings for further interest, and suggested videos.¹³ Neil Hollands's book *Fellowship in a Ring* is a terrific and topical account of how to organize a science fiction and fantasy group with tons of suggested titles to keep the group going. While most book groups choose one book for all members to read and discuss, Hollands points out "one reader's golden ring is another's deadly burden."¹⁴ An alternative approach is the thematic book group where members choose a book of their choice.

In some universities, book discussion groups have been started to target a specific audience or need. Librarians at the University of Dayton partnered with interested faculty to offer a reading program for sophomores. Based on national benchmarks, Dayton's students were found to be reading fewer recreational materials than their peers nationwide. Sophomores were pinpointed because it was felt that freshmen are often overwhelmed with the whole first year experience. Notices went out to students, informing them that the books would be free, there would be refreshments and a chance for \$150 textbook vouchers. Students who participated in the reading program were often those who read recreational books, and females outnumbered males three to one. The reading groups all met after 6 p.m. to avoid scheduling conflicts, and some of the groups even met after 9 p.m. Most of the groups numbered between five and fourteen members.¹⁵

Loyola University of Maryland has a fantastic diversity reading program that is coordinated by their office of academic affairs and diversity. They have an annual group luncheon with a guest speaker, such as Sister Patricia McLaughton from the Caroline Center, a workforce development program for women in Baltimore. The books included Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (Putnam, 2009), a novel that takes place in 1962 Mississippi from the voices of African American maids; Nell Irvin Painter's *The History of White People* (Norton, 2010), an interesting description of how the concept of race evolved; Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (Random House, 2010) tells of Henrietta Lacks, whose cells were taken from her over 60 years ago, the DNA of which was

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used in developing the polio vaccine, cancer research, and gene mapping; Antero Pietila's *Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City* (Ivan R. Dee, 2010), which describes the racial housing patterns that developed in Baltimore; *The Other Wes Moore* (Spiegel and Grau, 2010), a memoir of how two people with the same name can evolve into completely different fates; and *Whistling Vivaldi and Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us* (Norton, 2010) by social psychologist Claude Steele, which wonderfully describes the effects of our psychological grouping of people.

Keeping interest in a book discussion group shouldn't be on one person's shoulders. While a coordinating committee didn't seem to work for my campus group, we switched the chairmanship responsibilities every few months, which brought in fresh ideas. Joining with other constituencies helps too. Student clubs and organizations offer collaborative opportunities. After providing a list of possible biographies of famous psychologists, the student psychology club joined us for several book talks. The student veteran's committee took part in our discussions after reaching a consensus of what book they would like to be discussed. We also picked up some new members when we took an exhibit table at the annual campus health fair—our booth was “Improve Your Brainpower,” which attracted attention through our roulette wheel and candy gifts.

Publicity is important for on-campus book groups. In describing the planning for an annual library lecture, Irene Herold offers great suggestions for getting the word out about your activities. The College Relations department will often assist in creating a press release to local news outlets, which can attract local community readers (and don't forget to get every group member's e-mail address to keep them informed of future book talks). Every library staff are bound to have some individuals who excel in creating great graphics, which can be incorporated into a reading program guide, which should be placed near the book checkout area for possible future members. You might find interested faculty including book topics or guest speakers into their curriculum.¹⁶

So, here's hoping you will be interested enough to take that first step and talk to your colleagues about starting an on-campus diversity reading group. You'll find it enjoyable to learn about your community of users and bring attention to library resources and programs as well. We're enthusiastic about programming for future campus speakers—we have teams working on displays, reading lists, networking with community advocacy groups, and film screenings with follow-up panel discussions. No matter what age, racial makeup, or religion the group might be, with some advance planning, you can be on your way to not only launch a reading group, you might even keep it running for a long time, maybe longer than Oprah!

RESOURCES

Many divisions and roundtables of the American Library Association maintain suggested readings on a variety of diversity topics. See www.ala.org.

All kinds of interesting data about book clubs is reported in a 2009 online survey (ReadingGroupGuides.com, the Online Community for Reading Groups) of almost 9,000 readers: <http://readinggroupguides.com/surveys/ReadingGroupGuidesReaderSurvey.pdf>.

The California Council for the Humanities connects Californians to understand their shared heritage and diverse cultures. They support a wide array of activities including reading groups. See www.calhum.org/about/about_main.htm.

The Enoch Pratt Free Library provides a great website: “Organizing and Running an Adult Book Discussion Group.” (See www.prattlibrary.org/locations/fiction/index.aspx?id=32696). Included are links to getting a group started, how to choose books, and resources for good discussion topics and questions.

The Seattle Public Library loans kits of books to discussion groups that meet not only in the Library, but those that congregate in members' homes, businesses, churches, community centers, senior centers, and retirement homes. More information is located at www.spl.org/default.asp?pageID=collection_readinglists_discussiongroup.

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