

Summer 2002

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Recommended Citation

Bahr, Alice and Bolton, Nancy (2002) "Share the Experience: Academic Library, Public Library, and Community Partnerships," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 50 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol50/iss2/8>

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Share the Experience: Academic Library, Public Library, and Community Partnerships

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Examples abound of innovative ways in which public and academic libraries are partnering with each other and with their communities. In December, 2001, Nova Southeastern University (FL) announced the opening of its \$43 million Library, Research, and Information Technology Center, a joint-use facility created to serve the university's students and the residents of Broward County.¹ An even newer form of cooperative partnering across libraries to serve the broad needs of a larger community is 24/7 interactive reference services. The Alliance Library System in west central Illinois coordinates a "Ready for Reference" service for a group of eight private, public, and community colleges.² ASERL is also currently investigating options for cooperative online reference programming among member libraries.³

Clearly, the impetus for some kinds of partnering is economic. The "Ready for Reference" project was funded through a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant. But other types of partnering are also tied to mission or institutional goals. For years, the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL) lobbied for a statewide electronic resource-sharing program. The legislature passed the budget for an Alabama Virtual Library on 9 July 1999, expecting that a program would be in place before the start of school. While the Alabama Public Library Service began the arduous task of selecting databases, NAAL academic librarians assisted by using their database searching expertise to train school and public librarians. The impetus was to ensure

the success of an initiative for which the organization had campaigned long and hard.

Another means of partnering is opening academic programs to the public. Not only does that increase attendance by giving programs a wider audience but also it holds the promise of additional benefits. One of these is building relationships with community members who may consider lending their talents and support to other campus initiatives. Making libraries central to their communities is an impetus for the American Library Association's [Live @ Your Library](#) grants. Now in its second year, the grant program focuses on public programs in academic libraries.⁴

Public programming can also be mission-based. Academic friends' groups can provide a more permanent vehicle for public programming and community involvement, and many include that in their statement of purpose. One goal of The Friends of the Spring Hill College Library (Mobile, AL) is "to promote library/community ties." That goal dovetails well with the College's *Strategic Plan*, which calls for increased "presence and service in the local and regional community."⁵ In addition to several years of public programming featuring local, regional, and state writers, this organization's group also operates a used bookstore that supports public school summer reading programs.

Along with partnering based on defined needs—a new building, a grant for start-up costs for a new project, highlighting local authors' presence in the community—librarians can also initiate ideas for community-based services. While the sharing of facilities, staff, resources, and programs offers obvious benefits, some projects exceed the resources of even several institutions. These projects can open doors to a higher level of community involvement for both academic and public libraries. They can increase the library's presence in the larger community, forge relationships for future

efforts, and help to achieve mission-based goals of reaching out to the community.

The Project: A City-Wide Reading Project

This article provides details about one such large-scale community project called *Mobile's Book: Share the Experience*, launched in 2002. The inspiration for the project came from a 1998 Washington Center for the Book program called *If All of Seattle Read the Same Book*. The original concept of that program was to promote literacy and reading by encouraging an entire city to read and discuss the same book. The idea spread to other communities, including, Rochester and Buffalo NY, Chicago, and most recently the entire state of Kentucky.⁶

Amazingly, what began in part as a literacy or literary effort transformed itself into a community building effort. With support from the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund, the Washington program became a community-building project designed to provide a shared experience for both confirmed book lovers and infrequent readers. In addition to emphasizing the importance of books in culture, the project allowed citizens of diverse backgrounds and circumstances to share a common experience—in short, to begin a dialogue. Books have been the perfect facilitators of this increased dialogue because they have the capacity to allow even delicate issues to be talked about in safety.

Such large scale initiatives as *If All of Seattle Read the Same Book* and *Mobile's Book: Share the Experience* take months of planning and coordination, and, in Mobile's experience, librarians can be crucial to their success.

The Project: A Local Touch

In 2002 the city of Mobile, after more than six years of planning, launched a series of events to celebrate its 300th birthday. Events included a commissioned sculpture for the waterfront, an original documentary film, *We Are Mobile*, celebrating the people of the city, books, exhibits, and an expanded, totally renovated art museum. It was not until 2001, however, late in

the planning effort, that Tricentennial Committee members heard about the Washington Center for the Book project. How they heard about it and the process that ensued bears recounting.

Intrigued by a 2001 story on National Public Radio about *If All Of Seattle Read the Same Book* and aware that Mobile was planning events to celebrate its birthday the following year, an academic librarian mentioned the NPR story to the library director. The director asked the librarian to present the idea to the academic Friends of the Library Board of Directors. Realizing that the scope of the project exceeded its resources, the Friends offered support but suggested that overall leadership needed to come from elsewhere. The director and librarian approached the Vice President for Academic Affairs, who contacted the chair of the Mobile Tricentennial Committee.

Almost immediately The Mobile Tricentennial Book Committee formed. Its chair, carefully selected by the Chair of Tricentennial Committee, invited not just the librarian who mentioned the project but also the directors of all the public and academic libraries and any of their staff they might designate to participate in bringing the Washington program to Mobile. The process of launching *Mobile's Book: Share the Experience* and the librarians' collaborative role in shaping it were defining moments in its success.

A Few Steps to Success

Step 1: Make Sure Leadership Rests with a Local Citizen with Organizational Experience. Although libraries and their staffs have much to contribute to citywide programs, a community-based program needs a community leader. Not only can that individual harness the interest of other community members, s/he can also maintain equilibrium among those supporting the effort much more effectively than might the head of any single organization or entity.

That said, it's ideal to have the person who initiates the idea present. At the first meeting of the Mobile Tricentennial Book Committee, the librarian responsible for bringing the idea to the table provided

background and inspiration. That latter contribution remained unflagging, became contagious, and gave on-going value to each of the steps that followed. Because directors of different types of libraries were present, along with representatives from community organizations, it was relatively easy to make certain commitments early on, both of resources and staff.

Step 2: Establish Key Committees

Crucial to transforming an idea into a reality is establishing key working committees. This maximizes the larger committee's effectiveness as it targets specific tasks, utilizes unique skills and talents of participants, facilitates decision-making, and reduces duplication of efforts.

Designated committees were as follows:

Book Selection - Establish early as work is time consuming and pivotal to project continuation

College Scholars - More intensive focus designed for academic interests

Finance - Including fundraising and grant writing

High School Liaison - Work to encourage inclusion of book in curriculum and summer reading

Membership - Consistent to inclusive goals, a wide and diverse group was encouraged

Mission Statement - Small committee that operated for a very brief time (see below)

Public Relations - Radio and TV interviews and public service commercials, posters, billboards

Publications - Author brochure, reading group study guide, list of related books for children

Publisher/Book Store Liaison - Familiarity with publishing industry is desirable

Writing Competition - Encouraged the community to share their own stories inspired by the book

While most of the listed committees would be essential in any similar project, others are tailored to specific objectives and scope. For instance, the citywide writing component and the scholars weekend may not be implemented every year.

Step 3: Write a Mission Statement

Although academic and public library partnering on a community project provides strong support for it, that alone doesn't guarantee success. One step essential to keep the project on track and to guide the deliberations of those selecting a city's book is writing a mission statement that clarifies the committee's and the project's intent, goals, and responsibilities. For example, although the initial project idea--an entire city reading the same book--had universal appeal, committee participants had differing expectations and perspectives about the project's scope and its desired outcome. Recognizing the need for clarification, a subcommittee was formed to write a mission statement. This not only defined precisely the common cause, but also served as an effective means to disseminate the idea to the community at large and potential grant sources.

Our mission statement was as follows:

The Mobile Tricentennial Book Committee has been created to celebrate the written word and to facilitate the exchange of ideas. The Committee promotes the idea that books are an important part of our culture and encourages all of Mobile to share a common experience by reading the same book.

Step 4: Invite Broad Participation on the Book Selection Committee

Although the mission might have stated more explicitly the community-building aspect of the project, implied within the language, particularly the phrases "all of Mobile" and "common experience" was the idea that a title selected had to be accessible to as many citizens as possible, including high school students. Vital to the process of selecting a book is broad participation in the Book Selection Committee. Children's and young adult librarians, high school teachers, parents, avid readers, college English teachers, academic librarians, literacy advocates, students, book club members, youth leadership organization leaders, headmasters at private schools, citizens aware of community issues—anyone concerned with or responsible for literacy, reading, and community involvement needs to participate.

All of the above participated in the book selection committee for *Mobile's Book*. To ensure the broadest representation possible, however, the entire community was invited to call any committee member and recommend a book. And call they did. Committee members considered more than 400 works. In some cases, members would read several titles, provide short summaries and recommend only one or two. Then the entire committee would read the recommended titles.

Even with, and sometimes because of, broad participation, tensions can arise. Some will want a local author selected, others a literary masterpiece, so it is often wise, even with broad participation, to have co-chairs guide the Committee's work. This takes the leadership burden off of a single set of shoulders and can facilitate diverse points of view. One of the co-chairs set a tone for all of the committee's efforts: that in the first year of the project only one title would be selected (leaving the door open for the project to become *Mobile's Books* and include titles for younger readers) and that the project would be planned on a full fledged level but done regardless of whether funding became available. This resolve set the project on a clear course, making it possible to see it through to completion.

In order to facilitate the selection of a book title, several criteria were adopted by the book selection committee, which included both public and academic librarians. The proposed and accepted mission statement, stressing the primary goal of community building, served as a guideline for developing the criteria.

Step 5: Establish firm Criteria for Choosing a Book as well as how the book is to be used within the community

1. Length should not exceed 300 pages, preferably closer to 200.
2. Language ought to be approximately the level of a newspaper, or no more difficult to read.
3. Subject should engage our humanity, yet not be merely controversial or merely topical.
4. Open with regard to time, place, and date of publication and not limited (for example) by region, i.e. Mobile, Alabama, and the South.

5. Available in relatively low cost trade paperback or mass-market edition, with clear print and adequate line-spacing.

If fiction:

1. Well-developed characters dealing with life issues with which readers can easily identify.
2. Good plot, not too introspective.

Mobile's Book is designed to

- Provide students in lower achieving high schools with free copies of books
- Provide for reading of the book over the local PBS radio station and purchase the equipment that the station needs to allow community call-in questions to a visiting author and to broadcast local book clubs' discussions
- Incorporate *Mobile's Book* into the local school lesson plans
- Support authors' visits to local schools, community centers, as well as to universities
- Serialize a portion of the book in *The Register* [the local newspaper]
- Support the development of discussion guides appropriate to different reading levels
- Develop and distribute reading lists of books on similar topics that are appropriate for children ages two to twelve
- Support efforts to publicize the program: posters, buttons, etc.
- Sponsor writing contest and prizes for students at all grade levels

Step 6: Consider Choosing a Book Whose Author Enjoys Working with the Public

Although an author's presence isn't essential to encourage dialogue about the ideas s/he conveys, in the case of *Mobile's Book: Share the Experience*, selecting a work by Rick Bragg added a dimension of vitality and immediacy to the purpose of the project: building community. Bragg enjoys rather than disdains his readers, is willing to sign books for hours, wants to talk to those who request signed copies, offers encouraging, helpful comments to students, and agreed to multiple venues and visits to the city. Having an author who is willing to visit high

schools, to present awards for writing contests, and also to address large gatherings validates the idea that books do bring us together in a personal way with others whose lives have been touched by sharing and understanding a reality both like and unlike our own.

Step 7: Contact Publishers and Local Bookstores

The best time to contact publishers and local bookstores is when the book selection process nears completion. Although not the case for *Mobile's Book*, the level of support individual publishers may be willing to lend to such a project can be a determining factor in selecting a title. The Committee's experience with the publisher was so positive that this factor would undoubtedly influence future choices.

Buttons are important to encouraging the dialogue that the project is designed to promote. They identify those who have read the book, and serve as a catalyst to encourage dialogue. The easiest place to make the buttons available is at the bookstores where readers will be purchasing copies. It's wise to establish good relationships with bookstore managers, get a commitment to promote the project and the book, and also to commit to purchasing a specified number of buttons. The latter allows a committee to decrease the items for which to raise money and reduces costs for individual bookstores, since quantity reduces price.

Step 8: Plan Early to Fund Raise

The most successful fund raising efforts spell out each specific project cost in detail. *Mobile's Book* did not have the benefit of advanced planning; however, to minimize the effect of a shortened lead time the committee prepared a project proposal and budget for three years. *Mobile's Book* is planned to be annual, having a life beyond the actual Tri-centennial celebration. This and innovative approaches to finding financial support such as asking city council members to support the purchase of books for high schools in their districts and asking local

printers with accounts at the universities to consider donating some work to the project can give the initiative life before actual funding proposal dollars arrive.

Mobile's Title Selection

The book selected was *Ava's Man* by Rick Bragg. A memoir about a grandfather the author never knew, *Ava's Man* offers an ideal platform for various related public projects as children's and senior citizens' writing contests and specialized workshops on researching families and making family crests. The title had the added benefit of describing a period in Alabama history when families struggled for survival, but preserved values of mutual love and support that forged unbreakable bonds.

Public and Academic Librarians' Roles

In all of the crucial steps listed above, librarians played an important role. At the first meeting of the Mobile Tricentennial Book Committee, librarians from all the public and academic libraries were at the table, and that made a difference. For example, the public relations coordinator for the public library committed to purchasing a minimum of 200 copies of whatever book was chosen. The director of the public library authorized their special events coordinator, with a track record of managing large-scale events, to chair the special events subcommittee. One of the academic librarians, a previous bookstore owner, chaired the publisher relations committee. The gains here were phenomenal. The publisher agreed to pay all the costs associated with the author's multiple visits to the city, took 60 percent of the hardcover cost of books purchased for high school students, and produced promotional kits and stand-up posters for bookstores. Without the support and approval of the library directors to authorize their professionals' time, the likelihood of so much being accomplished in a brief period of time is questionable.

Two academic librarians teamed to produce a brochure and book club reading guide. An academic library director with experience raising funds for library projects chaired the

Finance Committee and sat on the College and University Liaison Committee. The latter developed, with funding secured from the Alabama Humanities Foundation, the scholarly component of the yearlong series of events, entitled the Mobile Tricentennial Literary Weekend.

This event brought together professors from several institutions, students reading papers resulting from assignments on the selected book, local authors—poets, fiction and non-fiction writers—and the academic and public communities in the area. The collegiality of working with such a broad group of community members was reward in itself, but the visibility of the library, the campus and the connection with local artists—the Director introduced the local authors before panels began—spoke volumes about the role of the academic library in the community.

The Director's fund raising experience had been limited to state and national foundations and organizations and alumni. Rarely had it encompassed the myriad of local sources such as local political leaders, charitable organizations, and community-based sources of support. Making contacts with people and organizations in the community supporting literacy, reading, and community-based projects offered the benefit of widening the contact base for future fund raising needs.

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. By partnering both with each other and with a myriad of active citizens and local organizations, the public and academic libraries were able to accomplish much more than they might have lending individual support to the project. For instance, the public library provided meeting space for planning sessions. Using a highly recognizable, centrally located public meeting space saved time and provided a wonderful service. An academic librarian compiled a reading list of materials in the public library related to the selected work and aimed at younger readers. Librarians at the public library refined it, color-coding titles by age groups, and distributed the list to all the branch libraries. The public libraries with their wider ability to distribute materials made the academic librarians' efforts more effective. So, too, did the public library's contacts with local volunteer

reading groups serving senior centers and schools. They played a vital role as the central drop-off point for the writing submissions that were the final and capstone part of the project. On the other hand, one of the academic library's contacts with the local public radio station located on its campus tapped in not only to reading services for the visually impaired but also helped publicize the writing competitions and the public library's role in supporting them.

Conclusion

Potentially, collaborative initiatives among libraries can reduce individual efforts, help secure funding, and strengthen services. They make good sense for specific, defined needs. They can, however, also open doors for greater community involvement, for bringing ideas not sustainable by any individual library to the attention of community members who can bring them to fruition, and for cementing, through partnership, their higher social role of fostering understanding.

*Ultimately, for communities to thrive, people need to talk to one another. More importantly, they need to find things in common about which to talk. What normally binds strangers together is a reference to the weather, a common, shared experience. Communities have much more than that to share. What better way to start than with books to build a community of readers and thinkers who recognize their common humanity and have sufficient practice talking about ideas to explore their differences in that context?*⁷

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