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Creating a Reading Culture in an Academic Library

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Introduction

In 1984, Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin concluded that "in the United States today, aliteracy is widespread" (Weeks 2001). In the time that has elapsed since that statement was made, aliteracy is still a concern for librarians. What exactly is aliteracy? Is it the same as illiteracy? No, aliteracy, the lack of the reading habit in capable readers, is quite different from illiteracy, the inability to read. In 1999, a survey by the NDP Group [a company that provides sales and marketing information to industries] found that only 45 percent of Americans read a half-hour or more every day (Weeks 2001). While most of us would instinctively agree with the above findings as far as the general population is concerned, we would like to think that the reading culture is alive and well on college campuses; however, is that really the case?

Aliteracy is becoming a growing concern on college campuses, including East Tennessee State University (ETSU). Several years ago, a colleague emailed the librarians at Sherrod Library an article from the online edition of the *Washington Post* (Weeks 2001) about a graduate student at Park University in Kansas City who was making it through school by skimming texts, drawing information and themes from dust jackets, watching television, and listening to audio books. Jeremy Spreitzer, the focus of the *Washington Post* story, represented the growing number of students in the United States who are aliterate. After discussing this article at our faculty meeting, we

came to the conclusion that there were a number of students on our campus that fit this description, and that the library must be creative in encouraging students to cultivate a lifelong reading habit.

According to Philip A. Thompsen, Professor of Communications at West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania, "Students today are less capable of getting full value from textbooks than they were ten years ago" (Weeks 2001). Other complaints are that students either are not reading the assigned class readings or are reading the minimum required to get by. Why aren't students reading? There are a number of factors that are involved according to students, including time limitations, money constraints, outside demands, and other leisure time interests.

A glance at ETSU's student population shows that 81 percent of ETSU students commute to classes. Seventy-two percent of our students live in the 15 counties that are closest to campus, which in some cases could mean a commute of up to 3 hours per day. Approximately 70 percent of the student body work as well as attend classes: 40 percent of students work on campus 1-20 hours/week while 30 percent report working off campus 1-20 hours/week. Thirty-one percent of our students were awarded Pell grants for the 2002-2003 academic year. In 2002, 6,588 students out of the enrolled student population of 11,131 were 22 or older (Lee). Several things can be surmised from these statistics. First, that time spent working and commuting to classes is time not available for reading, although

students may have the option of listening to audiobooks. Second, those students who work during the school year as well as those going to school on Pell grants probably have limited funds to buy reading materials. Third, since many of our students are older, they may have family obligations that limit their reading time. In order to encourage our students to become life-long readers, the librarians at Sherrod Library have concentrated their efforts in three areas: creating an inviting physical environment, developing more extensive collections for leisure reading and listening, and participating in community outreach activities.

Physical Environment

One of the most exciting additions to the East Tennessee State University landscape has been the new C. C. Sherrod Library. The library, an architecturally stunning building that opened in January 1999, is situated on a site that has shade trees and shrubs to the right of the front entrance. Immediately in front of the building is Borchuck Plaza, an open area with benches where students can meet to relax, study, socialize, or play hacky sack. Sculptures on loan have even been displayed on the plaza.

Everything about this library is designed to invite students to come in, sit down, and stay awhile. Florescent lighting is supplemented with ample natural light. The second floor has a relaxed reading area, the Silvers Reading Area, where students can browse the latest editions of popular magazines and newspapers or settle down with a book from the Barbara Jaffe Silvers Collection of current popular reading books. Scattered throughout this area, as well as the stack areas on each floor, are chairs with ottomans. Sherrod Library also boasts a 24-hour study area with carrels for individual study and long tables for group work, as well as comfortable chairs. The 24-hour area also contains a room with drink and snack

vending machines and a separate smoking room.

Okay, so we have an enticing physical environment. Now what? One of the first things that a student would see upon entering the library is a display area. These themed displays usually rotate on a monthly basis, but occasionally a display will be left up for a longer period. For example, we usually do one display for the entire summer with a theme involving recreation or travel. At other times, we might have two to four exhibits on display simultaneously. Some themes are obvious--February is Black History Month and March is Women's History Month--while others are selected from *Chase's Calendar of Events* with the hope of encouraging patron interest, reading, and discussion. Displays vary in size and scope, and often include bibliographies, quizzes, timelines, fact sheets, and objects, as well as a cart of books related to the topic. The pictures from our "We Read Banned Books" display, which featured campus personalities reading banned books, were downloaded onto the Sherrod Library website for a short period of time. The display committee encourages other departments to create exhibits.

One of the ways that the library publicizes the new books we purchase is to shelve them in the main lobby, where they are easily visible. New books are assigned a temporary holdings location of "new books shelf". A weekly list of titles by call number is generated from Voyager and posted on the library's web page. By clicking on a title, a patron can see if a book is available and where it is located.

As in most academic libraries, the policy at ETSU is to remove book jackets from all new books and apply barcodes and labels directly to book spines. The book jackets are therefore removed by the vendor when being processed and are shipped along with each book order. Once the books are cataloged, additional spine labels are printed and applied to

especially colorful book jackets or those that include details about the book on the inside front or back flaps. The jackets are placed in wall mounted display cases on each floor. Call numbers on the jackets correspond to books located on that floor, making it more convenient for patrons to find the book. These displays are changed every few weeks. It is not surprising that these jacket displays attract attention and help generate interest in the books.

Leisure Reading Collections

Read ETSU

One result of our discussion of the *Washington Post* article was Read ETSU, a collection of popular used paperback books that readers can borrow without going through the circulation process. Begun in 2001, Read ETSU was the brainstorm of our Associate Director, Jean Flanigan. Located in a carousel in the Sherrod Library lobby, the collection was started and is maintained with donated books. These books are branded with a Read ETSU logo on the inside cover and placed in the carousel. Borrowers can take as many books as they like and return them at their leisure. There is no due date. The Read ETSU coordinator estimates that one to three percent of the books are returned.

We have publicized Read ETSU in several different ways. Initially, Read ETSU bookmarks were printed and distributed. A link from the Sherrod Library homepage briefly describes the program and tells readers how to donate their books. Pleas for donations have been sent to the faculty/staff mailing list. The ETSU Library Associates has also purchased used books for the collection. Although we have no way to keep accurate statistics since Read ETSU books are not checked out through our circulation system, the coordinator of the program estimates that 2,100 books have been put out since the program began. The success of the program is evidenced by a constant need for new donations.

Barbara Jaffe Silvers Collection and Reading Area

The Barbara Jaffe Silvers collection and the Silvers Reading Area were established by Herb Silvers through an endowment to the library. He designated that it be used to initiate and continue a book collection to honor the memory of his wife, Barbara Jaffe Silvers, an ETSU alumna and instructor in the university's history department. A separate reading area was created in the periodicals department next to the daily newspapers. This area provided ample space in front of large windows for the furniture, new bookcases, and signage requested by the benefactor. Seventy history titles from the Silvers' private collection were initially placed in the collection, along with additional books donated by ETSU faculty. Recent issues of more than seventy popular periodicals were also placed on open shelves in this area and shelved alphabetically by title for easy browsing.

Mr. Silvers later agreed to the idea of using a lease plan to add a large number of new titles to the collection. The library selected a lease plan with Baker & Taylor that provided a core collection of 100 titles and 10 new books per month. Since this reading area is located on the second floor and not readily visible when one enters the library, several new lease books are placed on display in the lobby along with an announcement of other new arrivals. This display has helped to publicize the leisure collection and provide ready access to several new books without going upstairs. Due to the popularity of the leased book collection at Sherrod, a second lease plan was initiated for one of the ETSU off campus libraries in the fall of 2003.

Audiobook Collection

ETSU is a commuter campus and the library's audiobook collection has become very popular. The first titles were purchased in the fall of 2000 and as of fall 2004, 747 titles had circulated more than 2,000 times. The collection is housed in

the Library Media Center, where the audiobooks may be checked out by students, faculty, and staff. Approximately 100 titles are added each year. The collection is divided into fiction and nonfiction on the shelves for browsing, or one can search the online catalog using the keyword "audiobooks" to get a complete list of titles.

Titles are selected individually rather than through a subscription plan. The collection has been developed with an emphasis on titles that are course-related as well as classics. We try not to duplicate titles held by the local public library. According to our records, science fiction titles have the highest circulation. Audiobooks in either cassette or CD formats are purchased complete with physical processing and bibliographic records from Recorded Books, LLC.

CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT

Academic Advantage

Academic Advantage is the name of a cohort of first year students as well as an academic course. It was designed to orient first year students to university experiences. The faculty who teach Academic Advantage classes are asked to provide the library with each semester's reading list in advance, so that the appropriate books can be added to the collection. Faculty agree that this collaboration with the library helps them to emphasize the importance of reading by providing book titles on course related topics, thus increasing library use by their students.

Winter Cruise and Community Showcase

The Library staff and faculty continually look for opportunities on campus to promote the library and reading. Participation in events such as Winter Cruise and Community Showcase are two examples of this. Winter Cruise is held every year in the D. P. Culp University Center. Each "cruise" has a theme and

student organizations and campus offices will sponsor booths. Sherrod Library sponsored a booth in 2002, when the theme was "New York! New York!" In keeping with this theme, librarians created a Harlem Renaissance display as well as a bibliography entitled "Literary Tour of New York." To enhance the interest, the booth also included copies of a make-your-own Statue of Liberty handout, library bookmarks, and free used paperbacks from the Read ETSU display in the library. Due to staff limitations, Sherrod Library only participated in one Winter Cruise; however, we considered our participation a success and would be open to participating again.

Community Showcase is an annual outdoor event jointly sponsored by the Johnson City/Jonesborough/Washington County Chamber of Commerce and the ETSU Alumni Association. Area chamber members as well as other organizations participate in this event, which is held at the beginning of the fall semester. In order to introduce new students to the library's services, Sherrod Library has a booth at the showcase. Giveaways include Read ETSU books and library bookmarks with the library hours and department phone numbers.

Community Outreach

Library Associates

The ETSU Library Associates group brings together those in the ETSU community and region who share the desire to support the library. Activities include book and media sales, participation in workshops, sponsorship of library speakers, reading discussion groups, awards ceremonies, and other activities developed by the organization's membership in cooperation with Sherrod Library. The Associates' annual book sale and book discussion group are two activities that are helping promote a reading environment at ETSU.

The Associates' annual book sale serves as both a fundraiser and an event to

promote reading. The two day event, which is held during homecoming weekend, draws a large crowd from both the campus community and area residents. It is publicized in the ETSU campus newspaper and students are some of the most enthusiastic customers. Book donations for the sale are collected throughout the year and the titles cover a wide range of subjects. The books are sorted by subject, priced, and placed on book trucks that are moved outside on the day of the sale. Most items sell for \$.25 to \$2.00.

The Library Associates' book discussion group meets one Monday a month, September through May at 5:30 in the evening. The group selects four or five titles ahead of time, selecting a mix of fiction and non-fiction and alternating between shorter and longer works. Attendance has ranged from three to eleven participants. Light finger foods and soft drinks are served following the book discussion.

Celebration of Books and Authors

ETSU's first Celebration of Books and Authors was held on Saturday, April 13, 2002. The purpose of the celebration was fourfold: to honor the profession of writing; to promote the joy of reading and the love of books; to provide an occasion for readers and writers to meet and to share their mutual interest; and to nourish a culture of reading and writing at ETSU and throughout the region. More than 100 authors from as far away as New York and Los Angeles came to the Culp Center to meet their readers and sign copies of their books. The authors were treated to a free marketing workshop and social

gathering on Friday, while participants were treated to free author showcase events on Saturday. The Celebration was sponsored by the ETSU Library Associates, with corporate sponsorship provided by Sprint. More than 30 businesses provided support, as did more than 100 community volunteers. A second celebration was held on March 27, 2004.

Conclusion

At the present time, the Sherrod librarians are looking at two more possibilities for making ETSU a place where recreational reading is encouraged. One possibility is the placement of a coffee bar in the library. We envision an inviting area where patrons can linger over the newspaper or a popular periodical. Another possibility would be a Reading Across the Curriculum program. Librarians could work in conjunction with teaching faculty to create bibliographies of non-scholarly fiction and nonfiction books related to a discipline. By focusing on reading the entire book rather than selections, students would expand their knowledge and appreciation of that discipline. In the future, Sherrod Library will continue to look for ways to create a reading culture at East Tennessee State University.

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