

2015

GCC Reads--Creating Community Through Reading

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Recommended Citation

Elrobeh, Dede (2015) "GCC Reads--Creating Community Through Reading," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 27: Iss. 3, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7081>

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topped the list (Wohlwend). Considering the literacy statistics for our city and the communities surrounding our campus, we feel much like Vashti, the little girl from *The Dot*. We are empowered to do our part to make a difference in our classrooms, on our campus, and in our community. With the inclusion of picture books in the classroom and the support services of the Reading Center and library, the long-term goal would be to help move families out of the low literacy statistic. This would enable individuals to not only be more prepared for school but also be more prepared for their professional lives.

We believe that community colleges are in the best position to help students build, sustain, and transition their literacy skills to be successful both at school and at home. When our students state, "I grew up in a home with no books, but my home is going to be different," or "I never used to read at all, but now I read stories to my little brother" or "My goal is to one day have a bookshelf full of books that I can read," we recognize the power of our shared experiences in the classroom. We are not just building a strategy for literacy success for individual students within the confines of the college environment. We are providing the tools and supports to sustain and transi-

tion literacy successes beyond our circle of influence and into the circles of influence that our students have within their homes and communities. Literacy statistics for the urban area surrounding Metro campus may not be heartening, but we are hopeful that one student at a time, one book at a time, one family at a time, one home at a time, we are making our mark.

Reynolds' *The Dot* ends with Vashti meeting a little boy who feels as she did before she was encouraged and empowered to make her mark. He admires Vashti's work but states, "I can't draw a straight line with a ruler." Vashti slides a piece of paper over to the boy and warmly prompts, "Show me." Although his line was wobbly, Vashti looks at his work for some time and then states, "Sign it" (Reynolds). There is power in building, sustaining, and transitioning college readers. Our students and our communities are depending on us. How will you make your mark?

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GCCReads: Creating Community through Reading

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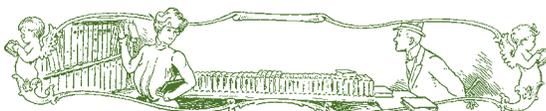
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"As teachers and librarians, we recognize that there is a correlation between reading for pleasure and academic success, and we believe that GCCReads is the best way to encourage students to read for pleasure."

Academic libraries are focusing on leisure reading. Much of this is due to the fact that recent research has reported the relationship between leisure reading and student learning. As members of the academy, librarians look for methods to support student attainment and align with college wide strategic initiatives. In the fall semester of 2013, **Glendale Community College Library** reconfigured a library space and created a Reading Room. The redesign included the addition of comfortable seating and a leisure collection consisting of bestselling non-fiction and fiction. Librarians noted an increase in use of the space as well as an increase in the circulation of periodicals and leisure books (a year-over-year growth of 51%).

GCC librarians began to focus on finding ways to encourage student leisure reading. Further research showed that other colleges,

such as **Virginia Commonwealth University**, were using reading blogs to encourage leisure reading among students. It became clear to GCC librarians that a blog might be the perfect catalyst for a grant-funded program. In the world of grants, in order for an idea to be seen as meriting support, it must meet a need that the funding organization perceives as a priority, it must have a seasoned team and be based in research. **GCCReads** was born out of these requirements and was funded by a grant from the **Maricopa Center for Learning and Instruction**. Annual monies are awarded to projects that promote innovation in teaching and learning and are aligned with college goals. In summary, the **GCCReads** grant proposed



that as a cooperative endeavor between developmental reading and library faculty, a student and faculty book club would be formed, with complimentary monthly club activities and the intention of encouraging voluntary reading and campus engagement, thus leading to greater student success and retention of the participating underprepared reading students.

GCCReads was crafted to address the social and educational needs of developmental reading students as these students are less likely to persist and succeed (Reading Developmental Education Fact Book, 2013). Currently, a critical strategic initiative for many community colleges is meeting the needs of underprepared students. Our proposal focused on providing participating developmental students with the means to make strong academic and personal connections with one another, GCC faculty, and the campus community. We envisioned

continued on page 22

encouraging students' intrinsic motivation to read through cooperative, fun reading activities outside of the traditional classroom. Fostering a mentor/mentee relationship between honors and developmental students became a hallmark of **GCCReads**.

In the spring of 2014 we received a grant, and planning for implementation began immediately. According to the proposal, we were to purchase approximately seventy-five copies of two books for the fall semester. The team selected the first book, and the second book was chosen by student poll. The Reading Specialist on the team suggested a local author's work, *Puerto Rican Goldilocks*. In this short and easy-to-read book, **Marisel Herrera** recounts her trials and joys growing up in NYC's Spanish Harlem. Since **GCC** is an Hispanic Serving Institution, with many first generation Latino college students, the book seemed fitting.

Author Visit

According to her Web page: *Marisel Herrera is a dynamic speaker, author, and life coach who energizes audiences with empowering messages that draw from her rich cultural heritage and passionate belief in the power of education and faith to transform lives. A New York-born Puerto Rican... she speaks to the bilingual and bicultural realities facing Latino/as, the fastest growing ethnic minority in the United States. Marisel did not fail to inspire during her visit to Glendale Community College; every student in the audience related to her message of "keeping it real" and "taking it to the next level."*

Marisel Herrera is the Director of **Aризона State University's First Year Success Center**, the benefit of which only became evident later when **Marisel** and her Student Success Coaches were able to meet with the **GCCReads'** mentors. This interaction gave **Marisel's** coaches an opportunity to share their leadership experience at **ASU** and answer queries about mentor relationships posed by **GCC** mentors. In the original grant application, only two lines were dedicated to the role of mentors in **GCCReads**; like many other parts of the program, the mentor component evolved as the plan for **GCCReads** was fleshed out. Honors students from both Phi Theta Kappa and a **GCC** honors level course were given a volunteer opportunity to provide reading modeling and support to **GCCReads'** underprepared students. In exchange, the honors students used the experience to meet course and club service requirements as well as gain experience that could be used on a resume. Many of the students planned to go into education and thus were excited about a chance to coach their peers. Together, mentors and mentees took the entry and exit reading survey, attended book discussion meetings, blogged, and participated in multiple **GCCReads** events. Hearing from the **ASU** mentors confirmed the value of the role of the **GCCReads** mentors.

Meeting Goals and Program Implementation

The grant writing process requires that goals and objectives be articulated. The overall goal of the program, as mentioned earlier, was to increase academic preparedness and persistence through the fostering of leisure reading and campus engagement among developmental reading students. To meet this objective students read the selected books, posted to the blog, and participated in group events. Students earned extra credit in their reading courses relative to the amount and frequency of their involvement. The second objective required consultation with **GCC's** Institutional Research department. These targeted results included determining more positive feelings about leisure reading and campus engagement as gauged by an analysis of pre-survey and post-survey data.

A central challenge of the **GCCReads** program was lack of student follow-through, as evidenced by the shortage of exit survey data: only 19 responses compared to the 45 who took the entry survey. As the semester wore on, there was a marked decrease in participation in activities (among both mentees and mentors — although less so with the latter group). Since Honors faculty built the option to participate in **GCCReads** into student service requirements, faculty recruitment and retention of mentors were more easily accomplished. Comparatively, the task of recruiting mentees from developmental classes took greater finesse because the parameters of the grant required that developmental student participation be voluntary. We relied on the collegiality of developmental instructors and their willingness to include **GCCReads** as an option in their curriculum.

Developmental reading classes were initially targeted for mentee recruitment. Spots not filled by developmental reading students were then offered to those in developmental English (grammar and writing). We reached out to the college's developmental reading and English faculty at the start of the fall semester. Developmental faculty were asked to offer extra credit for mentee participation, and a rubric was created to assist with this process. To promote developmental student participation, classroom visits were made by the faculty leads to explain the initiative and a detailed brochure was distributed. The brochure was crafted by a **GCCReads'** mentor (the student, a design major, also created a logo for the program which was widely used in the marketing of **GCCReads** and its related activities).

Emails and a blog *Updates* page were used to communicate with students. Students were also encouraged to sign up for Remind101 in order to receive text based reminders. Despite these multiple forms of contact, including paper based timelines for the second half of the semester, many students still expressed uncertainty with meeting and event dates and times. One student shared that she had hundreds of unopened emails in her Inbox. When asked how she handled **GCCReads** emails, she commented that the decision to read a message was solely driven by her interpretation of its

importance based on the subject line. Therefore, she implied it was likely that emails from **GCCReads** went unopened.

Entry/Exit Surveys and Student Feedback

Entry survey data indicated a high level of student interest. When asked to add comments, the following were made by mentees: "I'm new, and I look forward to meeting and reading with everyone"; "I love to read, and I never know what to read next. I hope this class will help me do just that"; and "I am interested in reading more with out [sic] thinking it is boring." A number of our mentees were English language learners and enrolled in **GCCReads** in order to improve their comprehension and speaking abilities. As one student commented, "I would like to understand everything in English." Mentors also expressed much enthusiasm for the opportunity to participate. The general spirit can be captured with the following quote, also taken from the survey: "I am excited to start **GCCReads** and I am looking forward in [sic] participate in helping other students."

Other results of the entry survey included a breakdown of skills that the students sought to improve through leisure reading. Of the 45 respondents (22 honors students and 23 developmental education students), comprehension and vocabulary skills were each identified by 34 students, writing skills by 30 students, grammar and spelling skills each by 22 students, "creativity" and "nothing" by 1 student each. As for their leisure reading habits, 5 of the 23 underprepared students read less than 1 hour per week, 7 read 1-2 hours, 6 read for 3-4 hours, 1 read for 5-6 hours, 1 read for more than 7 and 1 did not read for pleasure at all. Comparatively, 3 of the 22 honors students spent less than 1 hour per week, 7 spent 1-2 hours, 6 spent 3-4 hours, 3 spent 5-6, 2 more than 7 and 1 did not read for pleasure. Another question asked was "How many books have you read for pleasure in the last 6 months?" The 22 honors students reported as follows: 10 read 1-2 books, 6 read 3-4, 1 read 5-6, 3 read more than 6, and 2 read none. Similarly, 13 of the 23 developmental students read 1-2 books, 3 read 3-4, 2 read more than 6, and 4 read none. As an aside, 40 of the 45 students preferred print to eBooks. One student may have captured the reason for the low leisure reading numbers with the following statement: "I have very little time to read for pleasure during my semesters." Overall, all of the numbers favor honors students slightly when it comes to leisure reading.

In contrast to some of the previously mentioned challenges, **GCCReads** took pride in many accomplishments this first semester. Most importantly the relationship building (students to students and students to faculty), which became the heart of **GCCReads**. Although not all students persisted in the program for the entire semester, for those who did (and even for some who only made it to one discussion meeting), beneficial connections emerged and flourished. Students, both mentors and mentees, became more comfortable with the library; one honors student commented

continued on page 24

that before **GCCReads** she never felt at ease in the library. Many participants make it a point to stop by and visit with the faculty involved in **GCCReads** simply to say hello or chat about school, work, or family. It is also rewarding to find students reaching out to the faculty leads for assistance unrelated to the **GCCReads** program. Some examples include research assistance, borrowing books from the Reading Specialist, participation in other **GCC** programs (such as **Townsend Press Reading scholarship**), and seeking personal and academic support. But perhaps the most moving of the interactions took place between mentees and mentors with the former taking the lead. For example, *Puerto Rican Goldilocks* provided students for whom life has been difficult an opportunity to share with others in the group a first hand account of living in a refugee camp, facing prejudice, having to learn English as a second language, starting over in a new country, being a teenage mother, and much more.

Read Aloud and Book Drive

When asked in the Fall semester exit survey which skills and abilities students felt that participating in **GCCReads** helped to improve, students mentioned concrete skills such as comprehension, vocabulary, writing, grammar, and spelling. One honors student stated, "Encouraging me to read more often." Interestingly students also cited wanting to increase affective skills such as communication, interpersonal relationships and valuing the experiences of others such as the student who said "Talking with other people and helping others understand concepts and ideas in books."

GCCReads began as a proposal of a collaborative effort between the college's Library and Reading faculty, but it also successfully increased interdisciplinary and interdepartmental collaboration by involving other **GCC** faculty and staff. An important feature of **GCCReads** was the desire to merge students' enthusiasm for reading with service learning and outreach to the community. Early in the program, the idea of sharing the joys of literacy with emerging readers began to take shape. By collaborating with faculty in Early Childhood Education and that department's on-site Head Start Program, students in **GCCReads** were given an opportunity to take part in a Read Aloud event. The Read Aloud consisted of both mentors and mentees who paired-up with the Head Start preschoolers in small groups. There were two sessions of Read Aloud offered in one day; the sessions, which consisted of reading stories, arts 'n' crafts, and snack time, were both well attended. A total of 28 Wee Readers, along with the **GCCReads** faculty leads, student participants, Early Childhood Education faculty, Head Start teachers (and parent volunteers), and multiple **GCC** faculty and staff enjoyed this labor of love event. Students and faculty or staff who expressed an interest in reading to the youngsters attended a training session on best practices to employ when reading to

young children. A semi-private space in the library was transformed into a special reading zone that encouraged Wee Readers, teachers, and parents to experience the college library in a new, interactive, "noisy" space. Event preparation was a complicated endeavor that would not have been possible if not for the willingness of several students, faculty, and staff to pitch in with their unique talents.

Response to the Read Aloud was overwhelmingly positive; the students who helped plan, and especially those who read to the preschoolers and helped with the arts 'n' crafts, commented on how much they enjoyed the shared reading. Wee Readers, parents, faculty, and staff were equally enthusiastic and visibly enjoyed reading and helping at the different stations. Faculty from the Early Childhood Education department were so pleased by the Read Aloud that they have approached **GCCReads** faculty about future collaborations with the library. Overall, **GCCReads** inadvertently enhanced internal cooperation and opened doors for future collaborations.

A **GCCReads** event that merged community service and literacy was a book drive that benefited homeless children and teens. The **United We Serve's** "Running a Successful Book Drive" provided a wonderful source of guidance. Additionally, the campus marketing department offered invaluable assistance, including hosting a session on marketing basics for **GCCReads** students and faculty. Students learned from the experts that word of mouth was probably our best promotional tool. The marketing campaign, "50 Books for 50 Years," married the book drive to the college's 50th anniversary and was exceeded by 400 books. The books were collected in order to share the joy of reading with young people in need.

All 19 of the students who completed the Fall Semester Exit Survey stated that they would recommend **GCCReads** to other students. Many students, primarily honors, had suggestions. These included: matching every mentor with a mentee, making meeting attendance and participation in activities mandatory rather than voluntary because otherwise "people won't do it," changing the book selection process in order to give students more options, and in order to hold interest, meeting every week during the semester rather than just six times. Finally, although it was never the intention to have students from the honors level and developmental education courses return for the spring semester, several expressed interest. One mentor stated, "I am happy to stay in **GCCReads** after this semester" and another announced, "I really like it [sic] I hope I can come back."

With the current climate in academia focusing on "student success" endeavors, we are faced with the challenge of making connections with students beyond the classroom. Of course, we have always worked to help students succeed, but it is not always easy to quantify student success. We therefore fully embrace comments such as: "I think **GCCReads** has been a really fun experience. I think we should really try and advertise more. It is important that students here understand why we need to

leisure read" and "...awesome book! It makes me smile every time I was reading this book. I read my favorite chapters over and over again when I used to feel gloomy... I have recommended this book to lots of my friends." One can't help but think that we have helped students make connections that will help them along the way to student success. Our developmental students struggle with literacy, but ironically, reading has the potential to touch students of all levels. And indeed it did — our mentors recognized the value of their experience not only as readers but as promoters of readers: "...it's exciting to be involved in an effort to make reading fun and simultaneously promote literacy."

Finally a word of caution, as **GCCReads** developed from its initial planning stages to its enactment so did the time commitment. Programs such as these easily become difficult to manage. Thus before embarking on such an endeavor it is best to obtain support from the college's administration, faculty, and staff. As with any large project it is beneficial to have many hands providing the much needed support.

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