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GCC Reads--Creating Community Through Reading

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Building, Sustaining, and ...
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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 transition 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?

Works Cited


GCCReads: Creating Community through Reading

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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 academic community, 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 best-selling 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 that... continued on page 22
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 reading. 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). 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.

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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 teenager 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 GCCReads 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 GCCReads department and Marketing coordinated a 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 on a whole new level. And indeed it did — our mentors recognized the value of their experience not only as readers but as promoters of reading: “...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.

References


