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Asking Big Questions: Creating and Sustaining a Library Discussion Series

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What does climate change, Wicca, artificial intelligence, beauty, memes, trigger warnings, and genetic modification have in common? They have all been topics of discussion for Asking the Big Questions discussion series sponsored by the Rodney A. Briggs Library at the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM).

Rochelle Smith, and her fellow authors note in “Open House in the Ivory Tower: Public Programming at an Academic Library” that public programming, while frequently used in public libraries, is far less common in academic libraries. This is regrettable since library outreach is important on campuses as well as in the public library sphere. Outreach is a priority at our academic library and we’re committed to organizing and nurturing various programming initiatives throughout the year. Our Asking the Big Questions discussion series is one such venture. For the past eight years the librarians at Briggs Library have brought a world of ideas to our students, staff, faculty, and local community members. No one can deny that we live in an information rich world, but it is often difficult to make sense of the issues and have a reasoned discussion about them. At the same time, the college campus seems a particularly appropriate venue for discussions of current issues or quirky topics not always covered by the formal curriculum.

At UMM, it all started with a conversation with our campus Sustainability Coordinator about the need for an interdisciplinary campus forum to promote an exchange of ideas. We always give this colleague credit as the inspiration for what has become a very successful collegial venture. He simply remarked (albeit, with fervor) that our liberal arts campus should find a time and place to “ask the really big questions.”

From this persuasive exhortation, discussion and strategies emerged. The first year’s iteration co-sponsored with the UMM Office of Sustainability was based on a book called *Plan B 3.0 : Mobilizing to Save Civilization* by Lester Brown. This was a natural fit for UMM since we have received national recognition for our sustainability and alternative energy efforts. Reading and discussing one or two chapters each month was feasible, given the fact that the ebook was open

source and available to anyone simultaneously. Publicity included the usual fare such as posters and email invites, but we also created a blog dedicated to our discussion group where we could continue the conversation, RSS news feeds with links to the readings, announcements on our university website as well as advertisements in the local newspaper. The result was a surprisingly healthy turnout of a dozen people or more as well as robust discussions. These numbers were sustained and actually increased as the year progressed. It looked like we had a moderate hit on our hands.

The next year, we altered the model from one book and the expectation of participants reading chapters prior to the discussion to one theme for the year with various relevant topics as the focus each month. We chose gender and women's issues as the theme of the second year, with speakers facilitating discussion of such topics as the history of feminism, juggling career and family, and the future of women's rights. It was co-sponsored by our Commission on Women. Many participants were relieved that no reading was expected prior to the discussion. Articles were made available via electronic reserve, but there was no expectation that prior preparation or reading was necessary in order to fully participate. Our guest presenters took on a more significant role.

We continued the annual theme model again with faith and spirituality topics in the 3rd year. We chose to focus on religion because of the wealth of belief possibilities and also because the University of Minnesota, Morris has a very diverse student population from over 20 countries. According to the UMM 2014-2015 Institutional Data Book, approximately 9% are international students and 26% are students of color. Nearly a fifth of the UMM student body (17.2%) are American Indian. Our students arrive with a variety of religious or spiritual backgrounds and we wanted to tap into this diversity. Our offerings included Chinese philosophy, Wicca, Islam, Atheism, Native American Religion and Judaism. All discussions were heavily attended, but a few were especially popular. The discussion on Wicca spiritual beliefs and practices brought in a large crowd to hear a guest speaker share information about this nature-based religion. She also shared some personal thoughts about the discrimination that practitioners sometimes face. Perhaps the

biggest crowd was for the discussion on atheism (which also included agnosticism and secular humanism). It was standing room only to hear a UMM biology professor known for his strong convictions and sometimes controversial remarks. Although there were moments of tension and passions evident from many of the participants, voices were heard and not silenced. A common thread found in all the sessions was a willingness of those in attendance to really listen to each other. Sitting in the room as a student of Islamic faith or a Native American faculty member described their beliefs was very moving because it was often so personal. Seeing those in attendance respond with a desire to truly understand made the whole process even more satisfying.

For our fourth year of the Asking the Big Questions series we considered several options before deciding on something closer to home--Minnesota. You betcha! We used our home state as the starting point and then added relevant topics of interest. Examples included Minnesota in the movies, politics, GLBT issues, immigration, and Native American tribal histories. A former UMM Chancellor even returned to campus to give a special presentation that explored the culture and history of the Iron Range in Minnesota. Attendance held steady through the year, if a bit lower than our religious-themed offerings. Overall we liked the fact that we were able to offer both serious discussions as well as forays into popular culture. Even so, we were on the cusp of making some significant changes.

Rodney A. Briggs Library has five librarians with an assortment of regular duties and the added workload of planning and participating in monthly Asking the Big Questions sessions for four years had begun to take its toll. Rather than have our energy and enthusiasm sapped we decided that we would reduce the discussions to two times a semester. This would allow some breathing room for our busy schedules and other library activities. We also decided to abandon our year-long themes. In their stead we would have standalone sessions. In this way, we reasoned, if one particular topic was not popular we would only lose one discussion rather than half a dozen. A common year-long theme can help unite a discussion and give participants a roadmap to follow, but

it can also be a long slough or counterproductive if the subject matter is not embraced. Offering a different subject each time would also bring an immense amount of variety to our patrons.

Suddenly, the possibilities seemed endless. Another advantage of the single topic sessions was eliminating the necessity of planning a whole year in advance. It also increased our flexibility when we were approached by other campus units or organizations to co-sponsor a discussion that was timely and enabled a synergy of purpose.

For fall 2012 we chose the topics of bad movies, followed by political advertising (relevant given that 2012 was a presidential election year), reality television and finally gun violence. These were generally very well received. In the years since, we've focused on social media and privacy, government surveillance, extra-terrestrial life and social movements. One of the most welcome developments was the addition of multiple speakers for some sessions when possible and practical. This has enabled faculty from disparate disciplines to be in the same room and have an interdisciplinary conversation. A wonderful example of this was a discussion on beauty which showcased discipline perspectives from Art History, Philosophy, English and Chemistry. Another memorable session was on police violence and racial justice which featured officers from campus security, a district court judge and a Political Science professor.

After more than eight years we're still having fun coming up with new topics. Our fall 2016 Asking the Big Questions slate has been finalized and features an exploration of the presidential election as well as a spooky conversation on paranormal activity. Have we peaked your interest? If you decide to start your own discussion series here are a few things you might want to consider.

Planning

Assign duties to specific individuals so things get done. At Briggs Library one librarian handles the refreshments and room set-up while another secures guest speakers, coordinates publicity efforts, and reserves any needed technology. All of us help brainstorm possible topics. Checking campus events calendars for competing activities is important. However, be prepared for

frustrations when other groups may not have done the same date checking. Some conflicts on a busy active campus are inevitable, despite the best intentions.

Venue

Our meeting venue has always been in the library's McGinnis Room, an inviting room housing two of our special collections and is always popular with the entire campus community for readings and special events. Chairs can be arranged in variety of ways to encourage discussion yet accommodate large numbers when necessary. Light refreshments are also provided and participants are encouraged to help themselves to beverages and snacks throughout the discussion.

Topic Selection

Know your audience when choosing a discussion topic. What has worked in the past? What is going on in your community, campus or state that might translate into a great conversation? There may be an upcoming event that your library could tie into. Listening to what students and community members are talking about sparks ideas. If there's a hint of controversy attached to a subject that might propel more people to your event. At Briggs Library we try and keep our ear to the ground in order to find a subject that will really resonate.

Collaboration

Once topics have been identified, find creative ways to partner with individuals or organizations. This might take the form of speakers or just other groups that have a shared interest. Offer multiple dates to any potential presenters and then make the necessary arrangements as soon as possible. Consider having more than one speaker, if practical. This has the potential of offering more perspectives as well as bringing in additional circles of friends and course connections. If readings are being utilized, identify appropriate content with your speakers to be used before or during the discussion. We have benefited (as have the attendees, we hope) when extra credit is offered by faculty members to encourage attendance.

Publicity

After all the planning it's time to get the word out. Timing is everything. Publicize too early and people will forget about the event. Publicize too late and they might already have plans. Be prepared to use as many outlets as possible. We regularly use social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, posters designed with Canva, newspaper and radio announcements as well as digital signage.

Discussion

Discussion is the heart of our Asking the Big Questions event so we limit the amount of time that participants are talked at. After a brief introduction from one of the librarians our presenter gives a 10 to 15-minute overview of the topic. The rest of the hour is dedicated to general discussion. We strive to make participants feel comfortable in speaking their opinion and asking questions. The goal has always been a living room conversation rather than a formal lecture or debate. If there is a lull in the conversation, librarians in attendance will help nudge it forward.

After the first year of required reading we became more informal and now simply provide handouts on the night of the discussion that provide context or background.

After an event it can be tempting to just move on to the next thing. Remember to take time to reflect, suggests Rebecca Arzola in her winter 2013 article "Planning a Reading and Discussion Series in an Academic Library". What worked? What didn't? Are there things that could be done differently?

Challenges

It should be noted that we didn't know how much time and effort would be needed when we embarked on our programming. We were energized by the notion of bringing our various communities (student, staff, faculty, community) into the library and by the relationships we were building across campus. In their C&RL News article "Promoting Partnership" of March 2008, Stacy Brinkman and Frances Weinstein stated, "Hosting a program that involves both campus and

community can present some challenges, especially in the areas of publicity and organization.” We encountered some of these challenges as we searched for relevant annual themes. Besides the added workload and cost of refreshments that are incurred four times a year the greatest challenge is often not knowing what the turnout will be. A topic that looks great on paper and is heavily publicized can get a surprisingly small turnout. In addition, we have been largely unsuccessful in getting community members to come regularly to the discussions. We warmly welcome the 3-4 non-UMM attendees who don’t let parking fears deter their participation. Not surprisingly, securing guest speakers and facilitators can also be difficult when everyone’s schedule is so busy.

Benefits

Despite the added work that planning and executing the Asking the Big Questions series entails as well as the stubborn challenges encountered, we remain committed to continuing the discussion tradition. Over the years we have provided a venue where campus and community members can discuss meaningful ideas, sharing thoughts and opinions in a spirit of understanding. We have strengthened relationships by our partnerships and showcased the library as a place where the liberal arts come together one conversation at a time.