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Reader's Advisory in the Academic Library: Should You? (Yes!) Could You? (Yes!)

Katherine A. Turcotte
Merrimack College, turcottek@merrimack.edu

Christine Brown

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Reading Matters

According to the widely cited 2007 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) report, *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence*,

- Americans are spending less time reading
- Reading comprehension skills are eroding
- These declines have serious civic, social, cultural, and economic implications (p. 7)

The decline in leisure reading holds across most age groups, including college students.

But the data also clearly show that, *among other things*, "reading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic achievement" (p. 14-15) and the report concludes that:

"[R]eading frequently for pleasure is a behavior to be cultivated with the same **zeal** as academic achievement, financial or job performance, and global competitiveness" (p. 94) (emphasis added).

Fortunately, many college and university students indicate an interest in leisure reading – and even see specific benefits to it (*e.g*., Gilbert and Fister, 2011; Watson, 2015; Hodgson and Thomson, 2000; Burak, 2004). And while students often cite time as a constraint on their leisure reading, there are steps librarians can take to make the discovery of leisure reading materials easier and less time-consuming and to promote and encourage reading, and thus help students reap the rewards of reading for pleasure.

Social & Civic Engagement

* According to the NEA 2007 report, reading correlates with higher instances of voting and volunteerism, with other cultural and civic engagement activities, such as visits to museums, attendance at plays or concerts, and creation of artworks of their own, as well as with financially rewarding jobs and increased opportunities for career growth (p. 18).

* In the article, "Giving Pleasure Its Due: Collection Promotion and Readers' Advisory in Academic Libraries," Smith and Young report that the ability to participate in societal decisions, as well as developing skills important for full understanding of and participation in our culture, "may be contingent on being able to stay with and focus on ideas in a way fostered by reading, and more specifically by avid reading, reading for pleasure" (2008, p. 521).

* Much like Smith and Young, Dewan points out that reading "transmits the collective wisdom of our ancestors, improves social skills, increases self-knowledge, fosters empathy, advances human rights, provides a dress rehearsal for life, develops creativity, articulates emotions that help us cope with them, organizes experiences, provides a prototype of meaning for our lives, and assists in identity formation. It also facilitates our intellectual development. The more people read for pleasure, the more cognitive benefits they receive" (2013, p. 313).

Academic Achievement

* In the article, "Blurred Lines: Tying Recreational Reading to Research in the Academic Library," Conklin and Moreton report that a "large body of research shows a connection between reading and academic achievement, critical thinking, and improved literacy. Promoting reading and providing access to popular materials supports student success but with benefits that extend beyond their time at the university." They also suggest that "helping students select and access reading materials for both personal and academic purposes could then encourage them to become regular users of libraries before and after graduation" (2015, p. 73).

* Anne Cunningham and Keith Stanovich have conducted extensive research on the benefits of reading. In the article "What Reading Does for the Mind," the authors unveil that the "bulk of vocabulary growth during a child's lifetime occurs indirectly through language exposure rather than through direct teaching." They go on to say that many theorists agree that "reading volume, rather than oral language, is the prime contributor to individual differences in children's vocabulary" (2001, p. 138). Through several studies, the authors have proved that reading not only helps you retain information, but also helps you maintain that knowledge throughout your life and into old age.
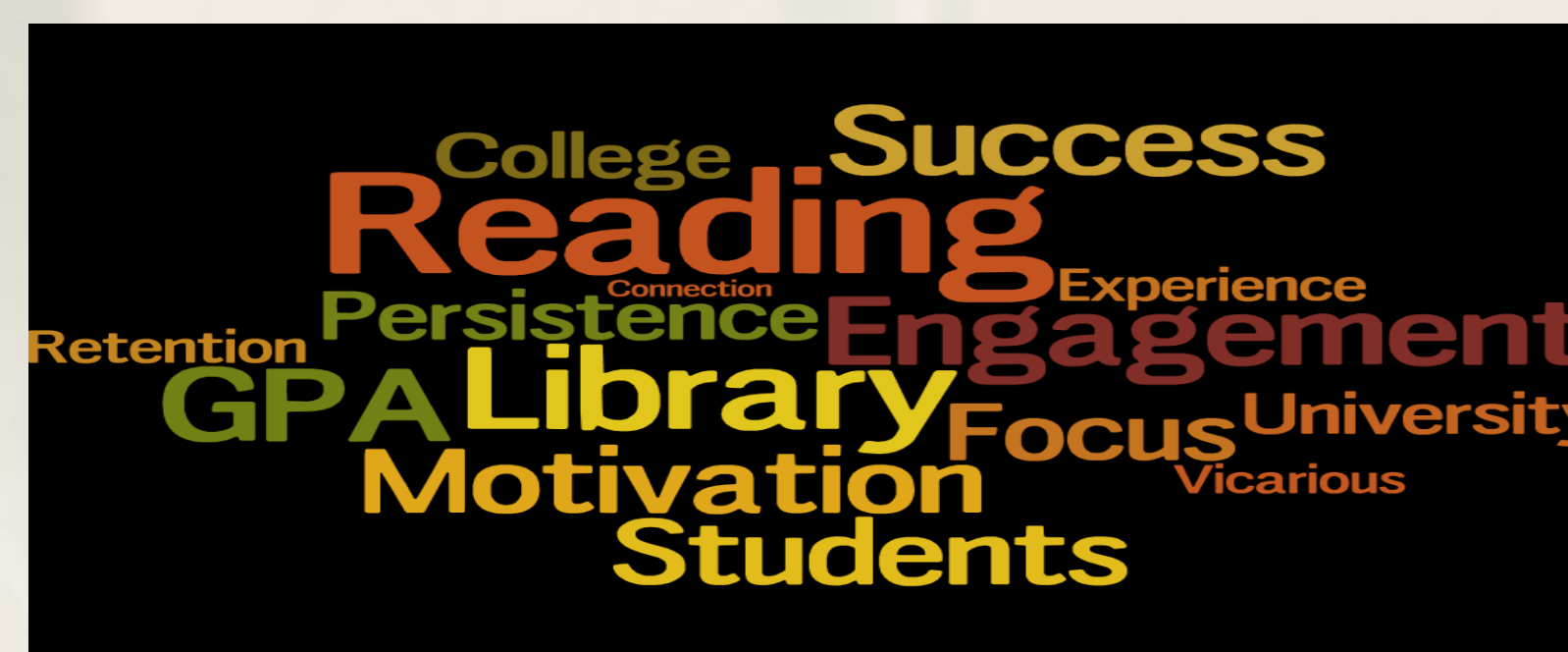
* In "Reading Matters in the Academic Library," Pauline Dewan argues that, "[r]eading is the foundation of all studies and the bedrock of communication and critical thinking skills. Those who develop the habit of reading have a greater likelihood of success in their immediate and long-term future." Speaking of young adults in particular, she goes on to say, "College-aged students are also at a point in their lives when reading can open up worlds - can indeed motivate and inspire them for the future. If students have not developed a love of reading by the time they finish college, they will be less likely to do so later in their lives" (2013, p. 311). Her review of the literature shows that "reading shapes cognitive development by increasing comprehension, writing skills, vocabulary, and grammatical development" (Krashen 2004 in Dewan, p. 313). Furthermore, language within literature "provides many opportunities for the learning of words and concepts and nuances of meaning, all of which may stimulate the development of intelligence" (Shutte and Malouffe in Dewan, ibid.).

* Specific studies, such as that conducted by Kimberly Hawkins, likewise found a significant positive relationship between voluntary reading and GPA in college students (2012), as did an earlier study by Gallik (1999).

Theory of Mind

* In a study that looked at the differences between fiction and non-fiction reading, Raymond Mar, et al., state, "The processing of narratives... shares some similarities with the processing of our real social environment. Thus, frequent readers of narrative fiction, individuals who could be considered 'bookworms,' may bolster or maintain social-processing skills whilst reading stories, although they are removed from actual social contact during this activity" (2006, p. 695). The authors found the opposite pattern vis-à-vis social abilities for readers of expository non-fiction.

* After completing an extensive review of the research studies on the topic, Keith Oatley, a cognitive psychologist, concluded that people who read fiction improve their understanding of others. In a recent article he notes that the effect is especially marked with literary fiction, "which ... enables people to change themselves. These effects are due partly to the process of engagement in stories, which includes making inferences and becoming emotionally involved, and partly to the contents of fiction, which include complex characters and circumstances that we might not encounter in daily life. Fiction can be thought of as a form of consciousness of selves and others that can be passed from an author to a reader or spectator, and can be internalized to augment everyday cognition" (2016, p. 618).

Reference & Library Promotion

* Bosman, Glover, and Prince aptly state in their article, "Growing Adult Readers," **"recreational reading services are a creative and effective way of marketing academic libraries to both frequent users and novices** ... Research libraries are often intimidating and confusing, especially for new users. A student's level of comfort and familiarity with the library is a factor that we consider critical to academic success. Therefore, **it is useful to position the library as a place not only to study and conduct research, but also as a place to relax and to enjoy leisure reading**" (2008, p. 56, emphasis added).   BUT...

* Jeannette Woodward, in *The Customer-Driven Library*, says "No one is going to read for pleasure if finding the right book is a chore...We need to entice students in the same way that successful bookstores do ..." (in Dewan 2015). We can do this by creating attractive, convenient, and browsable displays and by making reading recommendations through booklists, LibGuides, virtual displays, signage (e.g., "Hot Title!" "Staff Pick," etc.), and in other ways to help readers make decisions. [See Merrimack College's "Hot Titles" handout for how one college library does this.]

* Dewan points out that, "[l]ibraries that have created browsing rooms have found that they serve as a hook for students and create a welcoming atmosphere" (2013), and that "an emerging trend in the academic world is student engagement; by re-envisioning the library as a center for engagement," we help advance the mission of our parent institutions (Behler 2011in *ibid*.).

Christine Brown, Education Librarian & Head, Educational Resource Center, Maxwell Library, Bridgewater State University (MA)

Katherine Turcotte, Reference/Access Associate, Merrimack College (MA)

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