



PERSPECTIVE ON...

• Giving Pleasure Its Due: Collection Promotion and Readers' Advisory in Academic Libraries

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The National Endowment for the Arts' 2007 report "To Read or Not to Read" discusses the distressing nationwide decline in reading. This report has generated considerable dialogue. The NEA's data suggest that "frequency of reading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic achievement." In a complex world, the ability to participate fully in societal decisions may be contingent on homing in on ideas in a way fostered by reading, and specifically by *avid* reading, reading for pleasure. The reading of books imparts skills that other media may not be able to grant. Academic librarians understandably focus on supporting their colleges' pedagogical and research missions, only incidentally providing other resources, such as popular reading. However, fostering reading for pleasure both supports those pedagogical aims and moves beyond them. The university community needs these services more than ever, as the modes of electronic entertainment and communication employed by students fragment their attention ever further. Ludic reading is crucial, and promoting it remains essential to our profession. After a look back on 20th century academic library history, this article highlights ways academic librarians can encourage reading among users, including displays, instruction, programming, connecting with other libraries, expanding ideas of genre, and developing readers' advisory skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Are Books and Reading Still Important?

Reading—its decline and possibly imminent death, and the question of its place in a vibrant intellectual and civic life—is getting a lot of attention these days. In November 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts issued "To Read or Not to Read"¹ (a follow up to its 2004 "Reading at Risk"), which reports an especially steep decline in reading among teens and twentysomethings in recent years. Responses to the recent NEA report have ranged from a brief blurb in *Readers' Digest*² to newspaper coverage³ to articles in less mainstream publications.⁴ Longer think pieces have appeared such as Ursula LeGuin's spirited discussion of everything from the history of Americans' reading habits to the publishing industry's fraught relationship to capitalism.⁵ The February 22, 2008, issue of *CQ Researcher* is devoted to "the reading crisis",⁶ which Campbell, O'Brien and Flanigan have termed "aliteracy...the lack of the reading habit in capable readers."⁷ Some authors have disagreed with the NEA's dire predictions and instead sought to place current reading habits within the historical context of reading and literacy over the past three centuries.⁸ The library profession as a whole has even been taken to task by one of its own for its low-key response to the NEA's latest findings.⁹

The current spotlight on national reading habits provides libraries, and academic libraries in particular, with an opportunity. If the NEA report "calls for a national debate on the crisis but does not offer strategies or solutions,"¹⁰ this article hopes to address that void by providing some reflections and modest proposals on how academic librarians can use both our collections and our strengths as information experts to encourage the habit of reading among our users.¹¹

Does Pleasure Reading Help Us Think and Write Better?

Research has been done for decades on whether more reading makes for better student writing, at the elementary, high school, and college level.¹² Much of this research has focused on assigned or in-class reading, but a subset has looked specifically at ludic reading, reading for pleasure. "To Read or Not to Read" gathered together survey data suggesting that "frequency of reading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic achievement including better test scores in reading and writing."¹³

This issue has become more complex as the online reading environment of blogs, webrings, fansites and wikis proliferates.

Students may be doing a great deal of reading, but its nature has changed: much of it is now in short, unfiltered, unedited bites.¹⁴ While the academic community needs to acknowledge the validity and ubiquity of this type of reading, it also remains problematic. Research has indicated the emergence of “screen-based reading behavior” in the past 10 years, characterized by browsing, scanning, and non-linear reading (jumping from spot to spot on the page) rather than in-depth and sustained contemplation; in the wake of this behavior has come decreased attention span and less interaction with the text.¹⁵

It is difficult to do sustained, focused reading online, yet arguably this type of reading is the most crucial kind for the tasks a student needs to perform, in school and in life. Following an idea through to its conclusion(s) rather than continually darting off on tangents (represented, for example, by ubiquitous highlighted and linked words and images on websites), whether the idea is the love story in a romance novel or the unspooling of one of Einstein’s thought experiments, is key to participating in the conversations and critical thinking that underlie democratic participation.¹⁶ Indeed, reading correlates with higher instances of voting and volunteerism, according to the NEA.¹⁷ The concept of being “well-read” may sound to some like a chestnut left over from a time when the printed word faced little media competition, but it still has practical relevance both for individuals and for society as a whole. In a complex world, the ability to participate fully in societal decisions on global warming, genetic engineering, foreign policy, and other issues 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. This is not to downplay the value of an experience like perusing a blog by a soldier stationed in Iraq or using Wikipedia; rather it is to say that the reading of books imparts skills that are important for full understanding of and participation in our culture, skills that other media may not be able to grant.

Institutions of higher learning have traditionally been key places where people have been exposed to ideas via the printed word. But this is changing;¹⁸ the way colleges and universities talk about and promote reading has become narrower. A look back on the changes in academic life over the past century helps illuminate why.

HISTORY OF READERS’ ADVISORY AND COLLECTION PROMOTION IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

As Julie Elliott discusses in her 2007 article “Academic Libraries and Extracurricular Reading Promotion,”¹⁹ the 1930s and 1940s were the heyday of readers’ advisory in academic settings, with many college and university libraries featuring reading rooms for student leisure reading and even librarians assigned specifically to RA. This can be seen as part of a larger flowering of pleasure reading as the advent of paperback books made reading affordable and accessible to large numbers of people.²⁰ At the same time, both the goals of academic readers’ advisory and the demographics of its recipients were narrower than they are now. There were far fewer students overall, from less varied backgrounds educationally, ethnically, in terms of language and even gender. With a smaller, more homogenous group, and a basic consensus on what cultural capital college was meant to bestow, librarians could feel confident recommending “great books” as well as panning ones deemed unworthy;²¹ meanwhile students, pre-Youthquake, were generally likely to accept the judgment of adults in positions of authority as sound. These economic and social conditions were soon to change radically. Social upheavals

in the wake of the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement and the women’s movement not only sparked an irreverent youth culture, whose motto was “don’t trust anyone over 30”, but within academia raised thorny questions about what constituted the canon of good literature: for example, about the dearth of women and people of color. It became more difficult to complacently recommend reading materials without coming across as shoring up outmoded and exclusionary societal values.²²

At the same time, the GI Bill meant that a broader group of people could go to college, many of them first-generation college students with often different educational goals from those of previous generations. The increasing accessibility of a university education, through newly founded community colleges and government grants, spurred a move toward professionalization and commercialization of higher education, in which it is seen as less a means for discovery and intellectual exploration than a means to greater earning potential and job stability.²³

When this effect is coupled with increased standardization of education at every level, universities and colleges feeling pressure to adopt the quantifications of a business model for their operation, and budget cuts to public institutions, it is perhaps easy to see how a service like readers’ advisory can get pushed to the very periphery of academic life, if it still is given a place at all.

Although there are exceptions,²⁴ in recent years readers’ advisory in academic libraries has not received a great deal of direct attention in library literature. A search of EBSCO’s Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts (using the descriptors “reading” and “academic libraries”) yields only a handful of citations relevant to RA or collection promotion in academic libraries.²⁵

Academic librarians, even leaving aside quotidian struggles with budgets, online resources, and the constantly-changing world of instruction and reference, have understandably focused their resources and attention on supporting their university or college’s pedagogical and research missions, only incidentally providing other resources, such as popular magazines, popular fiction, or films. Ironically, libraries often find themselves attempting to approximate the atmosphere of a bookstore/café even as they downplay their physical collections as old-fashioned and out of step with an appearance of promoting cutting-edge research. But the argument could be made that fostering reading for pleasure is a crucial part of our mission, since it both supports those pedagogical aims and moves beyond them. According to the NEA, “reading frequently is a behavior to be cultivated with the same zeal as academic achievement, financial or job performance, and global competitiveness.”²⁶ Evidence is growing of the recognition of reading’s importance by colleges and universities, some of whom have begun to ask all incoming freshman to read the same book before arriving on campus.²⁷ It’s worth saying that the literature does not suggest that students and other members of the university community need or want RA services and pleasure reading less than they used to:²⁸ the scaling down of these services since the middle of the 20th century stems more from the library/university administration side, from budget cutbacks, time and staff constraints, the need to keep up with new technologies, and an increasing emphasis on a type of “efficiency” that considers such services superfluous and not worthy of university funds. Students still ask for fun books and for current novels: they value this service, and in fact new students may expect it based on their prior experiences in public and school libraries. Academic libraries should be fulfilling and building upon those expectations rather than letting them

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