



Reading Between the Lines: Extending the Reach of a University Common Reading Program

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Abstract

In 2000, Northern Kentucky University began their successful Book Connection Program, a common reading program targeting the freshmen population at the university. Throughout the past decade, the faculty and staff at the W. Frank Steely Library have discovered a number of ways to work collaboratively with the Office of First-Year Programs and other freshman instructors to enhance and enrich the Book Connection program. Through the creation of customized research guides for the selected book, themed library orientation sessions, creative displays, faculty workshop collaborations, acquisition of supplemental library materials and financial sponsorships, the academic library has become an essential partner in this thriving venture.

Keywords: shared reading program, common reading program, academic library, collaboration, undergraduates, orientation

Introduction

A little over a decade ago, Northern Kentucky University (NKU) began a Book Connection Program. In “one book, one community” programs popular across the nation, the program annually selects a book to be read and shared by a community, culminating with a lecture by the author. For NKU’s version of the program, the principal population each year was the freshman class. Free books are distributed to all freshmen in the summer orientation sessions so they can be read before the students arrive in the fall, and all freshmen instructors are encouraged to incorporate the Book Connection selection in some way into their courses. While the Office of First-Year Programs is the primary stakeholder (strongly incorporating the Book Connection selections into their University 101 freshman orientation course), many departments on campus also participate in the Book Connection Program. The faculty and staff at NKU’s W. Frank Steely Library discovered a number of valuable and successful methods that support the Book Connection Program, which provide new teaching and learning opportunities to NKU faculty, students and across the campus community.

Faculty Teaching Resources

A common thread found in the literature is the importance of aligning the shared book selection with the academic curriculum in order to ensure student and faculty buy-in. (Ferguson, 2006; Laufgraben, 2006; Rodney, 2004; Twiton, 2007). NKU has been very successful in these efforts because of a strong commitment from freshmen instructors across the disciplines.

In order to establish the campus-wide support of the Book Connection Program and selection, idea-sharing workshops for freshmen instructors are held in the summer and throughout the year. Several years ago, the library was invited to send a representative to speak briefly at the summer faculty workshop to introduce faculty to the Book Connection Program and support available from library resources and services. In preparation for this presentation, the librarian created a bibliography for faculty to strengthen their knowledge of Book Connection topics and to assist in planning their classes and creating research assignments. The librarian showcased related library resources for faculty to examine during the workshop. During this presentation, the librarian introduces the faculty to an electronic Book Connection research guide, distributes a bibliography, discusses related library resources and reminds faculty

about library consultation services available to them. The librarian also participates in small group discussions to discuss how to incorporate the book selection into their curricula.

The library's involvement in the annual faculty workshop is praised by First-Year Programs staff and has become a regular part of the workshop each year. In addition to the faculty teaching tools created for the workshop, librarians also create several library assignments related to the Book Connection to be used in conjunction with University 101 classes and provide curriculum consultations to assist NKU's faculty in adding information literacy components to their teaching or assignments related to the Book Connection.

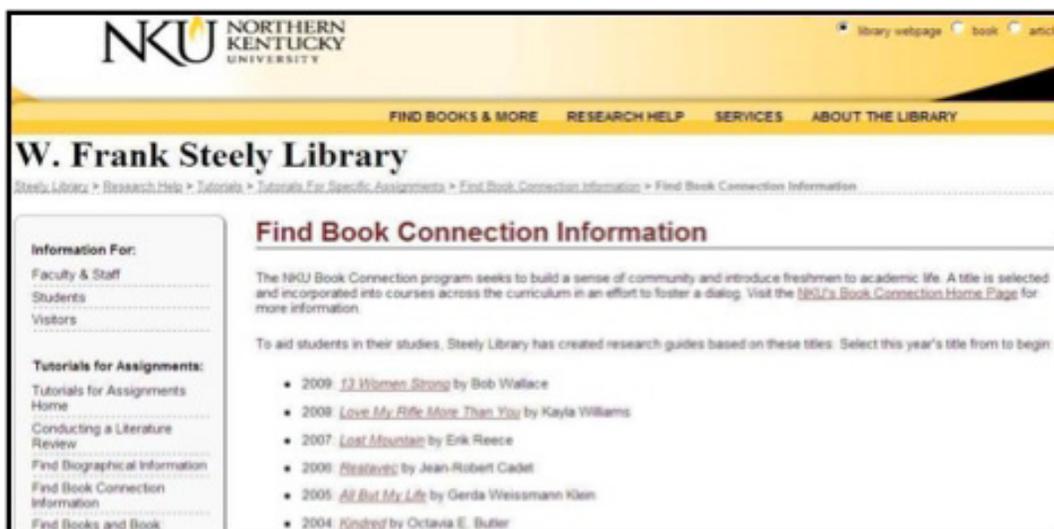


Figure 1: Book Connection Research Guide index page of online resources to Book Connection research

Customized Research Guides

The creation of research guides to accompany the Book Connection books is another component of the Book Connection Program. As shown in Figure 1, the academic librarians produce Book Connection research guides (see Figure 1) to support the themes and topics covered in the selected book that enhance access to resources available in the library and support student (and faculty) research. As illustrated in Figure 2, these guides list relevant reference and circulating items available through the library, call number ranges for relevant topics so students can browse the collection, a list of related Library of Congress Subject Headings, databases and sample search terms, and an extensive number of supplemental websites related to the book (see

Figure 2). The guides provide a customized portal of resources selected by the librarians, making it easier for students to undertake research related to course related assignments and the selected book. The guides are located conveniently on the library's webpage, and are promoted to all freshmen instructors in summer workshops and faculty mailings, and introduced to students in freshmen library orientation classes in the fall and spring semesters. While the focus of the guides is to support Book Connection research for the featured annual book, the guides remain on the library's webpage year-round to assist students with future research needs.

Information Literacy in the Classroom

Every year the library partners with the Office of First-Year Programs to provide University 101 Library Week. During this week, most of the 60+ sections of the University 101 course are brought into the library for a fifty minute orientation that initiates a foundation for information literacy and introduces freshmen to the services and resources of the library. Throughout the years, this orientation has undergone many formats, from games to specific themes like Survivor or CSI. In 2005, the academic librarians agreed to adopt the annual Book Connection selection as the theme for University 101 Library Week, connecting all in-class exercises, example searches, and library assignments to the topic of the selected book for that year.

This Book Connection themed instruction has become a continuing tradition for the library. When planning library orientation for University 101 classes, special attempts are made to include the current book selection in as many details as possible. For example, one year a teaching and learning method included in the library orientation was the creation of a concept map for brainstorming topic ideas. To model this brainstorming, students were given a concept map identifying possible subjects related to the book *Love My Rifle More Than You* (see Figure 3). Their subsequent post-library assignment involved researching a type of bias found in the book and writing a paper. Students were then able to utilize the concept map given to them in class as a research tool

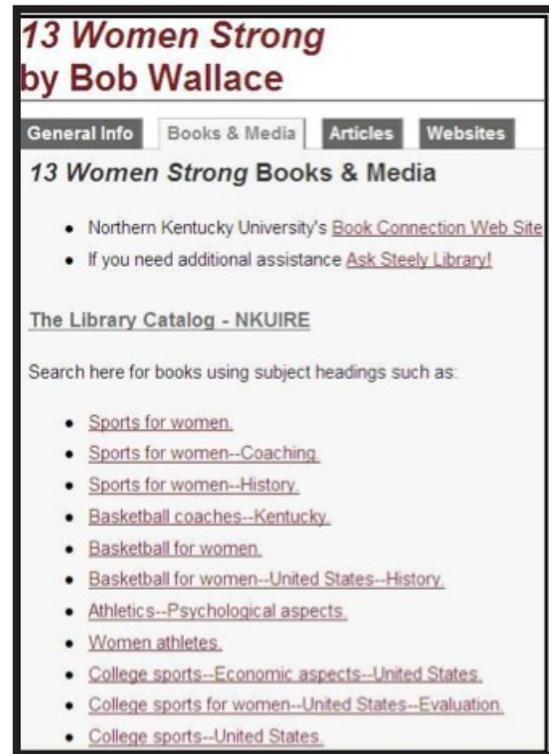


Figure 2: Research Guide Example from 2009: Subject heading breakdowns for 13 Women Strong

as they identified subjects to research. The Book Connection Program within the context of library instruction helps to create meaningful library experiences and integrate the library and its resources into the curriculum. Additionally, by introducing the Book Connection research guide in the library instruction for University 101, freshmen learn early in the semester about library services and resources that empower them throughout subsequent freshmen classes.

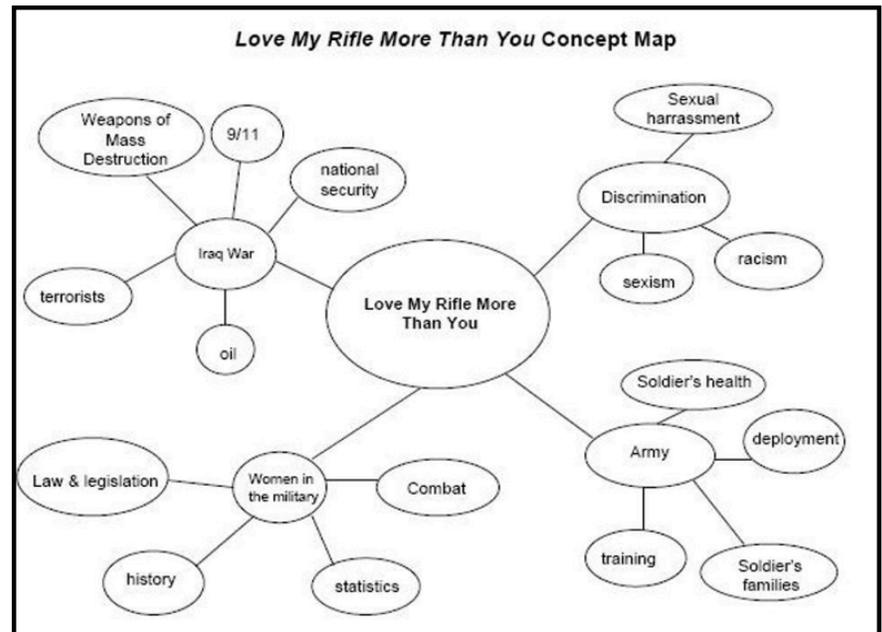


Figure 3: Concept Map Example for 2008 (created by Librarian Stephanie Henderson) demonstrating how to select keywords from *Love My Rifle More Than You*

Book Displays Bring the Book to Life

In the fifth year of NKU’s Book Connection, two staff members from the library’s Technical Services division initiated another Book Connection component. A themed display was created and showcased on the main floor of the library to feature items and themes from the selected book. For example, a display for Octavia Butler’s book, *Kindred*, featured items the main character possessed in her survival kit when she time traveled in order to promote the book and pique student curiosity. The Office of First-Year Programs was impressed with the display and urged the library to make this an annual component so that they could encourage their students to visit the library and the display. Subsequent displays have provided wonderful visual interpretations of the Book Connection selections, and offered further enrichment to the campus. For Gerda Weismann Klein’s *All But My Life*, the display featured maps of the concentration camps, quiz questions related to the book, and a poster created by library student employees inspired by the book. For Jean-Robert Cadet’s *Restavec*, the display featured a Haitian flag and map and other related items. *The Lost Mountain* exhibit commemorating Erik Reece’s book displayed a miniature backhoe and lumps of coal. Figure 4 shows the display for Kayla William’s *Love My Rifle More than You*, which included a rifle, GI Joes clad in army fatigues, small army men and a military Meal Ready to Eat (see Figure 4). Last year, when the featured book was NKU Professor Bob Wallace’s



Figure 4: Display Case Example (photo supplied by Rosanne Rawe) for 2009 selection *Love My Rifle More Than You*

Thirteen Women Strong (a history of NKU's award winning women's basketball team), the display case featured NKU spirit paraphernalia, NKU yearbooks, a basketball, and a WNBA Barbie with basketball goal. These creative exhibits require no expense, provide an additional component, and add a sense of community to the Book Connection Program.

Additional Library Involvement

In addition to the creation of teaching tools for faculty, book selection-themed library instruction, and creative exhibits, the library has established additional features to its participation in the Book Connection Program. As a regular service, the library annually places five copies of the Book Connection selection on reserve. This effort extends student and campus access to the book. Librarians also acquire

supplemental books and media to support the Book Connection selection. These items are ordered and added to the collection based on faculty requests, Book Connection author recommendations, and independent investigations by the librarians. Lastly, the library serves as one of the core Book Connection Program sponsors through its Friends of the Library Group and main library contributions. While the Book Connection Program is funded partially by a nominal fee to first time freshmen, other departments contribute money, advertising, food and other support for the events. The sponsors vary from year to year, depending on the book selection, and have included the English Department, the campus radio station, the Department of Student Affairs, Honors Department, and Alumni Affairs. The library's financial involvement varies from year to year. Last year, for example, the Friends of Steely Library Rifle covered the cost of a reception following an author talk.

Program Impact - First Year Program's Perspective

When asked to identify how the library's collaborative programs have impacted the Book

Connection experience over the past decade, administrators from First Year Programs offered the following endorsement (P. Adams, J. Pettit, and J. LaMothe, personal communication, January 1, 2011):

NKU's common reading program, The Book Connection, is definitely enhanced by the work done by the faculty and staff from the W. Frank Steely Library... Partnering with the library has provided credibility to the program in numerous ways, such as training for faculty and students. Each year, faculty from across the institution have been invited to attend comprehensive workshops that inform them how to access and utilize a wide range of resources associated with the book selection for the year. In addition, UNV 101 students attend information literacy sessions tied to Book Connection resources during class time so that they are able to make a connection between the common reading selection, the value of resources provided through the library and the wealth of information available on related topics and issues. The depth and breadth of resources made available to faculty and students are likewise impressive, meeting the needs of everyone from the tech savvy (podcasts and internet sources) to those who prefer print materials. Resources are varied and interesting, and made easily accessible via a link on the library's website. Each year, this information facilitates faculty preparation for class projects and discussion while enabling students to learn how to use a broad range of resources.

Program Impact - Library's Perspective

In addition to the anecdotal feedback, the impact of the library's Book Connection research guides is evidenced by the number of web hits. Tracked since 2007 using Google Analytics, there have been a combined total of 3,514 page views of the Book Connection research guides. While this number alone is not impressive, the more integrated the library becomes with the campus and its Book Connection activities, the greater the usage of the guides. In one of the first years the library began actively incorporating the Book Connection research guide into freshmen orientation instruction (2007), the guide received 160 hits. With the online library instruction materials more heavily promoted and the credibility of the previous nine guides now firmly established among NKU faculty, hits have increased to 954 in 2010. Approximately 1,250 students were enrolled in University 101 in 2010. This number of unique visits represents 76 percent of students enrolled

in this freshman seminar. In the near future, the W. Frank Steely Library plans to implement a more qualitative and quantitative assessment of the program to better evaluate the the various Book Connection components.

Conclusion

Many factors contribute to the accomplishments of the Book Connection common reading program at Northern Kentucky University. The effort and planning of First-Year Programs and the Book Connection Planning Committee, along with strong faculty commitment, are paramount to the overall success. Continued support from other campus areas also extends the reach of the Book Connection Program. A myriad of library services and resources created by the faculty and staff within the W. Frank Steely Library over the past decade have supported the mission of the campus-wide program and serve to contribute to the overall adoption and success of the Book Connection program. The W. Frank Steely Library will continue to seek ways to support and extend this campus learning program into the next decade.

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