

A Community Curated Collection in an Academic Library: Empowering Students Through Collection Development

Randyn A. Heisserer-Miller

Abstract

In 2019, Kent Library at Southeast Missouri State University implemented two initiatives to engage students in collection development. The *What Would You Like to Read About?* and *Carrie Woodburn Johnson Endowment Grants for Student Groups* programs enabled the creation of a community-curated collection through student empowerment and collaboration. During this presentation, Randyn A. Heisserer-Miller of Colorado State University shared details of the two student-led initiatives he implemented while Acquisitions Manager at Kent Library. Heisserer-Miller also engaged the audience in a critical discussion of student engagement in collection development and what voices are important to include when building relevant and vital collections that support student success.

Keywords: academic library, collection development, student engagement, student success, community curation

Introduction

This presentation detailed two programs that were initiated in 2019 at Kent Library at Southeast Missouri State University, a small regional

university in the bootheel of Missouri, to engage students in collection development. Randyn A. Heisserer-Miller led the audience of twelve library professionals through the details of the two programs, analysis of the outcomes, and takeaways after three years of student engagement in collection development at Kent Library. Heisserer-Miller engaged the audience in critical discussion of the programs' merits through interactive polling and small group discussions. The speaker's hope was to provide the inspiration for others to consider new and inventive ways to engage their communities more fully in collection development.

Background

Heisserer-Miller began the presentation by asking the audience two questions: "Does your library engage students in collection development?" and "How many of you believe engaging students in collection development would be a difficult sell to your library?" These two questions helped prompt discussion with the audience and provided a catalyst for them to begin pondering how these programs would work in their libraries. A majority of the audience reported their libraries engaged students in collection development in various ways, and a small number were adamant that this type of program would be a hard sell to their library administration or faculty.

Following this engagement exercise, Heisserer-Miller laid out the changing dynamics in higher education including declining enrollment, corporatization, and a focus on student success—particularly that of marginalized students. He then described changing realities for academic libraries, including an interpretation of student success focused on user services, particularly study and collaboration spaces. This emphasis has reduced budgets and physical space for material collections. He pointed out that often library resources are left out of the student services equation since they have traditionally been the domain of faculty and librarians.

The presenter then shifted to the realities at Southeast Missouri State University and Kent Library in 2019 when the two student-led programs were initiated. These realities included decreased funding, inflation costs, and a need for direct student engagement by employees in Resource Services to expand the scope of their work. To address these needs and expand Kent Library's collection services, the two programs were proposed and approved for implementation.

The Programs

Heisserer-Miller detailed the two programs by focusing on the subject area nomination program called *What Would You Like to Read About?* This program asked the student body at Southeast Missouri State University to nominate subject areas they thought could enrich the library's collection or that held interest to them. The nominated subject areas were compiled into a ballot and voted on by the student body, with the winning subject being awarded an allocation of money. A librarian at Kent Library whose area of expertise lined up with the subject area volunteered to select materials for addition into the collection using the allocation.

In 2019 bestselling young adult novels won and foreign language instruction won in 2020. Other nominated subject areas were history of transgendered and gender-non-conforming persons, sports history, Marxism, and illustration. The budget allocation for this program was reduced from \$3,000 in 2019 to \$1,000 in 2020 due to funding constraints. In 2021, this program was put on hold due to funding issues and changes in library personnel.

The second program Heisserer-Miller outlined was the *Carrie Woodburn Johnson Endowment Grant for Student Groups*. This program was based on a grant awarded by Kent Library to Southeast Missouri State University faculty for teaching and research materials from the endowment of the same name. The student group grants were awarded through an application process that asked the groups

to create a list of materials for consideration, work with a librarian at Kent Library, and justify their selections. Grant awards were capped at \$1,500 in 2019 and \$1,000 in 2020 and 2021. They could only be used on materials acquired through one-time purchases. Requests for resources that required a continuing commitment of funds were not considered to help ensure control of the budget.

The first-year grants were awarded to the National Student Speech Language and Hearing Association and the Student Dietetic Association. In 2020, awards were given to the Black Student Union, Finance and Economics Club; and Law, Politics, and Society Club. Only one award was given out in 2021 to the National Student Speech Language and Hearing Association. These groups requested materials including certified public accountant exam prep workbooks, books with a diversity, equity, and inclusion focus, and food model replica kits.

Timeline and Promotion

To convey the work and time commitment needed to get these two programs going, Heisserer-Miller laid out a timeline that started in August of each academic year and concluded in the following February, in line with the beginning of spring semester. This timeline enabled deadlines to be set for subject area nominations, voting, and materials selection, as well as the student group grant application deadline, evaluation, and awarding. The focus of this timeline was to ensure the materials were available to the students before the end of the academic year.

Heisserer-Miller went on to outline the necessity of promotion and planning to generating participation on a busy academic campus. Collaborating with the Office of Campus Life and the Dean of Students' Office at Southeast Missouri State University helped to ensure regular announcements and targeted emails. The graphic design staff at Kent Library

helped to ensure the library's website had updated announcements, correct webpage links, and accurate information on the library's homepage during the two programs' public periods. Additionally, a temporary location was created for the materials purchased from these two programs on the main floor of Kent Library. Signage announced what the collection was and why it was there.

The final piece of information about the programs Heisserer-Miller shared related to analytics and outcomes. He stated that over three years of the two programs, 295 items had been added to Kent Library's collection through direct student engagement. The library had spent a total of \$8,799 for the two programs over the same time. Additionally, direct student engagement accounted for fourteen nominated subjects receiving ninety votes over the two years of the subject area nomination program. Eight student group applications were received and six were awarded funding.

Takeaways

Heisserer-Miller offered five takeaways he and his team learned from these two programs that he hoped would help other libraries decide to engage students in this way. The takeaways were:

- Students welcome the opportunity to contribute
- Responsiveness, consistency, and commitment are key to success
- Some faculty will not agree with spending money on student requests
- Student engagement is critical for academic library vitality
- The programs presented new avenues for library engagement in diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice outreach and partnerships

Many lessons were learned during the first year of the programs. These takeaways helped to justify a continuing commitment to this level of

student engagement as a viable way to collaborate with students and build a more community-curated collection at Kent Library.

Discussion

To wrap up the presentation, Heisserer-Miller asked the audience to break into small groups, consider the following questions, and report back to the larger audience:

1. Is the student voice important for academic libraries as they consider student success? Why or why not?
2. As the landscape changes, are programs like these – that engage students in collection development – important for library vitality and buy-in? Why or why not?
3. What are ways that your library could engage students in collection development?

These questions produced lively discussion and brainstorming on ways different libraries with limited resources and staffing can find ways to engage students in this way. Most felt the student voice was important when considering student success. They also overwhelmingly felt that given changes to the academic landscape, this type of engagement was important for library vitality. They did express concern about administration and faculty buy-in.

Conclusion

To conclude the presentation Heisserer-Miller asked the audience to please keep brainstorming ways they could better engage students in their collection development practices. He encouraged them to take the ideas presented and let them transform into something useful for their library. Acknowledging that many libraries are understaffed, he

asked that those in attendance consider what could be done with the least amount of effort or disruption and the greatest benefit to students. Heisserer-Miller thanked the audience for their participation and feedback, which will help him implement a similar student organization grant program at Colorado State University in the fall.

Contributor Note

Randyn A. Heisserer-Miller is the Head of Collection Strategies at Colorado State University Libraries, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA.