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### Building Community Partnerships in a Common Reading Program

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*Article*

***Building Community Partnerships in a Common Reading Program***

Pamela Hayes-Bohanan  
Bridgewater State University

**Abstract**

Bridgewater, Massachusetts began its One Book One Community Reading program in 2005 with a steering committee comprised of members from a number of local organizations and the public library. When funding cuts drastically reduced the Bridgewater Public Library's hours and staffing levels in 2008, it had to withdraw from the program. The program is still in existence due to the dedication of the members of the steering committee.

Community reading programs are an excellent way to promote literacy at all levels, while bringing together disparate segments of a community. Although public libraries are often the driving force behind these programs, a community reading program can flourish with very little public library participation. By being innovative, developing strong partnerships, and building on previous successes, the library at Bridgewater State University and Bridgewater-Raynham Regional High School were able to save the community reading program when the Bridgewater Public Library in Massachusetts was forced to withdraw due to drastic budget cuts.

## History of the Program

Bridgewater, Massachusetts is a town of approximately 28,000 people in southeastern Massachusetts. It is home to Bridgewater State University<sup>1</sup>, a Master's I institution with approximately 11,000 students. The Office of University and Community Partnerships (formerly the College and Community Relations Council) works to “[build] partnerships and [foster] relationships between the university and the communities of Southeastern Massachusetts,” with special interest in social and cultural projects. The idea of a community read originated with Susan Brougham, the librarian at Bridgewater-Raynham Regional High School, who in 2005 approached a member of the College and Community Relations Council with the idea of organizing a community read of *Nickel and Dime: On Not Getting By in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich. The Council liked the idea and approached others in Bridgewater, resulting in the formation of the One Book One Community Steering Committee, comprised of Susan Brougham, representatives of the public library, a library trustee, a university librarian (the author), and several faculty members. Over the next several years, the committee selected books and scheduled programming.

According to its mission statement, Bridgewater State University “has a responsibility to educate the residents of Southeastern Massachusetts and the commonwealth, and...to support and advance the ... cultural life of the region and the state,” making the university a natural partner in this endeavor. The university also worked with the Bridgewater-Raynham Regional High School honors program by having faculty members occasionally speak at the school about their work. Other organizations in town became involved as well. A local church, South Shore Community, donated money to purchase 20 copies of Ehrenreich's book. (Sixty more copies were donated by the city of Kalamazoo, Michigan, which had used the book in 2004). The local bookseller sold the books at a considerable discount. Representatives from the town's senior center were involved by scheduling programs at the center and by reaching out to seniors about programs at the library and university. The diversity of the committee allowed for a true town-wide program and a cross-generational discussion.

In the spring of 2006, the public library sponsored an exhibit of art by local high school students with the theme “Living on a Minimum”, as well as an essay contest surrounding the theme “What was the worst job you ever had?” The university sponsored a viewing and discussion of the documentary *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices* after which faculty led discussions for the high school honors book club. Book discussions were also scheduled at the public library and the university. The university library sponsored two contests in conjunction with the book. One was specifically designed for students, with questions to help them to learn to navigate the library. The other was a “guess the amount of nickels and dimes in a jar” contest and was open to students, faculty, staff, and the greater community. The winner received the jar of money. The high school produced a play based on the book and developed curricula in several different disciplines around the book's themes. The American dream and poverty were themes ex-

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<sup>1</sup> Bridgewater State University changed its name from Bridgewater State College in the summer of 2010. University has been used throughout the article for clarity.

plored by English classes that read *The Great Gatsby*, *Great Expectations*, and *Of Mice and Men*. Social studies classes explored the book in conjunction with their studies of the U.S. Constitution. Other students compared working women during the Gilded Age to the experiences described in *Nickel and Dimed*. The spring's activities culminated with a visit from Barbara Ehrenreich that was sponsored by the Office of University and Community Partnerships and was open to the community.

The following year saw similarly successful programming, *sans* author visit, surrounding Jodi Picout's book, *My Sister's Keeper*. The next selection, *Night*, by Elie Wiesel, featured a bus tour to Washington, D.C. to visit the Holocaust Museum in addition to film screenings, book discussions, and other activities.

## **Budget Cuts**

Since 1982, Massachusetts Proposition 2-1/2 has required that municipal budget increases of more than 2.5 percent be approved by town citizens with votes known as overrides. When an override vote fails, a default budget prevails, often balancing the overall budget by deeply cutting certain departments. This occurred in Bridgewater in February of 2008, resulting in a budget cut of 73% for the public library with a loss of more than half of its staff. Ten part-time employees were laid off and the remaining seven full-time employees were cut to half-time. Because the public library's budget cut was disproportionate to other town departments, and it had to reduce its hours from 63 to 15 per week, it was decertified by the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC).

Libraries that are not certified by the MBLC do not receive state aid and are ineligible to apply for federal and state grants. Due to this loss of funding, the public library could no longer sponsor art exhibits or essay contests and had to reduce the number of books it could purchase. And because of the limited hours, meeting times for book discussions were difficult to schedule. Given these circumstances, the public library representatives on the One Book One Community Steering Committee reluctantly concluded that they would no longer be able to attend steering committee meetings.

Losing the public library's participation was a challenge. But the committee also had to consider the impact of the budget cuts on other town services. For example, teachers were laid off, and the senior center budget was drastically cut, reducing its hours of operation. The budget situation also caused a rift in the community, as citizens on both sides of the tax issue were angry. As the committee considered this reality, the members discussed selecting a book that might bring the community together. This task was more difficult than expected. We had to consider how possible book selections might be misconstrued by one or another faction of the town. After floundering a bit, we stopped to consider our mission, which was simply to promote reading. We therefore selected *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, without concern for how the theme may or may not bring the rest of the community together. A faculty member from the university's political science department had suggested this title because it could be used in a

variety of university and high school classes and could help make connections between the university and the high school.

## **Moving On**

The committee was concerned about losing the support of the public library, which had purchased copies of the books, sponsored book discussions and essay contests, and provided some excellent programming for the One Book One Community program. Nevertheless, we continued with plans to schedule activities and discussions surrounding *Fahrenheit 451* in the fall of 2008. The public library, while regretting that it could not be actively involved, continued to support the program as best it could by promoting discussions and other activities through its newsletter, and providing space for book discussions when feasible. The university library purchased extra copies of the book. (Residents of Bridgewater are entitled to free borrower cards at the University Library.) Because one of the book's themes is censorship, the committee decided to run the program during Banned Books Week at the end of September. With previous books we had tried to spread programming throughout the year, but found that interest waned over time. Compressing the activities into a single week allowed us to focus and not lose momentum. The committee looked into bringing Ray Bradbury to Bridgewater, but the cost was prohibitive. With funding from the Office of University and Community Partnerships, we were able to bring Junot Diaz, author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, to campus for Banned Books Week. Mr. Diaz made excellent connections with our chosen book, reading from one of his short stories and discussing censorship. Additionally, we planned a banned book reading and bonfire that attracted about a dozen multi-generational readers from the community. Even though the committee missed the connections provided by the public library, we had strong support from the Office of University and Community Partnerships, and were able to promote the events to the greater Bridgewater community.

Since the activities in fall 2008 took place during a single week, we selected another book for spring 2009, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, which could be linked to activities on Earth Day. These included visits by several professors and the author of this article to the high school to talk about the environment from various subject perspectives, including green chemistry, food sustainability, and Rachel Carson as author and an agent of change. The high school's Youth Environmental Social Society (YESS) Club sponsored an Edible Art Contest and a Recycled Fashion Show, both of which were well attended. The YESS Club also created posters to remind others about recycling and developed anti-smoking public service announcements. Since the book club of the local Unitarian Universalist Church had recently read the book, the committee sponsored a screening of the new film about Rachel Carson, *A Sense of Wonder*, at the Church. Email messages and local newspaper announcements were used to invite the greater community. Unfortunately, turnout was low for this event.

## Lessons Learned

Not all of the events were equally successful. Some may have had better turnout had we been able to use the meeting rooms at the public library, which are locations more familiar to the public. We were, therefore, pleased when the public library was able to open for a special One Book One Community event on a Saturday morning (a time when the library was normally closed) in February of 2010. The committee was pleased to see more than 60 people in attendance. Persuading faculty at the high school and the university to adopt the book for classroom use is a challenge. We have started paying closer attention to what faculty members already use in the classroom to guide our future selections. Perhaps the element that was most critical to keeping the One Book One Community program alive was that so many partners were involved from the very beginning. Running a program of this magnitude can be difficult to manage. A committee comprised of members from a variety of institutions allows for a sharing of talent and ideas and provides for continuity should there be a loss of partners. The committee may well have its real work cut out for it in the next year as we face the retirement of our founding member from the high school library. Recruiting new partners is likely to be on our agenda for the upcoming year.

In the meantime, the committee was delighted to have a Bridgewater resident approach us in the summer of 2009 with a suggestion for a book, *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson. She has become an active member of the committee and brought new energy, along with several other new committee members. The book turned out to have wide appeal, and thanks to the fact that there were three different versions of the book for different aged readers, we were able, for the first time, to collaborate with elementary and intermediate schools in Bridgewater. Our culminating event for this book featured two recently-returned veterans of the war in Iraq, who attracted a truly multi-generational audience.

A member of the public library Board of Trustees is still on the committee, and we maintain contact with one librarian from the public library in hopes that the public library can more fully participate when the economic situation improves. The public library was able to restore some hours this fall, and we remain hopeful that the situation will continue to improve. In any case, the library at Bridgewater State University has benefited from the connections it made in the community and by advancing the mission of the university "to educate the residents of Southeastern Massachusetts...and advance the cultural life of the region."

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