

Sarah Mailloux and Brad Matthies

Going to the dogs

One college library's program to encourage reading literacy

When the Casper College Library was approached by the Office of Student Financial Assistance to develop a reading literacy program, we jumped at the opportunity. The program had to give educational and meaningful job duties to work study students, while also supporting the mission of the college and library. Libraries have long championed reading literacy, so the programming choices were many. How should we plan a program that was innovative, fun, encouraged reading literacy, and would involve students at a largely commuter campus? The answer: we'll go to the dogs.

Developing the program

Research indicates that reading to dogs has very positive results. Children who read to dogs improve their literacy and fluency skills because of the nonjudgmental audience that dogs provide.¹ Schools that implement therapy dog reading programs see improvement in student engagement and other academic behaviors, while students simultaneously learn valuable lessons in empathy, respect, and compassion.²

If it is beneficial for humans to read to animals, is it also beneficial to the shelter animals? Research says that shelter dogs who listen to human voices on a regular basis have a reduced need for stress-relieving methods, such as ThunderShirts and anti-anxiety medicines.³ Overall, reading to shelter dogs can lessen their anxiety and make them more

adoptable.⁴ So with the benefits confirmed for both the children and the dogs, a shelter dog reading program appeared to be a win for all involved.

After reading a Dodo article about how the Humane Society of Missouri had a thriving shelter dog reading program,⁵ we approached our own Humane Society. Our local Humane Society director was interested in our idea. He had wanted to try a similar program but lacked the time and staffing to implement it. By partnering our library with the Humane Society, we would be able to help contribute to the quality of life of the shelter animals, provide service-learning opportunities for our college students, and help improve the literacy skills of the younger students in our town. And so Tales with Tails was born.

The Humane Society of Missouri willingly shared their Shelter Buddies Reading Program (SBRP) guide,⁶ complete with suggestions for implementing a new program. We used their basic program, but had to modify some of their suggested steps to fit with the layout of our local shelter. Together we developed our logistics and program materials based on the advice of the SBRP director.

Sarah Mailloux is reference and instruction librarian at Casper College, email: smailoux@caspercollege.edu, and Brad Matthies, formerly of Casper College, is now associate dean of libraries at Gonzaga University, email: matthies@gonzaga.edu

© 2019 Sarah Mailloux and Brad Matthies

We decided to call our young participants “Readers” to convey our respect for the time and effort they are giving to improving the lives of the animals. We knew that we needed to have books available for these Readers (at minimal cost). The library work-study student and a librarian set up a small library of animal-themed books across a wide range of reading levels that reflected the mission of the shelter. Once word got out about the program, a group of parents and a local author also donated books to the shelter library, doubling the size of the collection. And of course the Readers were encouraged to bring their own books, too.

At our local shelter, the dogs each reside in their own chain-link kennel in a large room. The shelter director wanted the Readers to remain outside of the kennels to keep them safe. Positioning the Readers outside of the kennels also teaches

the children to respect the personal space of others while the dogs can make their own choice about whether to approach the children. Eventually the dogs learn to willingly approach the front of their kennels on their own, and as they become better socialized to humans, their stay in the shelter tends to be shorter.⁷

This, of course, is one of our program goals: helping these shelter dogs become socialized in order to find their forever homes.

To further ensure participant safety, the shelter director requested adult volunteers to supervise the Readers, which led to service-learning opportunities for the students at our college, especially our education majors, who potentially could use this program in their

future classrooms. We named our volunteers “Walking Dictionaries.” Giving our volunteers this title let the children know that the volunteers were there to help and not to judge. We instructed our Walking Dictionaries to supervise for safety and answer any questions the Readers might have about their books, but otherwise appear as if they are not listening to the Readers. This assured our Readers that the adults were not there to correct any reading “mistakes” or be judgemental about their reading in any way.

In turn, this gave our Readers the freedom to read to the dogs on their own terms.

We initially found our Readers through the shelter’s existing Youth Program and also through social media, which meant that we had a variety of ages of students from all over our community. While we originally aimed for the 10-to-17 age group, we did have some younger students who we paired

with older Readers for the sake of safety. Our pilot program started during Spring Break with a limit of 15 Readers per session to accommodate the physical space of the shelter.

Program day

Each Tales with Tails session starts off with a registration time so that we can greet each Reader and create a nametag. We have safety waivers and picture releases for the parents/guardians to sign, and we answer questions the adults may have while the Readers choose books, if they have not brought their own. During each session we also hold orientations for both our Readers and our Walking Dictionaries. Our Readers learn the safety guidelines of the program, why their reading is so beneficial to the animals, and



Young boy reading to a pug.

how to judge dog body language. A shelter employee tours the Readers through the dogs' living areas, and each Reader chooses a dog to read to. Our Walking Dictionaries receive instruction on safety guidelines, dog body language, and how to supervise the Readers in a nonjudgemental manner. By default, the work-study student and librarian also act as Walking Dictionaries.

And so began day one of the pilot. Having previously learned how to sit sideways with the dogs—and with dog treats and books in hand—the kids began reading. To everyone's surprise, all barking stopped. Many of the dogs approached the front of their kennels to get closer to the Readers and their treats. A few chose to remain at the back of their kennel where they were more comfortable, but the overall response of the dogs was amazing. Out in the lobby, the shelter employees even noticed the distinct decrease in sound level and overall lack of barking.

On the second day, the same thing happened; the dogs settled down very quickly once the kids started reading to them. The last day of the pilot program was our most successful because we had reached Reader capacity and ran out of available dogs to read to. That same day, we also had a breakthrough with a dog named Pam. During the previous two days of reading, Pam was very active, nervous, and instigated most of the barking. A young Reader chose to read to her, and she instantly responded to him by sitting down near the front of her kennel to listen to him read and receive treats. Given that a shelter employee had to sit in the kennel with Pam to calm her during previous sessions, this was truly amazing. By the last day of the pilot we knew that our program

was a success. In a concrete room with less than ideal acoustics, all we could hear were the 12 Readers intently reading to the dogs.

After the reading was over, we ended each program day by allowing the children to physically interact with a friendly dog. A shelter employee would select a well-socialized dog and allow the children to pet and talk to the animal while under supervision. We also used the time to ask for program feedback using a plus/delta chart.



Readers enjoying socialization time.

Feedback from everyone involved in the pilot was positive: the Readers liked helping the dogs, the parents liked the reading practice, the shelter appreciated the enhanced awareness of their mission, and we just had fun. By the end of the last pilot day, two local teachers had already contacted the shelter asking if they could bring their classes in to read.

Conclusion

Moving forward, we are planning monthly programs to complement the shelter's existing Youth Volunteer program, and we are also investigating ways to incorporate local K–12 classes during the school year. Based on our success, we would encourage college librarians to give this program a try. Tales with Tails promoted our college's mission of supporting lifelong learning in the community and the library's mission of advocating for reading literacy. It gave our college students worthwhile job and service learning experiences and actively engaged our community's children in a fun and meaningful way.

Finally, the collaboration and partnership with another community organization was rewarding and had the added benefit of helping shelter animals become more adoptable through socialization. Simply put, this program was rewarding for all who were involved.

Notes

1. Jean Kirnan, Steven Siminerio, and Zachary Wong, "The Impact of a Therapy Dog Program on Children's Reading Skills and Attitudes toward Reading," *Early Childhood Education Journal* 44, no. 6 (2016): 637-651; Judy A. Rollins, "Brilliant, Absolutely Brilliant: Reading to Dogs," *Pediatric Nursing* 42, no. 2 (2016): 58.

2. Laura Bassette and Teresa Taber-Doughty, "The Effects of a Dog Reading Visitation Program on Academic Engagement Behavior in Three Elementary Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities: A Single Case Design," *Child & Youth Care Forum* 42, no. 3 (2013): 239-56; Donna Lamkin, "Fostering Literacy Learning with Three Middle School Special-Education Students Using Therapy Dogs as Reading Partners" (dissertation, State University of New York, 2017).

3. Stephen Messenger, "Something Really Amazing is Happening at This Animal Shelter," last modified March 9, 2016, <https://www.thedodo.com/kids-read-to-shelter-dogs-1620612867.html>.

4. Juliana. M. Hypes, "The Effects of the Human Voice on the Behavioral Indicators of Stress in Dogs Housed in an Animal Shelter" (thesis, West Virginia University, 2015).

5. Stephen Messenger, "Something Really Amazing is Happening at This Animal Shelter," last modified March 9, 2016, <https://www.thedodo.com/kids-read-to-shelter-dogs-1620612867.html>.

6. Humane Society of Missouri, "Shelter Buddies Reading Program Guide," accessed October 15, 2017, <http://hsmo.org/shelterbuddies/>.

7. Ibid., Humane Society of Missouri, <http://hsmo.org/shelterbuddies/>. *zz*

("Group interviews. . .," continues from page 152)

joyed meeting each other and felt a sense of camaraderie, though comparing themselves to the competition was unavoidable. One of our new librarians shared a unique take on the situation: "I liked having less pressure, in a sense. With the attention of interviewers being divided instead of solely focused on me, I felt reduced stress."

Candidates said they felt they were able to make a case for themselves during the campus visit. None of them made changes to their presentations or interview strategies based on observing their competitors. According to one of the new hires, "I liked that we got to listen to each other's presentations because I learned a lot from them. But we met with the faculty, the department, and department head alone, which gave us time to express ourselves without the other candidates being there. It was a good mix of group and individual time."

When asked about disadvantages of the group interview or what they would do to

change it, respondents expressed satisfaction with their experience. A couple mentioned potential pitfalls of group dynamics and less time to make an impression, though one added that UW Libraries made them feel "genuinely welcomed and seen as an individual." Other suggestions related to reducing the sense of competition through scheduling or discouraging candidates from sharing information about positions. One recommended that group interviews should be used only if multiple positions are available.

Responses were mixed regarding our strategy to avoid sharing information about the other candidates. One preferred meeting all the candidates and knowing from the beginning who applied for what. Others said they liked not knowing, including one of our new hires: "One candidate and I asked each other . . . even right after I told this person, I wish I had declined to answer! I felt something shift between us but sensed no animosity. In spite

(continues on page 168)