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From Book Club to Campus-Wide Engagement

The Power of a Graphic Novel in a First-Year Common Reading Program

Since it started in 2013, the Goldey-Beacom College library has hosted and led a book club for students with the financial support of the Student Government Association (SGA). The book club has been more than just a forum for discussion; it has been a place to build and foster community, exploring themes and narratives, such as bullying and immigration, to racism, including those presented through fiction and nonfiction, and diverse media like graphic novels. This commitment to inclusivity in content and format laid a solid foundation for what would become a significant step forward in the college's approach to our Common Reading Program.

In 2023, the book club, recognized for its diverse literary exploration of themes such as bullying, immigration, and racism, underwent a significant transformation. Inspired by the club's success in fostering a strong sense of community and motivated to broaden its impact, the library director launched a new initiative. The goal was to expand the book club into a common reading program, making it accessible to all first-year students and the wider college community. For this expanded program, *Seek You* by Kristen Radtke was chosen as the inaugural selection. This graphic novel profoundly resonated with previous club members, especially student-athletes, making it an ideal choice to kickstart this ambitious initiative.

The transition from a focused, discussion-oriented book club to an extensive reading initiative, particularly integrated into the curriculum of first-year writing courses, represented a significant and rewarding shift. This evolution required building new collaborative relationships between the academic support department and the library. A vital aspect of this initiative was integrating *Seek You* by Kristen Radtke into the ENG 175 curriculum, showcasing a forward-thinking approach to including graphic novels and various literary forms in academic study. The program culminated in a visual expression poster session, highlighting the novel's profound impact and the college's dedication to progressive and inclusive educational methods.

As this article unfolds, we will explore the intricacies of this transformation, including the collaborative efforts behind the expansion, the impact of integrating a graphic novel into the curriculum, and how this initiative influenced first-year students and the wider college

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community. This story shows how a traditional discussion-based book club, where members met for 45 minutes over food and drinks, grew into a common reading program that invited the entire campus to participate and required first-year students to read, highlighting the power of inclusive literature and innovative educational practices.

Collaborative Program Development

Expanding the library's book club into a comprehensive Common Reading Program in 2023 was a remarkable feat, underpinned by mutual support and collaboration between the Department of Academic Support and the library. This joint effort transformed the initiative from a small-scale book club into a campus-wide educational experience. In partnership with the Department of Academic Support, the library played a crucial role in enriching the program. Both departments worked hand-in-hand, with the library contributing its resources and expertise in literature and the academic department integrating the program seamlessly into the curriculum. This synergy was pivotal in selecting *Seek You* as the centerpiece for the program and in orchestrating a range of discussions, events, and faculty involvement that extended the program's reach and impact across the college.

The successful integration of *Seek You* into the college curriculum was mainly due to the participation of faculty and first-year experience staff. They brought the book into their classrooms, finding innovative ways to weave its themes into their syllabi and discussions. This cross-disciplinary engagement ensured the program extended its reach beyond the library and student club meetings, embedding itself into the First-Year Experience and first-year English writing courses.

Equally pivotal were the student leaders, particularly those from the original book club. Some helped to promote the program among their peers, leading discussions and creating an engaging atmosphere around the common read. Their initiatives and enthusiasm played a significant role in fostering a vibrant reading culture on campus. The library and academic support's leadership, SGA's support, faculty and staff's academic integration, and student leaders' active participation all converged to create a comprehensive and immersive reading experience. This collaborative model enriched the first-year students' introduction to college life and set a precedent for future reading initiatives.

Curriculum Integration and Creative Expression

The decision to embed *Seek You* into the academic curriculum transformed how literature was approached in the classroom, offering first-year students a fresh and engaging perspective. In ENG 175, instructors used *Seek You* as a reading assignment and a catalyst for deeper exploration and creative expression. The curriculum intentionally encourages students to engage with the book beyond its pages. Instructors tailored assignments to provoke critical thinking and personal reflection, connecting with students' experiences and perceptions of the graphic novel's themes.

A key highlight of the program was the visual expression poster session, where students transformed their interpretations of *Seek You* into visual art forms. This endeavor went beyond a simple assignment, evolving into an innovative exhibition of creativity and understanding. The posters, vividly showcasing how students internalized and articulated the complex themes of the novel, were not only displayed in the library but also were digitized and permanently archived in Quartex as part of the student portfolio collection. This digital

preservation extended the reach of the students' work beyond the physical confines of the library and offered a lasting testament to their creative and intellectual engagement with the novel. The visual expression poster session thus served as both the culmination of the students' learning journey and a lasting contribution to the college's academic archives, reflecting the depth and diversity of student perspectives. The success of this integration lies not only in the faculty's dedication but also in the support and resources provided by the library. The library provided workshops, discussion guides, and additional reading materials to help instructors and students navigate the graphic novel's format and determine its educational value.

The curriculum integration of *Seek You* represented an innovative approach to learning, where literature became a dynamic tool for exploration, discussion, and expression. The program's impact was evident in the academic outcomes and how it fostered a deeper connection between students, their peers, and the literature they explored.

Expanding Beyond the Classroom

The impact of the Common Reading Program extended far beyond the confines of the classroom, permeating various aspects of campus life and fostering a sense of community among the students. A series of engaging events and projects highlighted the program's success, complementing the academic exploration of *Seek You*.

One of the most notable events was a visit with author Kristen Radtke, which included a reception followed by a presentation and book signing. This event allowed students to interact directly with Radtke, deepening their understanding of the book and offering insights into the creative process. Radtke's visit brought the novel's themes to life, allowing students to connect the text with its creator, enriching their reading experience, and fostering further discussions about other literary initiatives, like launching a student-led literary journal.

Another innovative program component was the visual expression student poster project. This project involved a communal mosaic displayed in the library, where students and other college community members could express their thoughts on loneliness and connection. Participants added to the mosaic with 2x2 Post-it notes, gradually creating an image depicting the community's shared feelings and experiences (see Image 1). This interactive art piece became a physical manifestation of the book's themes and a powerful symbol of collective expression and unity.

However, not all planned activities were successful. The attempt to schedule discussion group sessions faced challenges and did not materialize as intended. This setback highlights the learning curve in implementing a program of this scale and the importance of adaptability and resilience in the face of obstacles.

Expanding the program beyond academic learning into a series of creative and engaging events significantly enhanced the overall impact of the Common Reading Program. These activities complemented



Mosaic depicting the community's shared feelings and experiences.

the curriculum and played a crucial role in building a vibrant, connected community on campus, exemplifying the power of literature to unite people from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Impact and Outcomes

The impact of the Common Reading Program became evident as the academic year unfolded. The program succeeded not just in its reach across the campus but in deeply engaging first-year students, faculty, and the college community.

The most notable impact was on student engagement and learning. The graphic novel format of *Seek You* sparked an increased interest in reading among students, particularly those less inclined toward traditional texts. This medium helped simplify complex themes, making them more accessible and engaging. Discussions around loneliness and the role of technology in modern society resonated with the students' experiences, enhancing their critical thinking and empathy. Beyond academic learning, the program significantly strengthened community bonds. Various events, like the community art project and the author's visit, facilitated interactions outside the classroom, contributing to a more inclusive and cohesive campus environment.

Feedback from the college community was predominantly positive, highlighting the program's effectiveness in making literature engaging and relevant. However, it also pointed out areas for improvement, such as the need for more structured discussion groups. Particularly poignant were the reflections from the original book club members, who took pride in seeing a book they had discussed transform into a central component of the college's academic and cultural life. Looking forward, the success of using a graphic novel has paved the way for exploring other nontraditional media, suggesting a future rich in innovative and inclusive literary initiatives. The program's focus on *Seek You* enriched the college experience beyond academics, fostering personal development and community engagement, and stands as a testament to the unifying power of literature.

Conclusion

As the program concluded, the evolution of the library's book club into a comprehensive Common Reading Program stood as a significant achievement. The selection of Kristen Radtke's *Seek You* marked a departure from conventional texts and proved to be a masterstroke in fostering engagement and discussion among first-year students. This innovative approach broadened the students' literary experiences and offered new avenues for exploring complex themes through a more accessible and relatable medium.

The program's success lies in its collaborative spirit, with the library, faculty, SGA, and students coming together to create a multifaceted experience. From integrating the book into the ENG 175 curriculum to the various events and projects that complemented the reading experience, each component played a crucial role in enriching the college community's engagement with the book.

While there were challenges, notably in scheduling discussion group sessions, these setbacks offered valuable lessons in flexibility and the importance of adaptability in educational programming. The program's impact extended beyond academic engagement, fostering a sense of community and belonging among students and strengthening the bonds within the college community.

Looking ahead, the program has set a new standard for exploration and engagement at the college. It has opened up possibilities for incorporating diverse literary forms and themes in future common reading initiatives, paving the way for more inclusive and innovative approaches to student engagement. The Common Reading Program centered around *Seek You* has enhanced the first-year experience and demonstrated the transformative power of literature in connecting people, stimulating thought, and enriching the educational landscape of the college. ≈