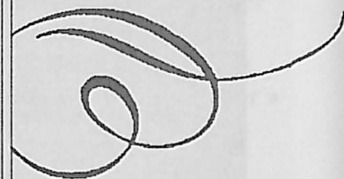


OPENING YOUR DOORS TO TEENS: CREATING SUSTAINABLE YOUNG ADULT PROGRAMS

by Julie Frew & Lettie Haver



INTRODUCTION

WHY? Why when your desk is overflowing with work, would you take on one more responsibility? In the world of public libraries, every day zooms by at the speed of sound. You have work schedules, book orders, and next year's budget awaiting your attention. Your budget and staff are already stretched. With all of these constraints, why would you choose to add programming for teens and 'tweens (ages 11-18)?

In the past, libraries have dropped that stellar, personal service to patrons once they enter their teen years, only to try and recapture this group's attention as they became adults. This gap in service has not only meant that fewer adults came to fully embrace the value of the public library as a community asset, but also meant shortchanging individual teenagers who would have benefited in myriad ways from direct interaction with positive, enthusiastic library staff. Also, teens are future taxpayers. Making sure that they understand the important role libraries play in their communities will help provide libraries with future support. Additionally, libraries need to understand the intrinsic value of teens - not merely as the future holders of library purse strings but as current stakeholders in community development.

Before a library begins offering programs for young adults, proponents should consider if there is "buy-in" from the rest of the staff. For programming to be successful, enthusiasm on the part of library staff is a must. Everyone at the library needs to be committed to making teen programming a success. Even staff members not directly involved with teen programming need to be on board with making the library a welcoming place for teenagers. Often, learning what teen programs involve and how other libraries have handled similar programming, may help staff members feel more at ease with the concept. Information on teen programming abounds, and it can be a little overwhelming. Choose a few books on the topic (see list at the end of this article). Other ways to get information include joining Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) electronic discussion lists (through the Ameri-

can Library Association; on the Web at <http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/yalsa.htm>) where you can observe/participate in teen programming and services conversations in real time. Also, be sure to ask the teens what they would like for the library to offer. Another good resource is fellow young adult programmers. Even if they work at a much larger or smaller library, programs can be adjusted to fit local community needs and budgets.

COST OF PROGRAMMING

Programming costs may be offset by contributions from local businesses. Often, communities will be very generous if they know the library needs something for their teen programming. Food, candy, and items for crafts may be donated if businesses are aware of the need. One important aspect of asking for community support is to make sure that teen services are aligned with the work the library is already doing and that programs are a natural extension of the library's mission and goals. Jones (2004) emphasizes that "money follows priorities" (p. 14) and, by linking youth services with the overall library purpose, the library will be more likely to financially sustain the programming.



Forensic Feast: left to right - Erica Bias; Caitlin Bradys; Kennedy Huffer; James Heath; Jacob Heath; Julia Frew; Haley Duncan; Heather Payne and Skyla McCleese.

ADVERTISING

Advertising is an important component of any successful library program. When advertising to teens, the library should think of different ways to reach this group. Create eye-catching fliers or posters, and with the school administration's permission, post them at local schools. Also ask that programming information be included in the schools' morning announcements and send programming information to the school newspaper. If the library is rolling out something big like a summer reading program or just wanting to jumpstart attendance to a new teen program, consider kicking this off with a school visit. Working with the school librarian may also be advantageous. Additionally, ask the local newspapers to include the information in their community news section. Include program information on the library's website and post fliers throughout the library. Consider collecting e-mail addresses from teens and e-mail them of upcoming events (be sure to obtain their permission).

PARTNERSHIPS

You should also scope out the community's youth services offerings. Get to know what the local Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, museums, parks departments, and other youth services are offering, and ask if they would like to co-sponsor events. They make excellent partners at low to no cost and often already have teen programming. Be sure not to duplicate the services that another provider can better offer. Supporting these local nonprofits strengthens the community and offers teens a continuity of service.

Additionally, be on the look out for lesser known resources. Artists abound, so start a conversation with local art galleries to see who would be interested in



Pumpkin carving:
sitting with backs to camera: (left to right) - Eliza Vocke and Felicia Tungate; standing with hands in pumpkins: (left to right) - Heather Payne and Skyla McCleese; in background: (left to right) - Laura Frew, Mark Howe and Immanuel Patrick.

showcasing their own talents. You may find artists more than willing to display their craft in return for a wider audience; just be sure to check references or know about their abilities to work directly with teens. Also consider asking volunteers such as retired teachers to help with programming.

PREPARATION

Once programs are chosen, select a date and time. To avoid scheduling conflicts, work with local schools and youth organizations. When implementing sustained programming, the library may find it helpful to consistently program on the same afternoon. For example, the library could offer programs each Wednesday at 3:30 p.m. The teens would know that something is happening at the library just for them on every Wednesday. This allows the library to draw new crowds while also getting the same teens walking in weekly after school simply because they can depend on the library to offer quality, fun programming.

Whatever the library chooses as its program, have a practice run. For example, if the teens will be making a craft, make it yourself first. Sometimes projects look easy on paper, but may be difficult to implement in a group setting. Be prepared to modify plans based on time, supplies, and number of participants. If the library is showing a movie, preview it first and check on public performance rights. If the library is holding a game night and playing computer games, play the games first so you are familiar with the characters and rules. After a practice run, you may decide to go with something completely different.

Having a sign-up sheet available at the circulation desk in advance of the program may prove useful since it helps to know an approximate number of attendees. If the teens sign up, the library can call, email, or text or instant message them and remind them of the program. (Be sure that the sign-up sheet asks if they want to be contacted.)

Prior to the program, check that everything is ready for the teens to arrive and keep statistics of how many attend. You should also be flexible, have a good sense of humor, and enjoy getting to know the teens. This can be a great time to talk about books they like to read or programs they would like to attend at the library. Teens are great at suggesting ideas for future programming.

If the library has access to a digital camera (a truly worthwhile investment), use it to take pictures at the program, then use the images to promote upcoming events, create a scrapbook, or reinforce positive memories of the library. (Again, be sure that you have written permission of the teens and their parents before using the photos in public displays.) The library board will be interested to hear how things went, and

your pictures will come in handy here, too. Photos of the program also make great thank you cards to those businesses and organizations who contributed their time, supplies, or funding to the event.

EVALUATE

After the program, evaluate how things went. Was there enough time to complete the project? Did you run out of food or supplies? Was there enough staff to help? What sort of feedback did the teens give? Think about both their verbal and nonverbal cues. To formalize their comments, develop a generic program survey that is handed out at the end of all programs. Evaluating things right after the program when everything is fresh will help improve future programming. You may want to take notes in case this program is repeated. Not every program is going to be a smashing success, and one cannot measure success in the same way for every program. The important thing is to keep learning from your "mistakes." Remember, perfection is not the goal of youth services. Working with teens is much more about the process and opening the library's doors to them through meaningful, fun programming.

YOU ARE READY!

Remember to get buy-in from stakeholders, research what programming may be of interest to teens in the local area, form partnerships, include teens on programming ideas, and evaluate programs. Working with teens can be one of the most important and rewarding services the library can provide to its community.

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Swank Motion Pictures, Inc. <http://www.swank.com>

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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