



## Evaluation of a Book Club Kit Program

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**Background:** Book clubs consist of groups of people reading and discussing the same books. Some book clubs are organized by public librarians. A far smaller number of health sciences librarians are involved with coordinating book clubs.

**Objectives:** This case report employed a survey and phone interviews to determine why a book club kit program organized by health sciences librarians did not generate more enthusiasm.

**Lessons learned:** The investigators found that direct phone interviews rather than a survey elicited the needed information. Many public libraries, particularly those in rural areas, are directed by people not even possessing a Master's degree in library or information science. Strategies for promoting use of the book club kits to these public librarians required different approaches.

**Conclusions:** Through a deeper understanding of rural public librarians' circumstances and needs, the investigators gained new insights on how health sciences librarians might possibly reach public librarians more effectively.

### Background

Book groups are popular gatherings of people wanting to share their interest in reading books. McCook de la Peña and Bossaller depict them as “a long-standing phenomenon of American cultural life that now take[s] place in both real space and cyberspace.”<sup>1</sup> They vary greatly in their format and context. Some are organized by their participants spontaneously; others are more structured and hosted by a facilitator. Some book groups borrow the books from a library while others rely on members to purchase their own copies. The ages of participants range from children to the elderly. Book group discussions can take place in people's homes, restaurants, community centers, or libraries. While most librarians associate book groups with public or school libraries, health sciences libraries also have hosted or organized book groups.<sup>2-4</sup>

The University of New Mexico's Health Sciences Library and Informatics Center (HSLIC) is the only health sciences library in the state. One of our strategic goals was to “empower our community to engage with health information.” One strategy within that goal was to: “create a sustainable outreach program to promote health information literacy and health equity.” In order to support this strategic goal, we

developed ten book club kits which included: eight copies of each book, book discussion questions, and health literacy handouts. Our kits were based on the Network of the National Library of Medicine's (NNLM) "Reading is Healthy" book club model.<sup>5</sup> The NNLM "Reading is Healthy" book club was created by a team of consumer health librarians who selected books to align with the priority health topics of its sponsoring organization, the NNLM *All of Us* Community Engagement Network. The NNLM Reading Club originally was promoted to public libraries as a popular and familiar "ready-to-use" health literacy program, and it was a success. They defined success as follows: "from a total collection of 21 featured health topics and 78 book titles, more than 6,300 readers nationwide discussed health and wellness. After a brief hiatus, the NNLM Reading Club resumed in 2022 with new health topics and titles."<sup>6</sup>

Our book club kits were publicized through sending a series of three direct emails to all 101 community and public library directors listed on the New Mexico State Library website.<sup>7</sup> We thought the book club kits would be utilized since New Mexico is a rural state and many of our libraries might not have sufficient resources to sponsor a book club. We offered the book club kits free of charge and included all the materials to conduct a book discussion group. Ironically, we had an initial concern that the program would be so popular that we may not have enough materials to circulate.

To promote the book club kits, we attended the Native American Special Interest Group Meeting<sup>8</sup> and the Health Literacy Task Force meeting.<sup>9</sup> There was not much interest generated from those initial contacts, so we sent out emails to the 101 public and community libraries listed on the aforementioned New Mexico State Library website.

Unfortunately, the initial email generated only *one* library's interest in checking out the book kits. This unexpected lack of response warranted further investigation. We were genuinely curious as to why more libraries were not taking advantage of the book club kits. Was there something we could change so that more libraries would participate or was it something else that was preventing libraries from ordering a book club kit?

## Method

Our method consisted of structured and unstructured interviews. We designed a five-question survey to guide the telephone interviews with library directors or staff at libraries who potentially might participate in the book club, after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board #22-270. We interviewed a total of 24 New Mexico community and public librarians by telephone. We decided to reach out to these 24 libraries because they provided a cross section that represented rural/urban, large/small, public/community, and wide geographic spread throughout the state. Also, several libraries did respond that they did not have any interest in the book club kits already, so we declined to interview them further.

The first four interview questions only involved a yes or no response. The interviewers asked:

1. Do you currently have a book club at your library?

2. Do you have enough staff to facilitate a book club?
3. Is your lack of participation due to the fact that materials are only available in English?
4. Is it the choice of titles that discouraged you from ordering a book club kit?
5. In your opinion, what is the biggest reason as to why you did not take advantage of the book club kits?

## Results

Talking with librarians directly made a huge difference. On more than one occasion, the library directors were the ones who picked up the phone and were generous with their time.

The overall results summarized in Table 1 demonstrate that 10 of these libraries are understaffed and are unable to conduct any type of book club.

Table 1. Reasons for not responding

Explanations	Number of libraries
Lack of staff	10
Programming is preplanned	4
Did not see emails	4
Lack of interest	2
Would not participate in interview	2
Do not have a book club	1
No book club experience	1

Also, four libraries preplan their programs and do not have the ability to stray from that schedule. Another four library directors reported not even seeing the original email, which might partially explain some lack of responses. Two contacted librarians chose not to participate in the interview and one library did not have a book club. Once there was an actual conversation with the various library directors and/or staff, three libraries expressed interest in possibly ordering book kits in the future.

## Lessons Learned

1. Direct individual contact through the phone generated genuine responses and created interest in the book club kits.
2. A single mode of communication (Example: email) is not always effective.
3. Many people still prefer to communicate through conversation.
4. Outside of the major cities in New Mexico, many community and public libraries often do not have a professionally trained MLS librarian with a broad perspective on the logistics and advantages of sponsoring a book club.

5. A book club kit program created by a national library that has proven successful in some states might require a different approach in other states.
6. Public and community libraries are embedded in communities with interests that might not align with pursuit of a book club; or at least a book club revolving around health issues.
7. Public and community libraries in rural areas have limited Internet service, so phone rather than email might be the most reliable way to contact these sites.

## Discussion

Overwhelmingly the results show that many public and community libraries around New Mexico are facing staffing shortages.<sup>10</sup> It appears there could have been more participation in the book clubs if there was either staff or volunteers to facilitate the program. In addition, the two libraries that stated they were unable to assist with this research could also be indicative of time constraints. In speaking with librarians on the phone, results showed that several did not receive or notice any communication regarding the book kits. By reaching out via phone to make more personal connections, we gained some traction for our book club kits. Finally, the territorial governor of New Mexico, Lew Wallace, once wrote, “Every calculation based on experience elsewhere fails in New Mexico”<sup>11</sup> suggesting that a book club kits program created by a national library that has proven successful in other states might require a different approach in some states. The interview results reveal that the program itself may not be the problem, but other aforementioned factors that contributed to the lack of participation.

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