

# The African American Read-In

## Building campus-community partnerships

Grace Jackson-Brown and Gloria Tibbs

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Library programming can be a highly effective means of connecting with a targeted audience. Programs can be tailored to specific themes, cultures, or communities to draw in audiences and turn them into library users. Gloria Tibbs, teaching and learning services librarian/diversity liaison at University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), and Grace Jackson-Brown, assistant professor of Library Science at Missouri State University (MSU), have found tremendous success with their programming efforts. Like many enthusiasts of annual cultural holidays, who make plans for those holidays on a year-round basis, these two librarians are hard at work in July making plans for their university's participation in the African American Read-In (AARI) celebration, which is traditionally held in February as part of Black History Month. Herein is a case study of how two academic librarians provide leadership in AARI projects of engagement by their universities that exemplify the universities' goals of diversity, literacy, and collaborative partnerships.

### What is the African American Read-In?

AARI is a national literacy initiative ongoing since 1989, sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) beginning in 1990, and later endorsed by the International Reading Association. AARI founder and director, Jerrie Cobb Scott, is a professor with the College of Education at the University of Memphis, and a long-time member of the NCTE's black caucus. The goal of AARI, according to its Web site, is to make the celebration of African American authors and literacy a traditional part of Black History Month activities.<sup>1</sup> NCTE upholds a pedagogical philosophy that sees literacy education as a process of teaching students to read, to write, and to think critically.<sup>2</sup> The NCTE black caucus, upholding the latter pedagogical philosophy, has developed AARI into an outreach initiative that combines a campaign for literacy with a component of diversity education.

For the last 22 years, more than a million readers from across the United States have gathered together to read the works of African American authors during AARI celebrations held in February. Read-in events are held at college and universities, elementary and secondary schools, public libraries, churches, civic and recreational centers, and even in private homes.

### Two university libraries' experiences with AARI

UMKC, one of four University of Missouri campuses, is a public university serving more than 15,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students. UMKC Libraries serves as the hub of learning activities for students, researchers, and UMKC's urban neighbors. UMKC Libraries consist of the Miller Nichols Library, the Dental Library, and the Health Sciences Library. Tibbs was the convener and chair of the first AARI held in 2010 establishing the event as a collaborative partnership with the UMKC Community. Tibbs and Stuart Hinds, director of the special collections, chaired the 2011 AARI. They were joined in 2012 by cochairs,

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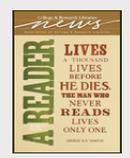
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Tracey Hughes, dental instructional resources librarian, and Kristy Steigerwalt, clinical medical librarian.

MSU is a public, comprehensive university with a mission in public affairs that is recognized by the Missouri legislature. MSU is the second largest university in the state of Missouri, and in 2011 its FTE was nearly 23,000 students in undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree-granting programs. The university's public affairs mission upholds a campus-wide commitment to foster expertise and responsibility in ethical leadership, cultural competence, and community engagement and affirms that diversity is central to providing and retaining a quality educational environment.

Jackson-Brown has led the way since 2009 in establishing a community-campus partnership as part of a citywide AARI celebration.

### **AARI at UMKC: Identify the stakeholders**

Are all potential stakeholders represented? It takes a team.

The commitment to diversity is an ongoing goal that should be nurtured and valued as demonstrated by the UMKC libraries' administrative leadership. Buy-in from inside and outside of the library is needed from administration to room setup. At UMKC, Dean of the Libraries Bonnie Postlethwaite provides leadership for the library to consistently support diverse perspectives and programming.

The success of AARI at UMKC depends on establishing and maintaining a network with the students, faculty, staff, and campus community. A supportive and valuable partnership at the UMKC university campus level comes from the leadership of Karen Dace, deputy chancellor for the Division of Diversity, Access, and Equity, who has provided both financial and programmatic support.

A connection to the students was established through the Multicultural Student Affairs Office. As a result of the connection, students selected the book, *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, John Steptoe's African Cinderella-like tale, and created a dramatization—complete with inventive costumes—during one of UMKC's AARI celebrations.

Examples of library staff support come from Mark Mattison, UMKC University Libraries advancement director, who recommended involving live performances related to works by African American authors. Mattison also secured financial support from the Friends of the Library and UMKC Alumni Association's Multicultural and Community Affairs Committee.

When Hinds joined the team as cochair of UMKC's AARI, he introduced the graphic design expertise of Scott Gipson from Special Collections who created the design of the AARI logo for the UMKC Libraries. The AARI brand image helps to define the event. The AARI logo is used in all marketing and on AARI T-shirts and sweatshirts. In addition, Hinds introduced the UMKC AARI planning committee to an online registration system that provides greater efficiency to the management of the event.

### **Value of personalization**

UMKC committee planners use e-mails for follow-ups, but through social media such as Facebook and Twitter, they are able to share a recent conversation from a campus event or library function before, during, and after the event. Target messages are sent at intervals to create excitement for AARI. Personalization of social media messages needs to be genuine and reflect true passion for AARI. The effort takes time and requires careful attention and is essential to creating strong, viable partnerships that yield results.

Personalization also includes complimentary refreshments for the UMKC AARI events. Providing another avenue of connection with the sharing of refreshments creates an enjoyable cultural experience for the attendees and the hosting library staff. While enjoying a refreshment tie-in to the vibrant and rich cultural AARI, conversation flows and connections are made. Refreshments at UMKC

festivities, such as homemade sweet potato cookies, peach cobbler, and red velvet cake added a strong cultural connection to the AARI.

### **Increased library collaboration with academic partners and library users**

A connection with the faculty was established with the UMKC Black Studies Program and Latina/Latino Studies Program through the directors respectively, Clovis E. Semmes and Miguel Carranza. Outreach efforts came from librarians who spread the word about AARI through personal marketing, as described by Peggy Barber and Linda Wallace in *Building a Buzz*.<sup>3</sup> Each year there was an increase in participation from different academic departments and student organizations. Don't wait for the campus community to come to your organization. Be involved in cultural, organizational, and departmental meetings and activities so that faces can be matched with names. You can increase the involvement of potential partners by asking for their support face-to-face. Keep a list of contacts from the registration to use for the next AARI or related programming. Each year as the faculty, staff, students, and community friends return for another AARI, they are coming to a library event where individuals are known by face and/or names. Once the connection is established, it is important to reciprocate in supporting others on campus. The library needs to come to mind as a valuable partner. The benefits of connecting to the community will build great support in partnerships and more members of the campus using the library.

### **AARI at MSU**

The Springfield AARI is a diversity initiative of the MSU Libraries that exemplifies the three pillars of the university's public affairs mission: cultural competence, community engagement, and ethical leadership. Jackson-Brown, with the administrative support from the libraries' Dean of Library Services Neosha Mackey, led the way to the development of the Springfield AARI from 2009 through 2012. Jackson-Brown helps to build partnerships in the AARI initiative between university campus and community entities that include the Springfield-Greene County Public Libraries, the Springfield Public Schools, Drury University, and the NAACP Springfield Chapter. Throughout the years, Gwen Marshall, Springfield Public Schools' diversity specialist, has served on the AARI steering committee and is a vital contact in circulating information about AARI to community parents and teachers. Martha Love, special projects director for the Springfield-Greene County Public Libraries, became a cochair of the event and helps to nurture and to expand community partnerships.

Collaborative partners from both inside and outside of the university environment coalesced into the Springfield AARI's phenomenal success in a city that has a population that is only 3.3 percent African American, making it truly a community-wide outreach event.

For example, MSU's Office for Multicultural Student Programming, directed by Assistant to the Vice-President Charlotte Hardin, joined the MSU Libraries to make AARI a part of the campus annual February events calendar. Associate Professor of Education Sabrina Brinson, involved her classroom students in service learning projects as part of AARI. These university partners bring in the support of diverse college student volunteers who assist with everything from registration of young middle school and high school students into a writer's workshop, serving as older peer-mentors alongside secondary school teens by reading and/or performing as part of Read-In Programs, and providing reading to pre-K through elementary school-aged students in group settings. For the last three years the Springfield AARI has been joined by one or more local community, one-year-partners including the Springfield Park District, the Storytellers of the Ozarks, and a cultural outreach group called Peoples Etiquette founded by Christine Peoples.

In the three years that the Springfield AARI has been offered, more than 1,000 participants, many of them children and teenagers, have visited public libraries and college libraries to attend AARI cultural programming promoting diversity

and literacy. Programs included award-winning children and young adult author Patricia McKissack, nationally renowned master storyteller Gladys Cogswell, other local storytellers, and African American poetry reading performances by local youth and adult mentors.

The Springfield AARI through one of its core partners, the Springfield Chapter of the NAACP, is recipient of a 2012 grant from the Missouri Humanities Council with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The grant was used to sponsor a speaking visit by Shane Evans, children's book illustrator-author and awardee of the 2012 Coretta Scott King Book Award. Evans presented two workshops in October 2012 as a prelude to the fourth annual Springfield AARI in February 2013.

## Lessons learned

### Caution in age of social media

Facebook and other social media sources can be a powerful tool for reaching out to others, but it also gives us reason to take measures to ensure that privacy is protected. Smart phones may be used to sneak pictures and/or audio-record during events that are then posted on a Web site without permission. Signage posted in the performance area stating your policy is a good precaution.

### Begin planning process early

First and foremost, planning a successful AARI or other cultural event necessitates early planning. In fact, starting in July to plan a February Black History Month event such as AARI probably means that it's a late start. Planning large-scale annual events is a year-round endeavor and should start with a follow-up meeting of all working members of the representative sponsoring groups held shortly after each successful year's event is completed.

During the follow-up meeting, assess the accomplishments of the event, but also discuss areas that could be improved upon or made even better the next year. Those academic librarians just starting out in the area of programming might begin by developing a small AARI program event, and reach out gradually to possible partners such as the Student Affairs Office for support and to establish a potential audience base.

Helpful tips for academic librarians in building partnerships while promoting cultural programming can be found in an article written by Stacy Brinkman.<sup>4</sup> A great, timely source to discover available grants and to learn about programming planning is ALA's Public Programs Office online resource center.<sup>5</sup>

AARI projects of engagement by the two universities described here were built upon igniting the passion for the celebration within the UMKC and MSU campus faculty, staff, students, and community friends. Connection was established through a love of literature.

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## Notes

1. [www.ncte.org/action/aari](http://www.ncte.org/action/aari).
2. [www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org).
3. Barber Peggy, Wallace Linda, *Building a Buzz: Libraries and Word-of-Mouth Marketing* (Chicago: America Library Association, 2010). » [Search Google Scholar](#)
4. Brinkman Stacy, "Promoting Partnership," *C&RL News* 69 (2008): 147-50. » [Search Google Scholar](#)
5. [www.programminglibrarian.org](http://www.programminglibrarian.org).

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