Implementing Leisure Reading in the Academic Library: A Real Life Scenario

The “Hot Titles” collection in the McQuade Library at Merrimack College has evolved quite a bit over the last year. While this collection has always been about showcasing new and popular titles (approximately 120 at any given time), several aspects of it have changed as far as acquisitions and marketing are concerned. Previously, the Hot Titles collection was made up of rentals, leased through McNaughton. While this subscription service provided many beneficial features, such as a rotating collection, the ability to purchase inventory for a permanent collection, and an assigned McNaughton team member to assist with your account, as a group, we at McQuade decided to discontinue our partnership. After several meetings, it was determined that the cost per book (about $30) was much higher than we could get elsewhere (i.e. Amazon). Also, since McNaughton only leases books from a particular list, not all titles that we wanted (or that patrons requested) were available, either for a lengthy period of time, or at all. With this being the case, we decided to simply allocate a budget ($2,500/year) for “Hot Titles” and purchase the books through Amazon. This gave us the option to decide if we wanted a title in paper or hardback, as well as a much larger selection, all for a lower price point.

After looking at the cost of the Hot Titles collection, we began to run reports to evaluate the collection’s usage. The checkouts of these items were fair, but we thought they could be better. At this point, the Hot Titles were on shelving around a fireplace, which had seating around it as well. There were no face-outs and very minimal signage, which was not very eye-catching. While this setup looked nice enough, it wasn’t practical and was hard to browse, especially when patrons were sitting in the chairs, which was often. We decided to relocate our collection to two large display tables in the center of the first floor. This allowed all book covers to be seen, as we used display stands facing out, rather than lining the books up like in the stacks. We also updated our signage, placing bright signs on each table. With this change, patrons could now easily browse and borrow without the hassle of interrupting those enjoying the fireplace.

In another attempt to boost checkouts, we also looked at our loan rules to see what could be improved there. Students were permitted to checkout Hot Titles for three weeks with two renewals, while faculty and staff were able to have items out for a whole semester with two renewals. With these loan rules, an item could potentially only be checked out once a semester, if the patron happened to be a faculty or staff member. To ensure fairness and to allow more patrons access to our new and popular books, we shortened the borrowing period for all patrons to two weeks with one renewal. Prior to this change, we posted flyers on the library bulletin boards and had bookmarks printed to be placed in all of the Hot Title books, so everyone on campus would be aware of the new two week rule. Although we thought there may be some pushback from faculty members, no one even seemed to notice the change.

Other improvements we made to the Hot Titles collection included creating a Lib Guides page (http://libguides.merrimack.edu/HotTitles/Home) which includes a link to request items, as well as links to the catalog record for all Hot Titles, adding audiobooks to the collection, and implementing Staff and Student Worker Picks. We also started identifying graphic novels and books written by faculty and alums with bright neon labels on the covers.

With all of these changes, we’ve seen an increase of Hot Title checkouts from the previous academic year. For the 2014/2015 academic year we had 353 Hot Title checkouts and for the 2015/2016 academic year we had 424 Hot Title checkouts. This gives us an increase of 71 Hot Title checkouts.