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Jessica Szempruch

University of South Florida, jszempru@usf.edu

Katrina I. Hinds

University of South Florida, katrinahinds@usf.edu

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**Virtual Book Club: Impactful Library Programming at a Distance Through
Co-Curricular Collaboration**

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Jessica N. Szempruch^{a*} and Katrina I. Hinds^b

*^AUSF Libraries, University of South Florida, Sarasota, USA; ^bOffice of Student Engagement,
University of South Florida, Sarasota, USA*

*Corresponding author: Jessica N. Szempruch, jszempru@usf.edu; University of South Florida,
Sarasota, FL, USA; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3750-4435>

Virtual Book Club: Impactful Library Programming at a Distance Through Co-Curricular Collaboration

ABSTRACT

This article presents the University of South Florida's Virtual Book Club, created and continually improved during a time of social isolation (COVID-19 pandemic). Implementation steps taken are discussed, presenting practical considerations to others who may wish to replicate this program. Additionally, this article explores findings from a program evaluation survey. Through engagement with the club, students reported enhanced feelings of connection, as well as improved learning outcomes. Authors posit that meaningful cross-campus collaboration can lead to positive community outreach, facilitate deep engagement, and build community regardless of distance.

Keywords: library programming; student engagement; co-curricular experiences; book clubs; virtual programming; collaborative outreach; belonging; student perceptions; cross-campus collaboration; learning outcomes

Introduction

In March 2020, the University of South Florida (USF) was – like many other institutions around the world – faced with the challenge of immediately moving to remote instruction. Suddenly it seemed that everything beyond the most essential functions of community life were at a standstill. The USF Sarasota-Manatee campus student body is comprised of approximately 2000 FTE, entirely commuter or fully-online students who are accustomed to close connections and frequent high-touch interactions with faculty and staff. Many students live at home with their families and even those who classify themselves as distance learners typically spend a significant amount of time on-campus participating in co-curricular events, making friends, studying, etc. When the forced campus closure moved all university operations online, students immediately lost the formal and informal involvement opportunities that provided them the capacity to

socialize and connect with others. Traditional on-campus learners suddenly became distance learners with little warning. As unprecedented changes developed, it quickly became clear that some students felt isolated and needed an intellectually stimulating opportunity to connect with their friends and the campus community. At the beginning of April 2020, a student approached the campus librarian and assistant director of Student Engagement to pitch the idea for a reading group. The professionals immediately joined together to build a virtual book club (VBC) to fit the unique needs and desires of their students. The professionals were particularly concerned with fostering and growing the connections, community, and sense of belonging so prevalent within on-campus, face-to-face engagement activities on their small campus. Working together with student workers and a staff library specialist, VBC went from a dream idea to an engaging reality.

This article presents one university's virtual student book club, created and continually improved during a time of social isolation. After a seemingly successful year of club activities, the professionals leading the efforts surveyed student members to ascertain perceptions of the club and their own personal development in relation to their participation. This feedback was used to refine modality and club structure in hopes of future growth and long-term sustainability. This article is useful to academic librarians similarly dealing with students who are feeling disconnected from the campus experience. Through this article, academic librarians will see how combining the efforts of library and student engagement professionals to foster a meaningful co-curricular outlet can lead to positive community outreach, facilitate deep engagement, and build community regardless of distance. Additionally, the mechanics of developing, organizing, and implementing the virtual book club are discussed, presenting practical considerations to others who may wish to replicate this virtual co-curricular opportunity on their own campuses.

Literature review

Book clubs have long been a programming staple of public libraries. On college and university campuses, book clubs are less widespread and when in place are not always offered by or in conjunction with the academic library. Current literature on book clubs in academic libraries is focused on clubs with synchronous, in-person meetings. In these cases, meetings take place infrequently on a monthly (Jansen, 2019) or once-a-semester basis (Fajado, 2010). Book clubs are sometimes used as a tool to fill up space in the absence of other programming, such as during summer breaks or periods of lower enrollment (Jansen, 2018). Book clubs may get their start as off-shoots of required courses geared toward supporting specific enrollments such as international students, honors college cohorts, or summer bridge students (Jansen, 2018; Jansen, 2019). Ad hoc books clubs and reading groups may also be tied to other institutional programming, such as a campus speaker series, a singular campus activity or event, or an important celebration of an affinity group (Goldberg & Trott, 2012).

Student participation in co-curricular programs, such as book clubs, has been long identified as one of the strongest contributors to college student success and development (Astin, 1999; Foubert & Urbanski, 2006; Kuh, 1995). Astin's research and theory of student involvement shows that a student's success is most influenced by their level of involvement; the more involved they are in their college experience, the more likely they are to persist and succeed (1984, 1993, 1999). Astin (1999) defines the involved student as "one who...devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members, staff, and other students" (p. 518). Students who participate in something like a co-curricular book club are more likely to develop strong interpersonal relationships with their peers and build a connection to their institution

(Foubert & Urbanski, 2006), resulting in perceived feelings of social connectedness, higher emotional and physical well-being, and less feelings of loneliness (Farrell, Jorgenson, Fudge, & Pritchard, 2018). Students who seek involvement opportunities that include informal, positive interactions with not just their peers but also staff and faculty, are more likely to build strong relationships with staff and faculty, resulting in higher feelings of self-confidence and self-worth (Kuh, 1995), as well as the perception that they are more than just an ID number, but a valued member of the campus community (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow & Salomone, 2002). Research has shown that the involved student demonstrates elevated levels of development in their ability to establish and clarify purpose, career exploration and planning, as well as autonomy and life management (Foubert & Urbanski, 2006). Students who have not directed their energy into involvement experiences may have a perceived lack of social connectedness during their time at college and are more likely to share experiences of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007).

Foundations of Virtual Book Club

Virtual Book Club (VBC) is at its core a community of readers driven by their common enjoyment of reading for pleasure. An initial call to join VBC was announced on the campus student engagement platform (BullsConnect), via the universities' LMS announcements, through the Office of Student Engagement's weekly emails to students, and on social media to all students; such calls are repeated each time a new book is started. Functionally, VBC meetings run similarly to many other book clubs. After books are chosen and distributed to members, the librarian in charge of the program breaks down each book selection into manageable reading sections (typically four to six per book) and creates a reading schedule. This process allows students to read at a manageable pace and helps assure that most members never fall too far

behind to participate in the discussions. VBC meets weekly for an hour-long synchronous discussion of each section. Weekly meetings average 12 to 18 participants. In addition to book discussion questions developed by the librarian and student participants, synchronous VBC meetings frequently include polling, other interactive activities, and sharing of additional library-provided content to enhance the reading. Reading and interacting with each book take about four to six weeks. As VBC nears the end of each book, soliciting recommendations and voting for the next selection takes place. There is then a week off between books to regroup and allow time for the new books to arrive to each student.

Book choice

Prior to Virtual Book Club's formation, the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee campus had some experience in book discussion activities. From 2017-2020, the campus held a successful university-wide Common Read program. The program was developed and implemented by a small, dedicated committee led by individuals from Library Services and Office of Student Engagement. The selection process for Common Read titles was always done with consideration of student book recommendations and feedback; students played an active role in all aspects of the committee's work which led to increased satisfaction and engagement with the overall Common Read program.

When it came time to start selecting titles for VBC it was evident that student input would be an essential component to success. For the inaugural book selection, recommendations were collected from the original student organizers and the facilitators. This list was then provided to all interested VBC founding members and put to a vote. For the following few book selections, recommendations were solicited from all members of VBC with a few constraints added to each subsequent selection period to make the process run more smoothly. During these

earliest reading cycles, students were simply asked to recommend a few titles that seemed interesting. This loose constraint led to an abundance of recommendations but no explanation of why they were recommended which made it harder for student members to vote on a choice. By the fifth selection cycle, recommendations began to be limited to three per member per cycle and required an explanation to be provided. Most recently, library-provided book review resources have been introduced to help inform student voters and guide selection processes. As of Spring 2022, VBC has read 13 books across multiple genres, ranging from best-selling thrillers (Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient*) to historical retellings (Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*).

Budget

The program was envisioned to remove as many barriers to access for student participation as possible. As a signature program of the Office of Student Engagement, VBC was given a book budget of \$500 per book selection. Students who wish to participate in reading of any selection can sign up to receive a complimentary copy of the book which becomes theirs to keep. In a typical cycle, approximately 40 copies of each selection have been requested. Due to the nature of the funding source complimentary book copies are restricted to currently enrolled students only. Links to library copies of the books, at both the university and local public library systems, are also provided to all book club members to facilitate easy access regardless of enrollment status. Copies of previously-read VBC selections are held on Course Reserve for loan by interested community members who may have missed a book.

As VBC became more popular it became important to consider per book cost as a more expensive book would mean that fewer students could receive a complimentary copy. The need to keep cost in check was compounded by the infeasibility of buying books in bulk from the

publisher or the campus bookstore -- processes which, in a more traditional situation, could allow for discounted book costs. With all student members learning remotely and program staff working from home it was essential that the books chosen would be easily procured and shipped directly to each participant's home. To facilitate this process, special approval was given by the university's Purchasing department to obtain the books individually from Amazon. At first there was no limitation put on the cost of books; however, as popularity grew it became necessary to impose some limits. A per-book allowance of approximately \$12.50 was settled upon to maximize the number of participants while considering the realistic cost of a typical best seller title. Following this change all recommendations were required to include a link to the Amazon product listing for price confirmation prior to being included in the ballot. More costly books may be considered if there is additional funding in the budget such as in the case of a special event collaboration, or tabled for future purchase consideration when costs lower.

Technology

The first major question tackled was which video conferencing software to use for meetings. Organizers knew that selecting the right technology was a crucial step in ensuring equitable student participation. Just prior to the switch to remote learning, USF had begun a university-wide implementation of Microsoft Teams, which included providing institutional access to all students. Consumer education was already underway with the product, and many university stakeholders were thinking of ways to get all students on-board with the change. Utilizing Microsoft Teams as the VBC meeting software was thus a natural fit due to the ease of access and the potential for enhanced technology learning outcomes. Multiple aspects of the Teams platform were utilized from the beginning including synchronous meetings and meeting chat, channels within the Virtual Book Club Team ("General" and "Leadership"), general

asynchronous chat for between meetings, file sharing, linking to library resources, integration with Word and other Office products, and polling.

While Teams allows for meeting recordings, VBC meetings are not recorded. Early on in the development process VBC members discussed and decided as a group not to record the synchronous book discussion meetings. Student leaders felt that recording the conversations may make participants uncomfortable and less willing to grapple with complex issues. They felt strongly that student club meetings should be a place where students could speak openly to each other in the moment. It was decided that allowing the meeting chat to remain open and available for view by members who missed the synchronous meetings would be an acceptable alternative. To maintain conversational flow, any questions formally posed in the meeting by VBC leaders are also pasted in the chat log at the time they are asked verbally. Additionally, participants were encouraged to participate at a level that felt comfortable to them, whether that meant keeping their camera off, contributing via chat, or even just listening.

Furthermore, leaders of VBC recognized the value of less formal engagement options. A GroupMe chat was created for between-meeting conversations and as an alternative for those who miss synchronous meetings or are feeling overwhelmed by too many virtual meetings. Each week VBC facilitators post the discussion questions in the GroupMe chat, however all further discussion within the GroupMe chat is completely participant-lead. In addition to discussing the weekly questions, GroupMe chat members have used the chat to set up book swaps, share information about other events on campus, and give book recommendations. An active, student-led Instagram account ([usfm_bookclub](#)) was also created to share important information and build community. Additionally, complementary event programming, including Netflix Party-style viewings of book related movies and limited series, and a chess tournament (in conjunction

with the selection of *The Queen's Gambit*) have taken place. Through these multiple modes, VBC members were able to find connection points that made sense for their own learning and engagement styles.

Evaluating the success of Virtual Book Club

The first year of VBC wrapped up in April 2021. Before diving into plans for year two, VBC organizers undertook a program evaluation to guide improvements for the future. For this program evaluation, they conducted an anonymous survey of all student VBC participants who were still actively enrolled at the university at the time of inquiry. A twenty question Qualtrics survey was distributed on March 21st, 2021 to 32 students. Question types were both quantitative and qualitative, including multiple choice, multiple selection, Likert scale, and free response. The survey ran from March 21st, 2021 to April 2nd, 2021, during which time 16 students completed it in full, representing 50% of students who received the survey. This sample aligns with the number of students who were typically attending any given synchronous meeting at the time. At the time of the program evaluation survey, membership was still primary comprised of Sarasota-Manatee campus affiliated students, which was reflected in the sample (10 from Sarasota-Manatee, 6 not responding). Demographics showed sample responses came from 87.5% undergraduate and 12.5% graduate students, with both full-time (68.75%) and part-time (31.25%) student status.

In addition to gathering valuable information regarding the nature of each student's interaction with VBC to that point, the survey was designed to identify the factors that contributed to VBC's unique success, and examine the impact of participation on students' feelings of belonging, social connectedness, and personal growth. In order to achieve this second point, VBC leadership adopted five learning outcomes from the Office of Student Engagement

which are foundational to all student engagement opportunities created on campus, and incorporated these into three questions within the survey in order to evaluate participants' learning and growth. These learning outcomes include:

- (1) **Critical Thinking:** Identifying multiple approaches to formulating an opinion, making a decision, or solving a problem, by being open to new ideas and perspectives.
- (2) **Effective Reasoning:** Using information from a variety of sources, including your own personal experiences in order to come to a new conclusion and then articulate the reason for your chosen approach.
- (3) **Building Meaningful Relationships:** Establishing mutually trustworthy and rewarding relationships with others.
- (4) **Effective Communication:** Successfully conveying yourself by effectively writing, speaking, presenting, listening attentively, and utilizing non-verbal communication in a courteous and professional manner.
- (5) **Effective Use of Technology:** Successfully navigating and utilizing new or existing technology in order to connect with others, access opportunities otherwise not available in another format, and/or complete a task or goal.

Program evaluation survey findings

From this survey several major themes emerged: belonging and social connectedness; skill building; positive response to virtuality; and new exposure to co-curricular involvement.

Participation fosters a sense of belonging and social connectedness

Respondents shared that they made the decision to join VBC because they were seeking an opportunity to socialize with other students which remaining connected with their student peers and campus. In their survey answers, students shared that it was during this time of isolation that they could not socialize with anyone outside of their household until VBC's formation provided the opportunity. A student in their fourth year of school shared:

During the pandemic I had very little social interaction and being able to come together to do something we all love, like reading books and talk about them with others was a mental break from the world around me. Joining helped me stay in contact with others in my university as well as read books, which is something I have always enjoyed but didn't feel I had the time for.

As a result of participating in VBC, 93% of respondents said that they felt more connected with others, 87% felt like they had a place that they belong, and 88% felt that they were able to build meaningful relationships with other members. Respondents' open-ended answers provided more insight into their sense of belonging and connectedness as it relates to VBC:

- One of my favorite parts [of Virtual Book Club] is the open mindedness and exceptional conversation. Especially the friends I've made so far. Everyone is really nice, and it builds a sense of community.
- I came back after the first book because I enjoyed the company of the other members, and our conversations are always great.
- VBC is a small community that has interests similar to mine. Coming to book club is my favorite part of the week as we get to come together and talk about the book in a safe space.

Participation provides an opportunity to build skills

As a result of participating in VBC, 100% of survey respondents agreed that they used critical thinking, effective reasoning, and effective communication, while 93% agreed they effectively used technology, and 88% agreed they built meaningful relationships.

Not only did students use these skills, but a considerable number of respondents also reported growth in these areas with 93% agreeing they enhanced their critical thinking skills, 87% agreeing they enhanced their effective reasoning skills and technology skills, and 81%

agreeing they enhanced their skills in building meaningful relationships and effective communication.

Virtual delivery positively impacts participation

The virtual environment in which VBC was created was a key influence factor; 81% of respondents agreed that the virtual aspect of the club positively influenced their participation.

Many of the student's open-ended responses made it clear that the ability to participate in a club virtually opened a door to involvement that wasn't otherwise available to them, even pre-pandemic:

- I am not on campus at all, so the main reason I can join is because it's virtual and online.
- I am a long-distance student, and I wouldn't have been able to join if it wasn't virtual.
- I prefer virtual because I don't have convenient transportation to campus.

From student responses, we know that the virtual setting has allowed for more flexibility than ever before, allowing students the option to participate both synchronously and asynchronously.

87% of respondents shared that they had attended live weekly meetings on Microsoft Teams and

93% of respondents shared they participated in the GroupMe chat, which takes place

asynchronously, outside of the weekly meetings. In their open-ended responses, students shared

examples of how the flexible virtual setting removed barriers and made it more convenient for

them to participate:

- I do not have to travel to participate. Even though I cannot attend the meetings, I can still join the discussions later through the chat.
- It's convenient to come home from work and jump into the meeting without having to go somewhere else. If I'm not interested in talking a lot during a meeting, I don't feel uncomfortable because I can just shut off my camera or use the chat.

- The virtual setting of the club has given me the chance to participate during a busy schedule of grad school. I don't know if I would have participated if I had to drive to a place to meet.
- It's easier to keep up with readings and attend meetings while being in the comfort of my own home.

Virtual Book Club is a novel involvement opportunity at USF

As the pandemic progressed, the opportunity to participate in VBC was formally extended to all three of the USF campuses making VBC the first general interest, co-curricular, book club offered across the university. Open-ended responses show that student participants were motivated to participate because they especially enjoy reading and have been seeking a student organization where they could read with others:

- I joined Virtual Book Club as an incoming freshman and was looking for ways to get involved in activities. I was also looking for a structured way to keep reading.
- I came to book club because I wanted to gather with a group of people and be able to converse about books we were reading together.
- I have always wanted to be a part of a book club to engage with other people!
- I joined because the book caught my eye and seemed interesting to me. I also wanted to experience what a book club was like.

With 56% of respondents indicating that prior to joining VBC they were not involved in student life at USF, including membership in student organizations, Student Government Association, Campus Activities Board, or on-campus employment, we can surmise that VBC is providing an involvement opportunity for students who may not otherwise engage with the university outside of their coursework.

The future of Virtual Book Club

Providing as many ways as possible to connect and engage with VBC has been and remains a priority for the VBC coordinators. For example, feedback regarding interactions with external content and library resources related to each book indicated that this connection point needed further development. To that end, rather than relying on sharing only within the Teams channel, a new Virtual Book Club LibGuide (usfsm.libguides.com/VBC) was developed by the program's librarian to curate helpful resources, additional readings, and make meaningful connections with each selection. Traffic from the guide has led to some additional librarian consultation requests for the librarian who leads VBC noting the guide as a connection point, and inspired more library research on individual selection-related topics. Additionally, discussion questions posed in weekly meetings are posted to the guide following each week's synchronous meeting allowing those who are unable to attend the opportunity to reflect. Past selection sub-pages remain available for students who wish to look back. Since its creation in Summer 2021 the VBC LibGuide has maintained active visitor counts.

Many interested parties outside of VBC's sphere questioned whether the club would remain virtual and as well-attended once pandemic restrictions were lifted allowing for in-person gathering. The time to test this came during the Fall 2021 semester as in-person student engagement opportunities began to resume under university guidance. VBC, however, remained virtual as student responses were strongly in favor of virtuality. While engagement at on-campus activities continued slowly building back to pre-pandemic levels through the semester, VBC's popularity thrived and continued to grow. When some restrictions on gatherings were reintroduced toward the end of the semester leading to on-campus activities being changed or canceled, VBC felt no negative effect. For VBC, virtuality makes sense. The student population

is more geographically dispersed than pre-pandemic, due to both student migration and the consolidation of three independently accredited institutions throughout the Tampa Bay geographic area (Sarasota-Manatee, St. Petersburg, and Tampa) into one new university unit. Virtuality allows for robust cross-campus membership, where regular engagement opportunities are available regardless of distance from the home campus.

As VBC's popularity continues to grow, coordinators have begun focusing on how VBC might offer additional opportunities to enhance engagement and increase feelings of connection and belonging. In late Summer 2021, VBC was approached by a group of students who were interested in starting a sub-group of VBC focused solely on reading manga, anime, and graphic novels. VBC coordinators worked with these students to create their own student group, now called Moshi Moshi, effectively extending the reach of VBC. In Fall 2021, VBC sponsored Moshi Moshi as they read two books and discussed them virtually. Sharing the love of reading beyond book club selections is another opportunity for connection and belonging. Student participants frequently share book recommendations during synchronous meetings as well as throughout the GroupMe chat. VBC coordinators have discussed the possibility of leveraging inter-campus mail and relationships with departments on each of the three USF campuses to facilitate book-swaps for participants who are interested in recommending and reading books from each other's personal collections. Additionally, the VBC LibGuide has been expanded to include a section of further reading suggestions from members with links to USF Libraries' holdings.

Conclusion

What initially began as a temporary program meant to keep students engaged for what was originally assumed to be a few weeks, quickly evolved into one of the most successful, on-going

virtual co-curricular programs offered to students at USF. Membership continues to grow steadily even as most co-curricular opportunities have shifted back to an in-person format. As of May 2022, VBC has had a total of 217 unique participants, read 13 books, with an average of 44 students participating in each book. In August 2021, the VBC coordinators were awarded the 2020-2021 USF Student Success Regional Chancellor Award. This award honors the work of an individual, team, department or college for outstanding contributions made to advancing student success on the USF regional campuses. VBC is now firmly cemented as a signature program and will continue to be offered in the future.

From this experience, it is clear that virtual book clubs can make important impacts on students' sense of belonging, personal development, and improved skills/competencies. Intentionally designed, supported student book clubs can serve a role far beyond just maintaining student engagement. Academic librarians can benefit by seeking out strategic partnerships and collaborating with campus departments focused on fostering positive student engagement. Such collaborations result in increased resources, including funding and staffing. By partnering to provide co-curricular programming, academic librarians have the opportunity to build deeper connections with students across majors, resulting in more visibility for library services and a higher rate of student success. Future research may consider the role of virtual book club programming within the context of high impact practices such as facilitating deep interaction between faculty librarians and student participants.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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