WHAT IS THE SLOW BOOKS MOVEMENT?

In a March 23, 2012 blog post on The Atlantic website, author Maura Kelly argues for a new “slow movement,” the “Slow Books Movement.” Not unlike the Slow Food’s call for a more nutritious, substantive diet, the Slow Books Movement challenges readers to choose more substantive reading material—serious literature that encourages quiet contemplation and that broadens self-awareness. Slow books is neither an alarmist reaction to technology nor a nostalgic longing for the past—meaningful works of literature exist whether in electronic or print formats. Rather, the point of slow reading is simply to challenge minds and stimulate reflection—developing readers’ ability to think critically and to form new ideas.

WHY PROMOTE RECREATIONAL READING ON CAMPUS?

Contrary to the dismal findings reported in the often-cited NEA survey “Reading at Risk” (1998), students are actually extremely engaged in reading (Jolliffe & Harl, 2008, p. 611)—are relatively scarce. This is a problem since one of the negative tendencies associated with digital media activities (Jolliffe & Harl, 2008, Salter & Brook, 2007). However, students interact with, and are the most motivated by, texts that are technologically based:

Why promote recreational reading on campus? (Fister, 2011); and 3) Students who like to read for pleasure tend to be more creative and successful in school (Kelly & Kneipp, 2009; Gallik, 1999).

My argument, however, is that the promotion of recreational reading is a part of the library’s educational and instructional mission—not counter to it. By creating opportunities for literacy activities that are meaningful to students” (p. 301). Book group discussions, by nature, are social and provide a meaningful literary activity outside of the formal classroom—helping to build a culture of reading and a community of readers on campus.

WHY SHOULD ACADEMIC LIBRARIES LEAD THIS MOVEMENT?

Recreational reading promotion in U.S. academic libraries is no new thing. It has, in fact, a historical precedent stretching as far back as the early twentieth century. Between the 1920s and 1960s, academic libraries routinely promoted recreational reading through book lists, book talks, articles in student newspapers, and public lectures. Some academic libraries even hired readers’ advisors—librarians whose specific job was to promote pleasure reading on campus. However, in the 1990s—coinciding with the publication of Harriet Branscomb Teaching With Books (1940)—this role began to fade. In his book, Branscomb criticizes academic librarians for dedicating too much effort to recreational reading activities and not enough to their traditional roles. Since the forties, supporting student and faculty research has been the primary focus of academic libraries in the US, suggesting that Branscomb’s vision has prevailed.

My argument, however, is that the promotion of recreational reading is a part of the library’s educational and instructional mission—not counter to it—and can be used to reach reading and information literacy skills. This argument is based on three key themes that have emerged from my research: 1) Literacy as a collaborative, social practice needs more emphasis (Keller-Cohen 1993); 2) Students who like to read for pleasure (Gilbert & Fister 2011) and 3) Students who like to read for pleasure tend to be more creative and successful in school (Kelly & Knipp, 1999, Gallik, 1999).