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Public Relations Promotion to Advance Child Reading and Literacy

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Public Relations Promotion to Advance Child Reading and Literacy

An Honors Program Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

by Rosemarie McGinty
May 2015

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Communication Studies, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

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Introduction

Literacy is a fundamental skill that children need to possess in order to be successful in all of their academic endeavors. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defines a literate person as one who can read and write, with understanding, a short statement on his or her everyday life (“the Official Source,” 2014). More descriptively, Reardon, Valentino, and Shores (2012) define literacy as “the ability to access, evaluate, and integrate information from a wide range of textual sources.” Literacy, or at least successful literacy, involves more than being able to read and write one simple sentence.

Increasing an appreciation for reading, and therefore literacy, in children in the United States is an important issue. According to the 2011 Main National Assessment of Education Progress, 67 percent of fourth-graders performed at or above the “basic” level, meaning they were able to use text to locate information and to justify opinions (Reardon et al., 2012). Only around 30 percent performed at or above the “proficient” level, meaning they demonstrated higher-order reading abilities, and less than 10 percent scored at an advanced level. Scores from eighth graders reflect similar percentages, except that only 3 percent scored at the advanced level (Reardon et al., 2012). Such low numbers of school children in the United States progressing past even basic levels of reading and literacy require new solutions to address these unfortunate circumstances and change future statistics.

I would like to focus my project on, but not limit it to, children of low socioeconomic status – making Harrisonburg an ideal location for this project because there are many elementary schools in the area with children from ethnically diverse and low-income families. A majority of the population in Harrisonburg classifies itself as white (78%). The remaining population is 16 percent Hispanic, 6 percent African American, and 4 percent Asian (Healthy
Community Council on the Quality of Life in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County, 2011). The state average is 11.1 percent of the population living below the poverty line, while 35 percent of Harrisonburg residents live below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Approximately 20 percent of families in Harrisonburg live below the poverty line, which remains higher than the state and national average (Healthy Community Council on the Quality of Life in Harrisonburg & Rockingham County, 2011).

Research shows that children whose parents do not provide a home environment in which they read frequently with the children or have productive verbal interactions with them fail to foster literacy development and elevate the risk of reading problems for the children (Waldfogel, 2012). Families of lower socioeconomic status are less likely to foster positive environments for the growth of an appreciation for reading due to elements such as lack of time, resources, and literacy skills from the parents (Kieffer, 2012).

In addition to being an area with many children coming from families of a low socioeconomic status, because of the diversity in Harrisonburg, many of the children struggle with literacy because English is not the language spoken at home. As of May 2010, the Harrisonburg city public schools had one of the highest Limited English Proficient (LEP) populations in the Commonwealth of Virginia (Understanding, Supporting, and Reaching English Language Learners, 2). Indeed, around 40 percent of the students in Harrisonburg city public schools are LEP. These children, who make up such a large part of Harrisonburg’s school system, need help in developing their English reading skills and are a great audience to include in the goal to increase children’s literacy in Harrisonburg.

The literacy facts about Harrisonburg’s adults show a clear need for a bigger literacy push for the children of Harrisonburg as well. According to statistics from the Skyline Literacy...
Coalition, around 13 percent of adults over 16 years of age in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County are at or below a Level 1 Literacy Level (“Local Literacy Facts,” 2007). Further, 13 percent of adults over 25 years of age in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County have less than a ninth-grade education (“Local Literacy Facts,” 2007). There is a need for more effort to be put toward helping the children in the community improve their literacy skills so they can grow up and improve these statistics.

It is clear that Harrisonburg is an ideal area for a children’s literacy campaign; the next step is deciding on which age group to focus. The K-12 range of children can be grouped into three subcategories to better understand the stages of development. The three subcategories come from Jean Piaget’s theory on stages of cognitive development in children. It is important to consider each of the subcategories in order to determine on which would be best to focus the efforts of a children’s literacy campaign.

Children between the ages of two and seven belong to Piaget’s preoperational stage. Characteristics of children in this stage include an increase in language ability, egocentric perspective, symbolic thought, and limited logic (Ojose, 2008). Piaget placed an emphasis on the lack of logic associated with this stage of development and because of that lack of logic rational thought makes little appearance.

Children between the ages of seven and eleven years of age belong to Piaget’s concrete operational stage. An astounding amount of cognitive growth characterizes this stage, due to an accelerated development of language and acquisition of basic skills (Osoje, 2008). During this stage, children are able to use their senses to know and understand better the things around them. Indeed, children in this stage can consider two or three dimensions simultaneously instead of sequentially (Osoje, 2008).
The final age group of focus is children of the ages eleven to seventeen – members of the formal operational stage of development. In this final stage, children are capable of forming hypotheses as well as deducing possible consequences (Osoje, 2008). Thus, Piaget’s stages of development show children progressively becoming more abstract and logical thinkers as they age (Piaget & Inhelder, 2004). It should be noted that there could be variability in when children reach the stages, due to environmental and personal factors. Some psychologists even suggest that many people never actually reach the formal operational stage (Osoje, 2008).

Based on the research from Piaget and Inhelder (2004) and Osoje (2008) I decided to focus my campaign on third graders. There are benefits to working on literacy at all of the different ages discussed, but third grade (aged 7 to 8 years) seems to be the best age to work on literacy skills and motivating children to read. Around this age and grade level is when children have an accelerated development of language and begin developing many basic skills. In order to foster better language development going forward, it is important to instill good reading habits and get children interested in continuing to read and work on their language skills.

Most successful literacy campaigns have enough resources to create an extended program that will take place over a few years – rather than just one day. For example, Save the Children provides training, tools, and support to schools in addition to providing activities for children after school and during the summer. Save the Children has been quite successful, with almost 70 percent of the children involved in the program showing major improvement beyond what would be expected if they were receiving solely classroom instruction (“Helping Children Succeed,” 2014).

Another example of a successful reading program in the United States is Reading is Fundamental (RIF). RIF is the largest children’s nonprofit in the United States and it focuses on
motivating young children to make reading a part of their everyday lives. The program delivers free books and literacy resources to children and families affected by poverty. Also, the volunteers in the program distribute books, stage reading motivation activities, and promote the importance of literacy in the community arena (“Reading is Fundamental,” 2014).

Locally, Harrisonburg has the Reading Road Show, which is a mobile literacy program. The program uses the Gus Bus to distribute books, in addition to food bags, to children and families throughout Harrisonburg, Rockingham County, and Page County. The Gus Bus provides opportunities for local children and their families to read together and participate in the book exchange program. This program has been quite successful and in 2013 children made approximately 7,297 visits to the Gus Bus during neighborhood stops in Harrisonburg, Rockingham County, and Page County (“The Reading Road Show,” 2014).

Although my campaign will be short-term, I have taken aspects from the successful campaigns I have seen and incorporated them into what I will do. For example, Save the Children provides tools for schools to help increase reading and Reading is Fundamental provides motivational reading activities – both of which I will do at my event. Also, Reading is Fundamental and the Gus Bus provide access to books to the children they support and after my event, each child will leave with his or her own book to keep and take home.

My Communication Studies and Public Relations courses have prepared me well for creating a successful campaign. After establishing that there is a problem – the children in Harrisonburg are in need of help in developing their literacy skills – and determining how I can help solve the problem – hold a literacy event for local 3rd graders – I have set clear goals and an objective. My three goals are to (1) attract interest in a literacy event, (2) increase the appreciation Harrisonburg children have for reading, and (3) strengthen Harrisonburg teachers’
ability to promote literacy in their classrooms. My objective is to increase literacy and interest in reading in Harrisonburg children who attend the event. Thus, I’ve completed the strategic planning step.

The next step is formulating action. One important aspect of planning action is considering audience engagement – including audience interest, participation, and feedback (Smith, 2013). One way to generate audience participation is to hold a special event – which is exactly what I am doing. Another proactive step I will take will be to gain sponsorships, which is a significant strategy for campaigns oriented toward community relations (Smith, 2013). It is my hope that local businesses will be interested in sponsoring the event, both for the positive publicity and the great cause their money will go toward.

The proactive strategy will be communication. According to Smith (2013), communication strategy is “a category that includes publicity, newsworthy information and transparent communication.” It will be important to pursue publicity and get the attention of local media, such as newspapers, blogs, and radio personalities. Currently, literacy may not be a hot topic in Harrisonburg, but according to priming theory, the media can help set the stage to provide the context for public discourse on the topic of local literacy (Smith, 2013). Hopefully, this will be the case. Of course, I do not want to rely completely on the media, it will be important to take the information directly to the publics using social media and other useful tools.

As more details surrounding the event and the sponsors for the event come together, I will need to develop the message strategy and select communication tactics. After implementing the strategic plan and holding the event it will be necessary to evaluate the strategic plan. These are all steps I will take as I work toward successfully completing my goals and objective.
Method

Goals and Objectives

In order to begin the process of designing, promoting, and holding an event it was important to establish goals and an objective. The goals were: to attract interest in a literacy event and to create a unique literacy event for Harrisonburg children to attend. The objective was to increase literacy and interest in and appreciation for reading in the Harrisonburg children who attend the event.

The most important concrete accomplishments I needed to work toward in order to successfully complete my goals and objective included: bringing an author to the event, bringing elementary school students to the event, finding a space for the event, funding the event, and creating promotional materials to attract interest in the event.

Key Publics

The publics I most wanted to engage in a communication process were elementary school staff, the JMU population, and local media. The first public with which I need to engage was the staff at a local elementary school. I needed to make sure there would be enough interest in attending a literacy event and that a field trip to JMU’s campus would be possible. Additionally, this is a public that I wanted to provide with literacy tools. I was able to reach the elementary school staff public through my connection with the third grade liaison and their attendance of the literacy event.

The next public I focused on was the JMU population. I needed permission from different JMU personnel throughout campus to create an honors project, fund it, get access to event space and procure other resources as well. I maintained a regular and open line of communication with my honors project advisor in order to maintain a positive connection to the JMU population. I
also directed messages at the students of JMU about fundraising and volunteering at the event. Social media was a useful tool in reaching many JMU students. It was important to gather the support and interest from the JMU community in order to facilitate a successful event on the school’s campus. In addition, I reached out to various JMU departments to garner support for the event. I worked with Event Management to book a large enough space for the event and to ensure the Public Safety Office was aware of the event details. Departments and organizations on campus also provided financial support in the forms of donations, fundraisers and grants. I received contributions from Gamma Phi Beta, JMU PRSSA, the JMU Honors Program and the Office of the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity. The School of Communication Studies was generous enough to donate most of the materials I needed for each of the stations at the event and printed the flyers that went in each goodie bag.

I also hoped to communicate with local media to garner interest in the event and cause behind the event. Working with liability issues with the school children made contacting local media in advance rather difficult, but I was able to send a press release to JMU’s newspaper, the Breeze (see Appendix C).

The last public for this event were local businesses interested in sponsoring this event, as well as other individuals not part of the JMU community who care about literacy development in young children. To this end, I reached out to local organizations who care about literacy and books, such as Barnes and Nobles and the Green Valley Book Fair. In order to supply a bag for each child I reached out to Barnes and Noble who provided branded bags with promotional materials inside. Additionally, Paxmont helped supply necessary materials such as paper and craft supplies. The Green Valley Book Fair provided mainly a financial contribution and included a promotional book mark to put in each of the goodie bags. The other source of
financial contributions was from the GoFundMe campaign I started online, which raised over $900 from family, friends and other individuals who saw the campaign and cared enough about the cause to donate. Every sponsor, contribution big or small, played a big part in the occurrence and success of this event.

**Implementation**

I began this project by conducting research on literacy in children, focusing in particular on literacy in Harrisonburg. After I saw that there was a great need for literacy help among children in the area I started planning for the event I wanted to hold. This involved looking into children’s book authors to see if I could find not only one that I liked, but one that was willing to come to Harrisonburg and for a reasonable price. I spoke with a few different authors before I found the perfect one: Timothy Young, from Easton, MD. I also identified the elementary school closest to JMU and established a relationship with its third grade liaison who expressed interest in the event.

The next step was to start fundraising as I had over $2,000 to procure in order to pay the author’s program fee, to buy a book for every child and to purchase all of the supplies necessary for communication and craft materials. I reached out to departments on campus, a JMU sorority, local businesses and created a GoFundMe social media fundraising campaign online. These methods were successful in gathering all of the funds and donations that made the event possible.

I also had to schedule the day and organize everything down to the very smallest detail. I secured a room for the event after speaking with University Management and changing the day of the event to fit with the room availability on campus. Thankfully, the author and school were able to be flexible with the date of the event. I finalized financial matters, so I could be sure to pay the author on time for his program and books. I also collected and organized all of the
volunteers, planned the activity stations for the event, purchased materials and scheduled the event to fit with the elementary school’s and the author’s timelines, working the volunteers into shifts including setup and cleanup.

The event was held on JMU’s campus in a space large enough to accommodate over 100 students, their teachers and JMU volunteers. I also booked the room next to the event space, so I could use it for preparation of the materials and volunteers. Event set-up began at 8 a.m. and the author, Timothy Young, arrived at 8:30 a.m. to prepare for his presentation to the children. We unloaded all of the craft supplies and the author’s books to set up in the event space.

The elementary schools students and teachers arrived around 9:30 a.m. By 10 a.m. the children were settled on the ground and enjoying the presentation from Timothy, author and illustrator of his books. He brought I Hate Picture Books to give to the children and presented it as well as I’m Looking for a Monster, They’re Coming!, Shadows on the Wall, and The Angry Little Puffin. He also incorporated an illustration activity into his presentation where he had a few kids from the audience scribble on his white board and he created a drawing out of the scribble. Timothy’s enthusiasm kept the kids engaged and having fun throughout his entire program. After the presentation ended, the children had the opportunity to use the restroom and re-group.

Then the children were able to rotate to different craft stations set up around the room. Each station was designed to be fun, yet educational, and promoted the joys of reading. There were eight stations total. At the first station, the children were able to make their own bookmarks. The second station held blank cartoon strips, so the kids could write and draw their own cartoons. The third station focused on worksheets, with word searches and coloring pages. At the fourth station, the children cut out and stapled together flip books. The fifth station was
the letter writing station where the kids could write a letter to the person of their choice and include fun stickers on their stationary. At the sixth station, kids made their own notepads out of brown paper bags and string. Kids participated in reading bingo at station seven. Timothy was able to stay after his program, so the children could get their books signed and speak with him one-on-one. Speaking with Timothy and having him sign a personal copy of his book was the eighth station. I assigned at least one volunteer to each station and the teachers and chaperones made sure the kids behaved and moved successfully from station to station. After rotating through all of the stations the kids ate their packed lunches. Around 1 p.m. the event came to a close and the children departed for their elementary school.

Each child left with a “goodie bag” that contained a book, the author’s promotional materials, any crafts the child made and wanted to take home, reading activities, promotional items from local businesses that supported the event, and a flyer I created for the children (see Appendix A), as well as a flyer I created for the parents (see Appendix B). The “goodie bags” allowed for the event to touch more than just those who were able to attend. The children took their things home and hopefully shared them with their families and potentially some friends as well. Thus, the event was able to reach elementary school-aged children, their teachers and their families/friends furthering the cause behind the event.
Evaluation

During the creation of this campaign I set three goals that would help me accomplish my objective of increasing literacy and interest in reading in Harrisonburg children who attended the event. The first of the three goals was to attract interest in a literacy event. I reached out to a local elementary school and formed a good relationship with the third grade liaison. The elementary school quickly expressed interest in the event and agreed to participate in what I planned.

The next goal was to increase the appreciation Harrisonburg children have for reading. I did this by developing a fun and engaging program. An author was able to connect with the children as a large group and individually. Also, the kids got to participate in many activities that combined fun, interactivity, and reading. Although I do not have data to prove that I accomplished this goal, based on the attitudes and brief conversations I had with children at the event, I believe the majority of the children in attendance had a greater appreciation for reading after attending the event.

The third and final goal was to strengthen the teachers’ ability to promote literacy in their classrooms. It is possible that this goal was achieved by providing the teachers with ideas of what fun, reading-based activities they can incorporate into their classrooms in the future, but I did not end up focusing on this goal. Instead, I decided to target a message at the parents/families of the children in attendance.

Although I did not achieve my third goal, I believe I was successful with my objective. Because I was not able to incorporate some form of data collection into my project, I have no data to support my success, but I am still confident in it. Each child was able to take home a copy of I Hate Picture Books – a book they all appeared to enjoy, as I saw many of them reading it
throughout the event and they responded well to it when the author incorporated it into his program. Also, the kids were able to work on their reading skills during activities such as completing word searches, writing letters, and playing reading bingo. Further, the flyers I sent home that targeted kids and their parents encouraged more reading and can act as references now that the event is over. Thus, I am confident in the success of my objective to increase literacy and interest in reading in the children who attended the event.
Reflection

Many elements led to the success of the event. I was able to raise enough money to pay for the author, books, and craft materials by starting an online giving campaign, garnering the support of local businesses, and asking for grants and donations from sources within James Madison University. All of these accomplishments took weeks of planning, organization and follow-through. While the bi-weekly meetings with my thesis advisor helped keep me on track and organized throughout the entire process, I learned that everything takes longer than you think it will. Details were constantly changing, such as the location of the event, the date of the event and the volunteers willing to participate. The most stressful and delayed process was gathering all of the finances. Even the guaranteed grants presented problems due to university bureaucracy and timing. Planning ahead and considering the event from every angle was imperative. Having an advisor to fill in the gaps with details I had not thought of or had forgot was quite helpful and I would not want to ever plan an event this large alone.

As I got closer to the day of the event I created a detailed event plan that covered everything from the schedule to volunteers to activity stations. Finally, the author and the positive energy from the children created an atmosphere where the purpose of the event could thrive. The children responded enthusiastically to the author’s presentation and rotated through the different activity stations with eagerness and excitement.

While I am pleased with the way the event turned out, there were some aspects of it that I consider areas of in need of improvement. The first major problem I encountered was booking a space for the event. I began looking to do this in late January/early February and this was not early enough to secure a large enough space on JMU’s campus. The room used for the event was
big enough to fit everyone in, but it would have been nice to have a space where everyone could
spread out more and provide more structure to the station rotations.

Another area I would change if done again was the communication. I had planned to be
far more proactive with my communication than I was able to pull together. Unfortunately, the
elementary school had strict rules, which made it difficult to reach out to the local media and
bring literacy to the attention of the community. Although I did send a press release to the school
paper, the Breeze, I think I waited until too close to the date of the event. If done again, I would
be sure to send a press to release to any media I wished to attend at least a full week in advance.

Finally, I really wish there could have been a way for me to incorporate some formal
research into the project in order to better evaluate the influence of the event on literacy levels in
the children who attended. Ideally, delivering a survey to the children before the event, right after
the event, and then again a month or two later would have provided beneficial data regarding the
impact of the event and the success or failure to meet the main objective of the project. Aside
from these few things that I would change if I were to do the event again, I believe that the
process went well.
Conclusion

Completing this honors project has provided with the invaluable opportunity of carrying out a public relations campaign by planning, organizing, and holding an event of my own interest and design. Further, I was able to pursue my passion of helping improve the literacy in young children through this project. Combining my personal and academic passion for this project has allowed me to grow as a student and an individual. I will take the lessons I learned while working on this campaign and use them as I continue on my academic and professional journey. After such a positive experience, I hope to have the opportunity to participate in something as meaningful and successful as this honors project in the future.
Appendix A

Reading is COOL

JMU Literacy Event, March 2015

Books can make you laugh, take you on an adventure, help you learn and so much more!

The author from today, Tim Young, loves to read!

Did you know books have caused wars, saved whole civilizations, and created best friends and worst enemies?

SPONSORS
Gamma Phi Beta, JMU PRSSA, Green Valley Book Fair, the School of Communication Studies, the Office of the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity, the JMU Honors Program, Paxmont, and Barnes & Noble
Reading as a Family

Fun Facts about Reading:

- For every year you read with your child, average lifetime earnings increase by $50,000!
- Reading together builds strong family relationships
- Books are a great way to teach kids how to handle new experiences
- Children who grow up with lots of books in the home tend to go farther in school

How You Can Make It Happen:

- Pick out books that will be fun for you and your kids to read together
- Make it a part of your daily/weekly routine
- Practice what you preach – read your own books around your children too!

Reading Questions to Ask Your Kids:

- What was your favorite part of the book? Why?
- What was the most interesting thing you learned from the book?
- Would you have ended the book differently?

Sponsors
Gamma Phi Beta, JMU PRSSA, Green Valley Book Fair, the School of Communication Studies, the Office of the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity, the JMU Honors Program, Paxmont, and Barnes & Noble

Source: www.kidcentraltn.com

JMU Literacy Event
March 2015
Rosemarie McGinty
Local Third Graders come to JMU to get Engaged in Reading

Harrisonburg, Va. -- On March 25, 2015, JMU senior, Rosemarie McGinty, will hold a literacy event on JMU’s campus in Taylor 306 for the third graders of Spotswood Elementary School. Coming to this event is Timothy Young, children’s book author and illustrator, who will put on an hour-long reading program beginning at 9:30 a.m..

After the program from Young, the children will participate in numerous crafts and activities, all of which aim to inspire the children to gain an appreciation for reading.

While the main purpose of this literacy event is to make a positive and lasting connection between children and books, it will also create a connection between JMU and the community. Student created and led, this event hosting more than 100 children, will be a volunteer opportunity for JMU students interested in serving children from the local community.

President Alger has a vision for JMU: to be the national model for the “engaged university.” Events like this literacy event are what will make this vision come to fruition.

Professor of Communication Studies and faculty advisor for this event, Dr. Hocke-Mirzashvili, expresses an appreciation for the variety of engagement here at JMU, saying that this event is “a great example of the diverse work JMU students do across campus. This honors project was created with the ambition to introduce young children to the world of reading but also to show educational possibilities, such as a university education.”

As her honors project, Rosemarie McGinty decided to conceptualize, create, organize, fundraise and run this literacy event. She was able to secure support from Gamma Phi Beta, JMU’s Honors
Program, JMU’s School of Communication Studies, JMU’s Office of the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity, JMU’s PRSSA chapter, the local Barnes and Nobles, the Green Valley Book Fair and Paxmont.

Along with many other creative student projects going on at JMU, this literacy event showcases how students are embracing the call for an engaged university.

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References


