Peer-Reviewed Article

Book Clubs as Means of Reducing Library Anxiety

Jacob Lackner, *Emory University*
Rebecca Luxmore, *Anacortes Public Library*
Xavier Kneedler-Shorten, *University of Montana*

ABSTRACT

Utilization of library resources can make a major impact in academic success; however, library anxiety can inhibit students from being willing to access library resources. The present study investigates how book clubs influence library anxiety. Five librarians were interviewed about their experiences with book clubs. Patterns emerged indicating book clubs offering holistic student support, focusing on building relationships, and addressing different levels of anxiety saw decreases in library anxiety. Suggestions for best practices in designing and running book clubs to decrease library anxiety are provided. Reduction in library anxiety helps increase a student's ability to use library resources and can thereby increase their academic success.

KEYWORDS

Library anxiety, book clubs, student support

SUGGESTED CITATION

Lackner, J.; Luxmore, R.; & Kneedler-Shorten, X. (2023). Book clubs as means of reducing library anxiety. *Journal of New Librarianship, 8* (1), 20–40. https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/13/2

Introduction

Utilization of library resources is instrumental in academic success, particularly at the university level (American Library Association, 2020; Mao & Kinsley, 2017; Scoulas & De Groote, 2019; Soria & Nackerud, 2017). Despite this, some students actively avoid the library, which may be due to library anxiety.

Library anxiety can be defined as fear of the library, which includes fear of the library's physical space and the process of finding materials. Constance Mellon first documented and termed the phrase library anxiety in college students (1986). She revealed that 75 to 85% of students thought library research was difficult or uncomfortable (Mellon, 1986, p. 160). Students' uncomfortable experience researching in the library permeates to other areas of the library, too, primarily in using the library building and its spaces and in interacting with library staff (Malvasi, Rudowsky, & Valencia, 2009). These feelings can make accessing the library difficult and may manifest as inability to ask for assistance, avoidance of the library, and procrastination on research projects. Addressing library anxiety is a critical issue in making libraries more equitable and welcoming.

Book clubs tend to be a natural fit for public libraries and have long been used as means of bringing communities together over their shared interest in literature. Libraries hosting book clubs provide an opportunity for readers to access new material, explore unfamiliar subject matter, and form relationships with library staff and fellow users. Sustained engagement on this level typically makes users more comfortable, thus reducing library anxiety.

Since book clubs are primarily a public library activity, little has been written about book clubs in academic libraries. Even less has been written about how book clubs can support related diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts and how DEI can intersect with library anxiety. The present study investigates how academic book clubs influence library anxiety and a student's sense of belonging in the library, as well as attempts to fill a gap in the literature. The report culminates in a list of recommendations for best practices for academic library book clubs, and offers ideas of how book clubs can be tailored for their unique populations.

Literature Review

In the years after Mellon's pioneering work in describing library anxiety (1986), many other researchers have dug deeper into the phenomenon. By 1992, Sharon Bostick had created a copyrighted and validated tool that measures library anxiety, the Library Anxiety Scale (Bostick, 1992). Botstick identifies five dimensions of library anxiety: barriers with staff, affective barriers, comfort with the library, knowledge of the library, and mechanical barriers (Bostick, 1992). The Library Anxiety Scale revealed, above all, that the library anxiety felt by students is "situational rather than necessarily linked to a person's temperament" (Nunes, 2016, para. 10). In other words, library anxiety can be experienced by anyone, can be alleviated by librarians,

and is not necessarily the responsibility of the user. Jiao, Onwuegbuzie, & Lichtenstein (1996) noted that students experiencing library anxiety show "cognitive, affective, and physiological symptoms that may include discomfort, fear, tension, feelings of uncertainty, learned helplessness, self-defeating thoughts, and mental disorganization" (p. 152). Larsen (2019) describes library anxiety simply as "the combination of feelings of shame, isolation, and inadequacy experienced by students" when using the library (p. 408).

Despite some of the varied definitions and effects of library anxiety, the literature agrees on the core belief that students suffering from library anxiety will use the library less often, and be more reluctant to ask for help. If library use has a connection to improved academic performance (Mao & Kinsley, 2017), then library anxiety may have a negative impact on student grades. For this reason, "there has been a recognized need to develop intervention strategies to help users cope with various library anxiety responses" (Westbrook & DeDecker, 1993, as cited in Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, & Bostick, 2004). These strategies have differed based on the varied methods used to reduce library anxiety. Approaches include reducing anxiety in the physical space of libraries or enhancing research skills among students to increase user skills. Other approaches hone in on the "attitudes, feelings and anxiety-provoking thoughts via training, instruction and individualized services" (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2004, p. 158). Onwuegbuzie et al. (2004) identify three different ways of reducing library anxiety that are commonly employed by library staff. One method of reducing library anxiety focuses on creating welcoming library spaces that illicit instinctual organization of resources to be more self-service while, "Another is knowledge based…intellectual access to information…through instruction" (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2004, p. 237). The third is librarian "mediation at stages of library use and of the information seeking process" (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2004, p. 237). Of these three methods, the utilization of library outreach most squarely falls into the method of reducing library anxiety through instruction. A case could be made that library outreach is a method of reducing library anxiety in all three categories Onwuegbuzie et al., lay out.

Constance Mellon believed that library instruction should be approached from a broad perspective that attempts to comfort and ease students rather than teach them everything they need to know about library research (Malvasi et al., 2009, p. 3). Mellon and others "assume that students would feel less anxious if they knew how to use the library or were instructed in how to use the library to search for information; library instruction has also been identified as a possible source of library anxiety" (Malvasi et al., 2009, p. 4). Library instruction can throw too much information at the student all at once, instead of in slow doses. Library instruction often comes in the form of one-shots where librarians try to fit as much as they can into a small amount of time. When studied, it was clear that students that received instruction from a librarian versus those who were taught using online learning technologies, felt significantly less library anxiety than those that didn't interact with librarians (Van Scoyoc, 2003). Despite library instructions burst format, the chance to interact with a librarian is valuable, above all. "Research

has demonstrated that people equate approachability with trustworthiness" (Willis et al. 2013, as cited in Muszkiewicz, 2017, p. 226). The human connection, once given an opportunity to form between librarian and user, can help bridge the gap between the ignorant or anxious library user.

Use of library instruction can reduce library anxiety if it allows "users to build on existing knowledge and skills," but Vidmar (1998) also recognizes that student's "feelings of uncertainty and anxiety…will fall short of achieving the desired effect" of connecting with students on an emotional level (Vidmar, 1998, as cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 2004, p. 257). Connecting with users on an emotional level has been identified as a key to reducing library anxiety, especially for underrepresented groups. It should be noted that "to date few studies have focused on remedying the problem of library anxiety" (Malvasi et al., 2009, p. 5). The work of Malvasi et al. (2009), "found that a combination of group instruction in a classroom setting and an online tutorial reduces library anxiety the most, compared to one-on-one instruction and no instruction" (p. 5) Still, these kinds of studies are rare. Many gaps still exist in the study of remedying the problem of library anxiety, including the use of library outreach and programming to combat library anxiety and library ignorance (Larsen et al., 2019). The literature is clear in its message that "no matter the underlying cause of library anxiety, it is up to librarians themselves to address and alleviate it" (Muszkiewicz, 2017, p. 237).

Academic libraries can sometimes feel like alien environments for students, especially for those from rural areas or smaller schools. The transition from these smaller environments to large, sometimes cavernous libraries and academic buildings can be daunting and intimidating. McPherson (2015) reports that feeling this way due to the size of the building is an attributive factor in library anxiety throughout library and information science literature. This is reinforced by Mellon's original findings that students described their feelings toward the library as fear and a feeling of being lost which correlated with their view of the vastness of libraries. The unfamiliar environment of the library causes library anxiety and further exacerbates their fear of seeking help or attending in-building information literacy or orientation opportunities. These opportunities are vital to teaching students the information search process and explaining library resources. Improving library instruction, librarian's demeanor, and library design and wayfinding to help reduce library anxiety is key. However, gaps still remain, specifically in the library's efforts outside of the library and the classroom in order to create friendly perceptions of the library among students.

Outreach acts as one method of introducing the library to new or anxious students. A challenge of library anxiety is dispelling library myths as well as letting students know what the library does. To effectively inform students on the value of the library "it is imperative that libraries are made as attractive, as welcoming, and as comfortable as possible" so as to make engaging students easier (Jiao et al, 1996, p. 159). Library outreach and programming offer library staff opportunities to engage with students through welcoming opportunities. In this

way, outreach mimics library instruction in reducing library anxiety. Librarians have a chance to speak to a group of interested students in a familiar space. Academic library outreach is varied, and in general, book clubs were comparatively rare in this review of the literature.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, book clubs have become more common in academic libraries for a variety of reasons (Regan, 2021). Even before COVID-19, some academic libraries used book clubs as effective ways of connecting with their communities. For Dewan (2013), promoting reading in academic libraries through book clubs and readers advisory acts as outreach that makes the library "the place to be and a center for engagement" for students (p. 316). In this way, book clubs meet students where they are by taking into account their needs, interests, and capabilities, something that has become increasingly important in a post-pandemic mindset. Fajardo (2010) talks about book clubs and their ability to engage students by "fostering community; the most consistent feature of the book club has been its diverse membership" (p. 69). Diversity in book clubs has helped create community, which is a theme Goldberg identifies with their book club and others (Goldberg, 2012). Bull and Jacobsen Kiciman (2021) found that "non-academic, interdepartmental, and intentional library programming that connects with a student's sense of identity can play a role in building community and belonging by fostering relationship-building with library workers and thus reducing library anxiety" (p. 1). Book clubs are effective at creating these community connections with librarians. These connections further students' familiarity with the library.

Muskiewicz (2017) states that "research has found that students respond well to the sociological concept of the familiar stranger", the stranger being the librarian (p. 236). Book clubs offer librarians a chance to speak to students one-on-one and become that "familiar stranger" because of the small size of book clubs (Fajardo, 2010; Forrest, 2011; Goldberg, 2012; Regan, 2021). Forrest (2011) provides more specifics on this experience by mentioning how they "made lasting connections with students [they] would never have had the opportunity to meet. A few students confided that they 'used to be afraid of librarians'" before joining the book club (p. 19). This interaction with librarians can reduce library anxiety by providing students with a familiar face or secondhand familiarity with library resources. Student experiences like these are similar to those seen in university orientation programs that libraries take part in (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2004, p. 256). Additionally, the content of the books and diversity of other students may bring familiarity or comfort that they may not receive when using services at the library's reference desk. In this way, library outreach, including book clubs, can be used to reduce library anxiety. As mentioned earlier in this literature review, multiple areas of library anxiety exist and multiple ideas exist to combat it. Library outreach and book clubs will not be sufficient alone, but can be joined with other methods (Muskiewicz, 2017).

Library anxiety encompasses how students feel about library resources, librarians themselves, and library spaces. Library anxiety can also be reduced and eliminated by using several tactics and resources. This literature review has aimed to show any connections that

book clubs have with reducing library anxiety. Broadly, it has also tried to show how library anxiety manifests within the library itself, how it affects users, and how it can be reduced. The literature identifies ways that, despite library anxiety, libraries can best engage with students, and factors that most affect the way library anxiety is experienced. With cognizance, skill, and empathy on the part of library staff, and through active outreach and engagement, librarians can face the problem head-on and work to make students feel welcome in the library.

However, librarians must be aware of library anxiety before they can address it. Library anxiety may not be well known as it has not been fully explored. The literature provides few resources for library anxiety and most resources found were over five years old. Just over half were less than 10 years old. Only a handful of resources looked at academic book clubs and fewer still discussed DEI. To address these gaps in the literature, this study explores how book clubs may be used in academic libraries to decrease library anxiety and a student's sense of belonging, while keeping DEI efforts at the forefront.

Methodology

Because quantitative data would not be descriptive enough to explore the ways in which books clubs could be used to reduce library anxiety, it was decided that qualitative data would be obtained via interviews with librarians who ran a book club. Due to the impact of COVID-19, as well as the difficulty of recruiting subjects, participation was not restricted to librarians currently facilitating a book club. While this study focuses on academic libraries, we decided to include any public librarians interested in participating as means of comparison and more fully developing best practices.

After receiving a verdict of not human subject research, from the University of Washington Institutional Review Board, our sponsor, Alaina C. Bull, a First Year Experience Librarian at the University of Washington Tacoma, utilized her Twitter contacts to attract subjects. She sent out a tweet stating,

> Hey library folks who have, or have planned to, hosted a book club, I have 3 MLIS grad students who want to know about your experience as part of their capstone. Please click here to sign up to talk to them.

A link led to a Google form, which requested contact information, the type of interview preferred, details about their libraries' book club, and asking if there are any other library staff we should contact. The tweet was sent out a total of three times.

Six librarians/library workers answered. One respondent did not reply to attempts to schedule interviews. The remaining five respondents were interviewed. Of those, five were female and one was male. As libraries tend to be a female dominated field, this sample seems to be representative of the larger population. Two respondents worked in community college libraries, two worked in university libraries, and one worked in a public library. The libraries

were fairly spread across the country with two in Illinois, one in Massachusetts, one in Texas, and one in Oregon.

Interviews were held via Zoom and lasted no more than forty-five minutes. The interviewer asked questions about how the book club was created and run (see appendix); the level of student engagement; examples of any observed library anxiety; observations of book club members becoming more comfortable with the library; intersections of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts; and suggestions for best practices. All interviews were recorded with automatic captions to create a transcript. Afterwards, the research team reviewed the transcripts and edited the captions for accuracy. Once cleaned, transcripts of the interviews were reviewed, and the research team identified thematic patterns. These patterns are discussed below, followed by suggestions for best practices in designing and running book clubs with the intention of reducing library anxiety.

Discussion

Holistic Student Support

In our interview with Callan Bignoli at Olin College, she mentioned that Olin students are known for their intense work ethic and extensive extracurricular activities, as Olin is known for its focus on engineering and academic rigor. She positions her activities to reach students on a holistic level, rather than coming from a place of intellectual inquiry. She said, "I don't want to be doing things that feel like more intellectual labor or, you know, work for students." This sentiment was shared by many of our other subjects. For instance, Kim Tipton pointed out,

> You know the research skills; they're not always going to need databases. They're not always going to use databases or need them, so we want to set them up with just some of these life things and we want to encourage a love of reading as part of that, you know, and just supporting the whole students.

Supporting the whole student demonstrates the institution cares for a student's well-being, reduces pressure and perfectionist tendencies, and thereby reduces anxiety.

Chance Medlin provided snacks to his students, in part to curb food insecurity, but also to aid students who were too stressed to eat. He said,

> We're here for you during the stress of finals. We do things like random snacks of kindness to try to just meet that, I think some of it is food, you know insecurity, but then, some of it is just that, I'm so stressed out I forgot to eat so having that little boost of food during finals, bringing the pets with a purpose, doing lots of distress activities, so I think that ties into emotions.

Both Medlin and Bignoli spoke of bringing in pets for emotional support and Bignoli mentioned setting up beach chairs, towels, and speakers so students could hang out in the sun. These

informal activities were library programs designed to foster positive contact between library staff and students. In brief, their programs succeeded by addressing emotional needs and giving students a sense of belonging.

Meeting Students Where They Are At

Traditional book clubs feature set memberships who all read the same book to facilitate discussion. This approach needs to be modified in a public or academic setting, where membership is in flux and students may or may not know each other. Commitment levels are variable, especially given the demands of student life. Our subjects took this into consideration, and intentionally designed their programs to accommodate students who read all of the book, some of the book, or none of the book. Book choices and reading commitments can be adjusted based on the perceived difficulty of an individual semester. Callan Bignoli described a recent decision to, "dial down the reading commitments, just because the amount of time that anyone seemed to have last semester was like very, very little, and also, too, for us here." As things settle, the book club will adjust again to better accommodate student's needs.

The flexibility and adaptability of book clubs as outreach is mirrored in other outreach and instruction efforts. Jiao et al. (2004) shows that adaptive instructional efforts that respond to student needs helps reduce library anxiety. Adaptive instruction might include a mix of in person teaching and use of online learning tools. Dewan (2013) demonstrated that the library has a chance to engage students through reading activities that provide options and center the student's experience. For instance, Kim Tipton noted that her students were very interested in graphic novels, which is a tough sell for traditional academic library collections at the community college where she works. In response, Tipton made an effort to include graphic novels that met academic criteria. She said,

> Bringing in graphic novels on one hand, yes it's interesting for them for leisure reading, but we also thought about how we can introduce them in the classroom as alternative sources in the form of like memoirs and some of the nonfiction graphic novels, so in that sense, in a roundabout way, through the book club this came out of that and we're looking for ways to bring them into the classroom in different ways, you know, and use them in instruction.

Graphic novels act as another flexible way of attracting students to book clubs, taking into account students differing interests and reading interests. They may also be more accessible to some students than traditional books. Graphic novels tend to be more readable in short sittings allowing the library to meet students where they are in the busy world of college students.

Using Technology Students Already Use

Many librarians mentioned using social media like Facebook, Twitter, Discord, and/or Instagram as means of advertising and communicating, since most students already use social

media. Two librarians mentioned creating courses in Canvas, the web-based learning management system their intuitions use for online learning. Callan Bignoli described her Canvas course as an orientation class, whereas Kim Tipton created a Canvas course for her library's book club. Book club members use Canvas to create announcements, post meeting dates, and converse on the discussion boards. Since students already use Canvas for their official classes, they can sidestep the potential time commitment of learning a new technology platform, and avoid potential anxiety.

Advertising

Advertising the club's existence is critical to build membership. Several librarians advertised for their book clubs at campus open houses, informationals, and/or club fairs. Chance Medlin noted that Texas A&M has a searchable database to help students find book clubs and other organizations on campus. Andrea Sowers, a public librarian, used social media and regularly visited nearby schools to advertise library programming. Medlin left advertising up to his students. "I think sometimes they get ideas, and they'll try different things, and they do have some social media accounts that they're on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram." As such, Medlin saw different levels of engagement happen over the years.

Kim Tipton used a large whiteboard in the library to announce meetings and attract foot traffic. When students come in for classes, Tipton ensures the library events page is up on the screen, which includes a notice for upcoming book club meetings. Kirsten Hostetler posted flyers in bathroom stalls to advertise. She said, "The toilet flash on the toilet stalls is a big thing- you've a very focused audience." No two libraries are identical, and strategies will inevitably vary based on the student population and library objectives. Still, a willingness to go wherever works was a common theme amongst our participants.

Forming Relationships

Unlike personal book clubs, many if not most library participants do not know each other before attending meetings. All of our subjects mentioned book clubs bringing students together. As Andrea Sowers pointed out, "There was definitely a lot of friendships formed in book club, where some of those people who really only came to book club would come to other stuff to see the other people." Book clubs can engage students beyond the book and allow them to connect with their peers. As Chance Medlin said,

> "I feel like we do have a lot of really deep conversations beyond the book like yes, they have some really fun beautiful conversations around the book sometimes. But a lot of times, they're bringing in what's going on during the pandemic or the stress, the anxiety of, just their fear."

Book clubs may provide a low-risk place to share life experiences, be heard, and feel connected to others. This may be especially beneficial for students of color, students with disabilities,

and/or students who belong to the LBGTQ+ community as their voices and lived experiences tend to be silenced or overlooked.

Kim Tipton recognized her student population is diverse, yet the library does not reflect that. While the library is taking steps to improve, Tipton has found the book club is a more immediate opportunity to increase DEI efforts. She said, "[Book club has] a lot of different cultural backgrounds and just experiences, and I think it's appreciated about the book club right away." She related an experience between two students, one who works as a blacksmith in his free time, and another student with physical limitations. She remarked that without the book club, these two students likely never would have crossed paths. Yet through their shared connection, the blacksmith made a custom suit of armor for his new friend.

"Library Osmosis"

We identified one of the major successes of book clubs as "library osmosis". Simply by engaging with a librarian in a library setting, patrons would become more comfortable with the library in general. Chance Medlin identified how his students began arriving to book club sessions early, hanging out together and using the library as a social space. He elaborated saying, "They'll talk about their favorite study spots in the library, so I know that they are using it beyond just the club."

One important technique to fight library anxiety is the use of student peers. Students, whether as paid employees, volunteers, or simply fellow patrons, can play a unique and important role as library ambassadors. Callan Bignoli stated that students who might be anxious about approaching her or a colleague would feel more comfortable talking to a fellow student. Book clubs, with their emphasis on active student participation, are an excellent way to have more experienced library veterans interact with newcomers.

The work of Mellon (1986), Onwuegbuzie et al. (2004), Malvasi et al. (2009), has featured a large focus on how library instruction can help introduce students to library services and bring them into the library environment. Book clubs are also an excellent entry point to introduce existing library services to students. Interlibrary loan, online reference, e-resources, etc. can all be advertised explicitly or implicitly during book club operations. Our findings suggest that library outreach and programming, specifically book clubs, can help introduce students to these services. This introduction to library services via book clubs may also be less anxiety inducing due to their more casual and less constrictive environment.

Building Community

Several of our participants stated that their book clubs build community relationships. Callan Bignoli's book club spans three local colleges, which helps students and faculty connect to each other across campuses. While Olin College focuses on engineering, Babson College is a business school, and Wellesley College is geared more towards the liberal arts. As Bignoli said,

"The power of this kind of three-college book club is that the three colleges are all very different." With different backgrounds comes different perspectives. Sharing the different perspectives in the book club helps create a stronger sense of community within the colleges.

Kirstin Hostetler's book club at Central Oregon Community College "is tied into larger programming that our college offers in connection to some community organizations as well." Hostetler noted participation tends to consist of community patrons and faculty who attend every year, as well as students. However, being a community college, students typically are only there for a couple years before they graduate, so student attendance fluctuates. The book club only meets in February and March during the Season of Non-Violence, which celebrates Martin Luther King Junior's, Mahatma Gandhi's, and Caesar Chavez's birthdays. The book club focuses on a social justice issue, which is tied into programming that includes book talks. Partnering with the college's Marketing and Public Relations team and other community organizations creates ties and builds a sense of community as they all work together to achieve a goal. Hostetler mentioned that because of the social justice conversations at book club, the library has re-evaluated their collection development policy, reading policy, and taken strides to ensure the collection is representative of the students and community. In response, there's been a noticeable increase in participation of students of color.

Different Types of Anxiety

Understanding the different types and levels of library anxiety allows librarians to better address areas of concern. We identified three areas most commonly cited as anxiety points for students: facilities, staff, and rules.

Facilities

Chance Medlin spoke of his background as a student, where he came from a small town and felt completely overwhelmed by the large size of the Texas A&M campus. He remarked, "Sometimes that first step of getting you in the building is the hardest part." As the library's facilities may be intimidating to students, finding ways to make it feel more welcoming is key to reducing anxiety. Medlin believes having a book club in the library helps students become more comfortable with the library. Spending time in the library doing something fun, like discussing books and engaging in activities, helps students become more familiar with the space. It is likely they will see and overhear services the library offers, which may lead to spending even more time in the library, thus decreasing anxiety.

Staff

Callan Bignoli noticed that students tend to be more comfortable approaching their peers than they would be approaching an authority figure, like a librarian, professor, or

counselor. Student workers or volunteers may become an entry point to other students. Bignoli explained,

> If maybe they feel a little anxious talking to me or my colleague, one of their classmates or someone who lives in their dorm is going to be working the desk or around the library. And so, my student workers do a lot, I think, to help mitigate that library anxiety.

Students may start out only approaching peers, but seeing how the librarian interacts with their peers, and with peer encouragement, student anxiety may decrease enough for the student to reach out to the librarian. Bignoli also described how using Discord may be less anxiety-inducing for students. She said,

> We also use Discord to communicate with students and I find that that kind of helps a little bit too because, like sometimes people are concerned that they're bothering you or they're taking up your time if they see you working on something at the desk or in your office. But they feel more comfortable sending you a Discord so that you can reply to it at your own time.

Understanding why students may feel anxious about approaching library workers is the first step in finding ways to reduce anxiety.

Fear of judgment and rejection from staff also was noted. Andrea Sowers noted many of the members she saw belonged in the LGBTQ+ community and feared revealing their true selves. To address this, Sowers intentionally selected diverse titles. She explained,

> One of my major things that I always try to make sure we are paying attention to, that we are reading diverse titles, whether it was BIPOC, whether it was LGBTQ, I always made sure that we really had those books that the kids could have a mirror for.

Intentionally choosing titles that reflect those diverse populations helps make members of those populations more comfortable and shows that staff accept them, thus reducing anxiety. Chance Medlin described reducing anxiety around approaching staff members by answering student questions, "regardless of whether it's connected to the libraries or not," being open with students, and repeating sentiments until students believe him.

Processes (Rules)

Medlin saw many students anxious about the library's policies, processes, and rules. Anxiety can stem from students feeling uncertain how things in the library work. To mitigate this, Medlin practiced dedicated outreach. He said,

> We go out to each and every possible point of contact that we can for first year students and really all. We try to get out there and reach as many of our huge population as we can, but I definitely think a lot of times that is part of our learning outcomes is to reduce

anxiety and show that we're here as support and ready to help them throughout their academic times.

By reminding students often that the library is there to help and support them in any way they can, the library helps students feel reassured. This repetition is important because students may not really hear or believe something the first time it's said. As Medlin stated, "I also realized that's part of my job is to say it six times so that sixth time you know they actually hear me or it's when they need to hear me."

Moving Forward

Based on our findings, we provide the following suggested best practices in creating and running book clubs to help reduce library anxiety.

Student Led, Librarian Guided

Facilitating a book club is a difficult balance. Our librarians described preparing questions, topics, and activities, while still giving students a wide berth to take ownership of sessions. Students are encouraged to select titles, lead discussions, recruit members, create marketing materials, and so on. The librarian remains important as an experienced guide and advocate, steering the conversations when they get too far off track, but knowing when students need to talk. Librarians are also charged with maintaining boundaries and ensuring the library remains a safe and welcoming space for all.

Collaboration

Book clubs can achieve success by working alongside similar community and campus organizations. Doing so not only offers the chance to pool resources and divide labor, but also adds the benefit of differing perspectives and community building. Callan Bignoli mentioned that because their college focused on technology and engineering, they partnered with a visiting artist program to provide another dimension for students to engage with. She explained, "We try to give them some other hats to try on while they're with us." Kirsten Hostetler's library ties their book club into larger programming offered by the college. The book club reads a social justice book, and, because of the partnership, they often receive the necessary funds to have the author speak to the book club. Collaboration and partnerships allow book clubs to do more for their students.

Collaboration with students allows the club to be tailored to better meet student needs. Providing opportunities for students to give input or select the material they read in book club is a natural way to support collaboration. Kirsten Hostetler recognized the students in the club might want more information on being a good ally, so chose titles related to allyship. She went on to mention that the few times discussion started veering into problematic territory, she was able to redirect the conversation. By redirecting the conversation, the librarian kept the space

safe for all students. Involving students in discussions and planning helps students feel heard, valued, and builds trust, all of which can help decrease anxiety.

Consistency

A consistent meeting time, space, and format were all identified as factors that developed a stronger core of members. Sending out reminders of the meeting time, date, location, and any other relevant information helps students plan and prepare better. Knowing what to expect helps decrease barriers to the club, and the library by extension, particularly for neurodivergent students.

Going over club norms at the beginning of each meeting helps students understand expectations. To ensure the book club is a safe space, Kirsten Hostetler stated that their first book club meeting is centered around creating norms of the group. Norms may address ensuring everyone has an opportunity to speak, people and privacy are respected, online etiquette is described and followed, and so on. Students are included in the creation of the norms. Afterwards, every meeting begins with a review of the norms. This ensures both regular and new members understand expectations and offers an opportunity to add to norms if necessary. Knowing expectations helps reduce anxiety and creates a safe space for all, thus increasing inclusion.

Reflection

A book club must be flexible to meet student's needs and interests. As such, regular reflection and evaluation of book clubs becomes essential. We noticed a general lack of assessment in book clubs. Without means of assessing, it can be difficult to determine if the book club is successful or even on the right track. Building in opportunities to formally and informally ask participants to reflect on book clubs and provide feedback can help ensure the book club is meeting student's needs and supporting desired outcomes. Chance Medlin stated,

> I think that's a constant question I asked [student book club leaders] is 'what you think people expect when they hear about book club, when they show up and then, how do you think we're meeting those expectations' and over the years, different leaderships have gotten feedback. They may open up different lines of communication and I think the more responsive that they are to getting that feedback and making changes and they've really evolved into a great organization that is responsive, and they'll try new things.

Positive response to feedback increases trust between students and librarians by showing that librarians care about the students and are willing to adapt to their needs. If students know they will be taken seriously when offering feedback, it builds trust, which decreases anxiety.

Food

Over and over, our subjects mentioned food as a primary draw. Food is an easy and effective way to add value and increase participation in any activity. Offering food also helps safeguard against food insecurity.

Accessibility

Students have school, work, family responsibilities, and so on. For a student to be willing to take on another commitment, like a book club, there must be more benefit than drawback. As such, making a book club easily accessible becomes vital for the book club's success and sustainability.

Access to Meetings

Finding a permanent meeting place that is accessible for users with mobility aids increases inclusion. If possible, include a map and/or floorplan to the meeting place. Large, easy to read signs not only guide members to the club meeting, but also advertise there is a meeting, which may draw in new members walking past. Additionally, some members may be too anxious to ask for help or directions. Consider other ways to support members finding the location independently.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced book clubs to consider online options for meetings. Kirsten Hostetler and Chance Medlin noted that the book club being online provided a much-needed opportunity for connection. Callan Bignoli mentioned having an online component increased accessibility and inclusion. However, most libraries pointed out numerous difficulties in online or hybrid meetings, including technical difficulties, logistics, and focusing on the in-person attendants because they forget about those attending online. It seems the best course is asking club members what works best for them and adapting as necessary.

Hostetler attributed regular attendance to the book club lasting a few weeks once a year. The short time frame makes it easier for students to commit. Furthermore, since the book club meets during a special event, which happens at the same time each year, students are better able to anticipate and plan for participation in the book club.

All librarians noted struggles with finding meeting times that fit their student's schedules. While we have no specific suggestions for this, we do recommend being mindful of important academic dates. Multiple libraries noted they decrease reading and/or club demands around finals to avoid placing undue intellectual labor on club members. A couple clubs mentioned they provide alternative club programming during those times. Instead of focusing on a book, they provided space, time, and means for students to decompress and relax. Another library is trying to connect with instructors to see if extra credit would be given to those who participate in the library's book club.

Access to Materials

Many librarians noted they offer different formats for reading. Aside from physical books, they choose titles available in audio books, large print, eBooks, etc. so club members could choose the format most comfortable to them. Regardless of the format, all materials should be free to students.

Traditional book club format may, or may not work, well for students. Kim Tipton found that the idea of everyone reading the same book at the same time was inaccessible for its members. In response, the book club adapted in such a way that the purpose of the club was to create a space for readers to talk about books. Another club had students choose a genre or theme. The facilitator offered three or four titles that fit into that genre or theme and students voted on which they were going to read. Another variation of this may be asking students to read any book they wanted that fell under the specific genre or theme. Being flexible and creative in what students are reading not only increases accessibility, but also inclusion.

Several library book clubs offered questions so that people who did not read the book could still participate. Callan Bignoli mentioned she sends out the questions ahead of time, so students did not feel put on the spot to come up with an answer. Doing so reduces the intellectual demand and pressure of being in a book club.

All the librarians intentionally selected titles supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Students belonging to traditionally marginalized groups may feel isolated, disconnected, and/or like they do not belong to their institution (Mallon, 2019). Fraser (2018) added, "The lack of cultural knowledge among library staff causes additional stress" (p. 7). Book clubs choosing to read diverse material increases their cultural knowledge and signals they value DEI. Underrepresented populations may be more interested in participating in book clubs if the club utilizes materials that reflect them. Feeling seen and included helps make marginalized populations feel that they belong in the library, which contributes to reducing library anxiety.

Conclusion

Library anxiety can be defined as fear of the library, which includes fear of the library's physical space and the process of finding materials. Utilization of library resources is instrumental in academic success, particularly at the university level. Book clubs tend to be a natural fit for public libraries and have long been used as means of bringing communities together over their shared interest in literature. The present study investigates how academic book clubs influence library anxiety and a student's sense of belonging in the library. To do this, we interviewed five librarians from around the country asking them about their experiences with library anxiety and book clubs.

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed patterns in how libraries hosting book clubs can reduce library anxiety. We found most libraries focus on holistic student support by

recognizing students are more than their academic intellect and addressing common experiences like stress over finals and food insecurity. Similarly, to reduce the intellectual load of students, all libraries found ways to meet students where they are at, which includes using technology students already use. Book clubs saw relationships built between students, students and staff, and within the community. Additionally, different types of anxiety were noted, including anxiety over using the facilities, interacting with library workers, and knowing policies, processes, and rules. We identified one of the major successes of book clubs as "library osmosis", whereby simply by engaging with a librarian in a library setting, patrons would become more comfortable with the library in general.

Best practices for running book clubs with an intention of reducing library anxiety include librarians guiding the club but allowing students to lead it; collaborating with students and partnering with other organizations; maintaining a consistent meeting time, space, format, and norms; regular reflection and assessment of the book club, providing food; and ensuring the club is accessible through meetings and materials.

Deliberate efforts at increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in all these areas creates a more welcoming environment, which ultimately reduces library anxiety. Book clubs allow students the opportunity to engage with librarians without feeling the pressure or stress of traditional information transactions. These opportunities are especially crucial for marginalized people to gain a sense of belonging in a historically exclusive institution. Ideally, after sustained contact, students will begin to see the library as a place of refuge, rather than judgment.

It should be noted these findings target library anxiety specifically, and they may not apply to populations diagnosed with general, social, and other anxiety disorders. It is worth remembering that library anxiety is "situational rather than necessarily linked to a person's temperament" (Nunes, 2016, para. 10). Additionally, this study's small sample size may also impede generalizability.

Despite these limitations, results from this study contribute to previous research and suggest avenues for future exploration such as how book clubs influence library anxiety in public, K-12, community college, and private libraries. Explorations into the impact of how diagnosed anxiety disorders influence library usage may also be valuable as it is probable that diagnosed anxiety disorders contribute to library anxiety.

Mitigating library anxiety should be a major concern for any librarian concerned with community outreach, student engagement, or academic success. Admittedly, this will be a long fight. Library anxiety is a serious structural problem that will require hard work, empathy, understanding, and creativity. In other words, it will require the best that librarians have to offer.

References

American Library Association. (2020 April 12). *State of America's libraries report.*
     https://www.ala.org/news/state-americas-libraries-report-2020/academic-libraries

Bostick, S. L. (1992). *The development and validation of the library anxiety scale* (Order No.
     9310624) [Doctoral Dissertation, Wayne State University]. ProQuest Dissertations
     Publishing.

Bull, A. C. & Jacobsen Kiciman, J. (2021, March 25). *Engaging transfer students: A fiction book
     club and the transfer experience.* In *Transfer Student Success: Academic Library
     Outreach and Engagement.* American Library Association.

Dewan, P. (2013). Reading matters in the academic library: Taking the lead from public
     librarians. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, *52*(4), 309-16.
     https://doi.org/10.5860/rusq.52n4.309

Fajardo, A. (2010). Book clubs: Not just for public libraries. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*,
     17(1), 65-69. https://doi.org/10.1080/10691310903584783

Forrest, L. A. (2011). College book clubs: Collaborating for success. *Journal of Library
     Innovation 2*(2), 16-21. https://alliance-
     primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/lvbsh/TN_cdi_proquest_journals_10142
     88267

Fraser, K., & Bartlett, J. C. (2018). Fear at first sight: Library anxiety, race, and Nova Scotia.
     Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research,
     13(2), 1-22. https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v13i2.4366

Goldberg, M. (2012). Extracurricular reading: Creating and sustaining on campus book clubs.
     Reference and User Services Quarterly, *51*(3), 231–234.
     https://doi.org/10.5860/rusq.51n3.231

Jiao, Q. G., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Lichtenstein, A. A. (1996). Library anxiety: Characteristics of
     'at risk' college students. *Library & Information Science Research*, *18*(2), 151-163.
     https://doi.org/10.1016/S0740-8188(96)90017-1

Larsen, Wallace, S., Parker, A., & Pankl, L. (2019). From cubicles to community: Reducing
     library anxiety through critically reimagined social spaces. *The New Review of Academic
     Librarianship*, *25*(2-4), 408-423. https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2019.1615966

Mao, J., & Kinsley, K. (2017). Embracing the Generalized Propensity Score Method: Measuring
     the effect of library usage on first-time-in-college student academic success. *Evidence
     Based Library and Information Practice*, *12*(4), 129. https://doi.org/10.18438/B8BH35

Mallon, M. (2019). Diversity, equity, and inclusion. *Public Services Quarterly*, 15(4), 319–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2019.1664360

Malvasi, M., Rudowsky, C. Valencia, J. (2009). *Library Rx: Measuring and treating library anxiety a research study*. American Library Association.

McPherson, M. A., (2015). Library anxiety among university students: A survey. *International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions*, *41*(4), 317–325. https://doi.org/10.1177/0340035215603993

Mellon, C. (1986) Library anxiety: A grounded theory and its development. *Association of College and Research Libraries, 47(2), 160-165.*

Muszkiewicz. (2017). Get to know your librarian: How a simple orientation program helped alleviate library anxiety. *Public Services Quarterly, 13(4)*, 223–240. https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2017.1319780

Nunes, A. (2016, April 13). Do you suffer from library anxiety? *JSTOR Daily*. https://daily.jstor.org/do-you-suffer-from-library-anxiety/#:~:text=In%201992%2C%20Sharon%20Bostick%20developed,how%20it%20affects%20various%20demographics.

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Jiao, Q. G., & Bostick, S. L. (2004). *Library anxiety: theory, research, and applications*. Scarecrow Press.

Pellegrino, C. (2011, August 19). Does telling them to ask for help work? Investigating library help-seeking behaviors in college undergraduates. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, *51*(3), 272-77. https://doi.org/10.5860/rusq.51n3.272

Regan, A. (2021, November 10). News: Student-led book clubs: Creating a reading community for college students. *Programming Librarian*. https://programminglibrarian.org/articles/student-led-book-clubs-creating-reading-community-college-students

Scoulas, J., & De Groote, S. L. (2019). The library's impact on university students' academic success and learning. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, *14*(3), 2–27. https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29547

Soria, K., Fransen, J., & Nackerud, S. (2017). The impact of academic library resources on undergraduates' degree completion. *College & Research Libraries*, *78*(6), 812–823. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.78.6.812

Van Scoyoc, A. M. (2003). Reducing library anxiety in first-year students: The impact of computer-assisted instruction and bibliographic instruction. *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, *42*(4), 329–341. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20864059

Vidmar, D.J. (1998). Affective change: Integrating pre-sessions in the students' classroom prior to library instruction. *Reference Services Review, 26*, 75-95.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How did your book club begin?

2. Did you face any kind of resistance to the idea of starting a book club in your library? If so, what kind of resistance?

3. How does the governance of the club work?

4. How are the books chosen?

5. Could you speak generally about the level of student engagement? Do you see a lot of people come on a regular basis?

6. What is done to advertise or draw in members?

7. Have you noticed any examples of library anxiety at your library?

8. Has your library taken any conscious steps to be more welcoming on an emotional level?

9. Do you notice any book club members becoming more comfortable with the library in general?

10. Would you attribute that comfort level to the book club and, if so, why?

11. We're really curious about how book clubs can intersect with DEI efforts. In your experience, how has the book club made your library more diverse and/or inclusive?

12. What advice would you give to someone starting their own book club?

13. Do you have anything to add?