

2017 Seattle Reads Racial Equity Toolkit Assessment

The Seattle Public Library: Community Engagement Services and RSJI Change Team

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Seattle Reads is a “one book, one city” program, where people are encouraged to read and discuss the same book. The program culminates with a multi-day visit from the author. Seattle Reads is designed to deepen engagement in literature through reading and discussion, and to bring people together through the shared act of reading the same book.

The 2017 Seattle Reads selection was Angela Flournoy’s “The Turner House,” a novel exploring the lives of a multigenerational African-American household in post-recession Detroit.

RSJI ANALYSIS

The Seattle Reads program was the first “one book, one city” program in the nation when it launched in 1998. The program has been implemented across the country, in all 50 states, as well as being implemented internationally. While the program has remained a popular annual Library offering for 20 years, staff took note that many of the same program attendees were participating each year, and the program wasn’t seeing much audience growth or diversity.

A staffing change in program leadership provided a natural opportunity to reflect on the community impact of this program. Stesha Brandon, the Library’s new Literature & Humanities Program Manager, worked with the Library’s RSJI Change Team to assess the program and identify potential issues of inequity in the way the program was developed or marketed.

We identified four key ways we could assess whether we were prioritizing equity in this process. They were: content, process, resources and attendance. Some questions we asked throughout the process were: Are traditionally underrepresented communities involved in the program planning process? How are we distributing our program resources – including book distribution, artistic commissions, photographers, etc.? Does the attendance at the public programs reflect traditionally underrepresented communities? Is our marketing language inclusive and representative of the communities we are hoping to reach?

We came to every decision within Seattle Reads with a spirit of inquiry. This ensured that we used an equity lens throughout the process.

CREATE A BASELINE OF DATA

One shortcoming identified at the outset of 2017 program planning was the lack of consistent, established data sets that could help guide the work. Previous data gathering had focused on the number of program participants and their sentiment toward the program. Data was lacking in terms of identifying who was participating in the program, which hindered the Library’s

ability to identify whether the program's audience was reflective of Seattle's diverse communities. An RSJI outcome was set: help prioritize equity in the 2017 Seattle Reads program by establishing a baseline of data to understand the program's community impact and by involving community in program development.

This issue was addressed in 2017 thanks to the work of Valerie Wonder, managing librarian for the Library's Community Engagement Services (CES) division. A standard set of demographic questions was established for not just the Seattle Reads program, but for all programs that fall under the CES umbrella.

Thanks to that effort, we have a better sense of who we are reaching through the Seattle Reads program. Over 300 participants took part in our program survey. Here is what we know about our 2017 Seattle Reads audience:

- AGE:
 - Under 18 years old: Less than 1 percent
 - 19-24: years old: Less than 1 percent
 - 25-34 years old: 7%
 - 35-44 years old: 10%
 - 45-54 years old: 13%
 - 55-64 years old: 18%
 - 65-74 years old: 37%
 - 75 years old or older: 15%
- HOUSEHOLD INCOME:
 - No income: 1 percent
 - 25K or under: 6 percent
 - 25-49K: 12 percent
 - 50-79K: 20 percent
 - 80-99K: 7 percent
 - 100-150K: 17 percent
 - 150-250K: 10 percent
 - 250K or over: 2 percent
 - 24 percent did not answer
- Participants representing 22 different Seattle area zip codes attended programming
- 25 percent of participants were people of color; 14 percent of attendees identified as African-American; 5 percent identified as Asian/Pacific Islander; 3 percent identified as mixed race; 2 percent identified as Hispanic/Latino; 1 percent identified as American Indian/Native American.
- 86 percent of participants were women

We will use this baseline of data to help identify year-to-year trends and opportunities for community outreach.

INVOLVE COMMUNITY IN PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Seattle Reads is designed to engage the community. We used the CES Service Priorities as a guide to building the program. These principles are:

- Listen and learn
- Build relationships
- Prioritize equity
- Reach people where they are
- Bring people together
- Showcase community voices

It was our goal to fulfill these principles throughout our process. We started by involving internal stakeholders in a meeting to discuss Seattle Reads, and then hosted two community listening sessions with stakeholders from the African-American arts community. These sessions informed the program planning process and contributed to our relationship-building with the community.

We hosted public programs throughout the city to ensure that as many people as possible had access, and in two cases, we hosted the author at community hubs -- Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute and Rainier Beach High School -- rather than at a library. The programs brought people together to share their experiences and connect with their community.

To help focus our outreach efforts and better engage Seattle's African-American community, we hired community arts professional Vivian Phillips as a consultant. Ms. Phillips helped the Library develop deeper relationships with community organizations that had not traditionally been involved in our Seattle Reads program, including: Northwest African American Museum, Historic Central Area Arts District, Black Heritage Society of Washington, LANGSTON, Northwest Tap Connection and the African-American Writers' Alliance. This work helped create buy-in of the program and helped ensure the program was of interest and reflective of the community we were prioritizing.

Ms. Phillips and our community partners worked with us to analyze everything from our marketing efforts to our book distribution model to our artistic commissions. She notes in her final consultant report:

“Never once was anyone involved made to feel as though they were not getting the access that may have been afforded to other communities. Eliminating that perception meant: Hiring people from within the community to carry out various pieces of the project – Inye as a videographer, Naomi as photographer, NW Tap as performer, and a commission to the African-American Writers Alliance. The engagement felt completely equitable and led people to feel very connected to all elements of the project. Everyone seemed to be talking about The Turner House.”

Attached is the full consultant report.

RESULTS

We believe these efforts are positively reflected in the program participant data gathered:

- Attendance was up nearly 55 percent over last year
- More than 40 percent of participants had not participated in Seattle Reads in previous years, an increase of 10 percent from last year.
- 20 percent of participants had not attended any events at the Library in the past.
- Nearly 80 percent of participants rated their satisfaction with the program as an 8 out of 10 or higher
- More than 70 percent of attendees said they would discuss the book with their friends, family or community

One unexpected outreach result this year extends all the way to Gumi, South Korea. The Library entered into an MOU with the city of Gumi in February 2017 during the time that they were celebrating the anniversary of their one “one book, one city” reading program. Their program committee selected “The Turner House” along with “Jobs for Humans in the Age of Robots” by Goo Bon-gwon as the first books to read. Over 70 participants in their national book review contest ended up selecting “The Turner House” for their review – one reviewer said the book gave him a chance to consider the meaning of the concepts of house and home.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The following items were identified as recommendations and lessons learned for future years:

- We must allow time to involve community: Our deadlines can sometimes cause tension, but we control the timeline and can build in extra time to conduct meaningful community outreach to engage new audiences.
- Community consultants provide a huge value in terms of building community trust and developing stronger, more lasting relationships.
- The earlier we involve community partners in planning, the more they feel that their input will have a chance to be incorporated and make an impact. More lead time also allows for more creative approaches.
- Thoughtful book distribution is key to the success of this program – the more barriers to access we remove for our patrons and community, the more engagement we will see in the program.