

“The Library Will Buy You a Book Day”: A Novel Approach to Promoting Recreational Reading

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of “The Library Will Buy You a Book Day,” an event designed to promote recreational reading among students at The Hotchkiss School, an independent boarding high school of roughly 600 students located in Lakeville, Connecticut. Situating this event in the ever-growing body of research showing that an interest in reading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic success, this paper suggests one approach to putting the research to work in designing programs that increase students’ likelihood of engaging in recreational reading by promoting positive attitudes towards reading in the community and reducing barriers to access to compelling books.

Keywords: Recreational Reading, Reading Habits, High School Students

“Reading for pleasure can increase empathy, improve relationships with others, reduce the symptoms of depression and dementia, and improve wellbeing throughout life”: I start with this brief statement from Dawn Finch, President of Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in the United Kingdom, taken from her review of the Reading Agency’s 2015 *Literature Review: Reading for Pleasure and Empowerment*, because it encapsulates what we all know from our own experience as school librarians, not to mention the rafts of studies that were summarized in that landmark report and others since. Reading for pleasure can change all our lives for the better: the question for us is, how do we encourage reading for pleasure among our students?

Again, we have rafts of studies to help us navigate these waters, but it really boils down to a handful of straightforward principles: share our own joy of reading with our students (Merga 2015), surround them with a diverse collection of books and support them in discovering those that speak to them (Gretes 2013, Mueller et al. 2016), promote a sense of ownership of reading (Clark and Poulton 2011), and make time and space for reading in the school day. The concept that I want to share with you all today may be novel, but it’s not rocket science—it’s precisely the kind of thing any of us can come up with if we’re able to get outside of the usual way of doing things in order to directly pursue the higher goal of encouraging recreational reading among our students.

Before I turn to my core matter, though, I want to share with you that I work in a beautiful and well-staffed library. The previous director, Walter DeMelle, who some of you may know, did an amazing job building a robust collection and working with donors and architects to develop the original Edsel Ford Memorial Library into a spacious, warm, and inviting facility that serves a student body of roughly 600 high school students, 150 faculty members, 150 staff, their families, and the surrounding towns, whose residents have borrowing privileges at our library. We also have a staff of 10 in the library, including myself, and half of us have an MLIS or equivalent degree. I recognize that this is an embarrassment of riches for a high school library, but I still feel strongly that the concept of “The Library Will Buy You a Book Day” has the potential to be adapted to any number of libraries of varying levels of staffing and financial support.

When I was hired as Director of the Ford Library some four years ago, one of the directives I received from the new Head of School was to build bridges out from the library into the rest of the Hotchkiss community, to increase the approachability of the library and the librarians. In pursuit of that goal, I sought out every opportunity to introduce some extra fun into the students’ day—as one small example of the kind of lengths I would go to, we held a “Globe Party” in the library to celebrate the arrival of a new globe. There was food and drink, the globe itself on a handsome wooden stand built by

the school's carpenters, and roughly 20 students who attended and had an excellent time. This event and others like it were a lot of fun, and they helped shift the perception of the library among at least a certain cohort of students, making it more of a social hub than it had been in the past, but they didn't necessarily have the kind of programmatic effect I was looking for: they didn't really promote reading as such.

At the same time, the Ford Library team worked hard to develop existing and new programs to promote reading among the student body: beginning a rental program for YA titles, initiating a Personal Librarian program modelled on those at many of the Liberal Arts colleges our students attend upon graduation, enhancing the visibility of recreational reading titles in our main lobby, promoting Banned Books Week and other reading-oriented events within the school community. These programs, too, had their impact, but we often felt as though they weren't really connecting with students beyond those who were already committed library users.

For me, the revelation about how to instill excitement into library-supported recreational reading came as I pondered how to take advantage of one of the great rituals at Hotchkiss: the "Head of School's Holiday," an unscheduled event that comes 3 or 4 times a year, when the Head of School makes a surprise announcement to students declaring a break in classes, accompanied by a number of fun, school-sponsored activities. Having seen a couple of these go by, I realized that there must be a way to piggyback on the holiday to promote recreational reading. The spark of realization hit me as I considered how, during our Head's Holidays, there is always a student bus running into Millerton, New York a small town 3 miles from the Hotchkiss campus with a busy Main Street full of local shops—including one of our country's great independent bookstores, Oblong Books. The solution was simple: we would meet them at the bookstore and buy them books!

After talking the idea through with my team, we developed that germ of an idea into a coherent vision: we would have several librarians embedded at the bookstore throughout the day, meeting students and helping them find books they would like to read—but that the library didn't already own—and then buying the books for them to take away from the store and read. We did introduce one catch: we asked them to bring the books back to the library when they were done with them, which they were happy to do. Here is the email message I wrote to promote the first ever "Library Will Buy You a Book Day" event:

There is one simple equation that every student should know: libraries = free stuff. We have books, cameras, computers (and chargers), even a globe. But we don't always have exactly the book you want to read right now--or maybe we do, but someone else got their hands on it first!

Problem, meet solution: tomorrow, between the hours of Noon and 3pm, you can go to Oblong Books in Millerton and the library will buy you a book! That's right, the library will buy you a book. (There's just one catch, when you are done with it, you need to bring it back.)

So, take the shuttle into town, go to Oblong, find the book that speaks to you, let the staff know you are a Hotchkiss student, use the sign-up sheet at the register, and you'll be all set!

That first year, we had 75 students show up to choose a book—over 10% of the student body. Their selections ran the gamut from self-help, to history, to art books, to science fiction, to classic novels. We also heard from a number of faculty members who asked whether they were welcome to attend and take part as well: our official announcement had only gone out to students, but it seems word spread quickly about this great opportunity from the library. Thinking it through, we realized that expanding participation in the event to include faculty and staff at Hotchkiss would be an excellent way to bring the community together in a shared love of reading. Going forward we have opened the invitation to the full school community. We now have three of these annual events under our belt and, at the last one, we bought over 100 books for our school's readers, with ample participation from across the Hotchkiss community.

This is all well and good, but did our event generate any measurable increase in recreational reading at Hotchkiss? There are a number of ways to test this assumption: measuring the circulation of items purchased during this event against the circulation of other similar items in our collection; surveying our students to learn about their recreational reading habits and their participation in this event; to get a broader sense of the impact we have on our students, we could also compare the borrowing habits of our Seniors based on their year of entry into the school.

At first glance, the circulation data certainly suggest that this event drives recreational reading. As Table 1 below indicates, books we purchased during “The Library Will Buy You a Book Day” were borrowed significantly more on average than regular purchases made during the same calendar month, an effect that appears to increase the longer we hold these titles.

Table 1: Total Per Item Circulation as of June 15, 2017 and by Date of Purchase

	Feb 2017	May 2016	May 2015
Oblong	1.3	1.84	2.76
All Books	1	1.14	1.59

Similarly, in Table 2, we see that Seniors who entered the school in 9th Grade or 10th Grade read significantly more than those who enter in 11th or 12th. Obviously this number cannot be tied as directly to recreational reading, as there may be any number of other reasons for the variation. One of the most obvious would be that three- and four-year Seniors took different courses than the one- and two-year Seniors. Having reviewed the enrollment data, however, I found only three courses where the enrollment varied widely by year of entry: our Honors English Senior Seminar, Shakespeare and the Bible (another advanced English elective), and AP Economics almost exclusively enrolled three- and four-year Seniors. Clearly the first two of these courses would be likely to drive additional circulation, though it would seem unlikely that they account for the total difference.

Table 2: Mean and Median Senior Student Circulation by Year of Entry

	2013	2014	2015	2016
Mean	15.6	12.25	5.27	5.92
Median	8	6.5	4	4

Another major, course-related difference is that three- and four-year Seniors all participated in Hotchkiss’s Humanities program, an interdisciplinary set of courses that includes two major research projects, completed in close partnership with the Ford Library. Ultimately, that base of experience working with librarians and the library collections may drive circulation in general, although whether that reading is recreational in character is another matter altogether.

A fuller picture of our students’ recreational reading habits emerges from a survey we carried out this past May. Our survey (see Appendix A) was based on one developed by Judy Gallik for use with her students at Schreiner College (Gallik 1999). The main modifications made to the survey were removing a number of the demographic questions, to avoid discouraging participation by students who might be leery of sharing their GPA, and distinguishing between print and online sources more fully to get a better picture of the students reading habits. We also added a question to be able to correlate the other data points to participation in the “Library Will Buy You a Book” event. Of the 623 students currently active when we issued the survey, 135 began and completed it in full, for a robust response rate of roughly 21.7%. Those who replied were relatively evenly divided between three of the four grade levels: 35 Grade 9s, 44 Grade 10s, 40 Grade 11s, and 16 Grade 12s.

An analysis of the data from this survey leads to a number of observations that suggest the impact of this event on our students, as well as helping us understand their reading habits more generally. For example, students by and large report a greater interest in self-directed reading than they are able to satisfy during the academic year, with over 90% reporting that they would read more if they had more free time in which to read—including 100% of those who reported attending “The Library Will Buy You a Book Day.” Older students more frequently reported having participated in the event, while 9th graders were less likely to have heard of the event at all (see Chart 1). Several other strong correlations jump out of the data: students who participate in the event report overall higher rates of recreational reading during the summer (Chart 2), and reading in print (measured by aggregating responses for all print sources listed in question 4 of the survey) also correlates with participation in the event (Chart 3), as well as with class year to a slightly lesser degree (Chart 4). Meanwhile, reading online shows weak associations with participation in the event and class year (Charts 5 and 6, respectively).

Chart 1: “Library Will Buy You a Book Day” Participation and Awareness by Class Year

Did you participate in the "Library Will Buy You a Book Day"?

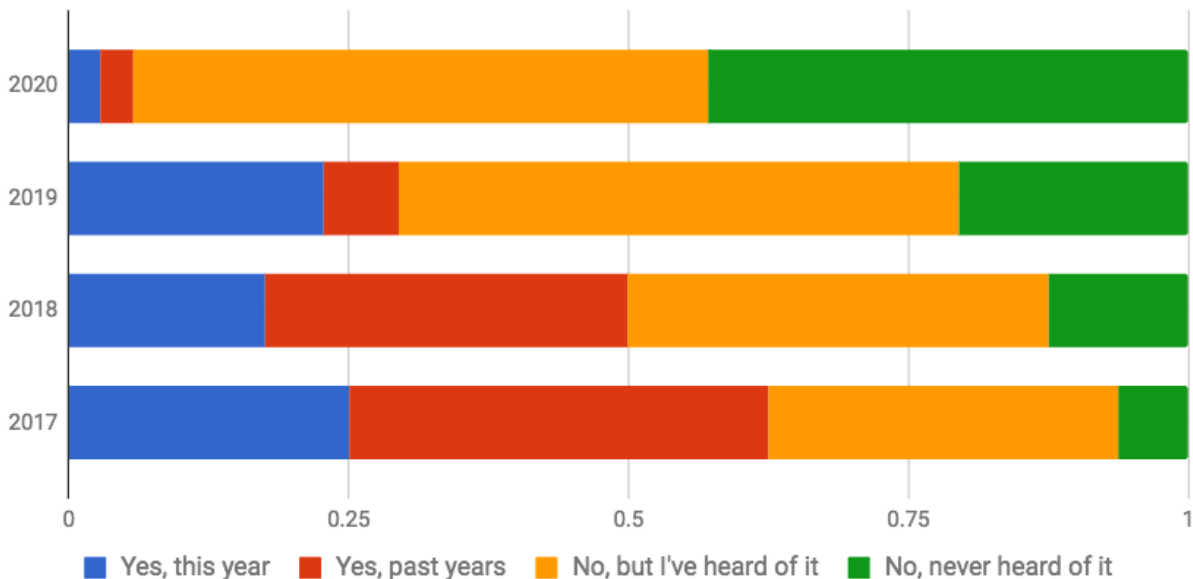


Chart 2: Summer Reading by "Library Will Buy You a Book Day" Participation

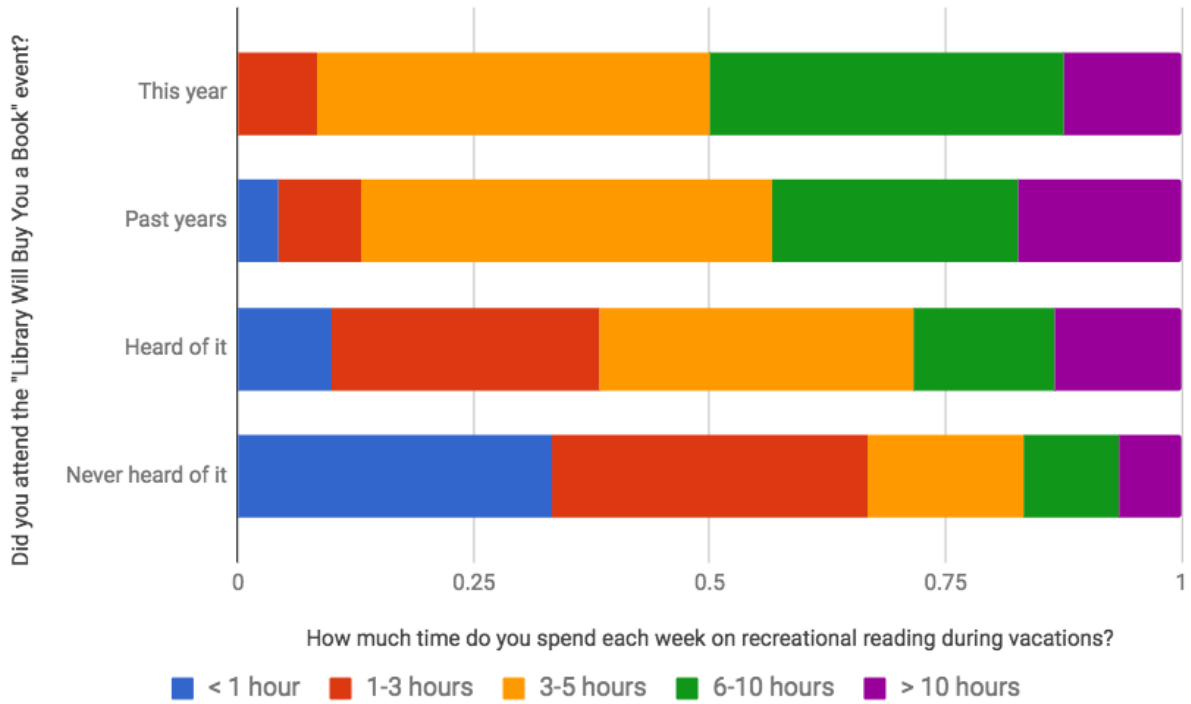


Chart 3: Print Reading by "Library Will Buy You a Book Day" Participation

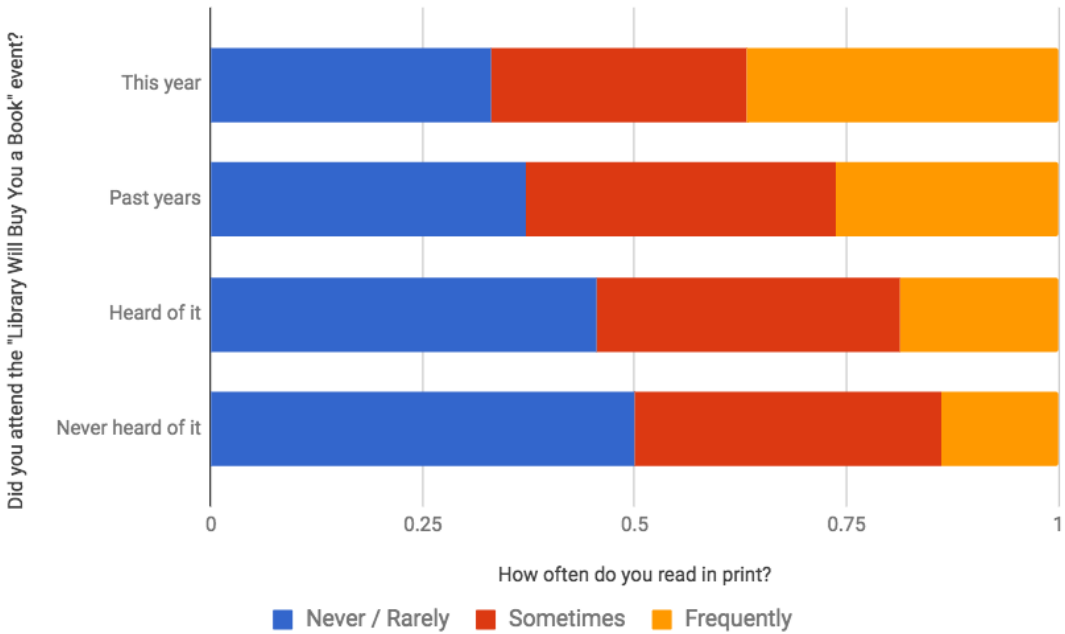


Chart 4: Print Reading by Class Year

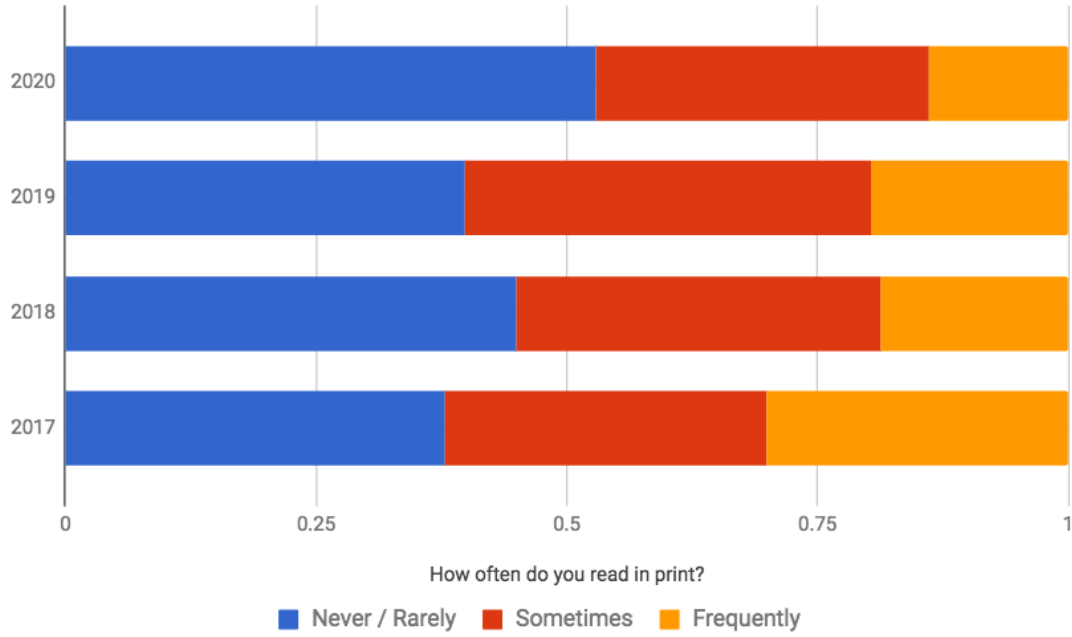


Chart 5: Online Reading by "Library Will Buy You a Book Day" Participation

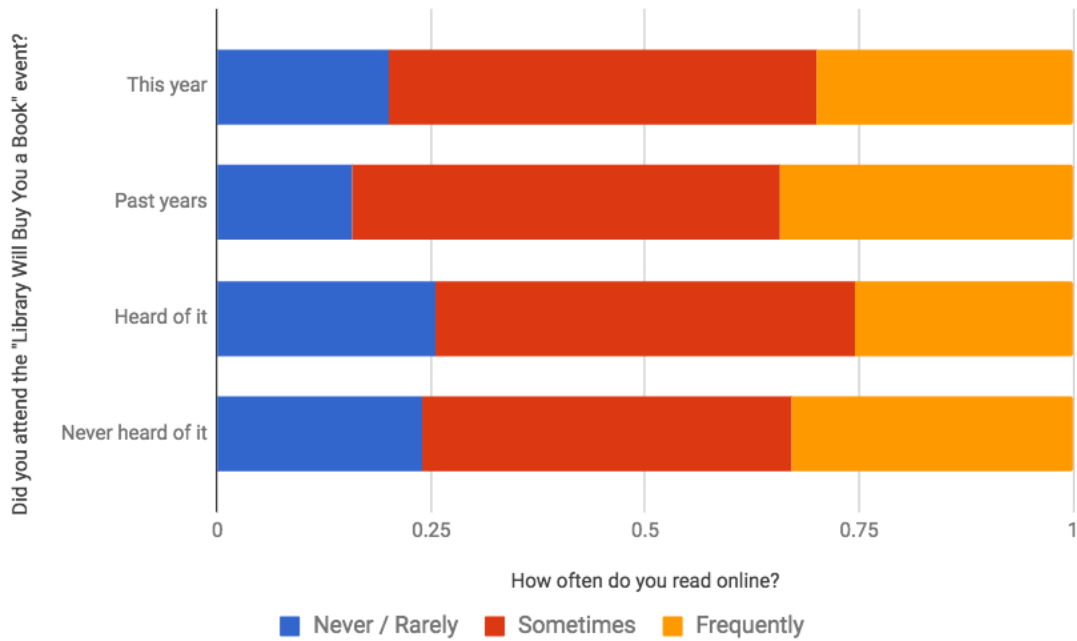
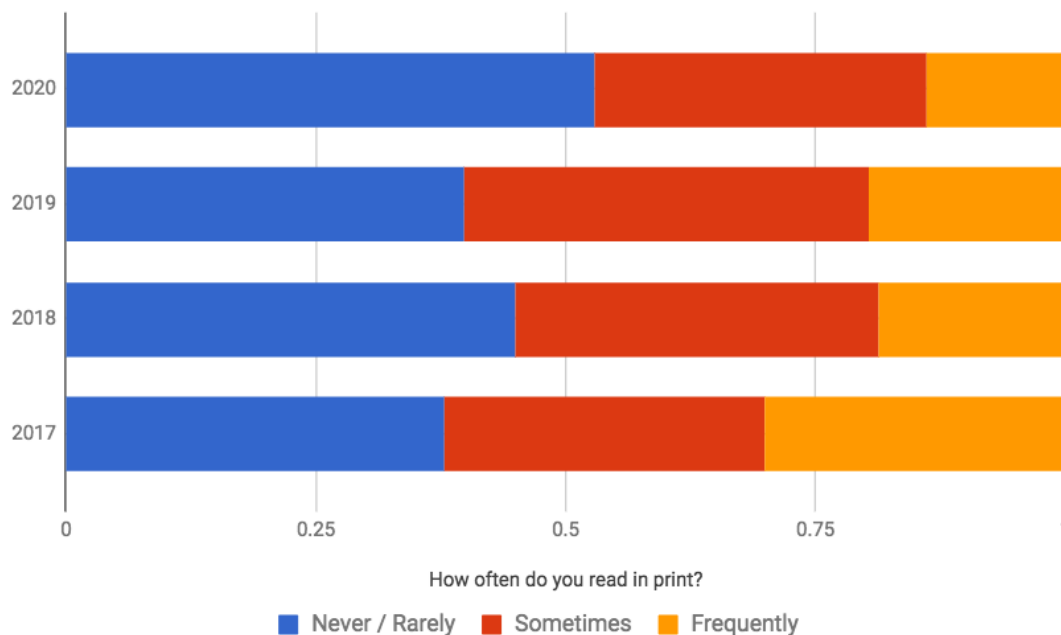


Chart 6: Online Reading by Class Year



This is a happy set of charts, but I want to caution all of us—and most of all myself—against reading too much into it. For one thing, there may be structural reasons why students read more in print as they move up in their classes: this survey was conducted in the late spring, at a time when most Seniors have more free time to commit to self-directed reading. For another, this is a snapshot of single year: I do not yet have longitudinal data to show the impact on a single cohort of students. Likewise, while there appears to be a correlation between reading print and taking part in the “Library Will Buy You a Book Day” there is nothing in the data that suggests that taking part is in itself producing an interest in reading more print. Indeed, the obvious assumption would be that students who like to read will read more in print and will want to take advantage of a deal where the library “buys” you a print book of your choice. So what’s the bottom line? I certainly cannot prove that “The Library Will Buy You a Book Day” convinces non-readers to pick up a book and begin a lifetime love affair with reading. What I can tell you is that it hits all the right buttons to make such an outcome possible: it puts Reader’s Advisory right at the point of purchase, it encourages a sense of ownership of reading, it draws attention to the broader community of readers (including adults), it celebrates reading as a source of enjoyment—it even promotes a local, independent bookstore! And we achieve all this at the cost of a few hours of staff time and a couple of thousand dollars a year, which we would have spent on books anyways—books that, the data suggest, would have circulated less frequently. So, perhaps you are considering: is this a model I can adapt for my library? Is there another way I could reduce the distance between readers (and non-readers) in my community and the books they might be interested in reading? Let me know what you come up with—I would love to hear from you and I’m happy to lend a hand in any way I can.

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Appendix A

Hotchkiss Reading Survey

1. Please indicate the amount of time you spend each week on recreational reading (not required for classes) when school is in session.
 - Less Than 1 Hour
 - 1-2 Hours
 - 3-5 Hours
 - 6-10 Hours
 - More than 10 Hours
2. Please indicate the amount of time you spend each week on recreational reading (not required for classes) during vacations.
 - Less Than 1 Hour
 - 1-2 Hours
 - 3-5 Hours
 - 6-10 Hours
 - More than 10 Hours
3. If you had more free time, would you read more?
 - Yes
 - No

4. Please indicate how often you read the following.

	Never / Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently
Newspapers (Print)			
Newspapers (Online)			
Magazines (Print)			
Magazines (Online)			
Comics/Graphic Novels			
Novels			
Poetry			
Non-Fiction Books			
Email			
Snapchat/Instagram/Facebook			
Other Internet Sites			

5. Did you participate in the "Library Will Buy You a Book" Holiday event at Oblong Books in Millerton?
 - Yes, this year
 - Yes, but not this year
 - No, but I've heard of it
 - No, never heard about it before now
6. What class are you in at Hotchkiss?
 - Class of 2017
 - Class of 2018
 - Class of 2019
 - Class of 2020