

MAKING THE COMIC-CON CONNECTION

USING STUDENT INTERESTS TO FOSTER UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

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“Ohmygoshwedidit!” we exclaimed exhaustedly one Thursday night in March 2017 as we closed the door on our first Lake Park Comic-Con (LPC-2) (<<https://sites.google.com/lphs.org/lpc2/home>>). We were sweaty because we forgot to have the industrial air conditioners turned on in the building, tired because we had been teaching/working for nearly thirteen hours and forgot to schedule breaks for ourselves, and gratified due to the number of learners who showed up and the handful who thanked us for putting the event on. But mostly we were exuberant with a million ideas for next year’s event. And yes, we were already planning the next one not seven minutes after the final student was picked up.

Even that first night, we knew we had created something incredibly special. We (Mariela Siegert, former librarian at Westfield Middle School in Bloomingdale, IL; Jennifer Sutton, librarian at Lake Park High School East Campus in Roselle, IL; and Sia Paganis, former librarian at Spring Wood Middle School in Keeneyville, IL) had managed to gather more than 100 learners from our individual school districts to meet at the high school for three hours to enjoy an evening celebrating comics, gaming, and graphic arts. We crammed the school library with vendors, artists, local shops, and

activities for our students and then sent them around the building to attend professional and student-led breakout sessions, such as zombie makeup tutorials, how to draw chibis, and how to play Dungeons and Dragons.

We hosted an art show, an anime cafe, and a photo booth. We collaborated with our administrators from all three schools to coordinate free student transportation, staff volunteers, and facility access. We received donations from publishers, the national comic book industry, and several Chicago organizations who responded overwhelmingly to our request for donations, keeping the event completely free for all student attendees and allowing us to send them home with comic-related goodies. In short, we pulled off a small miracle.

The LPC-2 Origin Story

Over the years, we have pondered exactly how that small miracle became reality, and we have determined that it was only through extensive collaboration at all levels—student, administrator, and community. The idea for LPC-2 was borne from a series of serendipitous collaborative circumstances. The LPC-2’s origin story resulted from the founding sponsors, Jennifer

and Mariela, attending the 2015 joint Illinois School Library Media Association (now the Association of School Library Educators) and Illinois Library Association Conference in Peoria, Illinois. This joint school-public library venture (which is atypical in Illinois)

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enabled us to access content shared by and about our public libraries. We attended a phenomenal session titled “Reading Is My Superpower: Purchasing and Promoting Comics @ Your Library” by Rachael Bild, Oak Park Public Library; Sarah Stumpf, White Oak Library District; Sarah Okner, Vernon Area Public Library District; and Kendra Mealy Wilk, Chicago Public Library. Thanks to the collegial generosity of our public



Students from five sender middle schools and the local high school peruse thirteen vendors at the fourth annual LPC-2. The event outgrew the library in the first year and had to move to a larger venue!

librarians, we learned about their collaborative Comic-Con event, Comicopolis (<www.whiteoaklibrary.org/Comicopolis>). We immediately found ourselves pondering: Wouldn't a free comic-themed event be a tremendous way to invite learners from our seven communities who merge into a single large high school to build relationships with staff members, find allies among their peers, and celebrate their interests and talents? The short answer was yes.

Such a large-scale collaboration between five sender middle schools and a large high school seemed an impossible feat. We found inspiration from a local school and community-based collaborative teen program called LitWorks: A Teen Book Fest, hosted by super-librarian Jennette Gonzalez. Litworks (<<https://litworksbookfest.weebly.com/>>) is an event hosted by Ridgewood High School (Norridge, Illinois) and Eisenhower Public Library (Harwood Heights, Illinois), in partnership with a local indepen-

dent bookstore, Anderson's Bookshop. These organizations invite young adult authors to speak and meet with teens in the Chicago area. We looked to the Litworks model as a framework for logistics and scheduling and how many students would attend an after-school library-sponsored event. One of the most compelling components of LitWorks was that it offered high-interest content to learners free of charge and was open to all interested students. We knew LPC-2 would be successful if we could employ a similar model.

If You Build It...

Fueled by our big ideas and heartened by the success of other such events, we got to work building capacity in our community. To begin, we needed to share our vision with our administration and gain their support. Without that collaboration, we knew our big ideas would fall flat. To initiate that relationship, we started with our "why."

Over our years as school librarians, we had anecdotal evidence from conversations and observations that there were students in our schools going unserved, even with 45 extracurricular activities and 27 interscholastic sports at the high school level. For the most part, these learners lacked connections to the school culture even in middle school, and were further ostracized by the sheer size and scope of the high school. The broad scope of LPC-2 would connect peers with similar interests and create friendships spanning sender middle schools to bring to freshman year. It was important to connect students with one another through a program since it was not happening in other outlets. The administration agreed with us when we met to discuss our idea.

Because of the co-sponsored nature of LPC-2, incoming students would be introduced to their high school librarian and library assistants by their middle school librarians, forging a connection

to at least one helpful adult in the high school building well before officially beginning as freshmen. LPC-2 would build community, the foundation of collaboration, by providing learners an opportunity to meet public librarians as well as local vendors from local artists, comic book stores, and restaurants. Finally, LPC-2 would provide our middle school students with something to look forward to by giving them a preview of the high school building and offering experiences with professional artists, graphic novelists, and more. By creating collaborative opportunities for our students through LPC-2, we could give them ownership of their high school experience. The administration was especially excited to note that we were attempting to build community and make connections with the sender middle schools and the high school students.

Our administration teams were tremendous allies and collaborative partners. It was no easy task to coordinate an event across six school calendars, to convince security staff to stay late for the event, and to get the theater department to agree to share their stage during spring musical rehearsals. Because we

started with our “why”—connecting students—the administrative teams were willing to go to bat for the program, finding ways to fund student transportation so middle school students could attend the event without paying for a bus. They also assisted in the various processes to hire paid chaperones, coordinate teacher and student volunteers, and create a safe space for outside presenters, vendors, and visitors to interact with our students.

Relying on Student Volunteers

We knew that we were going to need help on the day of the event, beyond administration, teacher volunteers, and school security. To say it took a village to make LPC-2 run smoothly is an understatement, and the most dynamic force was our student organizations who stepped in and took the lead. We started with those involved in the National Honor Society at the high school since the students needed service hours. The first year we utilized these volunteers to assist with registration and food sales, but we quickly realized that we would need more help. Casting our net to other organizations brought in the Spanish Honor Society and Key Club. These student assistants provided event

efficiency, additional student connections, and feedback from behind the scenes.

Ongoing feedback and open communication with our collaborative partners became integral to our continued success. After the first event in 2017, we gathered student reactions to build future programs. Attendees responded to our post-event survey asking for more representation of their particular interests (specifically Manga and more vendors) and sharing that they most enjoyed the sessions hosted by their older peers. They loudly called for a gaming tournament (still our most-attended and popular event). Annually, they share their honest impressions and are aware that we listen to their recommendations. Over time, they have advised us on everything from having vegetarian options in the concession stand to which night is best for the event (we moved to a Friday night so no one had to finish homework afterward). They asked us to add cosplay parades so our students can show off their costuming handiwork and to advertise who wins the art show. It was student attendees who pointed out that when their hands are full of

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goodies and purchased goods, they cannot fully enjoy themselves, so we instituted a coat check. Effectively, our student attendees have become our most impactful collaborators for our annual event.

Reflective student attendees have now taken ownership of LPC-2. While the program was initially formed from the ideas of adults and was loosely based on the frameworks of Comicopolis and LitWorks, in just four years it has truly gained its own identity. When students requested more presentations by peers, we

called on them to lead and they answered. At the first LPC-2, all but one of the sessions and activities were planned and executed by adults. By the 2020 LPC-2, seven of the nine sessions were student-led. To accomplish this, students were invited to meet with the planning committee, participate in a focus group, and assist in the promotion of LPC-2.

Lacking expertise in creating large-scale gaming tournaments, we asked the captains of the nascent e-sports teams to structure and run the

annual sixty-four-person Smash Brothers tournament, complete with spectators and prizes. The tabletop gaming club contributes annually by offering character-building and gaming sessions as well as open gaming throughout the event. Students have spoken with adults they know to acquire vendors and presenters. In fact, in 2018, a group of students launched their own micro-business in an LPC-2 vendor booth with an online store, and in 2020 an attendee of the inaugural LPC-2 started Lake Park's first comics club for her fellow comic-loving students.

Student attendees were not the only group looking to take ownership of a part of LPC-2. As our event grew, so did our need to collaborate with participants with different perspectives. When we asked for help displaying the artwork for our art show, Deyana Matt, art teacher at Westfield Middle School, took on the Art Show as her own annual project, publicizing with the art teachers from all the sender schools and the high school,

ONGOING FEEDBACK AND OPEN COMMUNICATION WITH OUR COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS BECAME INTEGRAL TO OUR CONTINUED SUCCESS.



Middle school students Sophie Leszczynska and Alexandra Stepien enjoy a slice of pizza at the first LPC-2 in 2017. Attending Comic Con as a middle school student equipped Sophie with the connections and confidence to begin comics club as an incoming freshman at Lake Park in 2019.

collecting and matting the art, and even setting up the show at LPC-2. After one event, our vendors gently suggested that our young students did not understand the etiquette of Comic-Cons, such as how to interact with and make purchases from vendors. This led to a quick teachable moment for attendees about con etiquette at the beginning of our program. Our custodial staff outlined how much trash was left behind in our auditorium when we gave away goodie bags, which helped change what was put in the bags along with the requirement that students clean up after themselves. Our volunteers communicated that they wanted to know where they would be assigned to work in advance of the event so they can plan their time accordingly. All the changes we made to streamline the event were due to collaboration with members that we had not considered initially.

Reflecting on Feedback

Over the years, we have come to rely on post-event questionnaires as a form of collaboration with less-vocal participants. We also have learned the importance of reflecting upon that feedback and making adjustments. Although we primarily operate our planning group through the G-Suite for Education by sharing and commenting on Google Docs, Google Sites, and Google Forms, we have found meeting in person to be one of the best ways to collaborate. In and of itself, an in-person meeting is not innovative, yet we recognize it is rare that administrators from so many separate school districts would validate the importance of our collaborative work by providing us the time and space during the school day to meet.

Our reflective in-person meetings were key collaborative moments. After the post-event questionnaire responses were gathered, our

planning group (which now consisted of Jennifer Sutton; Mariela Siegert; Jodi Worstman of Medinah Middle School in Medinah, IL; Ashley Darling from Peacock Junior High in Itasca, IL; and Stacey Jenca and Lisa Ciccio, library assistants at Lake Park High School) met to discuss our findings and brainstorm for the next event. We invited student leaders and/or those who were vocal to provide feedback and insight on the event, and we responded to what they had to say. When we met during our initial planning stages, we were able to work together to negotiate sharing major presenters like Jeffrey Brown or Scott Larson as author visits and to shoulder the financial burdens together, keeping LPC-2 free for student attendees. A major part of collaborating has always been understanding and playing to our individual strengths. We each have taken on specific jobs over the years and trusted that they would be completed. All of this requires a certain degree of trust and a level of collaboration that can only come from working together on a large-scale program over time.

To collaborate with others to create, endure, and improve upon a program of this magnitude really means to let go of control. The ability to trust that others will assist in creating and building on that vision of inclusivity and innovation requires a leap of faith that many are not willing to take. AASL's *National School Library Standards* suggest, "Get to know your colleagues as people before attempting to convince them to collaborate" (2018, 91). Doing this will bring about stronger collaboration, which in the end, will more likely lead to success. Once you find success working with others, it becomes easier to continue to do so. In our case, the benefit of that ongoing collaboration is the creation of an incredible opportunity for

students to more easily navigate the transition to high school through LPC-2, but the possibilities are truly limitless when librarians find innovative ways to work together.



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