

Spoken Word Poetry in the Library: Why Hip Hop has a Place in Academic Libraries

Presented at the California Academic & Research Libraries 2018 Conference

April 13-15, 2018

Redwood City, California

Presenter 1: Mark Stover, Dean, Oviatt Library, California State University, Northridge

Presenter 2: Del Williams, Acquisitions Librarian, Oviatt Library, California State University, Northridge

Abstract

Academic libraries have always included programmatic elements, but these have traditionally been staid events that focus on academic lectures and (white-centric) poetry or author readings. However, libraries are changing along with the demographics of our students. For the past three years, the Oviatt Library at California State University, Northridge, has offered its Learning Commons as a venue for Spoken Word poets and Hip Hop Musical artists during Black History Month. The presenters discussed the background and rationale for these events and also addressed the challenges that come with integrating spoken word poetry and hip hop music into an academic library. The presenters discussed issues of student engagement, multitasking in the library, the library's role in the artistic creation of visual and auditory knowledge, and the role of the library in giving a voice to students through narrative and art. The presenters also addressed issues such as noise in the library, complaints around content, and positive feedback from students.

Short Biographies

Mark Stover has been Dean of the Oviatt Library at California State University, Northridge since 2011, where he leads a staff of 90 staff members and librarians. He previously held a variety of faculty and administrative positions at San Diego State University as well as other academic institutions. At CSUN, he has overseen several multi-million dollar renovations, and provided leadership for the first campus Open Access Policy in the CSU. He received a Master of Library Science (M.L.S.) from UCLA and a Ph.D. in information science from Nova Southeastern University.

Del Williams received two undergraduate degrees from California State University Northridge and her Master's in Library and Information Science from San Jose State University. She is the Acquisitions Coordinator and Social Work Program Liaison at the Oviatt Library at California State University, Northridge. Del has served as the chair of the Oviatt Library's Black History Month Celebration Committee and was appointed to the advisory board for the Tom and Ethel Bradley Center. She is active in the California Faculty Association, serving as the Northridge Chapter Treasurer and their representative for the Council for Affirmative Action.

Summary of Contributions

Mark Stover's contribution to the presentation centered on his perspective as an administrator. Questions that he initially asked included how hip hop in the Library fit with the Library's mission; noise issues in the Library; and complaints about content. The mission statement says that "the Oviatt Library provides ... innovative physical and virtual spaces, user-focused services, and diverse educational and cultural programming in support of student success ... and the greater CSUN community." In addition, two of the Oviatt Library's values are "diversity and inclusion" and "innovation and discovery." Stover spoke about how cultural ignorance is no excuse for denying librarians the chance to engage students with relevant artistic formats and cutting edge programming. Any concerns about content would be addressed by the Library Bill of Rights, and noise issues can easily be mitigated. Stover also talked about the history of CSUN in terms of racial conflicts in the 1960s, and how there is a social justice component to Spoken Word in the Oviatt Library in light of historical events on campus. In the end, he was convinced of the importance of this programming because of its high impact on student engagement.

Del Williams' part of the presentation centered on the librarian's role in organizing a spoken word and hip hop event in the library. Williams spoke to the challenges of convincing the Library Dean that an event which included hip hop music would be appropriate for the library. Del presented the facts that students were engaged in hip hop across campus: holding events that centered on hip hop music, classes being taught in Africana Studies and Music that focused on hip hop and the creation of clubs and organizations around hip hop and spoken word. She spoke to the benefits of giving students a space to engage in spoken word and hip hop, how such an event would bring students into the library and how this would provide opportunities for the library to promote equipment and services available to students. She spoke about preparing for the event: the use of signage to alert patrons of an event that would raise the noise levels in the library, making available earplugs and checking areas to determine if the noise levels were

acceptable. Williams also presented the outcome of the assessment done at the close of the event, reporting on the overwhelmingly positive response of the audience.