

2014

ANNUAL REPORT



BOOKS@WORK

“Books@Work has opened my eyes to what people are capable of. It’s a unique opportunity to see individual thought processes firsthand.”

-Employer

REFLECTION

To the members of the Books@Work community — partners, participants, professors, supporters and friends:

Recent research underscores the power of reflection in the workplace.¹ In fact, the study's results demonstrated that giving employees a mere 15 minutes a day to reflect over a 10-day period resulted in a 20-25% increase in productivity.

Based on our experience at Books@Work, this comes as no surprise.

Life provides precious few opportunities to step back and reflect. If our work in 2014 were to tell us only one thing, it's that meaningful reflection unleashes a host of powerful outcomes — for individuals, their families, the communities in which they live and companies that employ them.

Books@Work brings professor-led seminars into workplaces and community settings to build confidence, critical thinking and camaraderie. By reading and discussing literature of many genres, with college professors, our participants use narrative as a platform to explore personal stories, cultural difference, global perspectives and timeless human themes.

Ann Kowal Smith
Founder and Executive Director

As one participant reflected, Books@Work “becomes a forum by which to explore bigger pictures.”

How does this play out in our program? In one case, it meant reflecting on, and sharing, personal histories and racial narratives as the group read Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*. For another, it meant rethinking a participant's relationship with a local group of Afghan refugees after reading Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. And for a young woman in a court mandated life skills class in lieu of incarceration, it meant reflecting on her own responsibility — and power — to help her young daughter grow up as she explored Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf* with her peers.

These personal reflections are only the beginning. In the workplace, powerful themes emerge from the singular and collective reflections that give rise to, and deepen, the groups' conversations — first about the books and later about work. As one group shared, Books@Work provided a rare opportunity to consider different perspectives, to disagree at work. In this

Felix M. Brueck
Chairman of the Board

age of highly specialized roles, employees are experts in their own domain. Challenging the expert and offering divergent views for respectful discussion and resolution is a dying art. When asked whether this newly practiced skill found its way into workplace conversations, a participant responded, “That very afternoon!”

In this report, we share more insights learned in 2014 with a focus on the nature and impact of reflection. But a quick word about our unusual photo, a reflection in its own right, taken at an exhibition of Olafur Eliasson's work at the new Fondation Vuitton in Paris. Standing in a room whose edges were completely obscured by the physical reflections of Eliasson's piece, we were both observers and participants as the experience of the piece unfolded. A perfect metaphor for the Books@Work journey, we are all (team members, professors, employers, participants and donors alike) observers and partakers in this wonderful exploration of the power of reflection in everyday life.

Thank you for making this journey possible.

1. G. Di Stefano, F. Gino, G. Pisano, B. Staats (2014). Learning By Thinking: How Reflection Aids Performance, Harvard Business School Working Paper.

WHY BOOKS@WORK?

Our society favors individuals with more education, while the less-educated struggle in the face of shrinking incomes and fewer opportunities. Many initiatives are focused on young students; relatively fewer serve adult learners. Although we intentionally bring together individuals of diverse educational levels to explore great literature, Books@Work targets the roughly 60% of American adults with a high school diploma but no college degree. Participants build skills, develop deeper appreciation for others and gain self-confidence in the workplace, at home and in their communities. In addition, these adults are parents, guardians and role models for children and adults. By demystifying the college experience and engaging them as learners, we invest in the ecosystem that nurtures the next generation.

Employers report being increasingly concerned about the lack of critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills in the workplace at all levels of the organization. Books@Work makes learning accessible and inspiring. When participants gain the tools and confidence to step up in the workplace, new opportunities open up for them and their teams. Beyond the workplace, our diverse participants make up a vibrant and palpable learning community.

By addressing these challenges, we believe that Books@Work can make a meaningful contribution to overcoming the increasing educational and economic disparity in the country. By becoming lifelong learners, our participants become the role models for the next generation that looks up to them and says, “that can be me.”



“A lot of the stories had to do with assumptions. Assumptions based on appearance. Assumptions based on your own bias, judgements. Making preconceived notions without actually looking at everything. I felt like that was something that stuck with me in my day job, in my social life. Don't be so quick to judge someone and don't be so quick to jump on something.”

- Participant

MEASURING OUR IMPACT

We measure our work in three areas: personal growth, organizational outcomes and societal impact. We track participants through surveys both prior to and following the completion of the program. But more importantly, we talk to as many participants as we can — one on one — to hear about the experience, the books and the discussion. We also talk with supervisors for an additional perspective on the effect of the program at work. There are six strong themes emerging from our data as reflected in participant comments and insights.

Although these prevailing themes provide strong evidence of personal growth and organizational outcomes, societal impact will necessarily take longer to demonstrate. Nonetheless, our participants frequently share books with family and friends and some engage differently in the community based on insights developed in the program.

BUILDS CONFIDENCE	“I’m coming out of my shell, reading different types of books, which is cool.”
FOSTERS RESPECT	“We make assumptions about people based on the way they talk or they interact.”
DEVELOPS TRUST	“When we take time to exchange ideas and feelings outside of the work environment, we build a deeper trust inside of the work environment.”
CREATES CONNECTIONS	“It’s helping make personal connections. I think that helps facilitate business transactions as well.”
INCLUDES DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES	“Hearing everyone else’s perspectives really opened my eyes to how different people feel about things.”
RECOGNIZES CONTRIBUTIONS OF COLLEAGUES	My colleague “is so intelligent...I would have never known that he had that kind of mind if I hadn’t done Books@Work with him.”
INTRODUCES NEW CONTENT & CAPABILITIES	“This was a great break in the day to have an intelligent conversation about a book I might not have otherwise chosen to read.”

PROFESSORS REFLECT

The professors find Books@Work a valuable opportunity to reflect as well. As one professor shared, “it reinforced the mantra of not jumping to conclusions about audience.” Another expressed, “the program challenged me intellectually and pedagogically to... be a more generous reader, to read in ways I used to read before I was an English major or an English professor.”

For many professors, the incredible insights participants offer create a unique and refreshing experience. “Many [participants] do not have a lot of experience with literature, but they have a lot of experience with life that creates fodder for great discussion.”

reflected one professor. As another stated, “It was extremely interesting to have responses and reactions from a group that is more mature and, mostly, more interested in the readings than my regular students at class.” Finally, a third shared: “[the participants’] responses reminded me that literature can really expand people’s thinking and feeling.”

Books@Work participants often wrestle deeply with texts in ways that are different from traditional students. For example, a group that was initially hesitant about reading Milan Kundera’s dark and powerful *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* was so inspired by the conversations with the

professor that the participants resolved to tackle it more fully and openly. The professor reported, “At our last session, the women were absolutely leading the book discussion on their own. They had wanted to reject the book in the beginning, but now they were meeting outside of our sessions to talk over the book’s contents, symbols, and consequences; they were researching difficult topics on their own and to satisfy their own curiosities; all of them had asked their families to read the book with them; and all of them were excited to share ways the book made them think differently by its end.” One participant shared that she viewed the completed book on her shelf as a trophy — the evidence of a hard but satisfying journey.

BY THE NUMBERS

27
PROGRAMS

14
EMPLOYERS

18
COLLEGES

4
STATES

384
PARTICIPANTS

79
PROFESSORS

89
BOOKS

LOOKING AHEAD

Over the last few years we have learned a great deal from our clients and participants. Initially we sought to serve only our target segment: adults in the workplace without a college education. Early feedback demonstrated that cross-hierarchical and cross-functional programs were even more powerful for both participants and their supervisors; they strengthen a culture of mutual respect and open dialogue across the organization. Books provide a unique platform to level the playing field, to get to know other people as individuals and to learn and practice mutually respectful critical debate. We are currently working with a few partners to deploy Books@Work as part of a broader culture-shaping initiative. By developing broader workplace cultures that respect individuals of all backgrounds and helping a diverse population develop new skills and greater confidence, we ensure the sustainability of our social mission — at work, at home and in society.

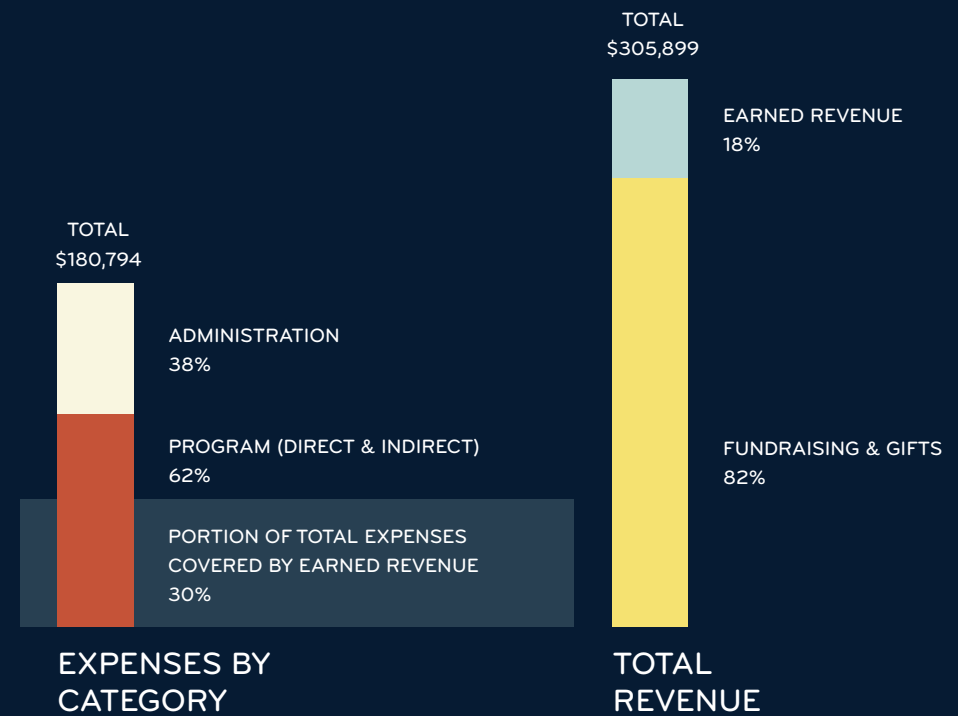
"I got to interact meaningfully with people whom I otherwise wouldn't have, which to me is one of the primary purposes of literature (maybe THE primary purpose.) It was also gratifying to feel that I could enable a positive literary experience for students over whom I had no authority, in a noninstitutionalized setting."

- Professor

FINANCIAL

Our funding model means that we partner with companies in more than name only. For each program, our partners reimburse our expenses related to professor honoraria, travel and books. In addition, our partners contribute an administrative fee to cover the costs associated with organizing the program, recruiting professors, monitoring quality and capturing outcomes.

At present, our operations depend on philanthropic support to enable us to deliver programs. At approximately 10,000 participants a year, we should generate sufficient revenue to fund our operations completely, permitting us to use every donated dollar to fund community-based programs or special projects to advance our mission.



LESSONS LEARNED

1 Leadership involvement makes a huge difference. Support from supervisors and executives signals that Books@Work is important, demonstrates the organization's commitment to Books@Work and its people and builds a culture of respect and trust across hierarchies and functions.

2 Participants hunger for diverse perspectives, telling us over and over how getting together with colleagues with fundamentally different interpretations of the same text inspires them and encourages them to explore and engage with different viewpoints.

3 Books with which participants struggle (and specifically those they do not "like") can be the most rewarding. Pushing people out of their comfort zones can create the most powerful learning experiences. Finding the right balance between challenge and comfort is very important.

CHOOSING BOOKS TO INSPIRE REFLECTION

There's no secret formula for selecting and framing books, but we have learned a great deal about what works and what doesn't. We supply professors with survey responses that capture participants' reading preferences and expectations for the seminar. We also connect professors in the same program, working with them to ensure diversity in genre, discipline, and narrative style. Many titles challenge participants to think

deeply about difficult topics. Examples include: James McBride's *The Color of Water*, a memoir of a black man growing up with a white mother; Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, a classic dystopian work; and Jorge Luis Borges' short essay, "The Library of Babel," a deceptively simple and astonishingly modern examination of the value of information and learning.

THANK YOU

Our donors, company partners and college partners give life to Books@Work. Your dedication to lifelong learning is helping individuals, families and communities. You are

making learning accessible and inspiring. Together, we are empowering participants, and inspiring role models for the next generation of learners.

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