

PARTING WORDS

CELEBRATIONS: USING THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY AS A BRIDGE FOR MULTICULTURAL ISSUES

By Susan Hubbs Motin

St. Cloud State University (SCSU), like many other public institutions, has experienced the multicultural issues surrounding holiday celebrations. The student population, approximately 16,000 with both undergraduate and graduate students, contains diverse, culturally rich, and flourishing religious communities. Among them are Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Pagans.

Historically, SCSU, the City of St. Cloud, Minnesota, and the surrounding community's majority cultures were immigrants who celebrated Christian observances. As the demographics have changed dramatically in the last two decades, the practice of celebrating only the Christian holiday of Christmas became a divisive issue on campus.

AFTER RESEARCHING THE VARIOUS RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC CELEBRATIONS, THE UNIFYING THEME OF LIGHT WAS RECOGNIZED AS BEING A PART OF THE RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC CELEBRATIONS THAT OCCURRED AROUND THIS TIME OF THE YEAR.

As a librarian who is active in the campus community, it was painful to hear all the voices of hurt and disenfranchisement. To be inclusive, I suggested that the library, known as Learning Resources & Technology Services (LR&TS), create a display in the entryway display case to highlight SCSU community members' religious and ethnic celebrations. After researching the various religious and ethnic celebrations, the unifying theme of light was recognized as being a part of the religious and ethnic celebrations that occurred around this time of the year.

The display was created to be both educational and visually appealing. The arrangement of all the celebrations was to be aesthetically pleasing and not in any particular order. Fabric appropriate for each celebration was used to cover the glass shelf where each celebration's books and objects were placed together. The display also included a small placard with the dates and description of each celebration and its cultural or religious affiliations. The display contained a complete Kwanzaa set, a menorah, a Yule log, an advent wreath, a Christmas tree, a crèche, a Krathong, a lantern for Chinese New Year, and a special book holder to display the Koran. Clear lights were hung or draped throughout the case to add to the theme and visual appeal.

As an outgrowth of the display case project the first year, we realized the need to share the books that had been purchased about the various religious traditions and to list the web sites that had been located. It was suggested that web pages be created to share this information with the campus and with anyone who might discover it while searching the Internet. The web page was connected to the LR&TS's web site with the following URL: <http://lrts.stcloudstate.edu/showcase/celebrations/default.asp>. The web site contains pages for both the print and electronic resources used to create the display and for people to consult for more in-

formation. Separate pages on the site feature books and links to other web sites.

As we set up the lights in the display case, we noticed immediate student and staff reactions. They were drawn to the case and began asking questions about what the display would contain. Once the display was complete, extremely positive feedback came from both students and staff from various cultural and religious groups. Many students and staff thanked the LR&TS for being so inclusive, opening itself to suggestions, and increasing everyone's understanding and appreciation of all of these celebrations. Some of the comments that we received over and over from students were: "Thank you for sharing my religious celebration with others. Many people do not know about the celebration of my [religion

or culture]," "Thank you for teaching me about all these celebrations; I did not know about any of them," and "I hope you will do this display again!" More positive feedback came from the local newspaper, which published a picture and an article that encouraged community members to come to campus to see the display.

This display has demonstrated how the library can and must take an active role in multicultural discussions that are part of society and of our own university campuses. An administrator at SCSU once compared the campus to a wheel, in which the library was the hub and all the various colleges were the spokes. Using this analogy, academic librarians should strive to take the lead in dispersing information by providing multicultural resources and a forum for all voices to be heard.


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Photo by Mary C. Shrode