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Re-Imagining Our Story: Creating a Virtual Summer Reading Program

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Re-Imagining Our Story: Creating a Virtual Summer Reading Program

Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Union County Library System (UCLS) opted to solely offer virtual programming for our popular Summer Reading Program. This article focuses on the background, planning, and implementation in creating and executing a fun and innovative summer experience for our community and patrons, including a gamification twist to incentivize our participants.

Keywords

Summer Reading, Virtual Programs

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Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Union County Library System (UCLS) opted to solely offer virtual programming for our popular Summer Reading Program, based on the 2020 Collaborative Summer Learning Program theme *Imagine Your Story*. We sought to design a fun way for our families and patrons to read, connect, and learn throughout the summer, and decided to employ gamification strategies by creating learning badges as a means of incentivization. The goal was to deliver an exceptional Summer Reading Program while ensuring the safety of our staff and community.

Development & Implementation

UCLS closed to the public due to the COVID-19 pandemic on March 16th, 2020, and library staff quickly began to reassess our Summer Reading Program. After research and discussion, we opted to go fully virtual for 2020, and began brainstorming creative and effective ways to reach our rural community in Union, South Carolina. Taking inspiration from an April 2020 Public Library Association webinar, *Summer Reading Badges: A Twist on Summer Reading*, UCLS staff began creating a Summer Reading Program based on badges and gamification; our Summer Reading Program ran from June 1 - July 31, and participants were able to earn both virtual and physical badges.

1. One goal was to earn badges through weekly activities. Library staff put together a Treasure Box Kit with 8 weekly activities, and participants were able to earn a badge by completing each activity. Activities included: designing a crown, constructing a dragon, creating a scratch animal ornament, producing a bookmark, creating and illustrating your own story, making a shield & sword, and decorating a slap bracelet.
2. Participants could also earn badges by tuning in for our three virtual performers: Bright Star Theatre, Science Tellers, and the South Carolina Aquarium.
3. Participants could earn badges by reading five, ten, or fifteen hours.

4. Lastly, participants could earn up to fifteen activity badges. These special activities gave participants the opportunity to earn badges through exploration, self-care, learning about our world, and helping others.
5. After completing any ten badges, participants earned a Completion Badge and officially completed our 2020 Summer Reading Program.

Registration, logging, and badge activities were tracked in Beanstack, a reading challenge software and mobile app. Once a virtual badge was earned in Beanstack, patrons were able to pick-up a lanyard from the library (color based on their age group) and a physical badge (button) to add to their lanyard. There were several goals we had in mind when implementing this program: we aimed to create an accessible program and expand our reach throughout the community, and we wanted the community to know that we are doing our best to deliver quality services during the COVID-19 pandemic while still maintaining safety measures.



This program was opened to all ages, so parents were able to complete the activities with their children and earn badges with them. Parents thanked us for the ways we inspired their families with learning and mindfulness.

UCLS staff used the times patrons came to the library to pick-up Treasure Box Kits, lanyards, or badges as opportunities to educate them on the library's services throughout the pandemic.

For example, some patrons were not aware they were able to register for a digital library card, download eBooks, or place physical books on hold using the library's No Contact Holds Service. (Photo of Treasure Box Kits, Courtesy of Union County Library System)

Statistics

UCLS saw 190 individuals sign up for summer reading, and a total of 947 badges were earned.

Participants read for over 43,500 minutes, and completed nearly 1,500 activities. We provided virtual programming five days a week for eight weeks and had three outside virtual performers. Our YouTube Channel launched in April 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic; throughout summer 2020, our channel received 450 views and over 15 hours of videos were watched.

Costs & Materials

Vendor(s)	Item(s)	Total
Beanstack (Zoobean)	3 year Premium Subscription*	\$5,380.00
Oriental Trading & Amazon	Treasure Box Kit Supplies	\$1,979.64
Jones School Supply	Lanyards	\$247.81
DEMCO	1  Book Bags (For Treasure Box Kits)	\$129.90
FlatIcon	Monthly Subscription (Badge Art)	\$11.99
Amazon	Button Makers + Supplies (For badges)	\$206.04
	Total:	\$7,955.38

Note: For Summer 2020 UCLS only had to pay the First Year License + Set Up Fee for a total of \$1,990.00 as opposed to the full \$5,380.00 up front.

Tips and Tricks

1. Share Documents

Using Google Docs for sharing documents helped with consistency and organization for library staff participating in virtual programs. Google Docs allowed everyone to stay on task and staff were able to see video deadlines and each weekly theme.

2. Utilize Partnerships

Partnerships allowed us to expand our community reach to patrons and expand our summer audience. We did this through our established partnerships with the YMCA, local daycares, and a church that typically serves as an after-school center. This allowed us to engage patrons who may not have otherwise registered for our Summer Reading Program.

3. Make It Fun!

Making learning fun is a primary goal of UCLS. This Summer Reading Program provided a way for participants to learn about art, music, science, and much more! Our virtual programming was fun and engaging and included weekly Treasure Box Kit activities, storytimes, crafts, STEAM activities, and fun, nutritional recipes to try at home.

4. Set Attainable Goals

In order to make it attainable for participants to complete the program we only required them to earn (any) ten badges. Badges could be earned through a combination of reading, participating in virtual programming, or completing the suggested activities, such as helping with chores or drawing a self-portrait. All of the activities we suggested could easily be completed by anyone at home and no additional items needed to be purchased.

5. Make It Accessible

We used social media to promote our Summer Reading Program and asked that all media outlets and local partners share the information with the community. We advertised if someone was unable

to pick up their Treasure Box Kit, lanyard, or badges, we would make other arrangements to ensure that all who desired to participate would be able to do so.

Conclusion

The Union County Library System strived to give our community a fun, innovative and creative opportunity to earn badges and complete our 2020 Summer Reading Program. In this unprecedented time, we focused on giving families the opportunity to connect with each other and learn new skills; to honor social distancing, all of our activities could be completed at home. We have received excellent feedback from our patrons, and many have expressed their gratitude for giving them ideas on at-home activities. We look forward to expanding our virtual programming in fall 2020 and bringing more ideas, activities, and resources into the homes of our patrons.