BIG QUESTIONS
Creating & Sustaining a Library Discussion Series

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ASKING THE BIG QUESTIONS

The Basics

- A campus/community discussion group that explores big ideas
- Features guest speakers and knowledgeable facilitators
- One hour “Living Room” conversations
- Frequent partnerships
- Fits our campus characteristics and culture
HISTORY

- Began in 2008 sparked by a conversation with campus colleague
- Based on a book or series of articles in early years
- Co-sponsored with other organizations or disciplines at times
- Based on annual theme for the first four years
- Changed frequency to twice a semester in 2012
- Moved to individual topics rather than annual theme
- Relied less on texts and more on brief presentations by local experts
- Focused always on the conversations
EXAMPLES OF PAST TOPICS

- Sustainability
- Feminism
- Chinese Philosophy
- Wicca
- Islam
- Atheism
- Native American Religion
- Minnesota in the Movies
- Minnesota & Immigration
- GLBT Issues in Minnesota
- Politics in Minnesota
- Political Ads
- Gun Violence
- Reality Television & American Culture
- Government Surveillance
- Privacy in the Digital Age
- Artificial Intelligence
- Genetic Engineering
- Life in the Cosmos
- Mental Illness
- Memes
- Beauty
- Trigger Warnings
- Species Extinction
KEEP IN MIND

- Timeliness of topics
- Knowledge of audience
- Controversial topics
- Feedback solicited
- Be prepared to be surprised!
COLLABORATE

- Partner with other organizations or disciplines
- Invite multiple speakers when practical
- Work with speakers to identify possible readings
- Listen to your collaborators and co-sponsors
- Be flexible
PLANNING

- Assign duties as needed
- Check out campus events calendar before scheduling
- Offer speakers multiple dates
- Reserve space as soon as possible
- Determine technology needs
- Arrange for refreshments
PUBLICITY

- Posters, emails, website, social media, displays, newspapers, and radio
- Timing is important
- Be informative and creative
- Reflect nature of audience
- Word of mouth
- Work with official communications unit
THE DISCUSSION

- Introductions
- Role of the speaker
- Stress overview and background information -- not lectures
- Supplementary readings
- Engaging in conversation
- Wrapping it up in a timely way
CHALLENGES

- Realize that big topics sometimes still draw small crowds.
- Acknowledge that potential speakers may be hard to identify or schedule.
- Balance conversation participation without dominating voices.
- Develop realistic notions of resources needed.
Here I am
in a world full
of wonder
with big
mystery
and I
think
it's strange
that nobody
really asks
the really big
question
BENEFITS

- Explore ideas that are meaningful to people
- Give individuals a venue to share opinions
- Give local “experts” a forum for sharing knowledge and expertise
- Bring your community together
- Strengthen relationships
- Showcase your library as a leader and destination
QUESTIONS?