Ben Franklin Circle

Santa Barbara Public Library

Adults

|

Intergenerational

Ben Franklin Circle

Dec 9, 2019

Free

Byline

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Ben Franklin Circles are conversation clubs modeled on Benjamin Franklin's "Junto." Franklin gathered a small group of peers for weekly meetings where they explored how to improve themselves and the world around them.

Ben Franklin Circles update Franklin's original structure to a modern-day "club for mutual improvement." Small groups meet regularly and use Franklin's 13 civic virtues — temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity and humility — as prompts to discuss what they hope to achieve in their own lives and how they can improve the world for others.

The project encourages people to identify and discuss shared values and to set commitments to put those values into action.

Advanced Planning

Previous surveys conducted by SBPL showed that the Santa Barbara community was looking for ways to connect with others and form relationships with neighbors. Implementing Ben Franklin Circles at our Central Library would encourage a space for deliberate and meaningful conversations among our community members.

This was a collaborative project with 92nd Street Y, a leading cultural and community center. Our programming librarian at the Central Library began planning for Ben Franklin Circle implementation about two months in advance. Planning was extremely simple as the 92nd Street Y provided guidance, advice, toolkits, discussion guides, promotional materials, original writings and ongoing host support. Internal library planning simply involved choosing what day of the month we thought would work best to consistently host the discussions (for us, the last Mondays of the month).

Groups are self-led and determine their own meeting schedule (weekly, bi-monthly, monthly). When planning the order in which we would discuss the virtues, staff did look at when there might be related happenings in the community that Circle attendees could be encouraged to attend.

Marketing

Part of our instigation for starting a Ben Franklin Circle at our Central Library was that we would be hosting Emily Esfahani Smith in relation to her book, "The Power of Meaning," and we knew she is a Ben Franklin Circle advocate. Planning in advance of this visit allowed us to share with Smith that we would be starting a Circle a little over a month after she would be in Santa Barbara. This ended up being our best marketing move, as Smith shared this at the speaking engagements she had in town, both at our library and at the local university.

Beyond this, we also implemented a series of regular marketing activities that included a press release to local news outlets, Facebook event series, social media mentions, creating a Meetup series, inclusion in our web calendar, internal fliers, a digital slide in our lobby and a feature in SBPL's newsletter.

This official marketing started about four weeks in advance of the program, with a ramp up the two weeks preceding the first meeting. Marketing is ongoing for the Circle and regularly occurs about every three months (fliers, social media, newsletter).

Day-of-event Activity

Day-of preparation is simple and easy to execute. The 92nd Street Y provides discussion guides for each of the 13 original topics, as well as the 12 "new" virtues. The librarian prints copies for potential attendees. These discussion guides provide a general format that includes:

- Ice Breaker
- Virtue Discussion with virtue definitions, prompt questions, and related quotes.
- Monthly Commitment that has a thought exercise and possible commitments to help spur ideas.

Printing of the discussion guide is almost the only day-of activity. Before the day of the event the librarian also makes sure one of the small rooms in the library is booked. If they are unavailable, the discussions have been held in general areas of the library simply by pulling together a dozen or so chairs in a circle.

A significant activity that we chose to implement for the discussions was to also provide a recommended reading list based on the virtue being discussed. These are prepared in advance of the meeting, with about 10 title suggestions. The lists are printed out for attendees to take with them on the day-of.

Program Execution

The initial marketing and ongoing efforts have proven successful. At the first meeting there were 23 people in attendance. Though attendance decreased after this first meeting (not unexpectedly), subsequent meetings have averaged about 9 people.

While each discussion is a different mix of attendees, many have been at over half of the meetings, which is of note as we have been meeting since January 2018.

Through suggestions from participants, we found that many wanted to have contacts between meetings. Therefore, we added a Ben Franklin Circle Group to our Facebook page where anyone who wanted could join and continue further conversation and share related materials.

Did you try this program at your library? Share your experience using this form.

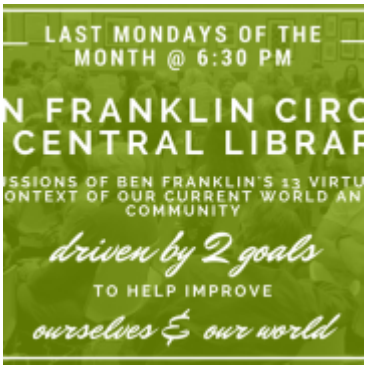
Supporting Materials

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