



Leisure reading: The gateway to student success

How 3 academic libraries leverage
popular reading to engage students
& help achieve better outcomes





For many, the idea of reading in academia conjures images of long, lonely hours spent in the library, laboring over dense course material. However, promising new data indicates that more college and university students are experiencing the holistic benefits that leisure reading offers.

Circulation of college and university ebook and audiobook collections* jumped by 9 percent in 2021, followed by another 17-percent increase through August 2022. And a 2022 survey of academic librarians by the Association of College & Research Libraries found a more than 14 percent increase in those acquiring non-academic titles for their digital collection. What titles are students reading? *The Vanishing Half*, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, *Harry Potter & The Sorcerer's Stone*, *The Midnight Library* and *A Promised Land* are among the highest circulating.*

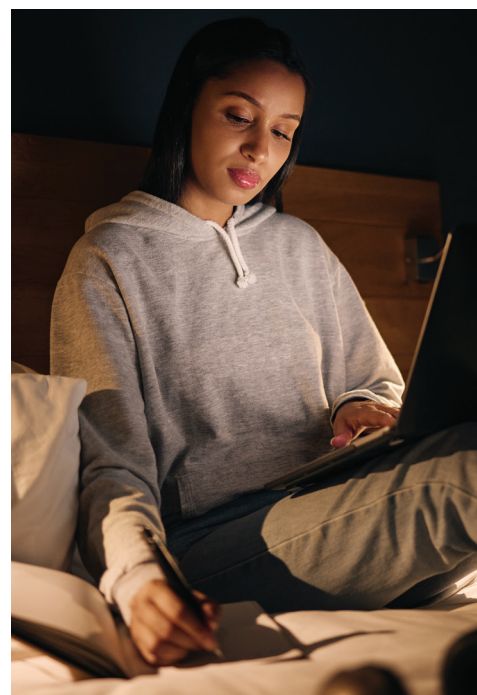
* College and university digital collections within the OverDrive Academic network.

Some additional points to consider:

- **Reading remains one of the biggest hobbies amongst members of the Gen Z and millennial generations.** In a 2022 Hobbies & Passions Behavioral survey conducted by YPulse, both Gen Z and Millennials identified reading as one of their top five hobbies. Leisure reading is an important component of this. Forty-four percent of 18–24-year-old book buyers and readers reported reading more for leisure in 2021 than previous years (Penguin Random House Consumer Insights, 2021 U.S. Book Buyer Segmentation).
- According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Americans spent more time reading for leisure in 2020 than the previous year. **Key groups that reported reading more include adult Gen Zers age 20-24 and younger millennials age 25-34.** This trend is driving an increase in binge reading, which is up 7 percent 2017-2021 (Penguin Random House Consumer Insights, 2021 U.S. Book Buyer Segmentation).
- **In addition to leisure reading, consumer research indicates that younger generations are continuing to turn to books as a key resource to learn a new skill or better prepare for their prospective futures** (Stylus, 2022). Skill building is a key area of interest for Gen Zers, with almost three-quarters (72 percent) identifying having taken a course outside of their schooling to learn a new skill (YPulse, 2022).

So, why is leisure reading so critically important to supporting the whole student – in both academic success and personal well-being? And what contributes to developing a thriving collection? This report explores the experiences of three librarians from diverse institutions who have partnered with OverDrive Academic and are successfully leaning into leisure reading to better serve their unique campus communities.

OverDrive Academic offers the industry's largest digital catalog of ebooks, audiobooks, magazines, video, interactive instruction and databases for college and university libraries worldwide. With the Libby reading app, named one of Popular Mechanics' 20 Best Apps of the Decade and the popular streaming video app Kanopy, we help extend the library to support students' academic needs and provide easy access to leisure reading anytime, anywhere on every major device.



GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Georgia Southern University (GSU) is a public research university with an enrollment of 26,000 students spread across its main campus in Statesboro, GA, and two nearby satellite campuses. It serves a wide range of students, including many non-traditional and active military. The university has partnered with OverDrive since 2016.

For Acquisitions Librarian Jessica Minihan Rigg, connecting students with leisure reading during the COVID-19 pandemic was crucial.

“For us, it was important that we provided some sort of escape,” she said. “Everyone needs a break, everyone needs to relax, and leisure reading is a great way to do that.”

Rigg noted that a critical component of the library supporting the whole student is recognizing and acknowledging they have lives outside of the classroom. This means addressing their actual interests and needs, which is why GSU leisure reading collection development is based on requests.

“They’re Georgia Southern students, but they’re also people, and mothers, and soldiers,” Rigg said. “Ultimately, I think our job is to help nurture their curiosity, and in a lot of ways, their empathy, too.”

A major component of GSU’s leisure reading strategy has been a shift to focus on ebooks and audiobooks through OverDrive. And this isn’t limited to just leisure reading. The library has also expanded its digital resources to serve growing areas of study.

“More and more of our content is moving online because we want to meet people where they are. And where they are is usually on their laptop or phone,” Rigg said.

Rating OverDrive’s leisure reading selection as “excellent,” Rigg noted that the library receives a high volume of requests for titles in languages other than English, which OverDrive’s catalog of millions of titles from thousands of publishers in 100+ languages can readily support. And since OverDrive also partners with more than 90 percent of North American public libraries, many incoming students are already familiar with – and fans of – the service.

“We have students come in and already know what (the OverDrive collection) is,” she said.

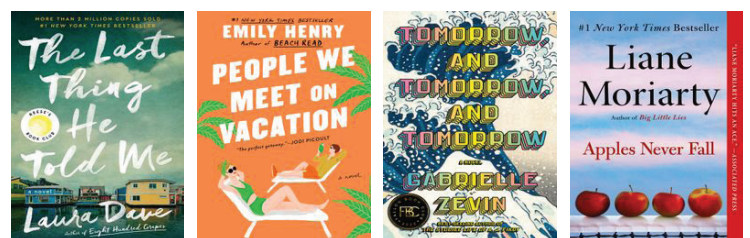
GSU’s focus on delivering in-demand leisure reading resources in convenient digital formats looks to continue well into the future. What would Rigg tell other academic libraries looking to do the same?

“(OverDrive’s) an excellent platform for academic libraries,” she said. “Having a digital copy of popular books meets (students’ needs) the best.”

“Everyone needs a break, everyone needs to relax, and leisure reading is a great way to do that.”



Jessica Minihan Rigg
Acquisitions Librarian, Georgia Southern University



The most popular reads at Georgia Southern University.

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

Boise State University, Idaho's largest public university, has an enrollment of 26,000+ and an urban campus in the heart of the city. Mary Aagard is the head of acquisitions and collections and an associate professor at the Albertsons Library.

"I feel like there's lots of opportunity for academic libraries to be a part of that student wellness and whole student conversation," she said.

Aagard believes leisure reading plays a role in this, alongside content in areas like self-help, personal development and DEI. Collectively, these types of content – which Boise State is increasingly offering in only digital formats – offer students opportunities for relaxation, contemplation, reflection and independent learning.

"Students need a chance to open their brains to a lot of different things and having a collection that isn't just tied to the curriculum helps them explore," she said.

And with complex issues seemingly emerging every day from every corner of the globe, it can be difficult at times to make sense of it all – especially for college students who are also trying to navigate their own changing lives. Aagard sees reading both popular fiction and titles about current events for leisure as a powerful way to gain a broader perspective on what's happening in our world.

"I'm a big proponent for how fiction opens your world and helps you develop empathy and understanding of other cultures," she said.

Students aren't the only ones benefiting from Boise State's OverDrive digital collection. Aagard reported receiving regular requests for leisure reading titles from faculty and staff as well.

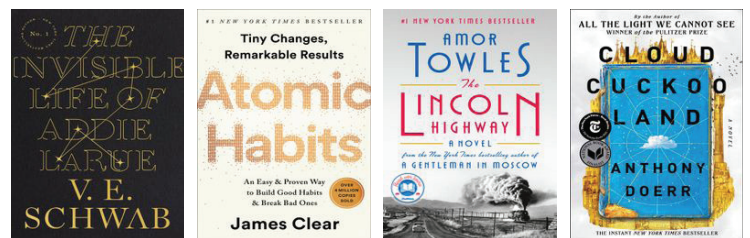
"Being able to provide this option to faculty and staff members is really cool, too," she said.

"I'm a big proponent for how fiction opens your world and helps you develop empathy and understanding of other cultures."



Mary Aagard

Head of Acquisitions & Collections
Associate Professor, Albertsons Library
Boise State University



A look at what students are reading at Boise State University.

NORTHEAST MISSISSIPPI COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Northeast Mississippi Community College serves 3,200 students across a five-county district. The school launched its OverDrive digital collection in August 2021.

“I think it’s changing the way we meet the needs of our library patrons,” Librarian Ellice Yager said of Northeast’s OverDrive digital collection. “Every change that it’s brought about has been for the better.”

Yager also points to lockdowns at the onset of the pandemic as an initial catalyst for growing the library’s digital collection, particularly leisure reading titles.

“We realized our digital collection just wasn’t where it needed to be to support our students,” she said. “With the library closed, they had no way to access leisure reading materials.”

Yager also cited Northeast’s growing distance learning program – half of its students are now online-only – as a driver in expanding its digital collection. A significant portion of the student population also lives in far away rural areas, and don’t have convenient access to Northeast’s sole physical library at its main campus or public library branches.

“We wanted to make sure they had access to the same resources as our students on campus,” she said.

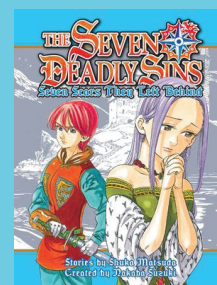
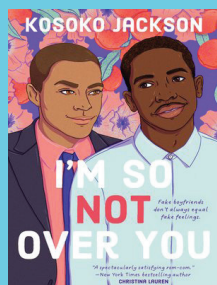
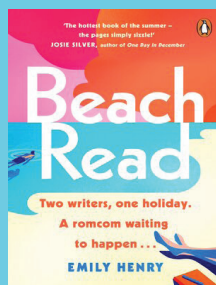
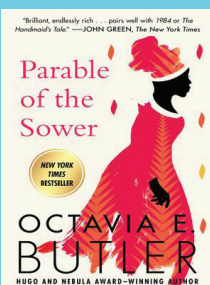
Yager sees supporting student mental health by, in part, providing a safe, inclusive space as a vital role of the library. Providing leisure reading resources that students can relate to and feel seen in is a key component of this.

“To us, I would say supporting the whole student is not just supporting them academically but supporting them to be successful in other areas of their lives,” she said.

That’s not to say leisure reading doesn’t contribute to academic success. Yager recalls a student who wanted to pursue nursing but struggled with low standardized test scores in reading. So, she and another librarian recommended books to help the student start reading for leisure. The plan worked, with the student improving her reading speed and vocabulary – and test scores – with the more she read.

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The Penguin Random House Library Marketing team identified titles that are igniting a curiosity and passion for learning, such as *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee and *The Body Is Not an Apology* by Sonya Renee Taylor. Whether sharing new fiction or revisiting classics, social media influencer recommendations are a big part of Gen Z and Millennial leisure reading as well, including *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler, *Beach Read* by Emily Henry, and *I’m So (Not) Over You* by Kosoko Jackson. Gaming and fandom are also impactful in leisure reading, as demonstrated in the series-based readership of Critical Role’s *Vox Machina Dungeons & Dragons* tie-in series, the graphic novel series *Lore Olympus* by Rachel Smythe, and the massively popular manga series *The Seven Deadly Sins* by Nakaba Suzuki.



"We were proud of her," Yager said.

Yager reports the library is buying significantly fewer physical titles, with its regular – and new – patrons making the shift to the digital collection. Audiobooks have proven especially popular.

"Everything we've needed has been available (through OverDrive)," she said. "I have been shocked at how many people want the audiobooks – that's been a huge hit."

Northeast students, faculty and staff access the college's OverDrive digital collection via the award-winning Libby app. Loved by millions of readers across the world, Libby enables users to read across devices, download titles for offline access, enjoy audiobooks in the car through Apple CarPlay, Android Auto or a Bluetooth connection, and send titles to a Kindle device (U.S. only).

"It's very user friendly," Yager said of Libby. "They usually don't have to have our help; it's so intuitive."

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Ellice Yager
Librarian, Northeast Mississippi Community College



New additions to the Northeast Mississippi Community College digital collection.

CONCLUSION

As evident by the invaluable perspective offered by the institutions profiled here, leisure reading is playing a critical role in how today's academic libraries are meeting students' evolving needs. Schools of all shapes and sizes are leveraging the game-changing benefits that digital collections offer and are turning to OverDrive Academic as a trusted partner to maximize impact and return on investment.