
■ At Issue

Film Society: Starting a Screening Series at a Community College

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Growing a media department with involved students is not just about enabling them to make their work, but to cultivate critical viewing and passionate film spectatorship by experiencing film in a public setting. A film screening series serves the entire campus by building community, both amongst media students and the larger college populace, but it also provides an opportunity for faculty to collaborate with other academic disciplines and community organizations. This paper will detail the steps for establishing a film society or screening series on campus.

Keywords: film screening, film society, clubs, community college, students

The power of cinema lies in its ability to shape our perceptions of the world around us, especially when we engage in meaningful dialogue about these films, but the communal film screening experience is being replaced by watching videos in the isolation of laptops and mobile devices. However, college campuses are an ideal place to use film for educational and community building purposes, where an academic panel discussion or roundtable might seem uninviting or boring to students, film screenings are a wonderful jumping-off point for discussions on issues that matter to the student body. A film screening series serves the entire campus, both amongst media students and the larger college populace, but it also provides an opportunity to collaborate with other academic disciplines and community organizations. This paper will detail the steps for establishing a film society or screening series on campus, specifically at a community college.

Background

For young people coming up in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s—future filmmakers, exhibitors, programmers, critics, academics, studio execs—the campus film society was an incubator. It was where writers learned to exhort or condemn, publishing programming notes or even their own magazines. It was where film lovers argued and proselytized, where they shaped their own taste and that of others,

programming with at most minimal input from a faculty advisor. (Pinkerton, 2017)

Public film screenings have long been a part of university life. The oldest campus film society was founded in 1935 at the University of Chicago, and for much of recent cinematic history “the most common alternative exhibition spaces were film societies and art house cine-clubs” (Zryd, 2011). On campus, students would encounter a variety of otherwise hard to find programming; among them were international films, socially conscious and politically challenging documentaries, and non-narrative experimental films. Students and filmmakers themselves, they relied on these screenings as an alternative to the local movie theater dominated by the typical Hollywood fare. Today, with films and media readily accessible on the internet, the height of campus film societies as a means of distributing maverick movies has likely come and gone, but some colleges are reviving their public screening in an effort to develop community and reinforce classroom instruction.

Growing a film department with involved students is not just about enabling them to make their work or read film criticism, colleges must also cultivate critical viewing and passionate film spectatorship. This is best achieved by experiencing film in a public setting where the audience directs their full attention to the screening and no mobile devices compete for their concentration. However, most educational institutes with a film society also have a Film Studies or Film Production program that provides a built-in audience of film lovers and enthusiasts. Community colleges or campuses that have only begun offering media courses can still see the benefit of organizing public film events. The Media and Digital Film Production students at the Bronx Community College (BCC) wanted to establish a film series of their own to bring together the student body through film while increasing awareness of student work and the media courses on campus. After assembling a group of students and a faculty advisor, we set out to serve BCC by presenting challenging screenings coupled with lively discussions.

A Mission

At Bronx Community College (BCC) there has been no official film society, but faculty and student clubs have hosted on-campus films for some time. After witnessing the popularity of these occasional film screenings, the BCC Film Society began as a collaborative effort between students and faculty in 2017. Structured as a club, students would lead the decision-making process, from programming to budgeting, with faculty and

administration serving to support their efforts. To begin with, we gathered together and asked basic questions about a screening series on our campus: Who is our audience? What films will serve our student body? What films will challenge them? Is a screening sufficient? How do we facilitate discussion about the films?

In order to determine the factors involved in establishing a film society, we researched a handful of other campus film screenings throughout the country. We found a wide variety of approaches. Some colleges ran film screenings as casual clubs, others charged admission and actively promoted screenings for the local community beyond students and faculty. Some colleges had genre-based screening series, like midnight movies of horror films, or foreign films. Some colleges had monthly screenings, others had weekly. Our students were pleased to find that most schools did not charge admission for screenings; for example, when Baylor University launched a free film society in 2014, they noted that “not every cinema buff can afford to buy DVDs of the movies he or she would like to see” (Hoover, 2015). BCC could relate.

Ironing out the details of programming would be the fun part. For our community college several things were immediately apparent about our mission as a film society: our student body would most likely not return to campus in the evening hours, and they would balk at being charged admission. Free daytime screenings were our goal. And, while we wanted to offer a film every week, this would be far too ambitious for a student-run organization with a quick turnover in the student body. After many drafts, we were able to distill our vision: “BCC Film Society Mission: Monthly film screenings of contemporary and cutting-edge films for the BCC community. Screenings are followed by a discussion with the filmmaker(s) or experts in the subject matter. No admission charged.”

Sample Film Society Mission Statements

Community College of Baltimore, Catonsville Campus:

Our mission is to gather students interested in the process of movie making and use the elements of cinematic arts to create independent/group films. Founded in 2012, CCBC Film Society has provided a great resource for anyone interested in film on the Catonsville Campus. From experienced filmmakers to curious beginners, Film Society offers a fun and exciting environment for anyone who wants to make movies. We are highly active on our Facebook page and group, so make sure to check us out for the latest updates!

Binghamton University:

Since 1965, Harpur Cinema has been seeking to bring to campus a range of significant films that in most cases would not be available to local audiences. Our program is international in scope, emphasizing foreign and independent films, as well as important films from the historical archive. All foreign films are shown in their original language with English subtitles.

Hillsdale College:

The purpose of the Hillsdale Film Society is to provide Hillsdale College students with the chance to view films of great cultural significance and artistic merit, whether through the script, score, directing, or filming.

We believe films are as important as great literature and as such, should be made available to students. As we read and discuss the “great books” here at Hillsdale College, so should we discuss the “great films.”

Building Community

. . .there are dozens of cities that have suffered from the loss of a brick-and-mortar meeting place for cinephiles, an absence that online commiseration can do little to replace. (Pinkerton, 2017)

Film screenings are pleasant on their own, but in order for them to offer an enriching educational and community building experience, screenings need to be accompanied with a discussion. Whenever possible, filmmakers should be brought in to discuss their work in person, and a student or faculty member should have prepared questions before opening up a Q&A with the audience. Many colleges record these interviews and post them on their YouTube channels or edit the highlights to promote their programs. When a filmmaker is not available, a guest expert or faculty member with expertise in the topic can also provide a lively debate. Librarian Katy Kelly at the University of Dayton describes how organizers can “reach out beyond the university.” For our Hispanic Heritage Month film series, as part of *Latino Americans: 500 Years of History*, we invited the director of media relations for our local minor league baseball team to introduce the documentary *¡Viva Baseball!*

This step of bringing filmmakers to campus has been particularly hard for students to accomplish. It will take some time to build the relationships, and budget, needed to host filmmakers. In the meantime, we have made some creative compromises that proved satisfactory. At one of our first screenings, the documentary *The Talk: Race in America*, we were

unable to bring the filmmaker to campus; however, one of the editors from the film recorded a brief introduction and invitation to discussion that we projected before the film. While it was disappointing not to have a live dialogue with the filmmakers, students were visibly excited by the on-screen acknowledgment of their film society. The filmmakers also provided us with thought-provoking discussion points to guide the question and answer session after the film. In this case, those materials were hardly necessary, as the film inspired many students to share their thoughts and opinions about the issues that directly reflected their own personal experiences, and a passionate post-screening conversation naturally took place. At the Showcase of Drone Films screening we were again unable to bring in the many filmmakers for the short films in the screening. We compromised by inviting the Media and Digital Film Production's drone technician and instructor to demonstrate aerial cinematography in the auditorium. The hands-on experience with equipment inspired enthusiastic interaction and inquiry.

Finally, people come together over food. Our film society is designated as a club, so while the students involved in programming believe in the educational role of the films, we also want this to be fun; therefore, we also provide free refreshments.

Logistics

Keep in mind that whether or not a fee is being charged for attendance, the public performance rights for the film must be secured. Since the guidelines surrounding public and private screenings of films are regulated by copyright law, most colleges will have a clear policy. The Emory University library has an in-depth Screening Policy page on their website that answers questions such as, "Why does my organization need to get permission to show this film?" and "When do you need permission, and when don't you need permission?" Campus administrators will appreciate a film society that abides by copyright guidelines.

Even though we hoped to host screenings for large groups, we were starting with a small band of committed students. Therefore, we were hesitant to meet in a cavernous theater that would draw attention to our small numbers and possibly deter post-screening discussions. From several suitable auditoriums and large classrooms, we chose a medium-sized space equipped with projectors on our campus. Our equipment requirements were simple, a computer and internet access, since many of the films we intended to watch were downloadable or available for streaming.

While pinning up posters around campus is an effective method of promotion, our team thought it best to take a wider, digital approach to marketing. Our goal is that all campus film screenings would be part of the BCC Film Society brand, so that the entire campus community would have a centralized place to find out about upcoming screenings. In order to achieve this, we set out to create a logo, website, social media pages, and poster templates.

Keeping with our mission to partner with other members of the campus community, we enlisted several design students to draft logos for the BCC Film Society.



Once a “look” was agreed upon, our team decided to create templates for marketing and promotion, rather than simply assigning the task to one student. Unlike a four-year college where students may live on campus, many community college students come and go at a rapid rate. Designing templates would allow new members of the BCC Film Society team to quickly create posters, programs, e-blasts and other marketing materials, without a steep learning curve.

In time, we hope to partner with faculty to program films that correspond with their courses and invite entire classes to screenings where professors will lead a Q&A, or to offer students an extra credit opportunity for writing a response paper. Another avenue for expansion that many

other colleges have developed is a student film festival, either showcasing student work or programmed by students.

Outcomes/Benefits

As the BCC Film Society developed, it became clear that there would not be a unifying programmatic theme, but rather, the interests and tastes of the students at the helm would dictate the film choices. Our founding group of students had a clear interest in social justice and issues of race in America. Out of the gate in October 2017, they were programming films like *The Talk: Race in America*, a PBS documentary described in the *Los Angeles Times* as being about “vital conversations taking place across the country—between law enforcement and the communities they serve, between activists and their allies, between grieving parents and a justice system often indifferent to their pain.” The post-screening conversations were opportunities to share stories and opinions that affected our students personally. The success of that screening led to the People of Color short films program. Student curator and BCC Film Society co-founder, Antonio Rodriguez,

pitched the idea of POC Shorts, a documentary series featuring short films by or about people of color. The series was specifically designed to engage with the wider BCC community. As the club grew, we were able to screen a wide variety of films that focused on race, gender identity, and social justice.

We continued with films in a similar vein for the first two years of the Film Society. Attendance fluctuated in large part to factors we had not originally considered, such as holiday weekends and midterm exams. Well-attended screens tended to be scheduled during academic lulls, far from deadlines or travel. We also saw an increase in audience size when we partnered with professors. Simply asking faculty to announce the film screenings in their classrooms boosted the number of people who came to the screenings, but far more effective were the professors who required attendance at the screening and written response from their students. These students engaged with the films and the post-screening discussions with curiosity and gusto. Surprisingly, the presence of the filmmaker or members of the production had little effect on drawing more audience members.

Being a two-year program, there is a quick turnaround in student membership and the Film Society student leadership is constantly changing. By 2019 the programming goals were completely new. Estefania Rivera, the newest BCC Film Society president, championed the idea of

programming films from their own favorite directors, so she began with Wes Anderson. Estefania chose his films because of her own personal connection to the work, specifically the way in which “his films covered themes of loss and tragedy with quirkiness and an overly stylized look that did not take away from the straightforward narrative that made for a good story.” What these screenings may have lacked in terms of promoting engagement on social justice issues they gained in the comradery of the students who gathered for a shared entertainment experience with popcorn and pizza and personal connection. Estefania went on to describe her overall experience:

Being part of the BCC Film Society gave me the opportunity to learn how to analyze films, to watch films that I either did not have the opportunity to watch before, or did not watch because it was outside of my scope of interest; it expanded my understanding of what makes a good film and allowed me to think of collaborations that could potentially provide students glimpses into subject matter they may not have access to and may want more knowledge on.

Conclusion

Creating a film screening series is an effective way to build community and invite meaningful participation in campus life. This is a particular challenge for community colleges who serve a busy student body made up of people with disparate needs and identities: commuters, immigrants, full-time workers, nontraditional students, or retirees. Additionally, it can be an easy goal to accomplish.

The fate of the campus film society shows that it doesn’t take long to destroy a tradition—but its history shows it doesn’t take such a very long time to make one. (Pinkerton, 2017)

Summary of Steps:

1. Gather your team (students? faculty?).
2. Compose a mission statement.
3. Iron out logistics (location, equipment, schedule, etc.).
4. Create a program (choose your films!).
5. Distribute promotional materials (logo, print, social media, web, and announcements).
6. Make plans to expand (a comprehensive website? documenting live Q&As with filmmaker? a film festival?).

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