

CASE STUDY: TRUSTING PASSIVE PROGRAMMING, ONE SMALL STEP AT ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

Overview



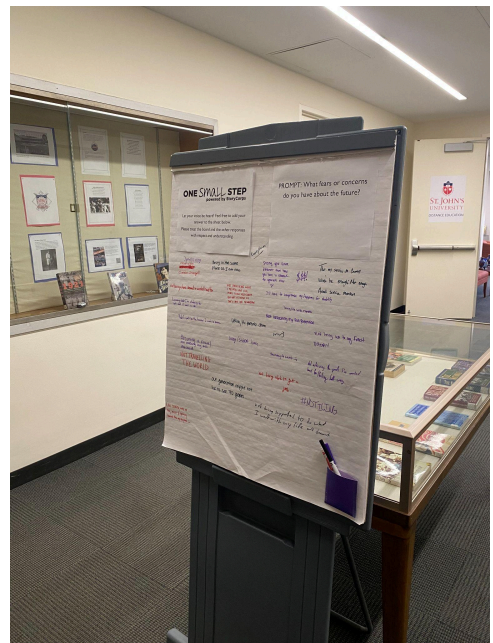
At St. John's University Libraries in Queens, New York, librarian Emma Quinn was looking for ways to support student connection in a campus environment where time is scarce and schedules are fragmented. As a commuter school serving a highly diverse student population, many students move quickly between classes, jobs, family responsibilities, and community commitments. Gathering people in the same room at the same time can be difficult, even when there is clear interest.

When Emma joined the One Small Step Libraries Initiative, she was drawn to the Community Response Board as a way to meet students where they already were. Rather than asking for long commitments or formal attendance, the board invited brief moments of reflection in a high traffic space. "I know from experience that our students are very busy," Emma said. "They are often passing through, and it can be difficult to get a lot of people in the room at the same time."

She was also curious to test a common assumption she had heard from other librarians. "I've talked to seasoned librarians too, and they've been like, well, they don't get as much engagement," she said of passive programming. "But I feel like this community response board is proving that not right."

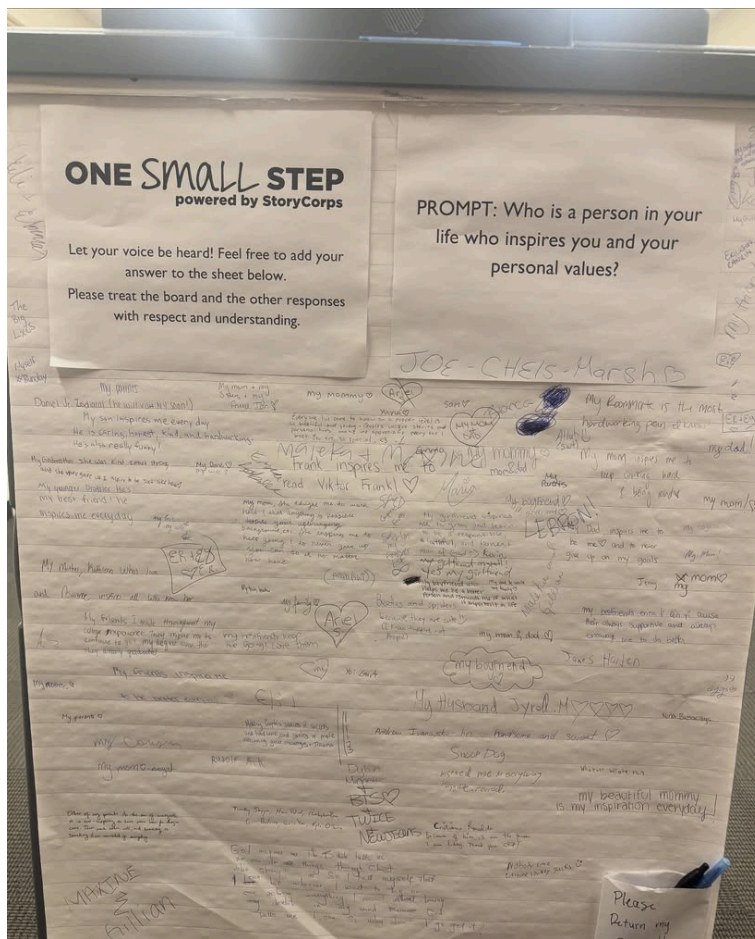
Approach

Emma implemented a One Small Step Community Response Board in a central area of the library using an easel pad, markers, and rotating prompts drawn from the OSS Great Question Bank. The setup was intentionally simple and low cost, with total expenses under



ten dollars. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and students were free to write, read, or move on without explanation.

The board ran in two phases, from April to May and again from October through December 2025. Over that period, over two hundred responses were collected. Emma updated prompts regularly and noticed that different questions produced different tones. Lighter prompts generated humor and playfulness, while questions about fear, the future, or disagreement elicited longer and more vulnerable responses.



One of the most striking aspects of the board was how contrasting perspectives appeared side by side. Emma recalled seeing one response to a prompt about the future that read, “I’m not worried because Jesus protects me in all things,” next to another that said, “I’m very worried because I’m a queer person and I’m scared for my life and safety.” For Emma, the proximity mattered. “These are two different perspectives,” she said, “but on the personal level, they’re allowed to exist next to each other.”

She chose to trust students with that openness. While she reviewed responses, her edits were minimal, limited to removing profanity when necessary. “I was surprised by how well the students were

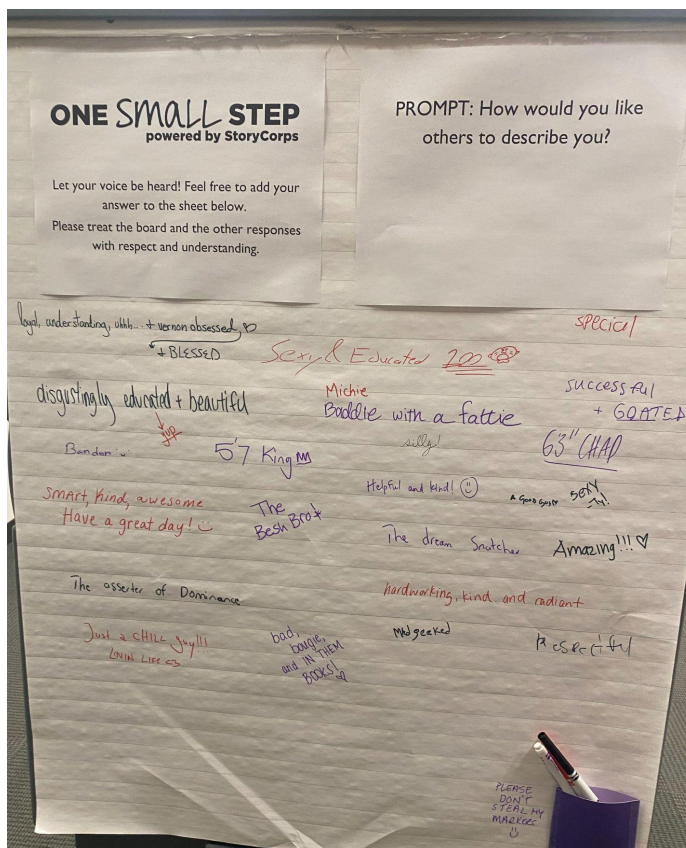
able to kind of navigate the line,” she said. “No one wrote anything intentionally inflammatory or bullying. Maybe I had been underestimating the students and their ability to deal with these issues.”

What Students Revealed

The responses on the board offered a window into student concerns that rarely surface in formal settings. Emma noticed how broad and layered the worries were. Students wrote about climate change and politics, about food insecurity and financial stress, about failing out of their programs and letting their families down. “There’s so much about our students that we do not get to know,” she reflected, “when we’re acting as the professional in the room.”

Some responses spoke directly to relationships and disagreement. When asked whether there were people in their lives they could comfortably disagree with, one student wrote, “My friend Emmy, we always go into a conversation open minded and try to understand things from each other’s point of view.” Another shared, “My boyfriend. Three years of dating teaches you the importance of listening.”

Others were playful or defiant. When asked to describe how others would describe them, students wrote “Disgustingly educated and beautiful.” “Bad, bougie, and IN THEM BOOKS!” Together, the responses painted a picture of students who were thoughtful, humorous, and deeply engaged.



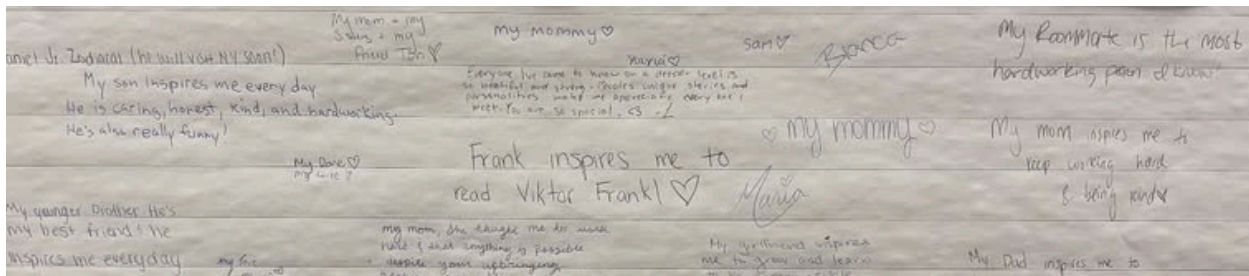
Emma was careful not to reduce the impact to numbers alone. “You can say there are two hundred responses,” she said, “but that doesn’t count the people who stop and read it, or the people who go home and talk about it.”

Beyond the Board

Faculty and staff became an unexpected audience. Colleagues told Emma they stopped by the board daily to see what students were writing. “When they hear that it’s my board,” she said, “they’re like, oh my gosh, I stop there every day. I can’t believe what the students are writing.” The board became a quiet gathering point, not just for participation, but for observation and reflection.

Alongside the board, Emma participated in OSS trainings, including the active listening workshop. “That was the most helpful training we did,” she said. Seeing active listening practiced in real time helped her imagine how similar work could translate to her campus, even if in person workshops would take longer to organize.

She also brought conversation cards to a student group she meets with regularly. Their response was immediate. “They were like, this is so cool. We should do this every week,” she said, laughing. Although coordinating larger events proved challenging, the interest confirmed for her that the desire for deeper conversation was already there.



What Changed

Emma came away with a stronger belief in trusting students and in the value of quiet, ongoing engagement. “We talk a lot about retention numbers,” she said. “And I’m like, I don’t know if the numbers matter so much as the individual students.” For her, the board demonstrated how connection and being seen can matter just as much as formal interventions.

She continues to run the response board and plans to keep it going as long as students are using it. “I just started a new one yesterday,” she said. “I’ll do it as long as people are using it.” Looking ahead, she hopes to partner with campus groups like the LGBTQ+ Center or Residential Life to host workshops and possibly train students as dialogue ambassadors.

For Emma, One Small Step offered both tools and affirmation. “I had a great time,” she said. “I feel like I learned a lot. I have all kinds of tools in my tool belt.” Her experience shows how passive programming, when designed with trust and care, can create space for connection in ways that are subtle, powerful, and lasting.

This case study highlights programs adapted from One Small Step toolkits. Visit diy.takeonesmallstep.org to explore the tools.