

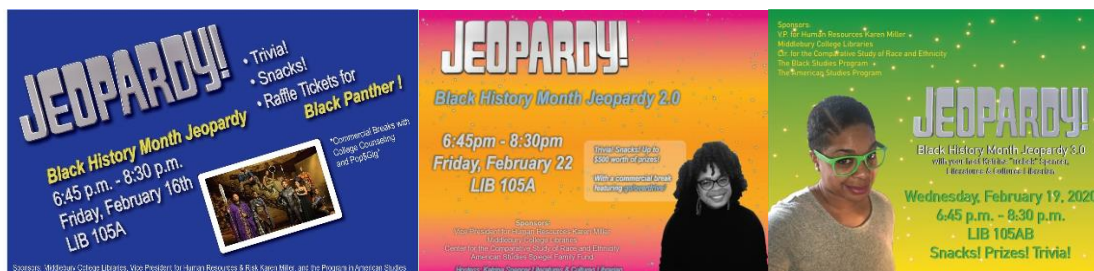
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Katrina Spencer is the Librarian for African-American and African Studies at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. In her previous role as the Literatures & Cultures Librarian at Middlebury College in Vermont, where she was liaison to the multicultural student center for three years, she developed an annual, competitive trivia event called Black History Month Jeopardy, which took place each February. See bit.ly/bhmjeopardy for the electronic boards used in 2018, 2019 and 2020. See bit.ly/bhmjeopardyphotos pictures from each year's events. See Katrina's personal website, www.katleespe.com, for more information on her career.

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Abstract: Many small towns in predominantly white spaces offer rather few opportunities to celebrate the cultural life and contributions of underrepresented groups in society. Libraries may have the capacity to practice anti-racist methodologies and forge strong bonds with underrepresented groups by supporting and hosting culturally affirming programming. Black History Month Jeopardy was a success every February in Middlebury, Vermont for three years where Librarian Katrina Spencer arranged for contestants to be rewarded for their knowledge about the Black diaspora. The article below offers a step-by-step guide on how to plan a similar event. Tips regarding scheduling, funding, and prizes are all included.

Black History Month Jeopardy at a PWI*: A How-To
by Katrina Spencer



I'm an academic librarian who works on college/university campuses. This means that my services are designed to meet the needs of students, faculty, staff, and community members in an active and dynamic learning environment. Middlebury College, where I hosted the Black History Month Jeopardy event (bit.ly/bhmjeopardy) for three years, is not only a predominantly white institution* (PWI) in a rural community, it is also the smallest of the institutions I've worked for, by a factor of ten. While its campus community is intimate, engaged, and shaped, in theory, to celebrate knowledge, like other institutions of higher education, it is a hub of activity with overscheduled people and countless competitions for their attention. So, for Black History Month Jeopardy, as with any event, it's good to know why you're organizing it and for whom. In Vermont in general, there are few public opportunities to celebrate Black cultures. This challenge may manifest itself differently in Atlanta, Detroit, Washington, D.C., and places like Oakland, California that have significant African American and Black populations. The town of Middlebury's population, however, is overwhelmingly white and the students the college is recruiting are increasingly diverse. So, as an explicit reminder, when we increase diversity within the student body within higher ed, we must also increase the diversity of the faculty, the staff-- including mental health practitioners-- the curricula, and the programming. This event, hosted annually, was one of the small ways I responded to my own call: to make the cultural life of the place where I resided reflect the people, even (especially) the underrepresented, who were there.

Before I take you through a step-by-step how-to guide for shaping your own competitive trivia event like this one during a cultural heritage month, let me tell you why this one made for excellent marketing for the library. In some communities, libraries may not be seen as welcoming spaces for Black people. Historically, they have been centers of exclusion that actively practiced segregationist policies. See [Ronald McNair's childhood story](#). As recently as 2019, libraries have been spaces where Black bodies have been profiled, policed, excessively scrutinized, and vilified. See the incident between a Black student and the police at [Barnard College](#). And libraries have been sites where white supremacists have distributed literature in the effort to promote hate. See this [news article from Middlebury College](#). These stories are not imaginary instances of bias; they are real manifestations of discrimination that communicate to Black people "We don't want you here. You don't belong." These are the generations of messaging we must attempt to counter when we design our spaces and our programming. The Black History Month Jeopardy event offers an oppositional narrative: it specifically invites Black people into the library to acknowledge, highlight, and celebrate our contributions to society. And we need an equal number of messages of inclusion, if not more, to drown out the many of exclusion we have accumulated throughout the history of the United States. This is one way to

do it. You will also note that the prizes selected and awarded during the event gave winners more opportunities to know and use library resources that reflect Black cultural contributions. In these ways, and many others year round, the library can continually tread the trail of becoming a proactive practitioner of anti-racism.

Quite a bit of planning goes into making this very worthy event a success. I minimally recommend a head start of six weeks for an organizer, and more if you're a new employee at an institution whose protocols, personnel, and/or student body are unknown to you. Testing technology, reserving rooms and props, and requesting funds all require time, intentionality, and frequently teamwork. The organizer must ask for collaboration from a variety of people and anticipate that some responses may be slow to arrive and/or require problem solving. So the experienced event organizer will schedule significant margins of safety or "cushioning" time that will allow them to address unexpected challenges that arise. That is, allot more time than you think you'll need. While preparing for an event like this one, you will soon notice that there are too many jobs for any one person to carry out. That is, just as is the case with long-time Jeopardy! host Alex Trebek, it is not advisable that the person who is hosting also be the person who is keeping track of points. Likewise, the person who is serving as a judge evaluating ambiguous answers for their acceptability should not also be responsible for making sure that used clues are updated to show they have expired. And the person who is documenting the event for your community with photographs may have too much to do if they are also serving snacks, for example. So, assembling a reliable and enthusiastic team is strongly recommended. Moreover, if these people are getting paid to participate, compensation may be an effective incentive for them to carry out their roles as agreed upon. Regular meetings with the team before the event facilitate communication.

Choosing the date of the event is no small task. While there were approximately 2,500 students at the residential, liberal arts campus where I worked, a relatively small number when we think of large and sometimes bloated enrollments at state schools, social calendars were packed and I had to make sure that Black History Month Jeopardy was not competing with major events were happening on the same evening. For example, there was the annual Posse Plus Retreat in February and the campus tradition called "Carnival" that regularly occurred during that period, too. I had to plan around them as their target audiences had major overlap with the same groups whose attendance I was trying to recruit. I always hosted my event in the evening, after the cafeteria's dinner hours as well, so no one would have to choose between food and fun. Not without exception, at the Middlebury College campus, classes were often in session between 8:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. So scheduling this extracurricular event outside of those hours was essential. When you schedule an event on your campus and/or within your library/institution, think about who you are trying to attract and their availability. Again, because students at Middlebury were residential, making their way to the library from the cafeteria or a dorm room was not a burdensome undertaking. However, if the community members you are trying to attract are commuters, working professionals, and/or parents, scheduling the event during the day and/or making the invitation explicitly family-friendly will be important.

Another good reason for starting the planning for Black History Month Jeopardy early has to do with budgeting. On the campus where I worked, departmental and program budgets were most full at the beginning of the academic year in August or September. So, requesting funds for an event happening in February gave department and program chairs five to six months of notice as they made their fiscal decisions about becoming sponsors for the event. Over the years at Middlebury, sponsors included the Anderson Freeman Resource Center (the multicultural student center), the Black Studies Program, the Center for the Comparative Study of Race & Ethnicity, the Department of Political Science, the Libraries, the Program in American Studies, and the Vice President for Human Resources. The cost of the programming ranged between \$600 and \$1,200 each year. Given the number of generous sponsors, no single donation ever exceeded \$250. So, lobbying for funds from a diverse array of sources allows the general pot of money to grow without implying an excessive expense for any particular donor. Moreover, the event's profile is broader as a variety of sponsors can promote the event with, to, and for their various constituent groups. Donated funds at Middlebury went towards prizes, many of which were print books by authors from the Black diaspora or devices that facilitated listening to the audiobooks within the library's collection, snacks, and props like noisemakers. Middlebury College is a well endowed institution and requests for funds were often met with warm and even prompt approval. However, this won't be the case everywhere. And, even though we enjoyed the abundance of funds, there were still detail-oriented, bureaucratic protocols involving signatures, receipts, and reimbursements that had to be followed. Plan accordingly.

What's important to remember when choosing prizes, aside from the cost, is who you are trying to motivate to engage. In my case, my target audience was typically college students aged 17-22 who were often people of color. One approach in choosing prizes they would want was trying to remain thematic by offering books by Black authors. Another was providing these students with luxuries that they might not readily indulge in otherwise. When I was able to combine both of these lenses, a happy nexus occurred. For example, Michelle Obama's *Becoming* was a timely prize in early 2019, just months after the book's release. Also, however, offering noise-cancelling headphones and/or Bluetooth speakers in an effort to encourage use of our newly curated audiobook collection, which included the former first lady's work, was perhaps even more clever. As Black History Month Jeopardy is designed to promote and celebrate a cultural heritage month, the prizes chosen acknowledged the rich contributions that a variety of authors from the Black diaspora had made to cultural life. The diverse fields these authors touched included academia, anthropology, art, astrophysics, athletics, comedy, fashion, journalism, literature, politics, rhetoric, television, theater, and film. Note that the authors, too, listed below, hailed not only from the 20th and the 21st centuries, but also from Canada, England, Haiti, Nigeria, South Africa, and the United States. So, the greats of the past were honored and new voices were also acknowledged. In the United States, too often, Black history is conceived of too narrowly, confined to the eras of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The starred (*) authors below are living authors whose inclusion asserts that Black history has a contemporary pulse. Moreover, including authors from around the world

underscored the fact that Blackness is a global discourse that goes beyond the contiguous 48 states.

- *The 1619 Project*, Nikole Hannah-Jones*
- *All About Love*, bell hooks*
- *All American Boys*, Jason Reynolds*
- *An American Marriage*, Tayari Jones*
- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Alex Haley
- *Becoming*, Michelle Obama*
- *Black Enough*, Ibi Zoboi*
- *Black Light: Kehinde Wiley*, Kehinde Wiley*
- *The Book of Negroes*, Lawrence Hill*
- *Born A Crime*, Trevor Noah*
- *The Darkest Child*, Delores Phillips
- *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama*
- *Everyday Is For The Thief*, Teju Cole*
- *Everything Inside*, Edwidge Danticat*
- *GuRu*, RuPaul*
- *Heads of the Colored People*, Nafissa Thompson-Spires*
- *How Not To Get Shot: And Other Advice from White People*, D. L. Hughley*
- *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic*, Kehinde Wiley*
- *The Last Black Unicorn*, Tiffany Haddish*
- *Letter from an Astrophysicist*, Neil deGrasse Tyson*
- *The Mamba Mentality: How I Play*, Kobe Bryant
- *Meaty*, Samantha Irby*
- *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith*
- *The Poet X*, Elizabeth Acevedo*
- *Redefining Realness*, Janet Mock*
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston
- *The Water Dancer*, Ta-Nehisi Coates*
- *We're Going To Need More Wine*, Gabrielle Union*

For clarity's sake, grand prizes like gift cards, noise-cancelling headphones, and Bluetooth speakers were reserved for six contestants paired in three teams. However, several trivia questions were posed to the attending audience, making members eligible to win the books listed above and helping to sustain engagement throughout the multiple rounds of clues.

While the prizes are a significant draw for the contestants and the audience, the clues are the indisputable heart of the game. There is no Jeopardy without clues. The person/people writing the clues must group the clues into thematic categories, and, if they follow the classic style of the game, they will be listed in ascending order of difficulty: the higher the point value, the more difficult the clue. Some of the categories I used included 90s sitcoms, the Caribbean, Drag Queens, hairstyles, journalists, [The Librarian Is In](#) (library materials reviewed in a campus newspaper column), The Motherland (Africa), Olympians, The Queen Bee (Beyoncé Knowles), quotable quotes, scandals, slang, song lyrics, and titles within the local audiobook collection.

See all 40 categories on slides 8 and 9 at bit.ly/bhmjeopardy. Daily Doubles offered contestants the opportunity to double their point value by placing a bet, and Final Jeopardy, once the theme was revealed, allowed contestants to risk their earnings on a final clue. I strongly recommend watching/re-watching a few episodes of Alex Trebek's Jeopardy!, available on Netflix and limitedly on YouTube, before constructing the game *and* a partial rehearsal of the event. While many North Americans have been watching this show for years, passive engagement as a viewer and active engagement as a host/hostess is quite different. A host/hostess must lead and control the sequencing of the event, prompt contestants during their turns, monitor point deductions and wagers, penalize contestants for failing to respond to clues in the form of a question, defer to judges for the acceptability of some answers, determine which contestant has rung in first in response to a clue, and indicate how much time a contestant should be given to respond to a clue. Therefore, hosting comes with a high degree of responsibility and vigilance most of us haven't encountered if we have not emceed an event in the past.

Equal in importance to the careful construction of inclusive clues is learning to expertly navigate the technology in the reserved room well in advance of the event. It is essential to the event's success. As we have seen with Alex Trebek's Jeopardy!, an electronic board is illuminated within a space that allows contestants to read the clues that are projected on them. I used the free, electronic, PowerPoint-based template found at bit.ly/jeopardyslidedeck to house and present my clues. After making a copy of the slide deck, you will note that each slide is sensitively pre-programmed to connect clues to their correct responses and provides the user a method to return to the board's home. However, if there is an automatic method to reveal that a clue has already been used and has expired, I did not discover it. Thankfully, I was lucky enough to have a faculty member in attendance who placed post-it notes over expired clues for each round of the game. Warning: I must emphasize the importance of testing each clue on the game board well in advance of the game. If one link is off, it can "break" the sequencing of the game. Moreover, the host's/hostess' job is to read the clues aloud. To make the event as accessible as possible to as many people as possible, provide the host/hostess with a microphone. Relying on the host/hostess to adequately project his/her/their voice is insufficient. Playing the Jeopardy! theme song at any point during the game is optional, but it does require a sound check if you wish to include it. During Final Jeopardy, it was fun when the audience hummed the theme in unison for the final countdown. While the professionals have hand-held buzzers to signal their readiness to respond to a clue, bells and/or whistles may be sufficient, reusable, and certainly more affordable.

Now that I have named and detailed many of the major considerations that must come into play in organizing Black History Month Jeopardy, let me state that the success of these events was largely predicated upon establishing relationships of trust with the people I was trying to reach. I was working at Middlebury College for a year before I even attempted to approach this idea. That time gave me the opportunity to get to know my students in several contexts within and outside of the library, as a librarian, but more importantly, as a human. It was only after I attended their socials, dance performances, retreat, and poetry readings, after I received them and their concerns in my office, and after I showed myself to be a political peer that I was able to extend an invitation with hopes that they might show up. In other words, I

demonstrated care for my students as whole people and in return I earned their attention. Moreover, it was only after I worked with a student to develop advertising flyers and posted them, emailed PDFs, and went on a relentless word of mouth campaign to promote these events that I won attendees. So while I can encourage readers here to make sure that their contestants are paired with their peers, yielding six competitors, as opposed to a traditional three; while I can encourage the host/hostess to throw clues out to the audience, allowing those attendees to compete for prizes, too; and while I can encourage you to create a round of Jeopardy for faculty/staff so the professionals can get in on the fun, too, no other piece of advice will exceed the importance of first making yourself a cherished member of the community you serve.

To recap, the reason why we do this is to affirm a community that has long been neglected, unduly ostracized, and prevented from enjoying basic access to the rights granted to the broader public in our society. Reparations for generations of injustice for Black peoples are long overdue and must be explicit, public, and standard. The wealth and relative success of this nation was built on the backs of enslaved persons and we still enjoy the immense profits that resulted from their suffering and oppression. The least we can do is attempt to acknowledge that their efforts have led us to great power, influence, and stability. Black History Month Jeopardy is an opportunity for communal learning, pride, and the literal prizing of knowledge concerning the Black diaspora. An event like this one is especially salient at predominantly white institutions where the curriculum will, without question, centrally include the likes of Curie, Darwin, Descartes, Dickinson, Locke, Robespierre, and Shakespeare but will consider the works of Achebe, Césaire, Crenshaw, Douglass, Lorde, Morrison, and Soyinka peripheral and optional. In places where the curriculum remains colonized, irrevocably white, and insistently European, Black History Month Jeopardy grants us an alternative epistemology. And, in addition to all the political reasons and impetuses for hosting this game, for Asian Americans, Blacks, Indigenous, and Latinx alike, when well planned, it is quite fun.

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