

Booksellers Hit the Books

By Alex Green | Sep 03, 2021



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In 2019, Jane Estes completed a course for new bookstore owners, and along with nine partners, she opened Lark & Owl Booksellers in Georgetown, Tex. Then she encountered a problem common to other booksellers in America—few resources exist to help established booksellers learn and develop the extensive

professional skills required to succeed in business.

Over time, Estes became increasingly concerned that the store's author event series could not grow unless she gained a deeper understanding of the intricacies of event management. "I knew that we did not have our processes up to the level that I knew we would need," Estes says. "There were too many variables I was worried about. I didn't know all the ways of getting the data we needed to collect."

Many booksellers have turned to private consultants before opening their stores, but for decades, established booksellers like Estes have had to rely on the age-old way of acquiring new skills while running their businesses. They asked other booksellers with more experience for help and advice. The results can be mixed, with booksellers nationwide struggling to develop best practices that will help retain staff, boost sales, and operate as efficiently as possible.

This August, Estes completed her first class in a new program intended to change the way booksellers learn the skills to run a successful business. She was one of 25 students to complete an eight-month course offered by the online Professional Bookseller Certification Program, a collegiate-like initiative intended to provide the nation's booksellers with rigorous and robust continuing education. "I was thrilled to sign up for it," Estes says of the event management course that launched in mid-January. More than two dozen booksellers spent two Sundays a month for eight months studying with four instructors, all experienced independent booksellers.

The certification program is the result of years of planning and development by founder Eileen Dengler, who has more than four decades of experience in the book trade and is currently executive director of the New Atlantic Independent Booksellers Association.

"It is humbling how hard it is to run an independent bookstore," Dengler says. The limitations of conference workshops and on-the-job training heightened her belief that an intensive educational program for professional booksellers is needed. Launching such an initiative was initially challenging. Few booksellers have the resources to attend an intensive in-person retreat, and most were also unfamiliar with remote learning tools. All of that changed when the Covid-19 pandemic spurred an embrace of online meeting technology, including among booksellers, and with that shift, Dengler has been able to create a school for booksellers that they can attend without leaving their stores. "We can reach so many more people with very in-depth information, which is why these classes go on for eight months," Dengler says. "We're not skimming the surface. We're going deep."

Along with the event management course, Dengler and her faculty are developing classes on store operations, basic bookselling, staff and human resources, and a career fast-track module intended for booksellers looking for a long-term career in bookselling. A course on inventory management began in July. The others will open for enrollment beginning in 2022. Booksellers who complete five courses will receive a Professional Bookseller certificate that recognizes their comprehensive learning. Each course is coordinated by a dean, with various instructors who teach specific classes within each course based on their expertise within the subject area.

Seeing a career in bookselling

Among those who believe bookselling is their future is Christina Marroquin, book buyer at Lark & Owl. Marroquin joined the staff after five years at nearby Book People, in Austin, Tex., where she worked as an event and marketing coordinator. To her surprise, when she started at Lark & Owl in early 2021, Marroquin discovered that Jane Estes had reserved a spot for an employee to take the certification program's second course—an intensive class on inventory management—in the hope that the new buyer might be excited to get professional training. Marroquin leaped at the chance. "I have the marketing and events experience, but I don't have the buyer experience," she says. A few weeks into the course, she has been learning about cost of goods, buying through Edelweiss, and working with the store's point of sale system. Among her 50 classmates are longtime bookstore owners, experienced buyers looking to hone their skills, and people who, like her, are new to the role. Along with class meetings and instructor office hours, the booksellers have a Facebook group where they review assignments and support one another.

All of the class homework is based on each classmate's store's actual operations, and Marroquin says her confidence has already increased. On one assignment, she had to evaluate two years of cost of goods in the store and then set goals and concrete steps based on her analysis. "I had zero confidence that I was doing the math correctly," she says. When she got the homework back, the instructor agreed entirely with her analysis and proposed approach. "It makes it a lot easier to know that you can do it," she says. "It's not intuitive for anybody. Nobody is born knowing how to open a bookstore and be successful with it. So it's been very helpful so far."

The practical design of the curriculum and homework is the result of hours of preparation by course instructors, and no small amount of personal experience. One of Marroquin's instructors, Jill Hendrix—who serves as dean of the 10-person inventory faculty—first began thinking about how to teach inventory management when she tried to train her husband in how to do book buying for Fiction Addiction, her bookstore in Greenville, S.C. "I realized that I could do the

buying, but I couldn't figure out how to train. It's years' worth of knowledge, and every time you go to a meeting or a seminar, you pick up a little trick here, or a little tip there. Then things change," she says. "But there wasn't really a comprehensive place that you could go to, with resources, to train a new buyer."

Through the certification program, Hendrix and her instructors are now developing those resources. The course begins with core concepts before expanding to touch the entirety of the buying process, from preparing for meetings with sales reps to communicating with fellow booksellers about placement of titles in the store. If they do complete the course, their final project will be a plan, based on their own store's existing practices, that they can immediately put to use.

Hendrix says she is hopeful that the skills in the inventory management course will help booksellers feel less overwhelmed, especially when they have multiple jobs in the store. "Being a buyer is exhausting," she says. "There are so many titles. There's so much information coming out to you. It never ends. And a lot of our students, like myself, are not just buyers. They do other things in the store. They're the owner, maybe they're the event manager."

In designing the course, Hendrix says she tried to develop methods that also respect the fact that there are many different ways that booksellers can approach buying. "What we're trying to do is give people best practices for the situation they're in," she says. "What we tell people is, there's not one right or wrong way to buy, but there are questions that you need to know the answers to. What those answers are will determine how you buy, and if you don't even know the questions, you haven't been answering them and you have a problem. If you don't know what your criteria are, if you don't know what your goals are, you're in real trouble."

As a student, Marroquin says the impact of the course goes beyond day-to-day skills. "When I applied for this job, I was just taking a shot in the dark," she says. "I never thought somebody who has five years of bookstore experience would be ready to do a buyer position." Now, she says, she can envision a career in bookselling. "It makes me feel more confident that it's something viable," she says. "You're not just buying books. There's so much more to it that makes it feel more like a career. This is something for the long haul."

Industry buy-in

The certification program immediately caught the attention of Heather Duncan, a former bookseller and now the executive director of the Mountains and Plains Independent Booksellers Association. Duncan and her board appropriated \$5,000 in awards to cover the tuition for booksellers in their region, so long as students successfully complete the class. Costs are \$100–\$250 per course. Lark & Owl is among the scholarship recipients.

"What we've just gone through as an industry, in this traumatic time with Covid-19, has really opened stores' eyes to the need to have experience with real business practices, and to really understand what they're doing," Duncan says. "The fact that the booksellers are doing the teaching, as opposed to bringing in some retail experts from out of the industry, makes a lot of difference—because no matter how much you might say otherwise, selling books is not the same as any other retail."

In some ways, Duncan says, the certification program is a return to the bookselling school that was a focus of operations for the American Booksellers Association in the 1990s, when the organization acquired a large property in Westchester County, N.Y., with the goal of creating a school for booksellers. While the ABA discontinued those efforts in the early 2000s, Anna Thorn, now a certification program instructor, points out that similar efforts continued in some European countries, where formal education of this kind is more common. Thorn says the new program will bring American bookselling in line with booksellers' European counterparts, while still respecting the unique character of each store. "A lot of booksellers want to open a store because they love books and bookstores, not because they want a small business, which I think is great," she says. "But these are the skills that a lot of booksellers and store owners aren't bringing naturally to the table. So just giving them the basics is important. I think that's the biggest foundational thing."

The program's first two courses were at maximum enrollment, and Dengler is now poised to launch other modules over the next two years. She plans to have the program become independent of NAIBA, which provided the initial support to develop it, but will not be the long-term owner of it. The future success of the initiative now depends on garnering financial support from publishers.

Dengler jokes that developing the programs and paying instructors costs a lot “in bookselling dollars, not Wall Street dollars.” But, she adds, the blunt reality is that bookselling is complex in large part because of forces beyond booksellers' control. “Publishers have created an industry for the independent booksellers that has to be navigated. We need their support in teaching booksellers how to do this properly,” she says. In return, she sees the potential for increased sales and greater stability for one of the industry's most essential bookselling channels for many years ahead.

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