



Creating Common Ground: Common Reading and the First Year of College

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The practice of assigning incoming students “common reading”—asking them to read the same book before they arrive on campus—has gained popularity in recent years as colleges and universities have sought new ways to improve the first-year experience. Like similar public reading initiatives sponsored by cities, libraries, and television and radio shows, campus common reading programs rest on a simple idea: that reading the same book brings people closer together as a community by creating common ground for discussion.

For the faculty and administrators who design orientation activities and first-year programs, this emphasis on building community has made common reading especially appealing. Assigning a book during the summer gives incoming students, who often come from very different backgrounds, a shared experience. At the same time, moderated discussions of the reading can bring the diversity of student viewpoints to the fore and provide an occasion for modeling the intellectual engagement with different ideas that is expected in college.

Yet although common reading programs share similar educational goals, the kinds of practices developed to support those goals vary widely from campus to campus. All students read the same book before arriving on campus—then what? Which practices of common reading programs are most effective? And what role does common reading play in larger, systematic efforts to create a unified experience for first-year students?

Key Elements of Common Reading Programs

A brief survey of campus Web sites shows that almost all common reading programs have been integrated into new-student orientations; most, in fact, focus primarily or exclusively on the orientation period. Drawing on students’ shared experience of the reading, these programs aim to ease the transition to college.

Small-group discussion is the cornerstone of the majority of common reading programs. At some point during orientation, most campuses divide new students into discussion groups, which typically are facilitated by volunteer faculty or staff. The content of group discussions depends upon the selected book, of course, but often the campus committees responsible for book selection intentionally choose common readings that broach issues they want to address during orientation. Many campuses pick books that enable discussion of U.S. and global diversity. For example, Albion College, according to its Web site, uses common reading to “begin student understanding of differences” and “provide an entry for students into the ideas of global citizenship.” Other popular themes, like “rites of passage” or “fitting in,” are chosen for their relevance to the period of transition in which new college students find themselves.

Some campuses seek to enrich orientation discussions by deepening students’ engagement with the reading process during the summer. Temple University is one of the many institutions that give students study questions to consider as they read. Other institutions, like

Ball State University, host online forums where students can begin discussion of the reading before they arrive on campus. Some schools encourage students to write about the reading by holding a contest for the best new student essay (as Northern Arizona University does) or require students to write an essay about the book for an introductory course (as Otterbein College does).

Common reading programs also supplement small-group discussions with other orientation activities. Campuses sometimes introduce new students to library research by showing them how to locate resources related to the common reading, its author, and the issues it raises. Cultural events are another feature of many programs: films, performances, panel discussions, or exhibits related to the book may be part of orientation or part of first-year cocurricular programming. Author visits are particularly popular as the “culminating event” of such programming, and some schools make a point of selecting a book written by a living author who is willing to deliver a talk, reading, or lecture series on campus.

In addition to contributing to a sense of campus community, such orientation activities can communicate valuable messages to new students. According to Jodi Levine Laufgraben, associate vice provost at Temple University and author of *Common Reading Programs: Going Beyond the Book* (a monograph published this year by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition), well-planned common reading programs signal “the importance of reading in college” and of “discussion and

respect for diverse viewpoints.” More broadly, she says, activities like small-group discussion satisfy “the desire to have an academic component to orientation,” which often otherwise focuses exclusively on student life. In this sense, common reading programs—even when they exist solely as a part of orientation—can give students an early taste of academic life and set the tone for the first year of college.

From Orientation to the First Year

Campus common reading programs diverge significantly in their approach to the regular academic year. Some programs conclude entirely at the end of orientation, or offer only a few final cocurricular events during the fall, while others partially or fully integrate the reading into the first year.

Among campuses that seek to continue conversations about the reading beyond orientation, most encourage but do not require faculty to weave the reading into fall courses. This approach, because it leaves decisions about if and how a book will be used to individual faculty members, has the advantage of being easy to implement. It is most likely to be effective when campuses offer discussion guides or workshops to help faculty integrate the common reading into their classes. Baruch College, for example, provides faculty with a range of materials related to the reading—including general study questions as well as sample writing assignments, possible cross-curricular activities, and suggested further reading.

The danger of relying upon individual classes to extend discussion of the common reading is that, from a student’s perspective,

such an approach may appear uncoordinated. Colleen Boff, the librarian for Bowling Green State University’s First-Year Experience, notes that this approach creates “potential for redundancy” between classes; it also leaves open the possibility that some students will never encounter the reading again after orientation.

Such problems can be at least partially addressed by improving communication among faculty and with students. Bowling Green’s common reading program thus is developing an online forum to facilitate the sharing of course materials related to the reading and make faculty more aware of what their colleagues are doing in the classroom. Other programs are helping students make informed course selections by publishing lists of courses that feature further discussion either of the common reading itself or of the social, political, and cultural issues it raises.

A few programs ensure that students will have a coherent experience of the reading by tying the selected book to a rotating first-year theme. At LaGuardia Community College, for example, students last year read Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*—a graphic novel that deals with the Holocaust and memory—as part of their exploration of “Rescue and Recovery.” This theme, in turn, permeated many aspects of the first year, from selected courses that incorporated the reading to cocurricular events that examined topics such as genocide and human rights. (The extensive online resources that LaGuardia developed to support activities related to the reading can be viewed at www.lagcc.cuny.edu/maus.)



Otterbein College, another school that links the common reading to an annual theme, has taken this approach further by fully integrating the book into required first-year courses. Such integration of the common reading into the curriculum presents challenges. Kate Porubcansky, who directs the Center for Student Involvement at Otterbein College, notes that “full campus buy-in” is essential if a single book is to be used extensively throughout the first year. And the selection of the book, which always must be done carefully, then becomes even more important: in addition to providing a compelling theme that can sustain discussion for a full year, the book must be “challenging but not overwhelming” and must lend itself to discussion in different disciplinary contexts, says Porubcansky. At Otterbein, where discussion of the reading occurs throughout the school’s highly interdisciplinary core curriculum, the chosen book must also provoke the kind of integrative learning that will enable students to make connections across courses.

What Works?

A common reading program such as the one developed by Otterbein College obviously serves very different purposes than a program that is limited to orientation week, and what makes a common reading program effective will vary with individual campus goals. Programs that are purposeful in developing activities that advance their specific aims for common reading are most likely to engage students in meaningful ways.

For programs that focus on orientation activities, the greatest challenge may be clearly communicating the purposes of common reading to students. Programs that end when orientation ends risk leaving some students wondering why they were assigned the reading in the first place—especially if activities related to the common reading seem only incidental or “tacked on” to orientation. Connecting small-group discussion with larger campus events and linking the selected book’s themes to the campus’s academic mission are ways of making common reading seem more relevant to students.

Programs that continue conversations about a common reading for an entire year, meanwhile, must be creative in developing strategies to sustain student interest. At their best, these kinds of programs—because they compel students to consider the same reading from different perspectives and through multiple lenses—can help students understand the interdisciplinarity and integration that are at the heart of liberal learning.

Common readings programs of all types are helping bridge divides on campus: between disciplines, between student life and academic affairs, between the orientation period and the first semester. Although some critics might lament that the growth of common reading programs has coincided with a decline of reading in general, many campuses are finding that these programs offer a practical way both of promoting reading as a shared intellectual experience and of enhancing the first year of college. ■

What Students Are Reading This Summer

A Selection of 2006 Common Books

- *Caucasia*, by Danzy Senna (James Madison University)
- *Confluence: A River, the Environment, Politics, and the Fate of All Humanity*, by Nathaniel Tripp (Albion College)
- *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, by Mark Haddon (Northern Arizona University)
- *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner (Appalachian State University)
- *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald (Cornell University)
- *The Inextinguishable Symphony: A True Story of Music and Love in Nazi Germany*, by Martin Goldsmith (Otterbein College)
- *Into the Forest*, by Jean Hegland (Bowling Green State University)
- *An Island Out of Time: A Memoir of Smith Island in the Chesapeake*, by Tom Horton (Goucher College)
- *The Namesake*, by Jhumpa Lahiri (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
- *Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting By in America*, by Barbara Ehrenreich (City University of New York–LaGuardia Community College)
- *1984*, by George Orwell (City University of New York–Baruch College)
- *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American*, by Jean-Robert Cadet (Northern Kentucky University)
- *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O’Brien (Bellevue Community College)
- *The Tortilla Curtain*, by T. C. Boyle (California State University Channel Islands)
- *When the Emperor Was Divine*, by Julie Otsuka (Temple University)