



TO: The Academic Senate

FROM: Common Read Committee (PRC), Ielleen Miller, Chair

DATE: May 16, 2019

SUBJECT: Information Item for Senate from Common Read Committee

Why Common Read?

Common Read programs have been around for a long time, with colleges and universities requiring incoming students to read a book or a series of texts over the summer. The National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition studies common reading programs, and in 2015 shared that 40% of orientation and first-year experience programs have a common read component (Keup & Young, 2015). The National Association of Scholars surveyed 481 institutions (214 public 4-year, 208 private, and 59 community colleges) that had a common read in 2017-2018 (Randall, 2018). Judging from their websites, Washington State University has had a common read at least since 2007, and Western Washington University since 2004. In short, common reads are quite common.

The EWU Common Read initiative came out of the Student Success & Retention Committee in Fall 2015.

The purposes of the EWU Common Read program were:

1. On our increasingly diverse campus, to create a common intellectual experience for incoming students, enhancing their connection with the campus community.
2. As part of the university's commitment to excellent education, to enhance students' critical reading and discussion skills and their ability to examine the same topic from different perspectives.
3. In an increasingly digital and media-driven society, to remind students that reading and discussing books is valuable for cultivating inquiry, creativity, and analysis and fostering a life-long love of learning.

Dr. Kevin Decker formed the Common Read Committee to choose the first book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Student Affairs arranged for every incoming first-year student to be given a copy during FirstSTEP in Summer 2016. Because the author was unable to come to campus, we brought Victoria Baptiste, Lacks's great granddaughter, and Alfred Carter, Jr., her grandson, and they gave a keynote during Diversity & Inclusion Week. In spring 2017, the committee chose *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* for the following year.

The University funded a Common Read Faculty Fellow for 2017-18, and Ielleen Miller was appointed the position. (The Faculty Fellow position was not funded for 2018-19.) The committee held two panel discussions during winter and spring quarter, "On Cruelty" and "On Mascots," to tie in with the Sherman Alexie book.

For 2018-19, the committee picked *The Good Food Revolution* by Will Allen, and sponsored book club meetings, cooking workshops, and two panel discussions fall and winter quarter. The author was on campus during Sustainability Week and gave the keynote.



Issues Encountered

Picking a Text is Difficult if We Really Are Not Requiring Students to Read It

For the third year, the committee streamlined the process of choosing a book, setting specific parameters (had to be tied to sustainability, couldn't be over 300 pages, had to be engaging, etc.). The chair identified a dozen candidates, the committee narrowed them down to ones we committed to reading over winter break, and then the committee voted and majority ruled. But as one can imagine, picking one book that will be engaging and enjoyable for the vast majority of our incoming students is not an easy task. It is vital to pick a book that a group of students on campus would love and promote.

EWU Students Unlikely to Read the Book Unless It Is Required

The book was promoted during FirstSTEPS, and a large majority of students received the book during FirstSTEP. (We ran out of books, and around 15% students were told to pick their copy up at the beginning of fall quarter.) The committee asked all the sections of FYE to give a survey to their students, to gauge interest in the book, and 262 answered. Only 5% read the book over the summer, and the most common reasons why the student didn't read it were "I didn't have time to read it" (51%), and "I didn't care for the subject matter" (28%).

How Could We Meet the Common Read Goals?

If the goals of creating a common intellectual experience, enhance critical reading and discussion skills, and fostering a life-long love of learning in our first-year students are important to us, then we need to design a required activity into fall orientation or the FYEs in the fall quarter. Just handing a book to our students and expecting it to happen will not work.

Whether we choose one book and have the students obtain their own copy (buy their own, borrow from the library), or we assign a series of essays on a theme, how we have the students engage in a discussion of the reading is crucial.

Micro-Seminars?

At Georgia College, they adopted a series of essays that students read for a micro-seminar taught during fall orientation by faculty members. Students are immediately given an introduction as to what it means to read and discuss academic essays in a civil manner, and get to meet a faculty member in a small group setting. See <https://libguides.gcsu.edu/GCReads>. Each faculty chooses specific essays from a larger list. In the future, they want to limit the choices to have a more "common" experience, and to carry forth the themes into programming throughout the year. Recruiting enough faculty to lead small group discussions has been problematic. (Ielleen Miller learned of their program at the ACRL National Conference.)

Tie the FYEs Together?

If FYEs are expected to teach student success skills along with the academic content, could the FYE instructors agree on a common set of readings and set aside class time to discuss them?



References

Keup, J. R. & Young, D. G. (2015). Telling the “story” of common reading programs: Using national data [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://sc.edu/nrc/system/pub_files/1532454215_0.pdf

Randall, D. (2018, September). Beach books 2017-2018: What do colleges and universities want students to read outside of class? [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://www.nas.org/images/documents/beach_books/2018/NAS_beachBooks2018_fullReport.pdf