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*In Search of  
the Right Book:  
Considerations  
in Common Read  
Book Selection*

College and university adoption and use of books as common reads has increased over the last several years (American Library Association, 2003; Ferguson, 2006). The growing popularity has also brought to light significant variations in how colleges and universities select and use common read texts. In some higher educational institutions, one tome is selected for all freshmen to read and discuss primarily during the initial orientation program; such programs are often referred to as *freshman read* or *first-year read*. Other institutions adopt a *common read*, *campus read*, or *one book* program, which involves selecting a book for the entire campus to read and discuss throughout the academic year (Laufgraben, 2006). Regardless of how common reads are selected, implemented, or what they are called, there are a variety of goals that are consistent among common read practices. This article focuses on a discussion of several variables to consider that increase the chances of a successful common read program.

**Purpose of Common Reads**

Boff, Schroeder, Letson, and Gambill (2007) contended that common reads can be used to foster students' exploration of values and ethics, increase awareness of cultural diversity, deepen feelings of being part of a community, and integrate social and academic campus experiences. In addition, reading books not directly associated with homework has been found to encourage students to enjoy reading and read more for both pleasure and learning (Mallard, Lowerty-Hart, Andersen, Cuevas, & Campbell, 2008; Paulson, 2006; Twiton, 2007).

Selecting a book that is enjoyable, challenging, and engaging stirs the intellectual minds of young adults; integrating such books into a wide range of curricula can be a complex process (Fister, 2007). Finding the right book is therefore critical for assuring the worthwhile investment of time and money as well as for the desired and anticipated levels of learning. Thoughtful consideration of the variety of goals, criteria, and levels of investment associated with common reads is necessary to assure the choice of the right book (Twiton, 2007). We assert that a framework created to explain and foster student development can be extremely useful for guiding the creation of a structure for selecting a common read and for evaluating the success of a common read program.

### **Theoretical Framework: Student Development**

Chickering and Reisser (1993) have developed an ideal framework to use as a guide for selecting a book and for explaining the learning, intellectual growth, and emotional growth associated with common reads. While individuals attend higher educational institutions, they are likely to experience growth in seven different areas, called “vectors” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The seven vectors include developing competence, managing emotions, becoming comfortable with dependency on others, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. The progression of development along the vectors is influenced by a range of variables internal and external to the student. The learning activities associated with common reads are likely to be considered a variable external to the student that can foster the development along these vectors.

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), students enter colleges and universities at different developmental levels and bring many highly influential personal characteristics that can either promote growth or deter advancement along the seven vectors. Additionally, development along each vector is influenced by learning experiences and interactions with others. Thus, students’ personal progress and growth in these areas are determined by a number of factors, including the strengths and weaknesses of their personal characteristics, the commitment of faculty members, the curriculum of their courses, and the nature of the support within the community at their institution.

Faculty members and other higher education personnel play an essential role in supporting student development along the seven vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The support for growth can take place within and outside of the classroom by structuring and providing curriculum that is relevant to students, encouraging them to engage in active learning, and providing a variety of views that challenge students

to question their values and assumptions (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Thus, when considering a common read and its place in the curriculum, it would be helpful to keep in mind the way in which the book might be perceived as a means of fostering student growth.

### **Common Read and Student Development**

Although not explicitly addressing common reads, Chickering's work suggests that literature can be instrumental in promoting student development (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006). Thus, to validate our expectation for common reads to foster student growth we embrace the vector theory which supports the potential for literature to influence student development. Student development can occur when readings (and the associated curriculum) prompt students to question their beliefs, explore their feelings, build a sense of community, and relate their emotions to others. Even though a wide variety of books may fulfill these functions, not all books are appropriate for assisting students in these areas of growth. Thus, common read books should be chosen in a thoughtful and systematic manner with the developmental level and trajectories of the readers in mind (Laufgraben, 2006). Those making the book choice may want to discuss and define their common read student learning and growth goals and expectations for student impact before deciding on a book. Having specific objectives in mind can help assure that the book chosen has content that helps promote research- and theory-supported expectations for student development.

### **The Book Choice Process**

As stated previously, a variety of processes for choosing a common read book have emerged as such programs have become more widely adopted. At our institution we established a freshman read program seven years ago; this program has now evolved into a campus-wide common read program. Initially the book for our freshman read was selected in part by a committee of volunteers composed of faculty, students, and staff. The committee narrowed the selection of recommended books to a few titles, which were submitted along with a brief synopsis of each to the university president, who made the final decision. Although the process worked well, the general consensus was that there was a need for a stronger student voice and influence in the selection process based on the assumption that student engagement is important to enhancing the common read program.

As the program has evolved, the initial consideration of reads has shifted from the committee to nominations of books by students for the committee to review. Thus, in the interest of increasing student

engagement, we shifted the nominations of potential books for the common read to the students. After the students provided their recommendations, the committee then narrowed down the many submissions to a few, and then, similar to the process in the initial method of book selection, the titles were forwarded to the president for the final decision.

The process of having the students nominate books has been positive in terms of increasing active student engagement in the book selection process and creating awareness of the common read program. However, there are drawbacks with our process. For example, recruiting student submissions is quite time consuming as is sorting through their many nominations. In addition, the books recommended by the students do not always meet the mission of the program. So, this may not be the best method of selection for all institutions, particularly if time for planning is limited. However, the impact of student involvement in the selection process on levels of student engagement and interest in the common read program is an area ripe for empirical research.

### **Type of Book**

The variety of books that have been used as common reads continues to expand beyond traditional classics or literature and now encompasses biographies, graphic novels, and other nontraditional literature. The majority of books we have used have been nonfiction, and these titles include personal accounts of an obstacle that was overcome, either by an individual or a community. The obstacles in the books we have selected have ranged from starvation (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009) to racial discrimination (Skloot, 2010). Reflecting upon the vectors we discussed previously (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), we anticipate that books with themes of overcoming obstacles provide students with an opportunity to explore their own perseverance, their ability to work through ambiguity, and their ability to ask for help as they seek solutions.

Most people on our common read committee feel that books about social justice, worldview issues, and ethics are key topics that need to be covered in the read. A few of the committee members have argued that philosophy, history, or science/technology should be the preferred or desired foci for a common read. Regardless of the ideas of committee members about the desired focus of a common read, it is the students at our institution who nominated books for consideration. The constraint placed on reads that could have been considered for selection (to be drawn from students' nominations) limited the ability of committee members' to influence the choice of a desired tome.

Again, reflecting on the work of Chickering and Reisser (1993), there may be more important considerations that can be useful to foster student growth than the philosophical perspective of the book used in the read. The process by which differences in ideas for book selection are resolved or influence the selection of a common read is an excellent direction for research.

### **Book Length**

Keeping books selected for a common read under 250 pages is helpful, as students are more likely to read a shorter book and faculty are more likely to integrate the book into their curriculum. In polling those involved with our common read program, it was interesting to note that the faculty who identified themselves as instructors of the first-year student success course were most likely to choose books with fewer than 200 pages, perhaps because of their expectation that the students would be more motivated to read a shorter book that takes less time to complete and is easier to comprehend. Why instructors of first-year students are more likely to select a shorter book is a phenomenon in need of additional research.

### **Final Thoughts and Conclusions**

Given the anticipated influence of common reads on student growth, it is critical to determine what aspects of students' development may be impacted by the books chosen to be read. Further, it is important to provide opportunities and structures that allow faculty, students, and staff to make decisions that can positively facilitate student development along the seven vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) or some other developmental framework. Thus in choosing a book, placing emphasis on the book's themes, and/or assuring content is aligned with the student growth provides a strategy for selection that is more likely to result in the selection of a book that will engage students in reflection and growth. For example, common reads that focus on issues of social justice, worldview, and ethics are theoretically more likely to promote student reflection, identity development (both personal and professional), integrity, and sense of purpose, all of which are components that Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggested are critical directions of student development. The desire for faculty and staff to engage students in deep thinking about social, global, and moral issues (Hosseini, 2003; Mortenson & Relin, 2006; Suskind, 1998) would explain the popularity of many common read books. Further, the popularity of these books may be attributed to the recognition of the potential for the reads to catalyze student development along multiple vectors.

The desire to engage students in common read selection and the related program activities are taking place on many campuses (Harper & Quaye, 2009), and yet reports of strategies for assuring the selection process fosters student engagement development and the corresponding supporting research are scant. The call for strategies and research is even more important to consider as movements are underway to increase student involvement in higher education decision making; however, the process of inclusion is not always easy (Harper & Quaye, 2009). The desire and practices of increasing inclusion suggest that reflection, clear goals, and patience may be essential for creating opportunities to engage students effectively in common read-related events. Thus, finding how students can best be involved is an important consideration and may vary depending on institutional culture, instructional goals, common read program structure, and experience with common reads. The benefits or influences that involving students in the selection process have on the greater student body engagement in reading the common read are important and potentially critical directions for future research.

Common reads are popular in higher education because there are many benefits of having a campus focus on reading one book, mainly an opportunity for a common conversation. We hope others will find our thoughts and recommendations useful and provide us feedback on their implementation. Further, we are encouraging others to build upon our work and expand the list of empirically based common read selection best practices. It is critical to the success of our common read programs that they are guided by thoughtful individuals informed by research findings.

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