

Beach Books

What Do Colleges Want Students to Read Outside Class?



Summary

In the last decade, the number of colleges that assign summer reading to incoming freshmen has soared. The National Association of Scholars has tracked and analyzed 290 such programs—the most comprehensive study of “common reading” programs to date. The study reveals national patterns in book selection. Major findings include a widespread assignment of books that promote liberal political views; a preponderance of contemporary writing; and a surprisingly low level of intellectual difficulty. The NAS recommends seven steps colleges can take to improve their book choices.

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A growing number of American colleges and universities assign a single book as summer reading to their incoming freshmen. The purpose of these “common reading” programs is to ensure that the students have at least one shared book to discuss during their fall semester. Some colleges go further and require that the assigned book be read by upperclassmen too and by faculty members.

This report, covering 180 books and 290 programs, is the most comprehensive study yet of this important development in American higher education.

Controversy

On a few occasions, such readings have sparked controversy. When UNC-Chapel Hill assigned socialist Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* in 2003, a student group, the Committee for a Better Carolina, protested the assignment as an “intellectually dishonest” attempt to sway student opinion. The students took out full-page newspaper ads and stirred up considerable public opposition to the assignment of Ehrenreich’s book. In 2009, Washington State University announced that its common reading for the fall would be Michael Pollan’s attack on industrial agriculture, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. The choice reportedly aggravated someone in the university and was withdrawn, though the situation was a bit murky. The university claimed it cancelled the book because it couldn’t afford to pay Pollan’s speaking fee. A Seattle-based lawyer who specializes in food-poisoning cases then paid the fee; Pollan spoke; and the book was reinstated as the common reading.

Though flare-ups such as these are rare, many of the books chosen by colleges with common reading programs do seem to reflect themes congenial to the academic left. We found the preponderance of reading assignments promotes liberal social causes and liberal sensibilities. Of the 180 books, 126 (70 percent) either explicitly promote a liberal political agenda or advance a liberal interpretation of events. By contrast, the study identifies only three books (less than 2 percent) that promote a conservative sensibility and none that promote conservative political causes. 51 books (28 percent) are neither liberal nor conservative.

This ideological tilt, however, is not the only controversy that ought to be raised by our findings. We also found that the books selected for common reading are generally pitched at an intellectual level well below what should be expected of college freshmen. Common reading programs are, in their inception, an attempt to make up for some of the misshapeness of American secondary education—especially its lack of consistent focus from school to school on books that define our cultural heritage and its failure to insist on high standards. Faculty members in recent years have complained vigorously about finding themselves trying to teach students who arrive at college possessing no real foundation in key ideas, key books, or key historical facts.

One answer to this onslaught of ill-prepared students is to re-instate the core curriculum, in which all admitted students are required to spend some portion of their first two years of college study engaged in studying the same important books. The NAS has long favored this approach, but core curricula are themselves controversial, since they require a significant reallocation of faculty time and attention.

Common reading programs are, in effect, a short-cut core curriculum. They attempt to ensure that students have at least one worthwhile book in common before embarking on a curriculum that quickly separates students into disparate paths of study. Can *one* book really serve as the common foundation of a college education? Perhaps it depends on the book. Homer’s *Iliad* served a function not unlike that for classical Greece; the Bible was long the foundation for teaching in the Western world. But the common reading programs of today are not modeled on the Greek ideal of *Paideia* or the Christian

conception of Scripture. Rather, “common reading” as practiced by American colleges seems to be grounded on something more like the idea of Oprah’s Book Club. That is to say, that students can experience the sense of being up-to-date, in-the-know, and able to talk easily with others about something that is popular now.

In this sense, the common reading programs, on the whole, are disappointing. Rather than asking students to stretch to the demands of college-level study, they shrink college-level study to the comfort zone of the average student.

We are not sure whether the colleges that have created these programs are aware of either the political slant or the triviality that characterizes many of the books they choose. Our guess is that they do not. The books may seem to the committees that pick them to be timely introductions to topics that students will soon study. In this sense, the books that appear on our list of common reading are perhaps best seen as illustrative of deeper problems in American higher education.

Methods

Included in the NAS study is every common reading program we could find that has been active during the last two years. We consulted several previous lists¹, checked every entry to determine if the program is still active, and then identified its most recently assigned book. We supplemented this core list with Google searches and LexisNexis searches. We called many of the colleges to confirm their newly announced 2010 selections, and in some cases the results we’ve recorded come in advance of the colleges’ own announcements. In our final results we have included every college that appears to have an active program.

We have listed the most up-to-date information available—2010 if possible, 2009 by default. We expect to update the list as new information becomes available and we welcome suggestions from readers who spot programs that we have missed. We have listed the programs in several ways:

1. Alphabetically by institution
2. Broken out as public institutions, community colleges, private non-sectarian, and sectarian colleges
3. Alphabetically by institutions listed in *U.S. News & World Report’s* top 100 lists for national universities and liberal arts colleges
4. Alphabetically by the authors of the books

To see these separate lists click on the tabs at the bottom of the spreadsheet. Wherever possible, we have included on our spreadsheet a link to the page on the college’s website that tells about the program.

We have also listed colleges and universities that have recently discontinued such programs (see “Defunct Programs” tab); or have been recently mentioned as having such programs but we have been unable to confirm that they still do (see “Old Programs” tab).

¹ The lists include Barbara Fister’s *One Book, One College*; the National Resource Center’s *Institutions Reporting First-year Summer Reading Programs*; *BookReporter.com’s Freshman Summer Reading 2009*; *ReadingGroupGuides.com’s Freshman Summer Reading 2009*; Iowa State University’s *Common Reading Programs*; and a 2007 *Minding the Campus* article by Anthony Paletta, “The Unseriousness of Freshman Summer Reading.”

Any comparative study sooner or later runs into the problem of what exactly to count. We have made several decisions about what should be considered a “common reading” program.

1. We have **excluded** from the list reading programs that are part of the college’s required courses. A fair number of colleges have mandatory core curricula, which by definition mean that the students end up with common readings. Our focus in this research is on common readings that a college requires outside and apart from its required common courses. The distinction can get blurred by the eagerness of colleges to make links between common reading programs and its regular courses, but by and large colleges and universities themselves draw the distinction for us. Some books are designated for “common reading” programs which generally enjoy a status outside the curriculum; while other books are part of the syllabi for credit-bearing academic courses.
2. We have **included** common reading programs that are voluntary or semi-voluntary. Some of the colleges make it clear to the students that they are under no special obligation to read the assigned book, but to take full advantage of the college’s programmed activities, they ought to. In fact, the distinction between “required” and “non-required” common reading programs is hazy, since even students enrolled in colleges that have “required” reading can usually escape the obligation without penalty if they want to.
3. We have **excluded** programs that appear on some recent lists but that we have been unable to verify.
4. We have **included** three institutions—the University of California Berkeley, the University of San Francisco, and Fairfield University—that had book-based common reading programs in 2009 but for 2010 have stretched the idea of common reading to another medium. Berkeley is having students submit DNA samples on a voluntary basis to test for metabolism of folate, tolerance of lactose, and metabolism of alcohol. We have omitted this venture from our list but kept Berkeley’s book from last year, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. U. San Francisco is having students “read” a mural by Diego Rivera. Fairfield has assigned a DVD, *RFK in the Land of Apartheid*. We have kept both of these on the list on the principle of heeding what colleges themselves say is “common reading.”
5. Common reading programs generally assign *one* book, but our list includes two institutions that assign more than one book. Chandler-Gilbert Community College has two books and Stanford University has three.
6. We have titled the report “Beach Books,” in reference to the practice of most of the participating colleges to assign the reading for summer, but we found a significant minority of colleges that do not set a strict season for the readings. The report ignores this distinction.

NAS is not the first to compile such a list, and we have benefited from studying earlier attempts. We have improved on these earlier attempts in two major ways. First, our list of institutions is the most up-to-date and comprehensive. Our list is about a third longer than the longest previous list that we have found.

Second, we attempt to identify the thematic categories that the books represent.

Categories

The category of book selected for common reading by the largest number of institutions is “Multiculturalism/Immigration/Racism.” Sixty of the 290 colleges and universities selected a book in this category. The most popular of these books is *Enrique’s Journey* by Sonia Nazario, a non-fiction reconstruction of the journey of an illegal Honduran immigrant to the United States. Ten colleges assigned *Enrique’s Journey* as common reading. Other books represented in the Multiculturalism/Immigration/Racism category include Warren St. John’s *Outcasts United*, an account of a soccer program in a Georgia town for the sons of refugee families (six colleges); and *Zeitoun*, the story of a post-Katrina hero who is mistakenly accused of belonging to Al Qaeda (six colleges).

We have also put Barack Obama’s memoir, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, (two colleges) in this category. Its subtitle says his memoir is explicitly a book about “race and inheritance.” But clearly, a college that chooses to assign a memoir by a sitting president may have selected it for reasons other than its ostensible subject. The same is true of every book selected for a reading program. Our attempt to classify books such as *Dreams from My Father* is useful only to the extent that we have identified underlying patterns in book selections. We’re aware that this approach leaves aside a great deal else that could be said about each individual choice.

The second most popular category of book is “Environmentalism/Animal Rights/Food.” Thirty-six of the colleges and universities selected a book dealing with environmental issues, food production, or green politics. Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, an extended analysis of the ingredients in four meals (starting with a lunch at McDonald’s) is assigned by seven colleges. Colin Beavan’s account of his extreme “green” lifestyle, *No Impact Man* (subtitle: “The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet, and the Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process”), which has been made into a popular documentary, is assigned at four colleges. William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer’s *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, about Kamkwamba’s adolescent ventures building windmills in his home village in Malawi, is assigned by three colleges.² And likewise Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, a memoir of a year spent eating home-grown and locally produced food, is assigned by three colleges.

Other popular categories are Islamic World (27 colleges); “New Age/Spiritual/Philosophy” (25 colleges); and “Holocaust/Genocide/War/Disaster” (25 colleges).

Although “New Age/Spiritual/Philosophy” is only the fourth most popular category, it includes the single most-assigned book in our study, *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*. Actually this is two books, volumes 1 and 2. Six colleges assigned volume 1; five colleges assigned volume 2. Both volumes are anthologies of short essays written for a series on National Public Radio that ran from 2005 to 2009. In the course of this weekly broadcast, more than 65,000 listeners contributed their testimonials, and roughly 210 were invited to read their essays for broadcast. The book version of *This I Believe* gathers some of these broadcast statements and mixes them with specimens of the original series hosted by Edward R. Murrow that ran on CBS from 1951 to 1955.

² Note that we classify the book by Kamkwamba and Mealer in our “environmentalism” category, not in “multiculturalism.” In the case of books that overlap categories, we have attempted to place them in the single category that fits best.

We also found several books selected as common readings that seemed to stand alone or nearly so. In these cases we assigned “categories” mostly as a point of comparison. Thus Charles C. Mann’s *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* assigned for common reading at Dartmouth College is one of only three books in a category we have labeled “Historical Speculation.” Mann’s book is an attempt to synthesize data and theory from anthropology, archaeology, and other disciplines to picture pre-Columbian native American societies. The other books we placed in the category “Historical Speculation” are the University of Pittsburgh’s 2009 choice, Ian F. McNeely and Lisa Wolverson’s *Reinventing Knowledge*, a “history of the key institutions that have organized knowledge in the West from the classical period onward”; and Rosemont College’s choice, *Blonde Roots*, a re-imagining of history in which Africans enslave Europeans and ship them to America.

Themes

As we worked on this material, we began to notice a few specific themes that cross-cut our categories, such as books that are also available in film versions (forty-six colleges have assigned such books), or books that are at least partly about Africa (twenty-nine colleges). The books that touch on Africa are by no means all in the “multicultural category.” Some of the books on African themes are instead about war (*The Translator; An Ordinary Man; A Long Way Gone*); the environment (*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*); or poverty and women (*The Blue Sweater*). A focus on “Africa” thus appears to have enhanced the chance that a book, no matter its subject, will be picked as a common reading.

We have noted these cross-cutting themes with symbols placed in the column before the titles. Other themes identified this way are comic books (or “graphic novels”—nine colleges), an East Asian focus (eighteen colleges), an African American focus (twenty-five), a Latino focus (seventeen), and a focus on dysfunctional families (five colleges). Nearly a third of the programs (30.3 percent, 88 out of 290) chose books that have an African, African-American, Latino, or East Asian theme. By contrast we have identified five books that deal in a significant way with Europe (*Copenhagen, The Communist Manifesto, The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, Maus, and Brooklyn*³—chosen by one college each). That’s 1.7 percent (5 out of 290) that chose books on a European theme.

Nine colleges chose a book that dealt with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We have marked these in our special theme column as “HK.”

Beyond College

Colleges and universities are not the only institutions that have “common reading” programs. The city of Seattle started a program in 1998 aimed at getting as many Seattleites as possible to read Russell Banks’ *The Sweet Hereafter*. Other cities soon joined the “One City One Book” program, which is now tracked by the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress. The American Library Association publishes a guide for cities considering this option. The National Endowment for the Arts sponsors a similar community program called The Big Read. Our focus is strictly on the college and university lists, but we note The Big Read has its own set of categories (Coming of Age, Courage, Crime and Justice, Identity, Integrity, Loss, and Love Stories) and that its selections are generally of higher literary quality than those of the colleges.

³ *Brooklyn* is a novel partly set in Ireland that deals with Irish immigrants to New York City.

At least one publisher, Penguin Group USA, has a special catalog of “Books for First Year Experience and Common Reading Programs.” Penguin doesn’t mention which colleges use which books and when we inquired, the company’s representative declined to tell us.

Analysis

Our categorization is, of course, an act of analysis. The assigned books could have been sorted in other ways. And we did not begin with categories to which to fit the books. Rather, we began with the books and looked for sensible ways to group them. Our categories, however imperfect, are meant to capture the sensibilities of the college and university selection committees. “Multiculturalism/Immigration/Racism” isn’t a tight intellectual box and the books we have assigned to this synthetic grouping are widely dispersed, for example, in the Library of Congress classification. But anyone familiar with campus discourse on these matters will recognize that discussions of multiculturalism, immigration, and racism currently flow together and use much of the same intellectual vocabulary. The same is true of our other synthetic categories, but rather than argue for them, we are content to let the reader of our report decide whether they help to clarify the choices colleges are making.

A. The classics and mid-20th century fiction

One conclusion is the current college reading programs take little interest in the classics. We found five colleges that had assigned books that could be considered classics in the sense that they have endured the test of time for many generations. The five are: Texas Tech (Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein*); Ithaca College (Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*); Indiana University at South Bend (Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*); and Le Moyne College and St. Mary’s College of Maryland (both are using Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*). There are no works of classical antiquity (Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Cicero, Ovid, Tacitus); none by Shakespeare or other Renaissance writers; no works of the Enlightenment (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Diderot, Samuel Johnson); and among the acknowledged masters of American literature, such as Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, Whitman, James, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, etc. only Mark Twain is represented. There are no classical works of Christian or Jewish thought; no scientific classics (e.g. Bacon, Galileo, Darwin, Einstein); no classics of history (e.g. Thucydides, Livy, Gibbon, Carlyle, Parkman). The teenage Mary Shelley’s fantasy *Frankenstein* is left by itself to represent not just British literature but all of European literature, from Homer to Dostoevsky.

We found four works that fall somewhere between classics and contemporary fiction: Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*, 1930 (The University of Southern Mississippi); Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*, 1939 (The College of New Jersey); Carson McCullers’ *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, 1940 (Triton College); and Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*, 1948 (John Brown University). We realize that the term “classics” is sometimes extended to works like these, and the books by Hammett, West, and McCullers are all included in the National Endowment for the Humanities funded Library of America. We recognize these four books as examples of excellent writing that have endured well beyond the time in which they were written but the label “classic” still seems premature. We have signaled their status with a symbol in the column before the titles.

The vast majority of common readings are books published in the last decade. The only work of social theory written earlier than the last decade is *The Communist Manifesto*.

B. Institution Type

Our study shows that common reading programs are disproportionately found at selective colleges and universities. Of the top one hundred “national universities” in the 2010 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, 79 have common reading programs. Of the top one hundred “liberal arts colleges” in the 2010 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, 38 have common reading programs. Of the total 290 institutions that we found with common reading programs, 173 (60 percent) are on neither of these top one-hundred lists. On the other hand, only three Ivy League colleges, Dartmouth, Cornell, and Brown, have common reading programs.

We found that a significant minority of the colleges and universities with common reading programs are public four-year institutions (136, or 47 percent). Public four-year institutions, however, represent only 24 percent of all four-year colleges in the U.S. Thus public four-year institutions are substantially over-represented among colleges that have common reading programs.

Forty-one community colleges also have common reading programs. That amounts to 3.6 percent of the nation’s 1,132 public two-year institutions.

116 of the institutions that have common reading programs are private colleges and universities. Of these 83 are non-sectarian and 33 are religiously affiliated. (We counted as non-sectarian institutions that have only nominal religious affiliations.) The category of private sectarian colleges includes the only three books in the study that we identified as representing traditional values (*Searching for God Knows What; The End of the Spear; Cry the Beloved Country*) and one of the four books (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) that we identified as classics. 27 of the 33 sectarian colleges picked books reflecting the same liberal outlook apparent in the selections of non-sectarian institutions.

Six of the institutions are women’s colleges: St. Joseph College, Sweet Briar College, Smith College, Pine Manor College, Peace College, and Mount Holyoke College. That’s 10 percent of the approximately 60 women’s colleges in the U.S. Five of the six women’s colleges chose a book authored or co-authored by a woman. We found common reading programs at two of the nation’s 81 historically black colleges and universities: Lincoln University, and Saint Augustine’s College. Only one military academy, the U.S. Coast Guard, has a common reading program. This year, the Commandant’s choice is *Rescue Warriors: The U.S. Coast Guard, America’s Forgotten Heroes* by David Helvarg.

C. Authors

Eleven of the authors are on the list of common readings for more than one book. Sherman Alexie (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian; Flight*), Da Chen (*The Colors of the Mountain; China’s Son; The Sounds of the River*), Dave Eggers (*What is the What; Zeitoun*), Tracy Kidder (*Mountains Beyond Mountains; Strength in What Remains*), Barbara Kingsolver (*The Bean Trees; Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*), John Krakauer (*Into the Wild; Where Men Win Glory*); James McBride (*Song Yet Sung; The Color of Water*); Greg Mortenson (*Three Cups of Tea; Stones Into Schools*), Michael Pollan (*In Defense of Food; The Omnivore’s Dilemma; The Botany of Desire*), Khaled Hosseini (*The Kite Runner; A Thousand Splendid Suns*), and Malcolm Gladwell (*Blink; Outliers*) are repeaters.

We also checked the numbers of male and female authors selected: 124 men and 48 women.

Aspirational Colleges

What should we make of this list as a whole? And what does it mean that 290 American colleges and universities have adopted programs like this?

First, we welcome the evidence of a continuing spirit of pedagogical innovation in American higher education. Roughly six percent of colleges and universities (290 out of 4,861) have ongoing ventures in this vein. Six percent seems a small slice overall, but our analysis shows that common reading programs are disproportionately a phenomenon of fairly selective institutions. Perhaps the best way to characterize the institutions that pursue common reading programs is that they are aspirational. Only three Ivy League institutions (Dartmouth, Brown, and Cornell) have such programs; Harvard, Yale, and Princeton don't. Few other top ranked institutions have them either. The University of California Berkeley and Stanford do; the California Institute of Technology doesn't. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology does not. Only two of the Seven Sisters (Mount Holyoke and Smith) have such a program.

While common reading programs are scarce at the very top levels of American undergraduate education, they are strongly represented among colleges and universities in *U.S. News and World Report's* two top 100 lists: the top 100 national universities and the top 100 liberal arts colleges. And among the 60 percent of common reading programs at institutions *not* on either of these two top 100 lists, many of them are nonetheless at substantial and well-known institutions (e.g. Case Western Reserve, Ohio University, Pennsylvania State University).

Rationales

The aspirational character of the institutions is underscored by the strongly-worded rationales colleges often post. These may, for example, connect the programs directly to the college's mission, as the University of North Carolina explains:

Synergy, UNCW's Common Reading Experience, supports the university mission of integration of teaching, research, and service, stimulation of intellectual curiosity, imagination, critical thinking, and thoughtful expression. The program supports goal one of the Strategic Plan: Create the most powerful learning experience possible for our students.

On many of the campuses, the common reading is part of a year-long "theme." In 2009-2010, Indiana University South Bend took as its themes "the urban and the rural," and tied its common reading, Alex Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here*. The theme was meant:

to focus campus and community events on a single topic that can reach across disciplines and foster interesting dialogues. Through a coordinated program of lectures, exhibits, performances, and other events co-sponsored by various campus schools, departments, and organizations, we can build an interrelated learning community that explores issues of social importance from a variety of viewpoints.

Such rationales seem wholesome in the sense of aiming at an intellectually worthwhile goal for students. But they also seem to betray some unstated anxieties.

One anxiety is that the students are so lacking in shared intellectual experience as to have little to talk about with one another—or little beyond television, music, and sports. Again and again, colleges

explain these programs as a way “to start conversations and engage in intellectual reflection.” (That phrasing comes from Butte College). Conversations and reflection are good things in themselves, but a question lurks in the background: why are the students judged as needing the extra push of an assigned book?

The answer, we suspect, involves the interplay of unsatisfactory high school and college curricula. Students arrive on campus as freshmen having read few of the same things and, because of the colleges’ own thinned-out general education requirements, remain that way. A common reading program from this angle seems a lightweight and relatively uncontroversial substitute for a core curriculum.

Stuck in Present Tense

In principle, of course, a common reading program could be built on the basis of intellectually challenging works; books of widely-recognized and lasting merit; books that are milestones of cultural achievement; books of undeniable historical importance; or books of profound artistry. We noted that five of the colleges out of the 290 chose works that plausibly fit at least one of these criteria: *Frankenstein*, *Walden*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (two colleges), and *The Communist Manifesto*.

What of the selections by the 285 other colleges? The best we can say is that all (or almost all) the selected works have some merit. We don’t see the list as comprised of third-rate writers or writing. There are, to be sure, a handful of choices that look eccentric and are of doubtful merit. We’re not sure, for example, that Ned Vizzini’s memoir of teenage drug addiction, *It’s Kind of a Funny Story*, ought to be the sole book that students at Murray State University should have read in common. But in most cases the selected authors are admired stylists, competent storytellers, or deservedly recognized reporters, even if they aren’t exactly the authors of books of first-rate literary or intellectual importance.

This is a judgment on our part and one that we recognize is open to dispute. The list of selected works is so weighted toward recent works by contemporary writers that it is impossible to say with certainty whether any of them have lasting significance. Will *Enrique’s Journey* survive the winnowing of time to be read widely a decade or two from now? Does it matter? Is it more important that students have as their “common reading” a contemporary work that connects to a vexing political issue (illegal immigration to the United States) right now?

We are skeptical about this pervasive emphasis on the contemporary and topical, for two reasons. First, it announces to students that the important things they should have in common as college students are the public affairs debates of the passing moment. College ought to be an occasion to take a step back from the news cycle and the endless buzz of opinion commentary to gain the larger perspectives of history and philosophy. World literature offers many great works that deal with exile, immigration, and arduous journeying to achieve a better life, and the experience of being displaced. If these are themes that colleges that assign *Enrique’s Journey* want their students to attend to especially, they might achieve something more profoundly educational by asking students to read the book of Ruth, *The Odyssey*, writings by Petrarch, or *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

We suspect that the present-ism that is so prevalent in the common readings reflects an underestimation of the students’ ability to discover connections between the past and the contemporary world. College ought to push students towards making such connections rather than assume that students won’t “get it.”

Second, students are already saturated in the immediacy of contemporary media. They are much more in need of developing the ability to stand back and reflect. Many of the books on the list have movie versions—which may be a factor in their selection, but is also a temptation to some students to skip the reading and see the movie instead. Moreover, many of the colleges seem to make a standard practice of inviting the author of the book to speak on campus during the academic year. It isn't hard to see the allure of giving students the opportunity to meet someone whose book they have read. But it appears the meet-the-author moment is increasingly becoming an indispensable part of the common reading program. And that in turn means that the choices for “common reading” are automatically narrowed to available speakers.

A much more flexible approach would be to consider inviting other speakers who are expert on the book or the subject.

Shallowness

It is hard to find anything on the list that poses even a modest intellectual challenge to the average reader. The common reading programs are built independently by the 290 colleges but the colleges seem remarkably consistent in the level of complexity of prose or the density of argument. Middlebrow proficiency appears to be the standard guiding these choices. The selections tend to be short, caffeinated, and emotional. Though there are exceptions, most of the books fall in the category of things that a traveler could read start to finish on a flight from New York to Los Angeles.

Perhaps that represents a realistic assessment by the colleges of what their students, on average, are capable of reading on their own, or their assessment of what their students are willing to read as part of an exercise that does not result in a grade on the transcript or credit towards graduation. The lightweight quality of the reading, however, fits awkwardly with the goals of the programs. Almost all of the colleges depict the readings as a way to draw students into the intellectual life of the campus and to stimulate “community” through a shared literary experience. Kalamazoo College is typical. It says its “Summer Common Reading is an important first step in building a cohesive, dynamic, educational community.” In fall 2009, that aspirational first step at Kalamazoo towards an educationally cohesive, dynamic community took the form of reading Rachel Kushner's *Telex from Cuba*, a novel about ex-pat American teenagers growing up in Cuba on the eve of Castro's revolution.

Kalamazoo, 1999-2009

This perhaps warrants a digression. Our study focuses on current readings and invites attention to trends among colleges with common reading programs. But we also noticed a high degree of consistency within programs year to year. Kalamazoo College's 2009 pick, for example, seems very much in line with Kalamazoo's previous picks:

- 1999-Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams*
- 2000-Richard Ford, *Independence Day*
- 2001-Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life*
- 2002-Ha Jin, *Waiting*
- 2003-Ann Patchett, *Bel Canto*
- 2004-Aleksandar Hemon, *Nowhere Man*
- 2005-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*

2006-Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*
2007-Edward P. Jones, *The Known World*
2008-Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

These are all examples of best-selling literary fiction, with a heavy emphasis on cultural and personal alienation.

These are books that tell, *ad seriatim*, of a young woman's "sometimes brilliant, often hapless search to find her place in the world;" a divorced middle-aged sportswriter turned real estate salesman spending a long weekend with his mentally ill teenage son; a Korean immigrant in a New York suburb who alienates his adopted daughter; a Chinese army doctor stuck in an arranged marriage; a Japanese industrial magnate and a opera soprano who are taken hostage by terrorists at a birthday party in an unnamed South American city; a refugee from worn-torn Bosnia who joins a rock band in Chicago and reflects on "his love for a country that no longer loves itself;" a fifteen-year old Nigerian girl who is oppressed by her Christian fanatic father; an American Jewish boy who travels to Ukraine to find out who saved his grandfather from the Nazis; a black slave owner in Virginia twenty years before the Civil War who worries that his wife won't maintain discipline; and an obese Dominican boy who suffers torments in an American city.

While the plots are widely varied, it is not hard to notice some strong thematic chords. Kalamazoo appears to have an affinity for books about people displaced from their origins and at a loss with the world they find themselves in. Every single book over eleven years of selections deals with people are coping with situations they have little hope of mastering. The protagonists are victims, trapped in adversity and possessing meager ability to overcome their circumstances. *A Gesture Life, Waiting, Nowhere Man*—the titles convey futility and the texts revel in the characters' usually hapless attempts to escape it. Several of the titles are sardonic comments on that futility: *Independence Day, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The protagonists are also in most of these books trapped as much by their lack of knowledge as by external constraints. The plots are often driven by the desire to find out something that is elusive: information that parents have withheld, the fate of missing relatives, or the incomprehensible foreign world in which the characters find themselves.

Of course, stories of protagonists trapped by circumstances they can't overcome are a perennial theme in literature. *Oedipus Rex, Hamlet, and Moby Dick* might be described this way too. Being overwhelmed by merciless fate is of the essence of tragedy. The books on the Kalamazoo list, however, are not tragedies. The theme at the center of them is not the need to face human weakness but the futility of trying.

Colleges with common reading programs vary in how they make their annual selections, and some procedures lend themselves more to year-to-year consistency than others. The theme of alienated impotence that seems so prominent in Kalamazoo's selections, however, appears to be a pretty common one overall.

Alienation

The comprehensive list of common readings for 2009-2010 offers books that are set in many parts of the world but on the whole they offer a distinctly disaffected view of American society and Western civilization. Sometimes this is conveyed directly, as in books such as *The Omnivore's Dilemma* or *Enrique's Journey*. In other cases, the disenchantment with the West is implicit. The two science fiction

works on the list, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Philip Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, for example, are pictures of technology and society gone darkly wrong.

Many of the books are grim assessments of American life; the most positive books generally extol non-Western cultures or individuals who have heroically survived injustices. The nine colleges that chose books about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina neatly capture both elements: the disaster serves to indict America for its callous treatment of the mostly poor and black residents of New Orleans and at the same time celebrate the heroic contributions of outside-the-system saints. (It will be interesting to see in a few years whether the Nashville floods of 2010 warrant a similar level of attention from authors and common reading committees.) Some of the common readings do not fit this mold, but the general tenor of the enterprise appears to be to introduce incoming college freshmen to a worldview congenial to the contemporary college, in which the students can look forward to learning why they should be alienated outsiders to American culture.

Alienation comes in many flavors. The single most assigned book in our study is the two volume anthology, *This I Believe*, which gathers together some of the essays National Public Radio solicited from listeners willing to share their core convictions on life. The "This I Believe" page on NPR's website gives the dominant flavor of these testimonials. Asian-American identity novelist Amy Tan believes in ghosts; Mexican-American novelist Luis Urrea (*The Devil's Highway*, chosen by three colleges in our study) believes in "lending attention," as opposed to "paying attention." Down-and-out Eve Birch believes that middleclass people who become impoverished should learn the helpful ways of those who have always been poor and that we should all be neighbors and share the wealth. Former White House advisor and leftist activist Van Jones believes in green jobs for urban youth. Almost all the "This I Believe" statements likewise set out a positive point in strong, confident language; but most of them are also sharp rejections of what the authors posit as the usual course of American life. Generally they amount to vignettes of self-definition by way of disdain for traditional values, casting off accepted ideals, or ironically re-appropriating such values and ideals for some counter-cultural goal.

Major Findings

The National Association of Scholars began this study without a hypothesis. We were simply interested in the rise of an academic innovation that seemed to be aligned with our ideal of fostering a stronger focus in undergraduate education on common reading and well-grounded dialogue. What we found, however, gives us several causes for concern:

- **Missed opportunities.** The common reading programs offer an excellent opportunity for colleges to set a tone for freshmen. This could and should be the point where colleges introduce students to some serious work, in the form of literature, scholarship, or philosophical inquiry. But few of the books actually chosen by colleges and universities as common reading rise to this level. Instead the common reading books are pretty close to high school level. The opportunity to move students to the next level has been missed.
- **Only four classic texts.** They are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*, and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. This is a very meager haul for the common reading programs, and of the four only *Walden* and *Huckleberry Finn* really have standing as works that every educated American should read. While we are glad to see the inclusion of at least a few classic books, these four are not very challenging texts.

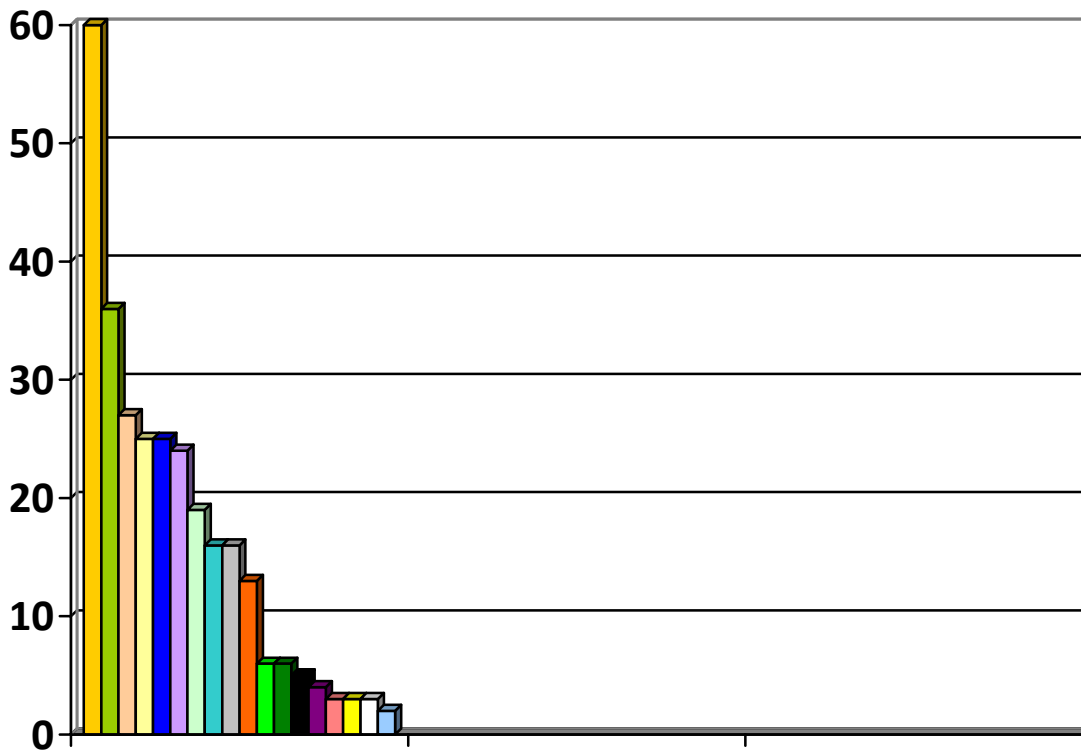
- **Only four books written before the 20th century:** *Frankenstein*, *Walden*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. The common readings overwhelmingly represent contemporary living writers. That undercuts the important role of colleges in helping students come into possession of the great writings that define their civilization.
- **Multiculturalism/Immigration/Racism is the dominant theme.** By far the largest number of colleges with common reading programs selected books that fell into this category. This is a bundle of themes that most students have been saturated with since kindergarten. We question whether in their introduction to college they need once again to be subjected to this form of attitudinizing.
- **The choices by and large reflect leftist political perspectives.** Even where the books themselves may convey more complex social views, most of the books on the list fit neatly with the agenda of the campus left: anti-Western, anti-business, multi-cultural, environmentalist, and alienated. The books do signal what lies ahead for students in many colleges: a four-year program of more of the same. We suspect that the people who make the selections are not really aware of how they have so dramatically narrowed their choices. Nor are we urging colleges to “balance” the list by adding other political perspectives. Rather we urge colleges to choose books of intrinsic educational importance.
- **Absence of books that reflect conservative values.** We found dozens of assigned books that promote liberal causes and dozens that represent a liberal sensibility. We found none that promote conservative causes and only three books (*The End of the Spear* at Grace College, *Searching for God Knows What* at Abilene Christian University, and *Cry, The Beloved Country* at John Brown University) that promote any kind of traditionalist sensibility. Both of these exceptions are books about Christian faith assigned at Christian colleges. Again, we do not seek an artificial “balance” of liberal and conservative books, but our study brings to light a now well-documented instance of systemic liberal bias in American colleges and universities. Since the existence of this bias is strongly disputed by some experts on higher education, this is an important finding.

Our study is open-ended, and we hope the data and our attempts to analyze it spur other attempts in the same direction. **We also hope to prompt colleges that have pursued this worthy experiment to improve their book choices. And we would like to encourage other colleges to take up common reading programs.** It would be better, of course, if students arrived in college already possessing a fund of common reading of important books. It would also be better if more colleges adopted core curricula that ensure a stronger base of common readings among their students. But while we wait for those systematic reforms, we think common reading programs have a potentially important role to play.

Recommendations

We recommend that colleges continue the experiment of common reading programs. Common reading isn't a general solution to the problem of college students who have a fragmentary grasp of Western civilization and little in common with each other beyond popular culture and their immersion in the ideological clichés of our time. But common reading is, in principle, a step forward. To make that step genuinely worthwhile, the choice of books must be improved. We recommend that colleges:

- 1. Choose books that challenge students intellectually.**
- 2. Pay deliberate attention to important books from earlier eras.**
- 3. Break bad habits. Choosing books that cheerlead for popular causes or reinforce a political sensibility is a bad habit.**
- 4. Keep it a *book* program, not a DNA, DVD, or a Diego Rivera mural program.**
- 5. Mix it up. Alienation and oppression are important themes but so are courage, fidelity, redemption, self-sacrifice, fellowship, and truth, among others.**
- 6. Bring new people into the selection committee from year to year. A stale committee makes stale choices.**
- 7. Consult outside sources. The National Endowment for the Arts program The Big Read has many worthy picks. Look for a list of top ten books for college freshmen from NAS in early 2011. Be sure to consult it before selecting next year's book.**



- Multiculturalism/Immigration/Racism
- Environmentalism/Animal Rights/Food
- Islamic World
- New Age/Spiritual/Philosophy
- Holocaust/Genocide/War/Disaster
- Society/Poverty/Women
- Disability/Disease
- Memoirs/Novels of Overcoming Adversity
- Mind/Technology/Economy
- Science
- Fantasy/Sci-Fi
- Classics
- Despair
- Slavery
- Rapacious Capitalism
- Historical Speculation
- Uncategorized
- Ideas About Education