Beach Books: 2014-2016. What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?

National Association of Scholars

www.nas.org/beachbooks (will go live February 9)
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Overview

- Hundreds of American colleges and universities assign a summer reading to entering freshmen, often the only book they will read in common with their classmates.

- This study of common readings covers more than 350 colleges and universities for the academic years 2014-2015 and 2015-16.

- Most colleges see the key purpose of a common reading program as fostering community on campus and student activism in the world.

- Colleges rarely assign classic texts.

- The common reading genre is parochial, contemporary, commercial, optimistic, juvenile, obsessed with suffering, and progressive.

The Findings

1. **Dominated by Mediocre, New Books.** Most common readings are recent, trendy, and intellectually unchallenging books.

2. **Predominantly Progressive.** Common readings usually emphasize progressive political themes—illegal immigrants contribute positively to America, the natural environment must be saved now.

3. **Not Intended for Academic Preparation.** Colleges choose their common readings to build community and encourage activism rather than to prepare students for academic life.

4. **A Homogeneous Market.** Publishers and authors market a homogenized product to a predictable, profitable market of college selection committees. Students are the captive readership.

5. **Recent.** More than half of common reading assignments (58% in 2014, 60% in 2015) were published between 2010 and the present. Only 17 assignments out of 738 (2.3%) were published before 1945.

6. **Nonfiction.** 71% of assignments in 2014 and 75% of assignments in 2015 were memoirs, biographies, essays, and other non-fiction.

7. **Almost No Classics.** Only a handful of colleges assigned works that could be considered classics.
Recommendations

1. **Higher Standards**: Common reading selection committees should choose classic books more often, expect their students to read mature books, and select students who can meet those expectations.

2. **Independent Judgment**: Selection committees should exercise independent judgment rather than simply rewarding publishers for their effective marketing.

Honorable Mentions

- **Le Moyne College**: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (2015-16).
- **Queens University of Charlotte**: Adam Johnson, *The Orphan Master’s Son* (2014-15).
- **University of Kansas**: Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (2015-16).

Conclusion

Common reading programs are a good idea in principle, but as they stand now they are largely a wasted opportunity. Common reading committees should choose better, more challenging, and more intellectually diverse books. NAS recommends 80 such books.

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About the National Association of Scholars: The National Association of Scholars is a network of scholars and citizens united by their commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education. It upholds the standards of a liberal arts education that fosters intellectual freedom, searches for the truth, and promotes virtuous citizenship.