

## INTRODUCTION

To look at eleven years of common reading assignments together is to confirm the snapshot each year’s analysis provides. College common readings record with exquisite precision the progressive concerns of the day. The individual books change each year, but common readings perennially promote progressive politics.

Common reading selections partly reflect the constraints on their selection committees. Each year colleges admit large number of students who have not yet read a college-level book and some of whom have never read a full-length adult book at all. Faculty and staff members on selection committees all over the country have reported this problem. Another constraint is that common reading programs largely leave students the voluntary choice of whether to read the common readings, and there is no academic requirement to motivate students to read the assigned book. Selection committees therefore face an unpleasant choice between selecting college-level books that few incoming students will read or selecting juvenile books that will appeal to a larger portion of the incoming class. We have the greatest sympathy for committees forced by these circumstances to make unpleasant compromises.

But within these constraints, selection committees are responsible for a further, unnecessary restriction. Overwhelmingly, they choose books that promote progressive politics. This voluntary restriction, and not the committees’ external constraints, is what ensures that common reading selections are overwhelmingly bland, homogenous, literarily undistinguished exercises in progressive propaganda. By far the most frequently assigned book between 2007/2008 and 2017/2018 was Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), assigned at 201 colleges. Common reading study guides for Skloot’s book transform a softly progressive narrative into a hard-sell to justify universal, government-provided health insurance.<sup>1</sup> Such study guides showcase leading questions: “Recent political discourse and controversy has surrounded the issue of affordable health care in the United States. How do the story of Henrietta Lacks and her family impact this issue?”<sup>2</sup> Invariably, the story “impacts” the issue by directing students to take the argument for government health care as a moral given. A common reading, intended to introduce students to collegiate inquiry, slips swiftly into an advertisement for progressive politics.

The second most frequently assigned book was Wes Moore’s *The Other Wes Moore* (2010), selected at 109 colleges. Common reading discussion guides turn Wes Moore’s blandly inspirational memoir into a tool for building support for the Federal Pell Grants education subsidy. Once again, the

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1 Stanley Kurtz, “Obama’s Secret Weapon: Henrietta Lacks,” *National Review Online*, August 19, 2013, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/obamas-secret-weapon-henrietta-lacks-stanley-kurtz/>.

2 University of South Florida, Henrietta Lacks Handout, <http://www.usf.edu/atle/documents/handout-henrietta-lacks.pdf>.

narrative supports leading questions: “How did the cutting of the Basic Educational Opportunity Grants impact Mary Moore and her goal of attending college? How do you think it changed the future for her family?”<sup>3</sup>

Assemble the most popular books, and a full map of progressive dogma emerges. Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2014) (76 colleges)—students should work to spring criminals from jail, via the Equal Justice Initiative.<sup>4</sup> Sonia Nazario’s *Enrique’s Journey: The Story of a Boy’s Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother* (2006) (52 colleges)—we should legalize illegal immigrants.<sup>5</sup> Dave Eggers’ *Zeitoun* (2009) (38 colleges)—evil Republicans cause hurricanes that destroy American cities, and then they persecute plaster-saint Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001) (23 colleges)—the American free-market system is awful.

Of the twenty-five most frequently assigned books, only one was published before 2000—Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990) (23 assignments). Twenty out of twenty-five were Nonfiction, Biography, or Memoir, including the eleven most frequently assigned texts. They are, overwhelmingly, books without enduring literary value, written in the bland style of the ghostwriter. They are the cream of that crop—good enough to stand

out among common reading selection committees for a decade. But it is telling that Greg Mortenson’s *Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace ... One School at a Time* (2007) shot to fourth place (74 selections) in the few years before Mortenson was caught out as a serial fibber. His inspirational hokum would probably be second on the list (more than 109 selections) if he hadn’t been caught—because the ideal book of the common reading genre is inspirational hokum.

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The general progressive character of the college common reading genre may be undergoing a further narrowing. The last several years have seen a dramatic concentration of book topics, toward African American experience, and a specific concentration on the penumbra of progressive racial ideologies, such as de-incarceration and micro-aggressions. It may be that this shift is a temporary change, following on the Ferguson Riots of 2015. It may, on the other hand, signal a more enduring narrowing and radicalization of the common reading genre, a shift from the soft-hearted humanitarianism of Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul*

3 Kansas State University, The Other Wes Moore Faculty Guide, [https://www.k-state.edu/ksbn/docs/Wes\\_Moore\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.k-state.edu/ksbn/docs/Wes_Moore_Guide.pdf).

4 David Randall, “Go Sell It On The Campus: *Beach Books* Update,” *Academic Questions* 30 (2017), pp. 471–475.

5 E.g., Sam Houston State University, Common Reader Program Curriculum Activities 2015-2016, <https://www.shsu.edu/dept/fye/documents/Curriculum-Guide-2015-2016-Final.pdf>.

6 Kansas State University, *Zeitoun*, <https://www.k-state.edu/ksbn/zeitoun/ZeitounGuide.pdf>; John Simerman, “Katrina literary hero Abdulrahman Zeitoun convicted of felony stalking,” *The Advocate*, June 6, 2016, [http://www.theadvocate.com/new\\_orleans/news/article\\_44f85201-e42f-50fo-983c-c9ab7ca5ba70.html](http://www.theadvocate.com/new_orleans/news/article_44f85201-e42f-50fo-983c-c9ab7ca5ba70.html).

*Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World* (2003) to the bitter rage of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015). As the academy becomes progressively more radicalized, so too may college common readings. As identity politics become an ever larger portion of the progressive mind, so too may readings focusing on ethnic and sexual identity.

Whether broadly or narrowly progressive, these readings betray that our colleges and universities can no longer conceive of a “common reading” outside the bounds of progressive politics and activism. This fact must be underlined. Progressive activism is no longer confined to identities-studies interdisciplinary programs; it now colors all the putatively “common” aspects of all university education, including not only common reading programs but also admissions, first year experience, student life, residential life, and college mission statements.

We have tabulated 4,754 assignments over the last eleven years at 732 separate institutions, including 1,664 individual texts—and discovered that almost all of them are artifacts of progressive ideology. Behind these assignments are 4,754 separate decisions, each made by up to 50 faculty and administrators. It takes an entire college full of likeminded progressives to make a progressive common reading; it takes a country of progressive academics to make so many likeminded common reading selections. 4,754 common reading selections are a database beyond compare to substantiate the belief that progressive activists have captured the American university.

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The same mass of data also reveals that a small minority of colleges do choose better books. Six percent of common readings were published before 1989, and those common readings include wonderful works, ranging from Homer's *Iliad* to *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* to Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*. These classic selections have passed the test of time and possess considerably higher literary quality than modern common readings. They also offer writing that was not composed to serve today's political agendas. Common reading programs can significantly improve themselves if they adopt the best existing practices of their peers.

Yet we cannot expect reform within the system to do much more than shift the weight of college common readings toward older works within the progressive tradition—a touch fewer choices of *Between the World and Me* and *Just Mercy*, a few more selections of John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* or Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Such improvements would be substantial—but would leave in place the progressive capture of the academy.

The NAS has recommended extensive administrative reforms that we believe would improve the common reading selection process, from changing common reading program mission statements to focus on academic outcomes only to excluding “co-curricular” administrators from the selection committees. We continue to support these reforms. But more must be done.

We now also recommend focused, exterior oversight of common reading programs, by public bodies or boards of trustees. These overseers should publicize common readings’ political skews, and by this publicity invoke the conscience of public opinion to inspire the selection committees to abandon their commitments to progressive politics.

A model for this sort of oversight now exists. In 2017, North Carolina passed into law a Campus Free Speech Act (CFSA), which provides institutional mechanisms to encourage free speech and institutional political neutrality in the University of North Carolina System (UNCS).<sup>7</sup> The CFSA establishes a Committee on Free Expression, whose duties include both “A description of substantial difficulties, controversies, or successes in maintaining a posture of administrative and institutional neutrality with regard to political or social issues” and “Any assessments, criticisms, commendations, or recommendations the Committee sees fit to include.”<sup>8</sup> We recommend that the Committee specifically investigate the UNCS common reading programs to see whether they violate institutional neutrality.<sup>9</sup> After all, a great many common readings in the UNCS channel progressive sentiments and policy positions, including Colin Beavan’s *No Impact Man*; Sonia Nazario’s *Enrique’s Journey*, and Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy*, while no UNCS common readings have provided equivalent support for conservative policy positions.<sup>10</sup> The Committee should then recommend programmatic changes to ensure the institutional neutrality of the UNCS common reading programs, which the Board of Governors could then mandate.

We strongly encourage the North Carolina Committee on Free Expression to take up common reading programs, and we recommend other states to pass similar Campus Free Speech Acts, not least so as to provide a basis for restoring political impartiality to public university common readings. We also recommend the Boards of Trustees at private institutions to take up similar measures on their own—not because private institutions are required to be politically impartial, as public institutions are, but because doing so will help their colleges to live up to the highest ideals of American education. The exact remit of these oversight commissions should vary appropriately from state to state, and from college to college. Yet all should work to ensure that a common reading’s articulation of institutional values escapes the narrow cage of progressive political dogma.

7 General Assembly of North Carolina, Session 2017, Session Law 2017-196, House Bill 527, <https://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2017/Bills/House/PDF/H527v6.pdf>.

8 General Assembly of North Carolina, Session 2017, Session Law 2017-196, House Bill 527, <https://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2017/Bills/House/PDF/H527v6.pdf>.

9 See the detailed recommendation in Stanley Kurtz, “Implementing the North Carolina Campus Free Speech Act,” The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, May 28, 2018, <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2018/05/implementing-the-north-carolina-campus-free-speech-act/>.

10 UNC Chapel Hill, 2015 Summer Reading Program: *Just Mercy*, <http://summerreading.web.unc.edu/previous-books/2015-summer-reading-program-just-mercy/>; UNC Charlotte, Common Reading Experience; <https://uocol.unc.edu/cre/>; UNC Wilmington, Common Reading, <https://uncw.edu/commonreading/archives.html>.

We make this recommendation with the knowledge that all external supervision over a university should be exercised with discretion and a light hand, and with an eye toward preserving a robust climate of academic freedom on campus. We take North Carolina’s CFSA, and the Committee on Free Expression, to embody this discretion and this light hand.

The National Association of Scholars has been inspecting college common readings for most of a decade now. We began by recommending that colleges choose better common readings. As the depth of the political bias in common reading programs became more apparent, we followed up on our first recommendations by recommending that colleges reform their common reading programs. We now have sufficient data on the depth of political bias in common readings nationwide that we have added a recommendation for external oversight upon college common reading programs. We believe the evidence we have gathered warrants this thorough reform.