

RECOMMENDATIONS

New Recommendations: 2018

The NAS proffers continuing recommendations on how to reform common reading programs, intended particularly for faculty, university administrators, and university donors. We print these below. Here we add several new recommendations, partly drawn from the information we have learned by incorporating the data of the last eleven years of common reading selections, and partly as a response to the spike of progressive intolerance and forced conformity that has afflicted academia these last several years.

1. **Adopt External Oversight.** External oversight committees, such as the Committee on Free Expression authorized by North Carolina’s Campus Free Speech Act, should inspect common reading programs and recommend ways to render them politically impartial.
2. **Adopt Best Existing Practices.** Some common reading programs already select classics and recently published intellectually challenging books. Their peers should adopt administrative processes that bring them up to the best existing practices of their peers.
3. **Seek Out Books That Foster Good Academic Character.** Seek books that inform students about the importance of intellectual humility, freedom of speech, individual dissent, and self-control; and that discourage self-righteous certitude, indulgence in outrage, collective activism, and rioting intolerance.
4. **Seek Out Books That Encourage Bipartisan American Unity.** We have predicted that college selection committees in the coming years will be tempted to choose books that channel progressive passions of anti-Trumpism. They should make an explicit effort to choose books that do not serve such political vendettas.
5. **Seek Out Books That Encourage Debate.** Selection committees should select books that challenge students precisely because they do not endorse “institutional values”—which all too often nowadays are statements of progressive dogma.

In addition to these new recommendations, we repeat these older suggestions:

General Selection Principles

1. Seek books that encapsulate intellectual diversity, not books that preach one message.
2. Seek books that stretch students’ minds: neither too short nor too long; neither too simple nor too complex; but sufficient to challenge and delight a young adult’s inquiring mind.
3. Seek books that see man in his moral complexity, and balance between Pollyanna optimism and cynical contempt.



4. Seek works of fiction that combine beauty of language, intellectual complexity, and moral seriousness.
5. Seek works of nonfiction that combine elegance, lucid argument, and respectful awareness that their readers should not be preached at, but persuaded.
6. Seek challenging books in preference to inoffensive ones.
7. Seek out important books from earlier eras.
8. Consult peers who read widely and well and who are intimately acquainted with good books.
9. Consult outside sources, such as the National Association of Scholars' list of Recommended Books (see **Appendix III: Recommended Books for College Common Reading**) or Modern Library's list of 100 Best Novels and 100 Best Nonfiction.¹⁸
10. Avoid books chosen for their subject matter, or books chosen to be inspirational; books chosen on those grounds are usually dull, often poorly written, and seldom distinguished.
11. Avoid books that appear in publishers' First-Year Experience catalogs.
12. Seek out books that will lift up the institution's academic standards and contribute to its intellectual reputation.

Mission Statements

Common reading programs' mission statements should be altered to include some or all of the following elements:

1. **Academic Outcomes Only:** Common reading programs should focus exclusively on preparing students for college-level academic work.
2. **Academic Assessments Only:** Common reading programs should focus exclusively on assessing their success at preparing students for college-level academic work.
3. **Selection Criterion: Full-Length Books:** Common reading programs should select at least one full-length book, with a minimum of 50,000 words of college-level prose (the length of *The Great Gatsby*) or 5,000 words of prosodically sophisticated poetry.
4. **Selection Criterion: Older Works:** Common reading programs should require, or give strong preference to: 1) books written before 1923, and hence in the public domain; 2) books written by dead authors; and/or 3) books published at least 20 years in the past.
5. **Selection Criterion: Intellectual Complexity:** Common reading programs should commit to selecting intellectually complex books, appropriate for college-level discussion.

¹⁸ Modern Library, "Top 100," <http://www.modernlibrary.com/top-100/>.



6. **Selection Criterion: Literary Quality:** Common reading programs should require books that exemplify beautiful writing, and are not merely efficient conveyors of information.
7. **Selection Criterion: Fiction:** Common reading programs should give strong preference to works of fiction. Common readings should seek to develop literary readers, whose imaginative empathy contributes to the habits of good citizenship.
8. **Selection Criterion: Translations:** Common reading programs should seek out works in translation. Colleges and universities should aim to introduce students to the broader world, and not be parochially reliant on English-speaking American authors.
9. **Selection Criterion: Mature Protagonists:** Common reading programs should seek out works of fiction with mature protagonists, which will introduce college students, as they enter adulthood, to the way that adults through the centuries have thought, felt, and behaved.
10. **Selection Criterion: Local Subject Matter:** Common reading programs should seek out works by alumni, works about the institution, and works about the institution's locality or state.
11. **Selection Criterion: Common American Character:** Common reading programs should seek out books that emphasize what Americans share in common rather than to books that emphasize what divides them.

If they are all adopted, the Selection Criteria of Translations, Mature Protagonists, Local Subject Matter, and Common American Character should be harmonized as much as possible. Where they conflict, the order of priority should be Common American Character, Local Subject Matter, Mature Protagonists, and Translations. Selection committees might consider dedicating one slot apiece on common reading shortlists for books in each of these four categories.

Faculty Management

We recommend administrative reforms to shift the management of common reading programs from the “co-curricular” bureaucracy to the faculty.

1. **Committees of Professors:** Common reading committees should be staffed exclusively by professors and librarians.
2. **Management by Regular Disciplinary Departments:** A majority of common reading committee members should be professors in regular disciplinary departments that specialize in teaching students how to read books (e.g., English, History, Philosophy).
3. **Tenured Professors as Committee Chairs:** Common reading committees should select tenured professors as their chairs.

4. **Small Committees:** Common reading selection committees should consist of no more than 5 members.
5. **Small Shortlists:** Common reading committees should have shortlists of no more than 5 books, so as to allow committee members the time to read each book carefully.
6. **Consultation with Composition Departments:** Composition (writing) professors and instructors ought to be consulted during book selection.
7. **Appointment of Student Discussion Leaders:** Committee members should choose discussion leaders from senior Literature majors, Literature graduate students, or equivalently trained students, properly compensated for their time.
8. **Selection of Academic Speakers:** Common reading committees should select professors, or other figures whose interests are primarily intellectual, to speak at lectures, symposia, and other events linked to the common reading.
9. **Composition of Associated Materials:** Common reading committees should compose their own discussion guides, essay prompts, and other associated materials.
10. **Voluntary Professorial Adoption:** Common reading committees should select books that professors throughout the institution will voluntarily integrate into their syllabi.
11. **Professorial Recompense:** All committee members should have their teaching load (or equivalent library duties) reduced by at least 1 course a year.

Program Structure

Common reading programs also should be reformed by a series of measures not directly related to establishing faculty management.

1. **Disciplinary Alternation:** Common reading programs charged with selecting *multidisciplinary* books should set up a regular disciplinary alternation, in which successive common readings focus on different disciplines.
2. **Voluntary Readings:** Common reading programs should adopt more advanced books as voluntary common readings.
3. **Discussion Goals:** Common reading discussions should aim to elicit thoughtful critique of the text and lively disagreement among students.
4. **Writing Requirements:** Common readings should be integrated with academic writing assignments, as part of a regular class.
5. **Divorce from Activism:** Common readings should not promote pledges, service-learning, civic engagement, or activism of any kind.

6. **Divorce from Sponsoring Administrative Sub-units:** Common reading programs should cut all ties to administrative subunits such as Offices of Diversity or Civic Engagement.
7. **Reduce or Cap Speaker Fees:** Funds previously dedicated to speaker fees should be transferred toward subsidizing common reading book purchases for students.
8. **Fiscal Transparency:** Common reading programs should be fiscally transparent, and publicize all costs on their websites.

Donors

Common reading programs often depend on special subsidies from outside donors. We direct the following recommendations to donors considering supporting common reading programs.

1. **Condition Support:** Donors should only fund common reading programs that adopt the mission statements and administrative structures recommended above.
2. **Require Documentation:** Donors should require common reading programs to inform them about teaching guides, lecture selections, and all other ancillary materials.
3. **Time-Limit Funding:** Donors should provide temporary funding for common reading programs, and never endow them.
4. **Thematic Support:** Donors should fund common readings linked to themes such as Classical Learning, Intellectual Diversity, or Institutions of American Liberty.

Institutions of Higher Education

Colleges and universities as a whole must also change their policies so as to make common readings useful components of the education they offer. We make only one recommendation:

1. Tighten college admission standards so as to select a student body with the capacity and desire to read a challenging book.

Common reading programs cannot expect to succeed without this essential support from their institutions as a whole.