

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION *of* SCHOLARS

Study Finds Improvement in College Common Reading Programs, But Much Work To Do

New York, NY (September 26, 2019) — American colleges and universities are beginning to choose better books, but common reading programs are still overwhelmingly designed to indoctrinate students with progressive propaganda, concludes *Beach Books 2018-2019*. This report, published by the National Association of Scholars, is the most recent edition of the nation's only comprehensive study of college common readings.

“Common readings are perceptibly better than in years past,” said report author David Randall. “For the last ten years, college reading programs have become overwhelmingly homogeneous. This is the first year that we’ve seen a number of colleges venture off the beaten path and away from activism-oriented books.”

Beach Books 2018-2019 analyzes 518 new college common reading selections at 475 institutions. Of those assignments, 19% fell into the category Civil Rights/Racism/Slavery, 15% into the category Crime and Punishment/ Police, and 25% into African American; in 2017 the corresponding numbers were 21%, 16%, and 25%. That’s a modest decrease in homogeneity, but still a considerable increase compared with 2014, when the corresponding numbers were 11%, 10%, and 16%.

College common readings are mostly: politically progressive, designed to promote activism, confined to American authors, juvenile, recent, and nonfiction.

NAS makes recommendations for improving common reading programs, such as creating external oversight committees to ensure that college readings remain apolitical. We also recommend that donors only fund programs that adopt these reforms.

NAS recommends **150 better books** to welcome freshmen to the life of the mind. This year’s **20 new recommendations** include Euripides’ *Medea*, Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Heart of a Dog*, Yasunari Kawabata’s *Snow Country*, and Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

This year we also added advice to would-be common reading authors, such as *Set up a booth at the First Year Experience Conference* and *Charge less to visit a campus than Ta-Nehisi Coates or Bryan Stevenson*. The worst common reading books are frequently the most popular ones.

“Colleges should not cheat students out of an excellent education. They should expose students to great books: books that explore the great mysteries of being human; books that pose hard questions; books that demonstrate excellent writing and excite students to think and write well,” said NAS president Peter Wood. “Colleges need to demonstrate value. Common readings can and should push students to excellence.”

Download the report at nas.org/beachbooks19

Honorable Mentions

Every year some colleges choose better books. NAS has selected 18 institutions for “Honorable Mention.” These schools chose books that treat academic subjects with verve and originality, books open to the broader world, and fine works of literature. This year these were:

- Arizona State University, School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership: Henry Brooks Adams, *Democracy: An American Novel* (1880)
- Bucknell University: Anne Carson, *Antigonick* (2012)
- Carthage College: W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903)
- CUNY Baruch College: Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America* (2004)
- Florida College: John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (1946)
- Harding University: C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952)
- Los Angeles Valley College: Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)
- Luther College: Homer, *The Odyssey* (ca. 800 BC)
- Mansfield University of Pennsylvania: Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886)
- Moravian College: John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (1946)
- Princeton University: Keith Whittington, *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech* (2018)
- Rutgers University, Honors College: Stephen Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (2018)
- The King’s College: William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1606)
- University of California, Santa Cruz, Rachel Carson College: John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)
- University of Central Florida: Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942)
- University of Mississippi: William Faulkner, *Collected Stories* (1950)
- University of Nebraska Omaha: Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918)
- University of Pennsylvania: Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927)

NAS is a network of scholars and citizens united by a commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education. Membership in NAS is open to all who share a commitment to these broad principles. NAS publishes a journal and has state and regional affiliates. Visit NAS at www.nas.org.

###

If you would like more information about this issue, please email Chance Layton at layton@nas.org