

## Assessed benefits of a Common Reading: Growing a comprehensive program

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### Abstract

Assessment on Washington State University's Common Reading Program indicates that students' involvement in the program positively affects their first-year experience and understanding of research within a university. The data also show an increase in beneficial effects when the program is more comprehensive in scope, both in programming and in university partners.

Surveys are administered using WSU's Skylight system. An e-mail invitation is sent to all freshmen during their second semester. Demographic and sorting information is gathered along with questions designed to ascertain respondents' level of involvement with the Common Reading. Directly after answering the demographic questions, students are asked to rate their experiences in a section titled "First Semester Experience." The questions regarding the first-year experience are asked separately from those about the Common Reading program, but analysis of the responses allows correlations to be made between students' experience with the reading program and their self-assessment with regard to key first-year goals.

In the first year of assessment there was a statistically significant improvement in the students' responses to first semester experience questions that correlated with the students' having at least two classes that addressed the Common Reading. The second year of data showed that students scored their experiences higher than they had in the first year with the greatest improvement shown in their "understanding of research that goes on at the university." This overall improvement can be linked to a more comprehensive Common Reading Program that introduced students to university research through a faculty lecture series.

### The Five Statements

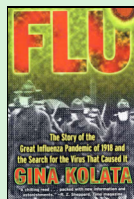
- My first semester, I felt like part of the academic community at WSU
- I had the opportunity to engage in informal discussions with faculty
- I was introduced to a rich diversity of ideas
- I felt a sense of community and common ground with other students
- I UNDERSTAND THE TYPES OF RESEARCH THAT GO ON AT A UNIVERSITY

### Assessed Benefits

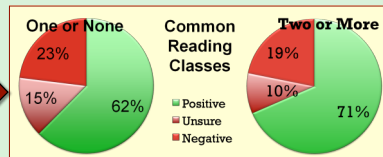
In 2007, students who reported having two or more classes that used the Common Reading in any capacity rated their experiences significantly more positively ( $p = 0.031$ ) than students who reported having only one or no classes that used the Common Reading. While individual questions did not show difference of statistical significance, it is important to note that each measure of engagement with the Common Reading program did yield measurable enhancement of students' first semester experience.

This grouping by number of classes that addressed the Common Reading includes students who may or may not have even read the book. While it is true that students in classes that used the book would be more likely, because of circumstance, to have read it, some of that cohort of students may have benefited from the continuity of having faculty who engaged with the Common Reading program while performing the reading at various levels of success.

Results have been grouped as positive (including somewhat and strongly agree) or negative (including somewhat and strongly disagree) there are also student responses of "unsure." To gain a high enough number of responses to find statistical significance, answers to the 5 Questions were grouped. No results were omitted.



The students who showed the most positive rate of responses to the statements based on the Common Reading outcomes were, in fact, those who reported having two or more classes that used the Common Reading. One interesting thing to note is that this group includes students who may or may not have read the book.



### Growth of our Common Reading Program

**2007** Students were involved with the CR primarily in residence halls and in learning community courses. WSU Libraries provided research guides and displays about the 1918 Flu epidemic. The only university-wide events were an author lecture and a campus visit from *The Columbian Exchange* author Alfred Crosby, who was featured prominently in the CR text for his research he performed while a faculty member at Washington State.

**2008** After assessing our program, we introduced a semester-long weekly faculty lecture series. Freshmen attended lectures by anthropology, forensic ecology, women's studies, and English faculty, among others.



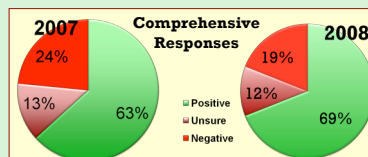
More than 2000 attended the author lecture. More than 1300 student attendees were recorded during the faculty lecture series.

After the 3<sup>rd</sup> lecture, short assessments were given to lecture attendees.

Although 79% indicated that they had attended because of course requirement or extra credit, 60% indicated that they found the presentations interesting. 41% said they would like to learn more about the subject.

### Increase in Benefits for Students

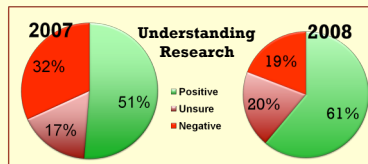
Students' assessment of all five first semester experience statements were higher in our 2<sup>nd</sup> year of assessment than in our first. The introduction of a more comprehensive program, linking our Common Reading with the larger university community, made it more difficult to pinpoint the variable contributing to higher responses. Another variable that must be further examined is how interesting students found the book, which was dramatically higher in 2008.



### "Understanding of research that goes on at the University"

The 5 statements were presented to students in a section of the questionnaire titled *My First Semester Experience*. The "Understanding Research" statement was the lowest overall scoring of the 5 Statements. An important aim of the Common Reading program has been to introduce students to the types of research that go on at a Research I institution like Washington State University. This deficit in students' awareness of university research shows that the goal of introducing students to the research work that goes on in a university is an important one.

The books that have been selected, Gina Kolata's *Flu*, Mary Roach's *Stiff*, as well as *Omnivore's Dilemma*, by Michael Pollan, were selected because the subject matters are interdisciplinary and can be used to introduce students to research being done by faculty at WSU.



### Broader Research Initiative:

Our team is seeking institutions which would like to participate in assessment similar to what we have done at WSU. This project will help us better understand the effects that Common Reading programs have on FYE as well as what variables impact student experience.

We are more than happy to assist in applying for IRB approval as well as providing some basic reading of your collected data.

All data collected will be turned over to individual programs, while we will use aggregate data to address these broader issues. There will be no cost to participating programs. Any publication of results will not name institutions, but will provide only relevant institutional characteristics.

2007 Author Lecture + alumni visit + residence life programming + libraries + learning community courses

2008 (Continued fall semester only programming) + added weekly faculty lecture series

2009 Added spring semester programs + college collaboration + new partners + book used in many more courses