

What Do We Mean by “Common” in a Common Reading?

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The Context: Some questions

“What are colleges seeking from [the emerging canon of] books? What is this common language we want our college students—not to say citizens—to share?”

--Jennifer Finney Boylan, “A Common Core for All of Us,”
New York Times Op-Ed, March 2014

“Common” seems simple, but

- if we aren't clear about the “common” goals of our programs, we create opportunities for frustration, dissension and controversy;
- and the predominate discussion becomes about book selection rather than about what our campus does with a book to advance those goals.

What DO we mean by “common”? And can this question point the national discussion and our own programs in new directions?

Some Possible Definitions

1. Advancement of a **shared set of values or cultural touch points**, which places the primary focus on the book selection.

The National Association of Scholars assumes this definition and encourages the adoption of classic works. They note with alarm the common reading “industry” of “recent, trendy, and intellectually unchallenging books” that “frequently emphasize progressive themes” or serve “as an excuse to promote political agendas.”

Beach Books: 2013-14, What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class? pp. 5, 22.

2. Introduction to common expectations of an academic community, which places emphasis on the messaging that accompanies the book.

- What are the common expectations?
- How and to whom are these expectations communicated?

3. Shared behavior or experience that creates a sense of community, affiliation, or belonging.

- How is this commonality communicated and fostered?
- What participation or contact with the book is required? What is encouraged?

4. Shared intellectual space to which various sectors of a university bring their perspective to a common topic or problem.

- Where and how are multidisciplinary and integrated thinking about a common text developed?
- How is this communicated, and to whom?

Some Questions to Consider

1. What is your campus's definition of "common" within your common reading program?
2. What opportunities does that definition bring to your campus?
3. Has your campus experienced challenges due to misunderstandings of the definition?
4. How might your campus better communicate your definition of "common" to your internal and external audiences?
5. How might your campus demonstrate the effectiveness of that approach?

Closing Comments

If we are clearer about our goals and the ways we enact them with a common text, perhaps we will find a more productive conversation that moves beyond text selection.

- “When a college or university respects opposing views, promotes study ahead of action, patiently seeks evidence for hypotheses, esteems the wisdom the others, and finds wonder in both new discoveries and ancient knowledge—it will show students what higher learning really is.” --NAS, *Beach Books: 2013-2014*, p. 52
- “Having a language in common doesn’t mean we have to agree with one another. It simply means that we—as a family, a college or a country—can engage in a meaningful conversation about the life of the mind.” —Jennifer Finney Boylan, “a Common Core for All of Us”

Thank you for attending this session and participating in the discussion!

We welcome your feedback on the session evaluation forms and in further conversation.

--Rebecca, Steven, Daphne, Jared, and Karen