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# Facing the Book Gap: Colleges Across the Country Create Programs to Combat Reading's Decline

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# FACING THE BOOK GAP

*Colleges across the country create programs to combat reading's decline*

By JoAnne Young and Betty Porter

**C**arolyn Martin, Provost of Cornell University, introduces Cornell's new student reading program with a concern about the decline in reading, especially among traditional college-age students. While they may still read, what they read has changed—contemporary communications tools promote brief, simplified communications, i.e., email, text messaging and captions on a television screen. She points out that this kind of reading is quickly forgotten. What students need is a return to the focused reading of literature that stimulates thinking and contributes to who we are and what we do ([www.reading.cornell.edu/welcome.html](http://www.reading.cornell.edu/welcome.html)). From a review of web sites of colleges and universities across the country, it appears that many academicians share Provost Martin's concern.

***Reading skills and experiences will not be lost if academic institutions can help it!***

Reading good literature as a means to forging a common within the academic community is intrinsic to the academic experience. Common reading programs are notable initiatives at many Jesuit colleges and universities. Typically they require students to read, before arriving on campus, a book that exemplifies the values the institution wishes to advocate. The books are chosen by a broad-based campus committee and given or sold at cost to first year and transfer students, often as an integral component of a first year experience program. For an example of this as an orientation activity, see Marquette University's Manresa Project ([www.marquette.edu/manresa/students/FirstYearReading.shtml](http://www.marquette.edu/manresa/students/FirstYearReading.shtml)); or, as a first semester or year long program integrated with an initiative of another focus, check Cornell's First Year Writing Seminars ([www.cornell.edu/our/nsri](http://www.cornell.edu/our/nsri)).

Some are designed for the entire college, such as Indiana University South Bend's One Book, One College program ([www.iusb.edu/~libg/onebook/](http://www.iusb.edu/~libg/onebook/)). Others take a more modest approach and limit the common reading program to a department or special program e.g., University of Texas-San Antonio's Learning Communities ([www.utsa.edu/lc/index.htm](http://www.utsa.edu/lc/index.htm)), and Santa Clara University Library's 'Book of the Quarter' program ([www.scu.edu/library/info/news/boq/homepage.html](http://www.scu.edu/library/info/news/boq/homepage.html)).

A few programs that began as a summer common reading program have evolved to a more innovative experience, such as Seattle University's "Academic Salon." ([www.seattleu.edu/academicSalons/index.htm](http://www.seattleu.edu/academicSalons/index.htm)).

***The rationales for this movement in a selection of schools offer similar themes***

"The goal of the First Year Book Program (FYB) is to provide a shared intellectual experience for all new students with the opportunity to discuss the book from a variety of disciplines.... The FYB program is also about community." (University of Maryland web site, [www.firstyearbook.umd.edu](http://www.firstyearbook.umd.edu)). "Kalamazoo's Summer Common Reading Program helps entering students, in collaboration with faculty, staff and Peer Leaders explore the world of ideas, the basis of our academic life together." ([www.kzoo.edu/fye/](http://www.kzoo.edu/fye/)).

"...We are excited to offer you the opportunity to participate in LSU's first Student Reading Program, a program designed to introduce you to the academic and intellectual

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culture of the University through a common reading experience... ([www.app1003.lsu.edu/srp/](http://www.app1003.lsu.edu/srp/)).

However stated, the predominant reasons focus around:

- building a sense of community among first year students,
- introducing students to the expectations of the institution of higher education,
- drawing the attention of students to social issues of the day,
- setting a common ground for conversations in classrooms and community,
- providing an example of the philosophical underpinnings of a liberal education,
- establishing an intellectual expectation for college life,
- encouraging students to read.

Common reading programs have come of age during the last ten years. The University of Maryland's First Year Book Program dates from 1994. Northwood University's common reading program, Omniquest, dates to the 1990-91 academic year. Perhaps this signals an awareness of the unique characteristics of the millennial student, or is in response to the experiential concerns heard among academics that students:

- have not been challenged to read,
- need a vehicle for building a sense of community,
- have unclear expectations of an academic experience, or
- need an activity designed to ease the transition from high school to college.

A review of the web sites for the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition ([www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr/index/html](http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr/index/html)), One Book, One College: Common Reading Programs ([www.homepages.gac.edu/~fister/onbook.html](http://www.homepages.gac.edu/~fister/onbook.html)), and Read Like a College Student ([www.smu.edu/alec/read-like.html](http://www.smu.edu/alec/read-like.html)) present more background on the rationale for common book programs. These sites also offer suggestions for topics, texts, programming and relevant program development.

Some are advocated and led by the institution's library, others are guided by an academic team, while a few are under the umbrella of student development. Whoever the parent organization is, the programs are generally broad-based involving professional staff, librarians and teaching faculty. Some include more experienced students as peer leaders or mentors. Most



An Xavier University student shares a moment with a young boy from Ghana, while participating in the Academic Service Learning Semester.

accounts indicate that the reading selection is chosen by a committee or the library; a few institutions include student suggestions, asking this year's class what might be a good choice for the next. A few programs rely on the program leader, generally a faculty member, for book selection.

There is an effort to select books that are contemporary (*The Kite Runner*), controversial (*The High Price of Materialism*), popular (*Tuesdays with Morrie*), easily read (*Riding the Bus with My Sister*). Topics most frequently address issues of social justice (*Dead Men Walking*), social consciousness (*Nickel and Dimed*), gender and ethnic diverse (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*), environmental sensitivity (*Evolution*), globalization (*Travels of a T-Shirt in a Global Economy*) and understanding others (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*). Examples of text choices from most colleges and universities can be found on the National Recourse Center for the First Year Experience web site

*Should students  
get the books free  
or buy them?*



*Nickel and Dimed • Reading Lolita in Tehran • Dead Man Walking*

and at the Library of Congress' list of "One Book" Reading Promotions ([www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html](http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html)).

Among proponents of these programs there is considerable dialog on discussion lists (Summer reading@appstate.edu), blogs and emails about the best approach, who should lead and other operational issues. For example a recent exchange addresses the value of giving students the book vs. having students purchase it, perhaps at a subsidized cost. Here the question is whether students will place less value on a book that is 'free' than one they must buy. Another addresses how to reinforce the value of the experience for students. Is the reading program just one more requirement, or is it a segue to an experience that will benefit them directly. Operational concerns such as the cost of bringing a speaker to campus, the speaking skill of individual authors, and relevance of particular texts to themes are openly investigated.

Instituting a common reading program within a first year experience or independently is not an iso-

lated initiative. Most successful programs have multiple dimensions: reading the book, participating in discussion sessions, attending lectures and visits by the author, text-relevant web sites, and most valued, the integration of the book and its topic into a course or courses. Success of a common reading program is not without costs. A successful program requires an institutional commitment that is comprehensive and ongoing. All dimensions of the institution — academic, student life, and library — should have a vital role. The commitment must be shared by administrators, faculty and staff. Integration of the goals of the program into academic offerings and social programming is fundamental. Resources in staff time and a realistic allocation of dollars are essential. In a world of tight budgets, strong competition from other programs and increased competition for the best students, continued common reading program success and expansion will also need nurturing. The program goals, while complex, must be clearly stated and measurable. Both students and faculty will have to demonstrate that they work. ■

## SOLIDARITY AROUND KATRINA

In our last issue (Spring 2006) we published an article by A. "Larry" Lorenz about the effects of Katrina on two Jesuit educational institutions in the south: Loyola University New Orleans and Spring Hill College. It gave a good picture of the hard work and generosity the catastrophe inspired, and especially of the solidarity shown by other Jesuit colleges and universities around the country. Unfortunately, the list of those schools published with the article (not supplied by its author) turns out to have been unofficial and very incomplete, naming only 16 of our 28, while in fact every one of them pitched in to offer support of various kinds. With sincere apologies to those left out, we now publish the official data supplied by the AJCU. It prompts renewed admiration for the combined resources of our network and reiterated gratitude for the generosity of these sister schools.

John J. O'Callaghan, S.J.  
*Chair, National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education*

Boston College .....	80
Canisius College .....	20
College of the Holy Cross .....	11
Creighton .....	50
Fairfield University .....	34
Fordham University .....	58
Georgetown University .....	65
Gonzaga University .....	17
John Carroll University .....	18
Le Moyne College .....	14
Loyola Chicago .....	252
Loyola College .....	62
Loyola Marymount .....	51
Marquette University .....	42
Regis .....	42
Rockhurst .....	20
Saint Joseph's University .....	38
Saint Louis University .....	130
Saint Peter's College .....	8
Santa Clara .....	33
Seattle .....	25
Spring Hill .....	76
University of Detroit-Mercy .....	5
University of San Francisco .....	70
University of Scranton .....	8
Wheeling .....	1
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