

MECHANICS OF COMMON READING PROGRAMS

Colleges generally give students—freshmen or the entire community—one book in their common reading programs. Students usually read the book over the summer, so that they can discuss it during orientation or early in the fall semester. Colleges intend these books to introduce new students to academic rigor, to promote community and conversation among the students, and to articulate their institutional values.

It isn't easy to set up or maintain a common reading program. The College of William and Mary just began one in 2015, and getting the program up and running involved the Dean's Office reading lists of common readings assigned at other universities; five separate deans reading and approving the final selection (Oliver Sacks' *Island of the Colorblind*); arranging with Vintage Books to publish a new print run of the book so that there would be enough copies for the students; mailing a copy of the book and a cover letter from Dean Kate Conley to every incoming student; modifying the syllabus and course assignment of William and Mary's introductory course "Writers about Writing" to incorporate Sacks' book; suggesting to orientation leaders that they use the book in their welcome to incoming freshmen; composing blog posts for the First Year Experience blog to publicize the program; arranging a three-person, interdisciplinary faculty panel on the book in the beginning of September; and adding questions to the students' orientation survey to elicit their feedback on the program. The purchase and mailing alone of the common reading cost more than \$18,000.³

William and Mary hardly exhausted the activities that a common reading program can include. Pomona College chose Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* in 2014 as its common reading, invited Adichie to speak at campus, and set its librarians to write an impressively thorough Library Guide (LibGuide) webpage on the book for the benefit of Pomona students.⁴ Hofstra University (New York), by way of incentive for a voluntary exercise, arranged a Common Reading Essay Contest in 2015 for its incoming students on Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*, with essays to be read and judged by the faculty, and the prize for the top (dog) three essayists a luncheon with Ms. Parks and a free iPad.⁵ William and Mary restricted its selectors to the Dean's Office; Elon University's (North Carolina) Selection Committee includes administrators, librarians, faculty, and students, and they take two years to choose a common reading.⁶ Each of these activities requires at least the payment of salary to administrators and faculty for their time, and further substantial outlays on expenses such as honoraria to visiting authors.

3 Cortney Langley, "William & Mary Launches First Common Book for Freshmen," *William & Mary News & Media*, September 17, 2015, <http://www.wm.edu/news/stories/2015/william--mary-launches-first-common-book-for-freshmen.php>.

4 Claremont Colleges Library, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *Americanah*: Welcome!," <http://libguides.libraries.claremont.edu/c.php?g=317857&p=2120186>.

5 Hofstra University First-Year Connections, "Common Reading Essay Contest," http://www.hofstra.edu/academics/colleges/hclas/fyc/commonreading/commonreading_essaycontest.html.

6 Elon University Common Reading, "Committee Members," http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/special_programs/common_reading/about-committee.xhtml; Elon University Common Reading, "Selection Process," http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/special_programs/common_reading/about-selection.xhtml.

Some colleges encourage faculty to incorporate the common reading into their courses; others incorporate it into required first-year courses. The University of South Florida does both:

First-year students will have the book integrated into their Academic Foundations courses and selected ENC 1102 First Year Composition courses. Other faculty teaching in both undergraduate and graduate courses will include parts of the book in their coursework.⁷

So too does the University of North Carolina, Wilmington: “During the fall, *Chasing Chaos* will be used in First-Year Seminar and various courses of the faculty’s choosing.”⁸ Most colleges still don’t incorporate common reading into their regular curricula, but there are plenty of models to show how it can be done.

Program Goals

Common reading programs aim to familiarize new students with how college students think, read, discuss, and write. They are meant to establish academic standards—and to establish a sense of community among students, both with other students and with the faculty. How well they do either of these things is open to question, but for most of the programs the emphasis falls on community building over academic preparation. Common reading programs focus on creating a sense of community both because they consider it a good in itself and because it is supposed to aid in both *student success* (diligence and excellence at study) and *student retention* (feeling sufficiently motivated not to drop out). Common reading programs are also meant to inculcate institutional identity and institutional goals—under which cover progressive tenets such as *diversity* and *sustainability* often creep in,⁹ but the desire to foster institutional identity also guides (for example) Benedictine colleges to choose books Benedictine in spirit. Books are selected to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, both to satisfy the varieties of student taste and disciplinary interest and so as to get as broad an institutional “buy-in” as possible from the administration and the faculty. The basic rationale, however, is that if students can be brought to care enough about a book to read it, and even think it’s interesting enough to talk about with their friends, they might also care enough about college to make a real go at their education.

We have serious qualms about these program goals—not least because they assume that the typical matriculating college freshman has to be wooed to something so basic as reading a book for pleasure. Neither do we believe they succeed particularly well even on their own terms. Yet we do think these goals are humane in their intent, if flawed in their execution and their consequences.

⁷ University of South Florida Common Reading Experience (CRE), “2015-2016 Book Selection,” <http://www.usf.edu/undergrad/cre/index.aspx>.

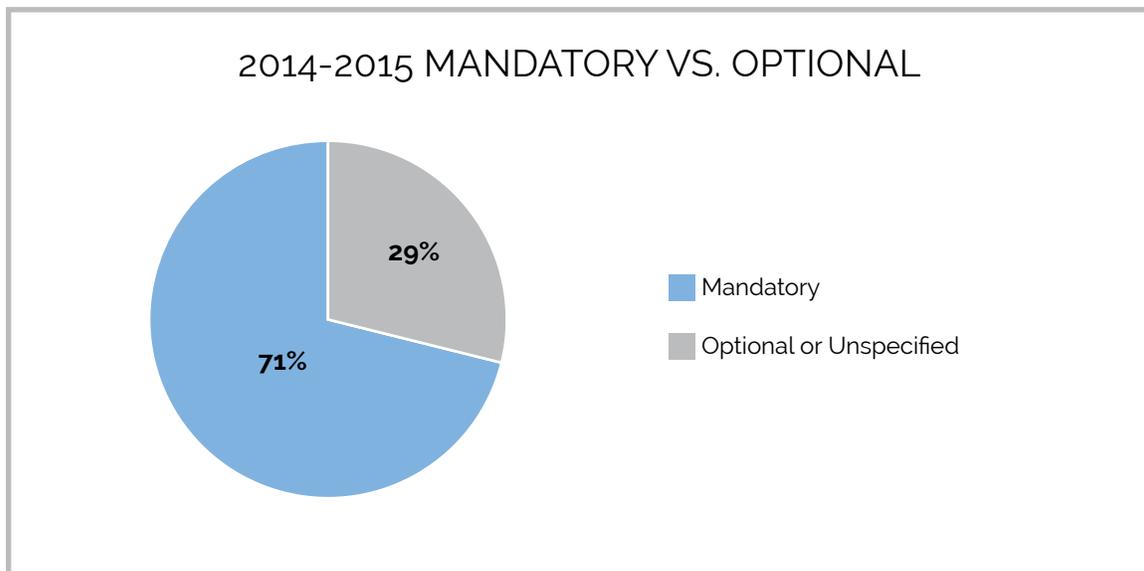
⁸ University of North Carolina Wilmington Common Reading, “Synergy: Common Reading,” <http://uncw.edu/commonreading>.

⁹ For extended definitions of *diversity* and *sustainability*, and full-length critiques of the programs that operate under their auspices, see Peter W. Wood, *Diversity: The Invention of a Concept* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003); and Rachelle Peterson and Peter W. Wood, *Sustainability: Higher Education’s New Fundamentalism* (National Association of Scholars, 2015), https://www.nas.org/projects/sustainability_report.

Mandatory or Optional?

Some colleges are clear about whether a book is mandatory or optional. Rollins College (Florida) states outright that “The Summer Reading program is required for all incoming first-year students and all transfer students,”¹⁰ while the University of Connecticut is equally clear that “We invite you to join us in reading this year’s book of choice.”¹¹ A great many colleges instead use ambiguous language: the University of Kentucky informs the reader that “New students will read a book selected for their cohort the summer before their first semester on campus,” where the expectation of participation avoids an imperative.¹² Eastern Illinois University rests its ambiguity instead upon whether the word *ask* is to be taken as tentative or demanding: “All first-year students will be asked to read the same book before their arrival on campus for the fall semester.”¹³ This ambiguity among common reading programs appears deliberate—delicate phrasing that will get as many students as possible to read the books without actually requiring the incoming students to do any work.

So far as we can judge from noncommittal language, in 2014-15 29% of colleges (105 out of 366) required students to read their common reading, while in 2015-16 the figure was 28% of colleges (98 out of 350).

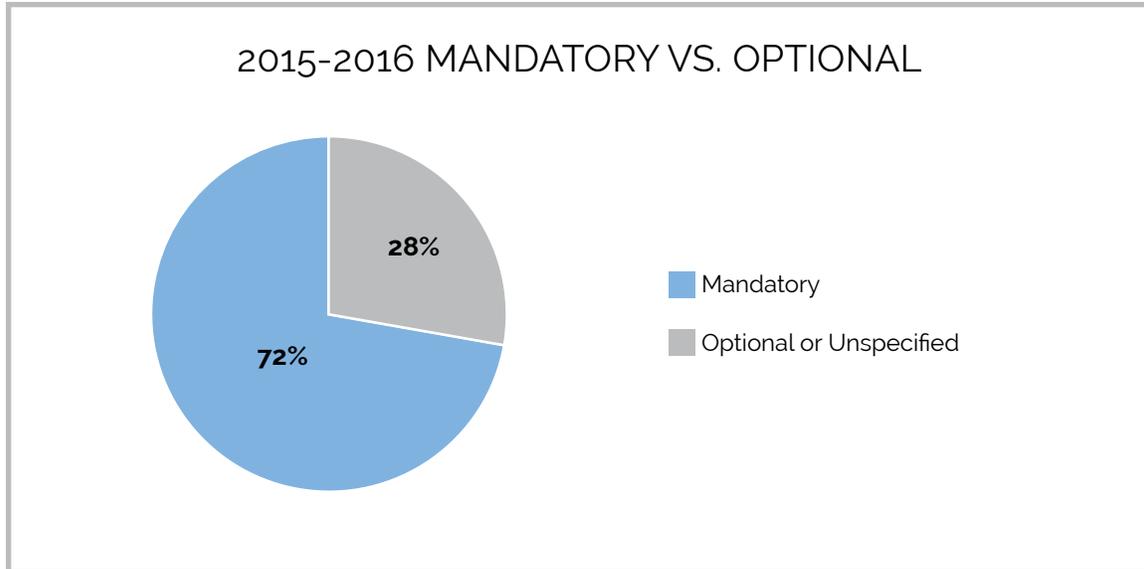


10 Rollins College Student Success, “Lifelong Learning Through Literature,” <http://www.rollins.edu/student-success/first-years-transfers/summer-reading.html>.

11 University of Connecticut, “UConn Reads,” <http://uconnreads.uconn.edu/>.

12 University of Kentucky Student Affairs, “Introduction to the Common Reading Experience,” <http://www.uky.edu/StudentAffairs/NewStudentPrograms/CRE4/aboutcre.php#6>.

13 Eastern Illinois University, “Welcome to Eastern Reads!,” <http://castle.eiu.edu/~eiureads/>.



One may wonder why a college would tread so lightly in setting this requirement. Are freshmen so delicate or so diffident that assigning them a required book prior to matriculation would make them choose a different college, or decide not to go to college at all? The colleges' answer appears to be, "Yes, they are."

Among those colleges that required their students to read the summer book, some provided no connection to any class or any alternative means of enforcement: examples include Coastal Carolina University (South Carolina), Saint Louis University (Missouri), and Young Harris College (Georgia).¹⁴ A few are more rigorous. Luther College (Iowa) includes an essay assignment on the Common Reading as part of its required first-year Paideia course—"You'll write your first Paideia paper about *The Book of Unknown Americans*"¹⁵—while Augustana College (Illinois) says that "All fall term LSFY [Liberal Studies] and first-year honors classes will discuss the book and collect the required summer writing assignment about the book as part of their common curriculum during the first few weeks of each course."¹⁶ Yet these measures to integrate the common reading with the curriculum are rare.

The enforcement of student participation in common reading programs relies, save in the few programs that actually test students for their knowledge of the book, on student enthusiasm to read, honorable unwillingness to get by on skimming and Cliff Notes, and shame at being found by

14 Coastal Carolina University, "CCU Announces Summer 2015 Big Read Book," May 12, 2015, <http://www.coastal.edu/newsarticles/story.php?id=4031>; Saint Louis University First-Year Experience, "First-Year Summer Reading," <http://www.slu.edu/student-involvement-center/first-year-experience/first-year-summer-reading>; Young Harris College, "Common Reading Program," <http://www.yhc.edu/student-life/fyf/common-reading>.

15 Luther College Paideia Program, "2015 Summer Reading Guide," <http://www.luther.edu/paideia/program/summer-reading/unknownamericans/>.

16 Augustana College Student Life, "Summer 2015 Reading for First-Year Students," <https://www.augustana.edu/student-life/incoming-students/preparing-for-the-fall-term/summer-reading-program>.

their peers unready to participate in a discussion of the common reading. Purdue University (Indiana) President Mitch Daniels' cancellation of the university's common reading program in 2014 illustrates the limits of such reliance. The more formal analysis of the failings of Purdue's program included the explanation that it was never "formally connected to the curriculum."¹⁷ Purdue student Patrick Smalls stated the consequence: "No one hardly read the book."¹⁸

"No one hardly read the book." – Patrick Smalls, Purdue University student.

For Freshmen or for All Students?

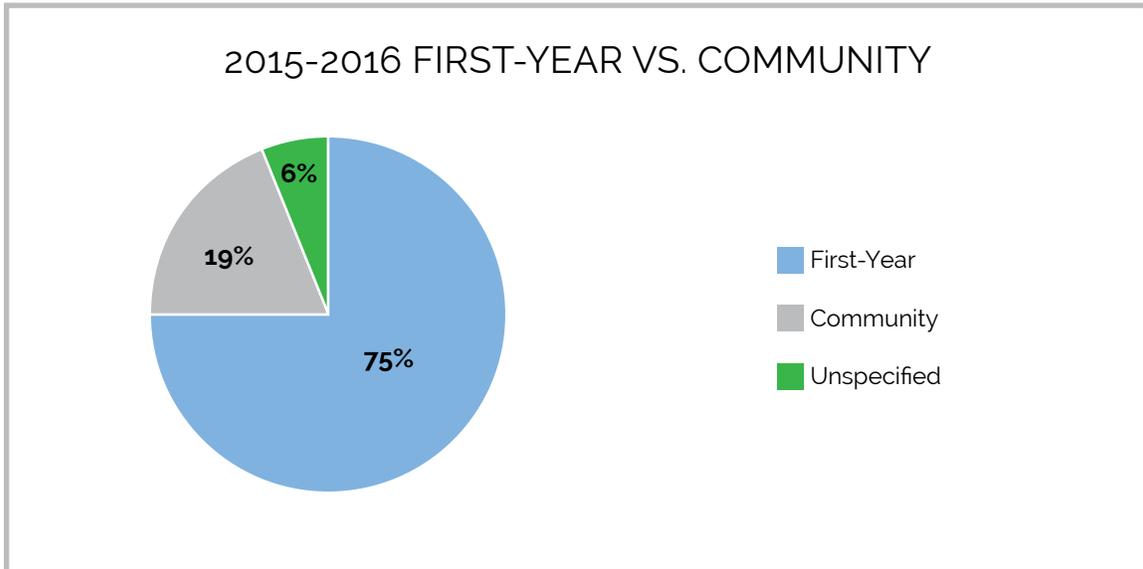
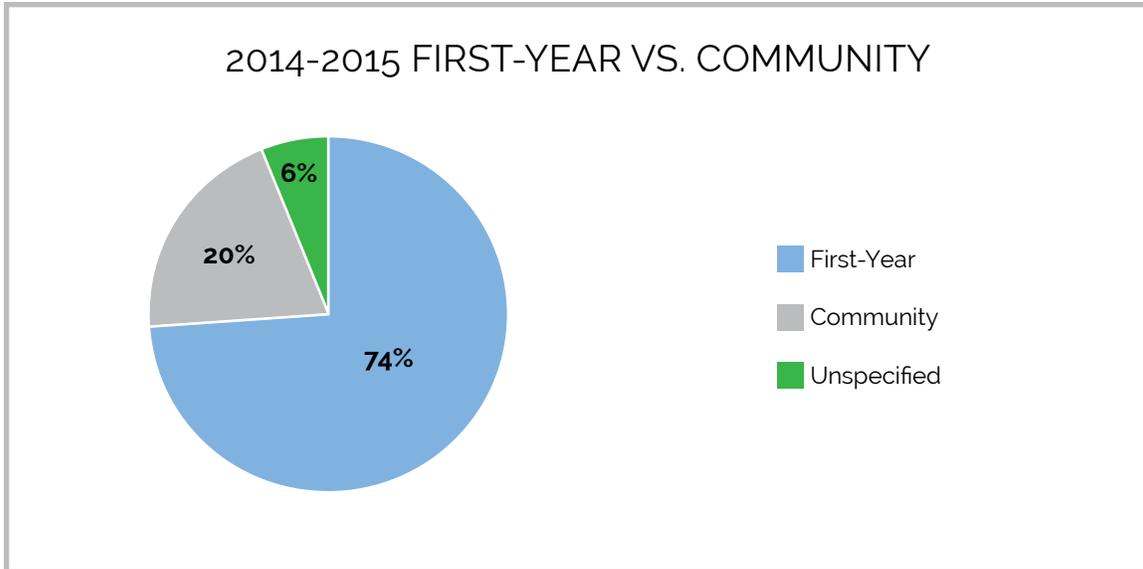
Colleges also use ambiguous language about who is supposed to read these books. Some are explicitly for new students (freshmen or transfers). Some, often community colleges, intend for them to be read by the entire community. Other programs try to square the circle, and say that their books are supposed to be for the entire community—but especially for new students. Concordia College (Minnesota), for example, states that "Each year, the entire Concordia campus community is invited to read a selected book. All first-year students participate in a discussion about the book during Fall Orientation."¹⁹ Northern Kentucky University's "Book Connection program seeks to provide a unifying, academic experience for more than 1,500 first-year students, while also engaging the community at large."²⁰ We have assigned all programs that refer at all to first-year students to the first-year category, on the grounds that their mention of the larger community is more than usually aspirational. In 2014-15, 74% of colleges (273 out of 366) directed their summer readings to first-year students and 20% (72 out of 366) directed them to the entire community; the remainder (21 out of 366) did not identify their target audience. In 2015-16, 75% of colleges (261 out of 350) directed their summer readings to first-year students and 19% (68 out of 350) directed them to the entire community; the remainder (21 out of 350) did not identify their target audience.

17 Hayleigh Colombo, "Emails Shed Light on End of Common Reading at Purdue," *JOnline Lafayette Journal & Courier*, April 19, 2014, <http://www.jonline.com/story/news/college/2014/04/18/emails-light-end-common-reading-purdue/7892757/>.

18 Jake Sohn, "Common Reading Program Meets Its Fateful End," *The Exponent Online*, January 14, 2014, http://www.purdueexponent.org/campus/article_ofb45b11-6eb6-5116-9d4e-77022d952623.html.

19 Concordia College First-Year Experience, "Summer Book Read," <https://www.concordiacollege.edu/studentlife/first-year-experience/summer-book-read/>.

20 Northern Kentucky University First Year Programs, "About Book Connections," <http://firstyear.nku.edu/bookconnection.html>.

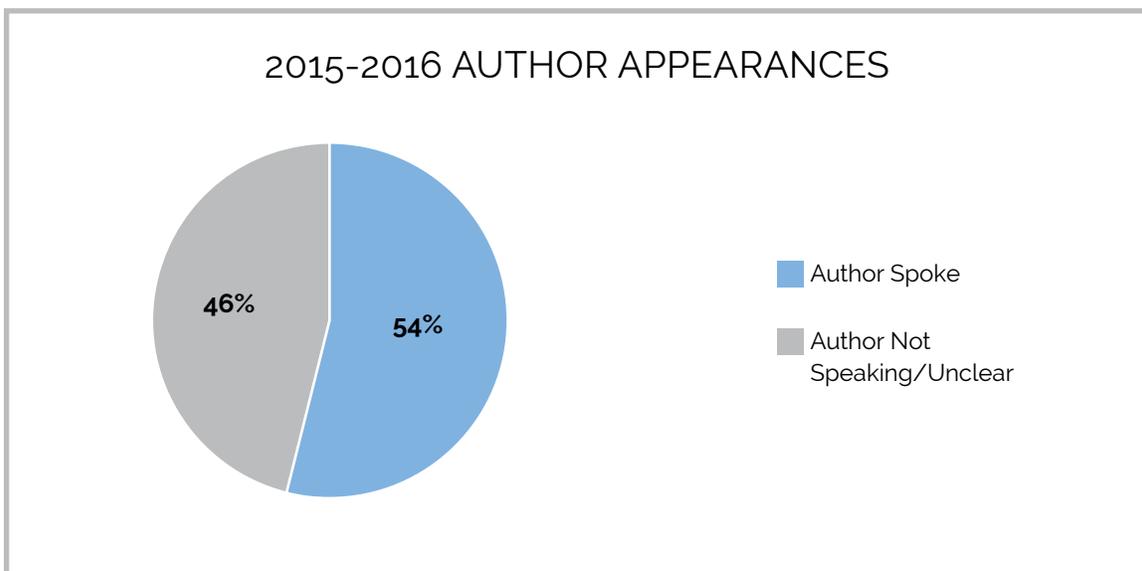
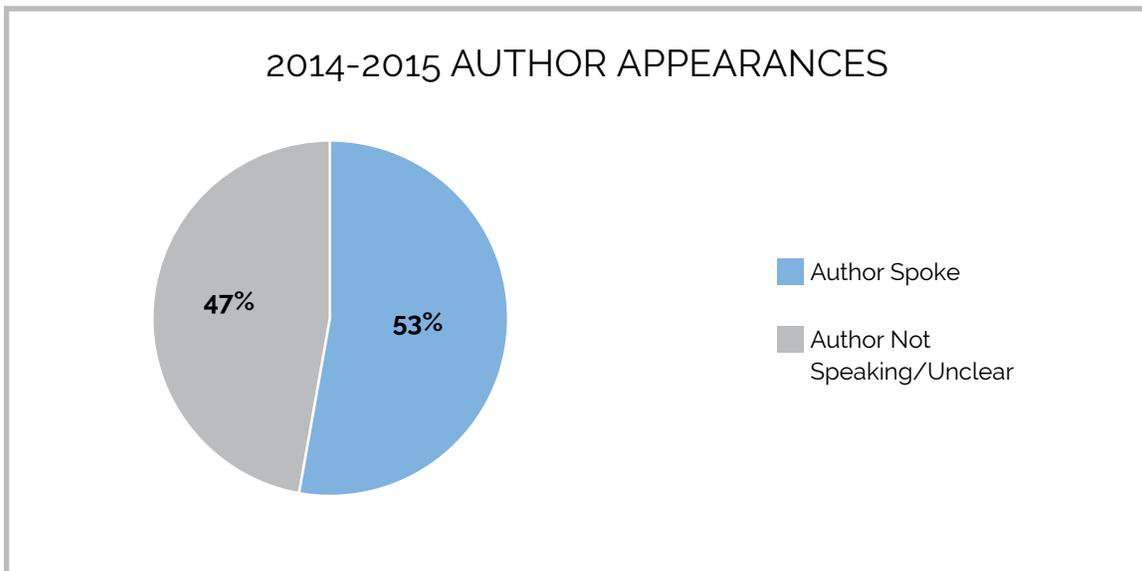


Author Speaking?

Many common reading programs specify in their selection criteria that the book's author should be living and available for a campus appearance: Otterbein College (Ohio), Ramapo College (New Jersey), and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville are examples.²¹ Even where this is not required, it is a predilection. Colleges frequently bring the authors to campus, usually for a convocation

²¹ Otterbein College Center for Student Success, "Common Book," <http://www.otterbein.edu/public/Academics/EnrichmentPrograms/CommonBook.aspx>; Ramapo College First-Year Seminar, "Summer Reading," <http://www.ramapo.edu/first-year/summer-reading/>; The University of Tennessee Knoxville First-Year Studies, "Suggest a Book," <http://fys.utk.edu/life-of-the-mind/suggest-a-book/>.

speech at the beginning of the freshman year or for a separate appearance in the fall. Some authors appear in the following spring, some have already appeared in the previous year, and when a book is assigned two years running, the author does not usually show up the second time. In 2014-15 at least 53% of colleges (193 out of 366) had author speeches, and in 2015-16 at least 54% of colleges (189 out of 350) had author speeches. This figure is a conservative estimate: not every author appearance is listed on the common reading website, and our web-searches probably missed a significant number of author visits. Our educated guess is that 60%+ of common reading programs include author speeches.



This figure does not include speeches by relatives and representatives of the author, or speeches by the subjects of a book. Colleges that assign Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* often have members of the Lacks family appear: in 2014, members of the Lacks family visited Monroe Community College (Michigan), and in 2015 Lacks family members appeared either by live appearances or by video connection at Gustavus Adolphus College (Minnesota) and Montana State University.²² In 2015 the University of Massachusetts Amherst invited both the author (Anand Giridharadas) and the subject (Raisuddin Bhuiyan) of *The True American: Murder and Mercy in Texas*, while Indiana University Southeast hosted Luma Mufleh, the soccer-coach subject of Warren St. John's *Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference*.²³ Malala Yousafzai did not travel from the United Kingdom to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to highlight Madison's 2014 common reading of *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*—but Shiza Shahid, CEO and co-founder of the Malala Fund, gave Madison's October keynote speech.²⁴

Such substitutes suffice; but it is a truth largely acknowledged that a college in possession of a common reading program must be in want of an author visit.

Who Chooses the Books

A few deans at William and Mary decided on Oliver Sacks' *Island of the Colorblind*, and Princeton's president Christopher L. Eisgruber continues to choose Princeton's common readings by himself,²⁵ but most common reading programs call upon a committee of faculty and staff, sometimes with student participation. The University of Cincinnati's Common Read Committee illustrates the size and departmental variety of such collective endeavors:

- Chris Carter, director of Composition; department of English and Comparative Literature
- Craig Dietsch, associate professor; department of Geology
- Billie Dziech, professor; department of English and Comparative Literature
- Nicolette Fernandez, assistant director; Office of Judicial Affairs
- Marla Hall, associate professor; department of Psychology
- Anne Hoehn, academic director; College of Engineering and Applied Sciences
- Max Inniger, peer leader; Center for First-Year Experience and Learning Communities
- Jenn Lewis, associate director, academic student advising; Carl H. Lindner College of Business

22 Janet Ekis, "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks' Launches MCC's First-Ever Common Read," *Student Tribune*, January 22, 2014, <http://www.monroecc.edu/webdbs/studtrib.nsf/Include-StudentTrib/F6048062E3E8B6B605257C6700764F-9C?OpenDocument>; Gustavus Adolphus College New Student Orientation, "Reading in Common Program," <https://gustavus.edu/orientation/readingInCommon.php>; Montana State University, "2015 MSU Convocation," <http://www.montana.edu/convocation/>.

23 University of Massachusetts Amherst Student Life, "2015 Common Read Events Schedule," <http://www.umass.edu/studentlife/commonread/news/2015-events>.

24 Jenny Price, "Go Big Read Brings Malala Fund Co-Founder to Campus," *University of Wisconsin-Madison News*, October 21, 2014, <http://news.wisc.edu/23219>.

25 Jamie Saxon, "Eisgruber Chooses 'Whistling Vivaldi' for Pre-Read," *News at Princeton*, April 9, 2015, <http://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S42/86/08E82/>.

- Nicole Mayo, director; Student Activities & Leadership Development
- Greg Metz, assistant dean, academic affairs; UC Blue Ash College
- Audrey Miller, instructor, College of Allied Health Sciences
- Tony Williams, program coordinator, New Student Orientation
- Joanna Mitro, professor and associate dean for undergraduate affairs; McMicken College of Arts and Sciences
- Kim Paice, associate professor, Art History
- Trent Pinto, director, Residence and Education Development
- Maria Romagnoli, director of undergraduate studies; department of English and Comparative Literature
- Joanne Schweitzer, associate professor of clinical; College of Nursing
- Robin Selzer, assistant professor, Division of Professional Practice and Experiential Learning (ProPEL)
- Carney Sotto, associate clinical professor and undergraduate director; department of Communication Sciences and Disorders; College of Allied Health Sciences
- Mary Sterns, senior assistant dean, Academic Affairs; UC Clermont College
- Ric Sweeney, assistant professor; Lindner College of Business

These 21 people considered 150 books and narrowed the pool down to 6 finalists before finally settling upon *The Other Wes Moore* for 2015-16 and *A Deadly Wandering* for 2016-17.²⁶ There are only 15 members apiece in the selection committees of institutions such as Pacific Lutheran University (Washington), Southern Methodist University (Texas), and University of Virginia School of Engineering & Applied Science, but these are bulky enough.²⁷ Common readings generally must satisfy the taste of a sizeable committee—and the larger the committee and the larger the collective time expended, the less exciting or ambitious the results of their efforts are likely to be.

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Names

Popular names for these programs are simple and descriptive: “Book in Common,” “Common Reading,” “Common Reader,” “Common Summer Reading,” “First-Year Common Reading,” “First-Year Reading Experience,” “Summer Reading,” and “Summer Reading Program.” More individual names include East Carolina University’s (North Carolina) “Pirate Read,” Metropolitan State

²⁶ University of Cincinnati Center for First Year Experience & Learning Communities, “The Next Common Read,” http://www.uc.edu/fye/center/communications_publications/FYEupdatehome/fye-1c-update-2014-2015/nextCR.html.

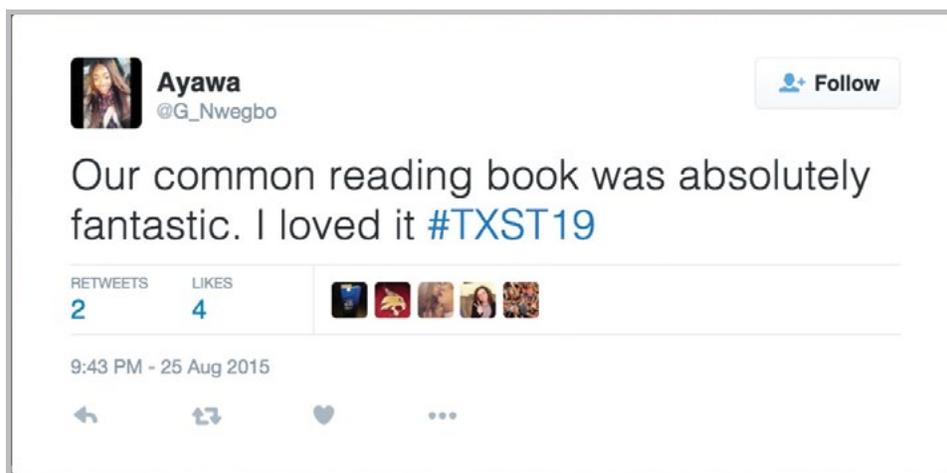
²⁷ Pacific Lutheran University First Year Experience Program, “Common Reading Selection Process,” <https://www.plu.edu/first-year/common-reading/selection-process/>; Southern Methodist University Office of the Provost, “2015 Common Reading Committee Members,” <http://www.smu.edu/Provost/CommonReading/Committee>; University of Virginia School of Engineering & Applied Science, “Common Reading Experience,” <http://www.seas.virginia.edu/acad/cre/>.

University of Denver’s (Colorado) “1Book/1Project/2Transform,” University of South Carolina Upstate’s “Preface,” and University of Tennessee Chattanooga’s “Read2Achieve.”

Social Media

Colleges have gone beyond posting web pages on their common readings and now incorporate a variety of social media as ways both to encourage student participation in these programs and to advertise the programs’ existence. Among the colleges whose common reading programs use social media, Kingsborough Community College (New York), Providence College (Rhode Island), and St. Cloud State University (Minnesota) have their own Facebook pages²⁸; the common reading programs of Shepherd University (West Virginia), Texas State University, University of North Carolina Wilmington use Twitter²⁹; and the University of Kentucky has put photographs about its common reading program on an Instagram account.³⁰ These social media efforts do not as yet seem overwhelmingly popular with their student bodies, but that is not for lack of effort on the part of the common reading programs.

Texas State University Common Reading Twitter Retweet³¹



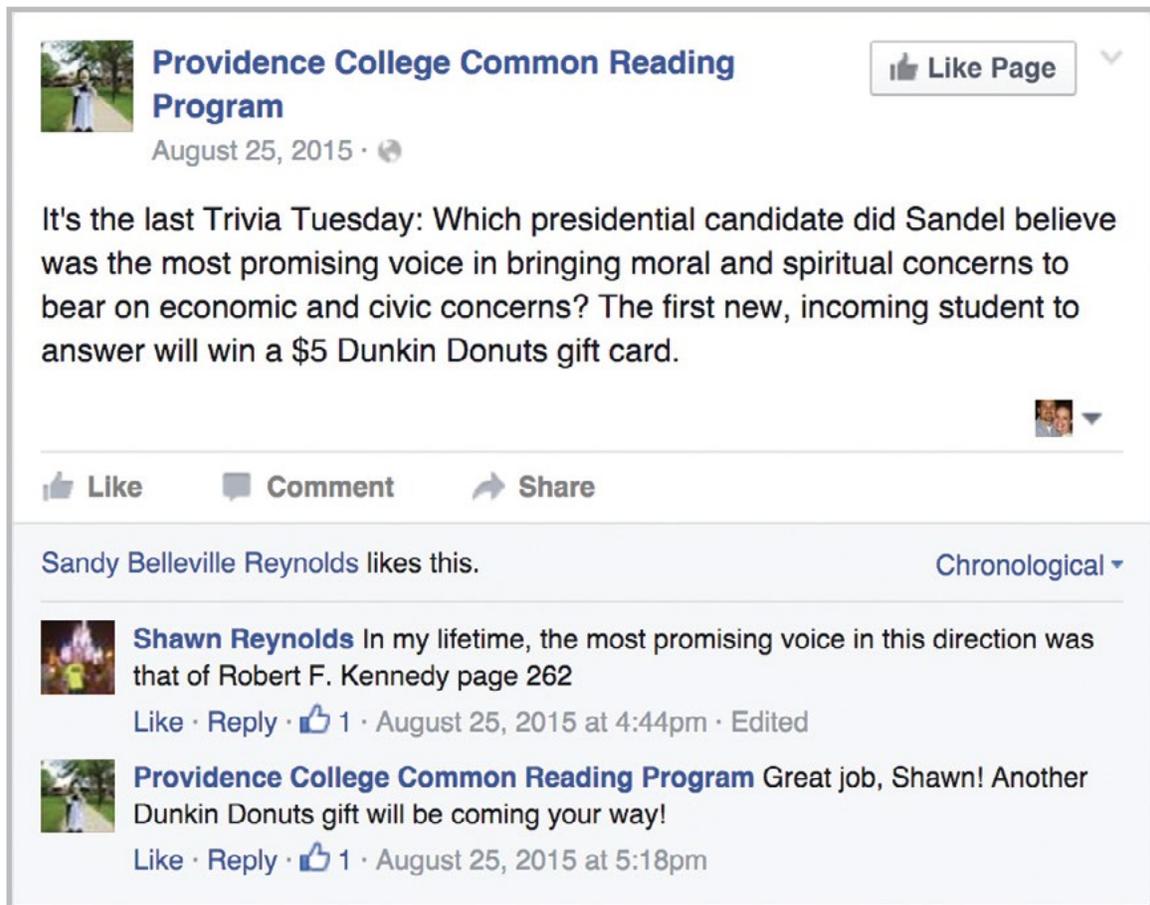
28 Kingsborough Community College, “KCC Reads: The Common Reading Program, Kingsborough CC CUNY,” <https://www.facebook.com/kcc.reads.cuny/>; Providence College, “Providence College Common Reading Program,” <https://www.facebook.com/friarbook/>; St. Cloud State University, “SCSU Common Read,” <https://www.facebook.com/SCSU-Common-Read-206140109405187/>.

29 Shepherd University, “SU Common Reading,” <https://twitter.com/commonreading>; Texas State University, “TXST Common Reading,” <https://twitter.com/bobcatbook>; University of North Carolina Wilmington, “UNCW Common Reading,” <https://twitter.com/uncwsynergy>.

30 University of Kentucky Common Reading Experience, “ukcommonreading,” <https://instagram.com/ukcommonreading/>.

31 TexasStateUniversityCommonReading, Twitter Retweet, https://twitter.com/G_Nwegbo/status/636398477266685952.

Providence College Common Reading Program Facebook Post³²



The image is a screenshot of a Facebook post. At the top left is the profile picture of the Providence College Common Reading Program, showing a person walking on a path. To the right of the picture is the page name "Providence College Common Reading Program" and a "Like Page" button. Below the page name is the date "August 25, 2015" and a globe icon. The main text of the post reads: "It's the last Trivia Tuesday: Which presidential candidate did Sandel believe was the most promising voice in bringing moral and spiritual concerns to bear on economic and civic concerns? The first new, incoming student to answer will win a \$5 Dunkin Donuts gift card." Below the text are icons for "Like", "Comment", and "Share". Underneath these icons, it says "Sandy Belleville Reynolds likes this." and "Chronological" with a dropdown arrow. There are two comments. The first is from Shawn Reynolds, with a profile picture of a person with purple hair, who says: "In my lifetime, the most promising voice in this direction was that of Robert F. Kennedy page 262". Below his comment are "Like", "Reply", and "1" (with a thumbs up icon), and the timestamp "August 25, 2015 at 4:44pm · Edited". The second comment is from the Providence College Common Reading Program, with its profile picture, who says: "Great job, Shawn! Another Dunkin Donuts gift will be coming your way!". Below this comment are "Like", "Reply", and "1" (with a thumbs up icon), and the timestamp "August 25, 2015 at 5:18pm".

³² Providence College Common Reading Program, Facebook Post, <https://www.facebook.com/friarbook/posts/884417214973059>.

University of Kentucky Instagram Photos³³



³³ University of Kentucky Common Reading, Instagram Photos, <https://instagram.com/ukcommonreading/>.

Yearlong Themes

A significant number of books are chosen to be part of a theme selected by college administrators so as to give programmatic unity to a variety of planned events on campus. In 2014-15, 6% of colleges (23 out of 366) chose a book as part of a theme, and in 2015-16, 7% (24 out of 350) chose a book as part of a theme. In the wake of the Ferguson, Missouri unrest, chosen themes for 2015-16 shifted significantly toward topics relating to race and justice.

2014-2015

Institution Name	Year Theme
Adelphi University	The Changing Nature of War and Peace
Amarillo College	Moral Courage
Georgia Institute of Technology	Digital Lives
Hesston College	Power of Choice: Changing Cultures of Oppression
Hiram College	Age and Aging
Indiana University, Southeast	The Gift of Empathy: Seeing the World through the Eyes of Another
LaGuardia Community College	Personal Narratives and Memoirs
Moravian College	War, Peacebuilding, and the Just Society
Occidental College	Emancipation
Pace University	Finding and Pursuing Your Passion
Rockhurst University	Cura Personalis (Care for the Whole Person)
Roger Williams University	Adaptation and Change
St. Edwards University	Justice
Stanford University	Science and Scientists
State University of New York, Cortland	R/Evolution
Texas State University	Exploring Democracy's Promise: From Segregation to Integration
The College of New Jersey	Justice
The King's College (New York)	Mortality
University of Alaska, Anchorage	Information, Ideas, Ideology: Shaping Your Reality.
University of Connecticut	Race in America
University of Pennsylvania	Year of Health
University of Tennessee, Knoxville	Creativity
Webster University	Disability Rights

2015-2016

Institution Name	Year Theme
Adelphi University	Racial Justice Matters
Elms College (College of Our Lady of the Elms)	Solidarity
Georgia Institute of Technology	Serve. Learn. Sustain.
Hesston College	Be the Change: Caring that Matters
High Point University	Just Communities
Hiram College	Borders
Illinois Wesleyan University	Nation(s) Divided?
Indiana University, Southeast	Building Communities in a Global Society
Lehigh University	Information, Ideas, Ideology: Shaping Your Reality.
Occidental College	Sustainability
Pace University	War, Peacebuilding, and the Just Society
Rockhurst University	Wisdom
St. Edwards University	Justice
Stanford University	Resilience
State University of New York, Cortland	Where Are We?
Texas State University	Bridged Through Stories: Shared Heritage of the United States and Mexico, an Homage to Dr. Tomás Rivera
The College of New Jersey	College and Change
University of Alaska, Anchorage	Negotiating Identity in America
University of Connecticut	Race in America
University of Northern Iowa	And Justice For All
University of Pennsylvania	Year of Discovery
Virginia Commonwealth University	Learning That Matters: Building a Culture of Generalizable Education
Webster University	Ferguson Protests
Western Michigan University	Making History Project

Sponsor Commitments

A significant number of books are chosen by the academy's diversity offices: the Diversity Cabinet co-sponsors the common reading at the University of New Orleans, the Diversity Council co-sponsors at Corning Community College (New York), and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion co-sponsors at Bunker Hill Community College (Massachusetts).³⁴ The sustainability programs are not yet institutional sponsors of common readings, but their influence can be seen in the uptick of sustainability themes for common reading programs. In 2015, Georgia Institute of Technology chose "Serve. Learn. Sustain."—a phrasing that apparently registers the influence of *Eat Pray Love*—and Occidental College selected "Sustainability." The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) certainly is interested in having common readings with sustainability themes: the AASHE's Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) evaluates institutions on criteria that include "choosing a sustainability-related book for common reading."³⁵ AASHE appears to be correct in thinking that selecting sustainability-themed common readings will influence student behavior. The University of Tennessee's student-led fossil fuel divestment campaign began in January 2013,³⁶ but surged in popularity after incoming students read the 2013-14 common reading, Bill McKibben's *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. McKibben also illustrated the utility of the author visit, as he visited the University of Tennessee's campus that fall.³⁷

Marketing the Books: The Development of the Common Reading Genre

Common reading books are now a standard market of the publishing industry, whose advertising materials delineate the genre's characteristics. Available catalogs include HarperCollins' *First-Year Student*, Knopf Doubleday's *First-Year & Common Reading*, Macmillan's *Books for the First Year Experience*, Simon & Schuster's *Freshman Year Reading*, and Yale University Press' *Freshman Reading*.³⁸ Penguin Random House's *2015 First Year & Common Reading* catalog is the most informative of these publications. On the first of its 116 pages, it informs the reader that "Many of our authors are also available to visit college campuses as part of a first-year program." Discussion guides and customized versions of the books are also available, among other services.

34 Bunker Hill Community College, "One Book Program," <http://www.bhcc.mass.edu/onebook/>; Corning Community College, "One Book One College: No Impact Man," <https://www.corning-cc.edu/one-book-one-college-no-impact-man/>; The University of New Orleans, "Common Read Program," <http://www.uno.edu/fye/common-read.aspx>.

35 Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), "STARS 2.0 Technical Manual," http://www.aashe.org/files/documents/STARS/2.0/stars_2.0.2_credit_en_3.pdf.

36 UT Coalition for Responsible Investment, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/UTCoalition/timeline>.

37 "Noted Environmentalist, Author Bill McKibben to Speak Monday," Tennessee Today, August 15, 2013, <http://tntoday.utk.edu/2013/08/15/noted-environmentalist-author-bill-mckibben-speak-monday/>.

38 HarperCollins, *First-Year Student 2015-2016*, <http://files.harpercollins.com/HarperAcademic/FirstYearStudent1516.pdf>; Knopf Doubleday, *First-Year & Common Reading*, <https://www.randomhouseacademic.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Knopf-Doubleday-First-Year-and-Common-Reading-2015-2016.pdf>; Macmillan, *Books for the First Year Experience*, <http://us.macmillan.com/static/macmillanacademic/Macmillan2016FYECOMMONREADINGBOOKS.pdf>; Simon & Schuster, "Freshman Year Reading," <http://pages.simonandschuster.com/freshmanreading>; Yale University Press, *Freshman Reading*, <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/OnlineCatalog.asp?catalog=3254795>.

The section headings categorize the market expertly: *Life Stories—Memoir; Biography & Autobiography; Fiction to Talk About; Inspiration & Guidance; History & Society; Life & College Guides; Environmental Studies & Health Sciences; and Social Action*. Penguin Random House also provides selection criteria for common reading selectors:

Think about the following questions when considering eligible books for your program:

Does the book **tell a good story**?

Is the book accessible? Will a variety of students at different reading levels and with different interests be able to engage with the book? To this point, consider page count. A good rule of thumb is the “300 Rule”: if possible, choose a book with 300 pages or less.

Does it **feature a protagonist students can relate to**? They might be the same age or be dealing with similar life situations (change, challenge, adversity).

Does the book touch on **teachable themes**, such as inclusiveness/diversity, global engagement, etc.?

Do the themes of the book **correspond to your university’s strategic mission**? Campus engagement and resources will be easier to secure if you make this relationship clear.

If having the book’s author speak is part of the plan for your reading program, it is important to **consider author availability** during the book selection process. Speaking fees and availability can vary considerably. You don’t want to go through all the work to select a book, only to find out that the author’s speaking fee will not work for your budget, or s/he is not available to speak on the dates you need!

Penguin Random House devotes a full page to advertising audiobooks for common reading; most colleges do not appear to be attuned to this option yet.³⁹ Meanwhile, the Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau is there to make sure that there are no difficulties involved in arranging the author’s campus visit:

We handle booking travel, creating an itinerary for the campus visit, and working with the author to tailor the content of the lecture for your campus. During the entire planning process, one of our 16 full-time lecture agents will be personally assigned to your event, serving as a dedicated liaison between

³⁹ Penguin Random House, *2015 First Year & Common Reading*, <https://www.randomhouseacademic.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/2015FYERHCATALOG.pdf>, esp. pp. 2-3, 6, 8, 10-11.

you and the author and guaranteeing a successful, worry-free event.⁴⁰

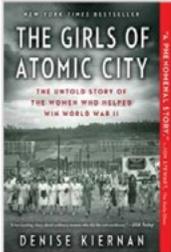
The publishers do all they can to make the selection of a common reading an effortless procedure.

The publishers do all they can to make the selection of a common reading an effortless procedure.

Advertising Copy

Publishing companies believe they know the taste of common reading selection committees. The best way to illustrate their conception of this taste is by extract. Below are the first books listed in several advertising catalogs and newsletters aimed for the common reading market—generally labeled as New, Featured, and so on. These books, and these advertising copies, provide a collective portrait of what the publishing companies judge will sell.

Simon & Schuster Common Reading Newsletter⁴¹





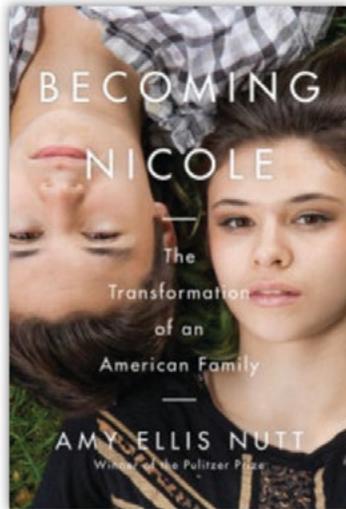
Denise Kiernan,
The Girls of Atomic City

This is the incredible true story of the top-secret World War II town of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and the young women brought there unknowingly to help build the atomic bomb.

40 Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau, “Planning First-Year Reading Programs,” September 29, 2015, <http://www.prhspeakers.com/first-year-reading-programs>.

41 Simon & Schuster Common Reading Newsletter, http://news.simonandschuster.com/pub/sf/ResponseForm?_ri_=X-oGzc2X%3DYQpgLjHJITQGtXcdzaEHRPqsXOsbs7s3ArOgFophdzezeLtzgFXll1zfFzem6YfCVXmTX%3DYQpgLjH-JITQGjLEiucEu67JOXFaYEKbvkzdfnrsRfnRyIPPURhvza5D5LlZg3&_ei_=EvLjZxTJvfz5lOvDTol4mg9id4yHvviLaKi-11J2cmndWZiClilN8W1Fqt9-JO1c5Ew1KMNU.

Random House Academic Service Newsletter, “December 2015 – First-Year & Common Reading”⁴²



EXAM COPY

BUY NOW

Becoming Nicole

The Transformation of an American Family
By Amy Ellis Nutt

Random House | Hardcover | 10/20/2015
978-0-8129-9541-1 | 304 pages | \$27.00

The inspiring true story of a transgender girl, her identical twin brother, and an ordinary American family's extraordinary journey to understand, nurture, and celebrate the uniqueness in us all, from the Pulitzer Prize-winning science reporter for *The Washington Post*.

"*Becoming Nicole* is a miracle. It's the story of a family struggling with—and embracing—a transgender child. But more than that, it's about accepting one another, and ourselves, in all our messy, contradictory glory." — Jennifer Finney Boylan, co-chair of GLAAD and author of *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders*

[Click here](#) to read an essay by Wayne Maines, father of Nicole Maines.

⁴² Random House Academic Service Newsletter, “December 2015 – First-Year & Common Reading,” http://view.email.randomhouse.com/?j=fe9415727563027a71&m=fe9713707566037575&ls=fe1a1078726206747d1479&l=ff64157570&s=fe4d1378736d007a7317&jb=ffca11&ju=fe5d1379756605797210&Ref=Email_B2B_2015-12-22&r=0.

HarperCollins, First-Year Student 2015-2016⁴³

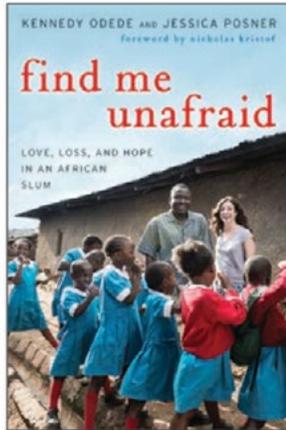
FIRST-YEAR STUDENT: BOOKS FOR COURSE ADOPTION

NEW & FEATURED

Find Me Unafraid:

Love, Loss, and Hope in an African Slum

Kennedy Odede and Jessica Posner



Find Me Unafraid tells the uncommon love story between two uncommon people whose collaboration sparked a successful movement to transform the lives of vulnerable girls and the urban poor. Jessica Posner met Kennedy Odede on her junior year abroad, when she arrived in Nairobi to work with Shining Hope for Communities, the youth empowerment group he had founded in Kibera, the notorious slum where he was raised. Though it was unheard of for a white person, Jessica decided to live in Kibera with Kennedy, and they fell in love. They went on to found Kibera's first tuition-free school for girls—a large, bright blue building, which stands as a bastion of hope in what once felt like a hopeless place. This is their story, and they are just getting started.

“Shining Hope for Communities is one of the most hopeful places I have ever visited.”
—Nicholas D. Kristof, *New York Times*

Ecco: 352 pp.

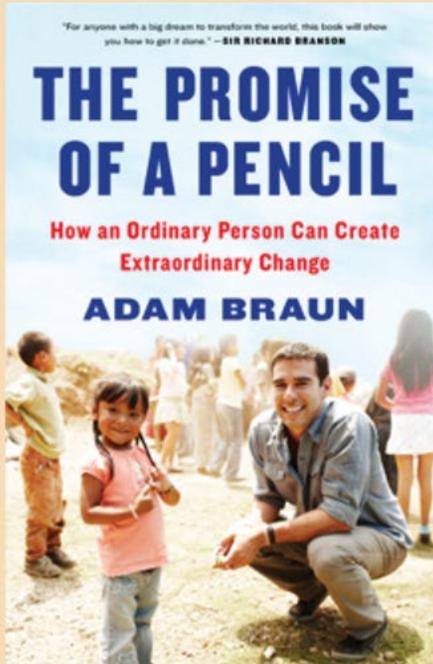
2015 • 978-0-06-229285-8 • hc • \$27.99 (\$34.99/CAN) 

Paperback available in September 2016: 978-0-06-229286-5 • pb • \$15.99 (\$19.99/CAN)

43 HarperCollins, First-Year Student 2015-2016, <http://files.harpercollins.com/HarperAcademic/FirstYearStudent1516.pdf>.

Simon & Schuster, “Freshman Year Reading”⁴⁴

This month's feature



The Promise of a Pencil **How an Ordinary Person Can Create Extraordinary Change**

By Adam Braun

9781476730839

Trade Paper

\$16.00

288 Pages

Scribner

**Theme: Global Perspective, Leadership,
Inspirational**

The riveting *New York Times* bestseller about a young man who built more than 250 schools around the world—and the steps anyone can take to lead a successful and significant life.

Adam Braun began working summers at hedge funds when he was just sixteen years old, sprinting down the path to a successful Wall Street career. But while traveling he met a young boy begging on the streets of India, who after being asked what he wanted most in the world, simply answered, “A pencil.” This small request led to a staggering series of events that took Braun backpacking through dozens of countries before eventually leaving a prestigious job to found Pencils of Promise, the organization he started with just \$25 that has since built more than 300 schools around the world.

The Promise of a Pencil chronicles Braun’s journey to find his calling, as each chapter explains one clear step that every person can take to turn their biggest ambitions into reality. If you feel restless and ready for transition, if you are seeking direction and purpose, this critically acclaimed bestseller is for you. Driven by inspiring stories and shareable insights, this is the book that will give you the tools to make your own life a story worth telling.

**All proceeds from this book will support Pencils of Promise.*

⁴⁴ Simon & Schuster, “Freshman Year Reading,” <http://pages.simonandschuster.com/freshmanreading>.

Authors

The authors of common reading books are entrepreneurs, although their market is the selection committees rather than the captive audience of student readers themselves. *The Other Wes Moore* is by far the most frequently selected book of the last two years—17 selections in 2014-15 and another 16 selections in 2015-16—and Wes Moore has worked hard to make that possible. The American Program Bureau represents him in his career as a public speaker, and informs us that he can speak on either of his two books (*The Other Wes Moore*, 2010; and *The Work*, 2014), and on topics such as “Transformational Leadership,” “The Transformative Power of Education,” and “Responsible Corporate Citizenship & the Real-Life Ramifications.” He has testimonials from numerous colleges, including the University of Utah, Davenport University (Michigan), and Kean University (New Jersey).⁴⁵ His own website lists an impressively large number of speaking events, and makes sure to include a “Buy Now” button at the top of every page.⁴⁶

The authors of common reading books are entrepreneurs, although their market is the selection committees rather than the captive audience of student readers themselves.

The Other Wes Moore: The Home Page⁴⁷



Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy* is the breakout book of 2015-16, assigned 14 times in the first summer following its publication, and in less than one year it has become the second most popular common reading of the last two years. Stevenson also has a webpage that lists his extensive series of public appearances and provides contact information for the person at Penguin Random House who will

⁴⁵ American Program Bureau, “Wes Moore,” <http://www.apbspeakers.com/speaker/wes-moore>.

⁴⁶ The Other Wes Moore, “Home,” <http://theotherwesmoore.com/>; The Other Wes Moore, “Press & Appearances,” <http://theotherwesmoore.com/press-appearances/>.

⁴⁷ The Other Wes Moore, “Home,” <http://theotherwesmoore.com/>.

tell the interested party what he needs to do, and pay, “[t]o host Bryan for a speaking engagement.”⁴⁸ Elsewhere on the internet you can find the Bryan Stevenson page of the Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau, with its own list of speaking topics and testimonials.⁴⁹ Dave Eggers’ *The Circle* ties with Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* as the third most frequently selected work—*The Circle* was selected 7 times in 2014-15 and another 6 times in 2015-16—and he too is represented by American Program Bureau. Eggers’ page also lists his preferred topics, but he has no testimonials.⁵⁰ All American Speakers informs the reader that Eggers’ Booking Fee Range is \$30,001 - \$50,000; we hope there is a campus discount.⁵¹

Dave Eggers Doesn’t Come Cheap⁵²



Dave Eggers Biography

Pulitzer Prize finalist author, philanthropist and founder of 826 Valencia, a non-profit tutoring lab network

Categories: [Authors](#), [Entertainment](#), [Speakers by Industry](#)

Booking Fee Range: [\\$30,001 - \\$50,000](#) ⓘ

PURPOSES OF COMMON READING PROGRAMS

Our previous edition of *Beach Books* noted the prominence of *community*, *academic expectations*, *conversation*, *social activism*, and *thoughtfulness* among the stated goals of common reading programs.⁵³ The prominence of these goals has not changed in the last two years, and they remain the cornerstones of common reading programs. The most important thing to mention about these objectives is that they largely subsume an academic experience to extra-academic aims. These keywords telegraph the content of those goals: all save *academic expectations* are the euphemistic jargon of the left. Ohio State University wishes to foster “challenging conversations with peers”; in 2015, it chose Will Allen’s *The Good Food Revolution: Growing Healthy Food, People, and Communities* (2012), which promotes urban farming so as to fight the social injustice

⁴⁸ Bryan Stevenson Just Mercy, “Events,” <http://bryanstevenson.com/events/>; Bryan Stevenson Just Mercy, “Contact,” <http://bryanstevenson.com/contact/>.

⁴⁹ Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau, “Bryan Stevenson,” <http://www.prhspeakers.com/speaker/bryan-stevenson>.

⁵⁰ American Program Bureau, “Dave Eggers,” <http://www.apbspeakers.com/speaker/dave-eggers>.

⁵¹ All American Speakers, “Dave Eggers Biography,” <http://www.allamericanspeakers.com/speakers/Dave-Eggers/383333>.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Ashley Thorne, Marilee Turscak, and Peter Wood, *Beach Books: 2013-2014. What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?* (National Association of Scholars, 2014; <https://www.nas.org/images/documents/NAS-BeachBooks.pdf>), pp. 21-22.