



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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COMMON READ: A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

Experienced instructors have long recognized that reading well means being able to enter into useful, shared conversations with others. These conversations allow students to express their own ideas and to do so in an informed way as a response to what they have discovered through their reading. Most students are offered this opportunity at some point in their classroom experiences, but what about incoming freshmen? They, in particular, need to meet new people, enter into conversations, and engage intellectually with others. They need to be able to relate their past experiences to their new roles as college learners and explore ideas they might not have considered independently. In a welcoming environment, they need to be able to engage the voices of others and have conversations about these voices. A successful Common Read program offers just that—an opportunity to be part of a community of learners.

As educators, we are constantly looking for ways to merge the curricular with the co-curricular—a way to get students involved outside the classroom. This endeavor is not always easy at a community college, where students juggle families, jobs, and school. These balancing acts, in more cases than not, take place on limited budgets. Ergo, asking students to participate in an activity that takes them away from their already onerous schedules does not usually bode well for success. Asking them to read a book, outside of their already overwhelming workload, might seem superfluous. Yet, knowing that deep learning takes place both in and out of the classroom, we educators understand the importance of offering learning opportunities in a variety of settings. Students tend to remain in school longer if they feel a sense of cohesiveness and belonging outside the classroom experience. Again, a successful Common Read program offers just that—an opportunity to be a community of learners outside the classroom.

With this knowledge and a bit of trepidation, in spring 2009, Wallace State Community College began

planning a Common Read program that would build this community of learners. A committee was formed, research was conducted, and plans were made to start the new program the following fall. Although these types of initiatives are quite common in university settings, few community colleges have initiated one—perhaps because of the number of nontraditional and transitional students on campus. Our interest in developing the program, however, rose out of a need to offer a shared experience among all incoming freshmen and to set an academic tone for newly arriving students.

First, we had to choose an appropriate book. Because Common Read programs are typically voluntary, students' willingness to read becomes a critical factor in the program's success. Choosing a difficult or apparently didactic book might turn students off. Hence, the most important criteria that we considered for choosing the first book included readability and potential for engaging students, literary quality, cost, diversity, and relevance to our incoming freshmen. We chose *Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom, which chronicles Albom's relationship with his college professor, Morrie Schwartz. After graduating, Albom loses touch with his professor but gets back in touch with him after seeing a profile of Schwartz battling Lou Gehrig's disease on an episode of *Nightline*. While dying, Schwartz teaches Albom (along with the reader) how to live.

One of the most important contributions to our Common Read experience was the modeling of intellectual behavior and values by administration, faculty, and staff. Clearly, they, along with the students, needed to buy into the initiative. Therefore, books were offered gratis to employees. Surprisingly, we had a large number of folks across campus request a copy of the book, and that number has significantly increased for next fall's book choice. Next, an invitation was sent to incoming freshmen during the summer, inviting them to "Get on Board" with Common Read. Late summer, the campus was peppered with posters, and display tables were set. Conversations had begun!

Next, the committee developed activities that were closely aligned with the college's mission. A number



of our freshmen composition instructors, as well as a few instructors from other disciplines, incorporated the book into their curricula. Our program was designed in concert with learning community classes. These courses offered an additional setting in which students read, discussed, researched, and wrote about the themes Schwartz emphasized.

Taking a more active role in their own learning and their transition to college, students were involved in and out of the classroom. One campus-wide activity included a skit performed in the lobby of the student center. The chair of our biology department agreed to portray Schwartz in the skit, and a student played the role of Morrie. Later during the semester, students and faculty were invited to a campus-wide showing of the movie—a professional development opportunity for faculty and staff. In addition, students from the Sigma Kappa Delta English Honor Society participated in a book discussion at a freshmen-faculty luncheon. Again, conversations were taking place!

No doubt, Wallace State's first Common Read program was a success, and more in-depth plans are being made to begin another next year. Surveys were completed by students, and events were evaluated based on learning outcomes and assessment. As educators, we know that merging the curricular with the co-curricular components of college reinforces the message that learning occurs both inside and outside the classroom and that reading well involves a shared conversation with a friend—whether that friend is a peer, an instructor, the president of the college, or a maintenance worker. When both faculty and non-faculty are seen reading the same book, what a powerful message this sends to our students! A successful Common Read program, and one worth sharing, goes beyond the book. It provides meaningful opportunities for students to become integrated into a community of learners.

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