

We'll Give You the Story; You Make it Your Own: Developing the Common Reader Program at West Texas A&M University

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Institutions of higher education are increasingly focusing on ways to engage and retain the first-year student. One initiative that has been used across the U.S. is a common reader program that has the goal of academically engaging students (Laufgraben, 2006). Although common reader programs vary in organizational structure, size, and design, they are generally unified by an agreement on purpose—academic integration for first-year students (Patterson, 2002).

Twinton (2007) found that common reader programs have been established at over 130 universities. With the exponential proliferation of these programs, colleges and universities are being pressed for assessment data to support their academic purpose and budgetary requirements. Laufgraben (2006) explained that “little has been written on what these programs are and on the extent to which they achieve academic objectives” (p. ix). However, these programs share another similarity—they lack an assessment tool evaluating program learning outcomes (Twinton, 2007).

Review of Literature

According to the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2004), students who spend more time reading outside class score higher on the Educational Enrichment scale. Thirty-one percent of students who scored in the top quartile indicated that they read five or more books for their own reading enjoyment. Common reader programs attempt to facilitate this deeper learning experience reported by NSSE by providing students an opportunity to read outside of the traditional classroom. This is a shift in the learning paradigm for students and their universities.

Barr and Tagg (1995) describe the learning paradigm that shifts from a traditional instructional model of transferring knowledge from teacher to learner to creating an environment where students are members of a community of learners that make discoveries and solve problems. This new paradigm is preferred and expected by current university students because it makes learning more interactive and engaging.

Involving students in both in- and out-of-class activities can impact their cognitive development, including critical thinking. The number of hours students spend studying and the number of nonassigned books read during a year are positively related to gains in critical thinking (Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1993). Though common reader programs do not have the ability to increase the number of nonassigned books that students read, the program gives students an opportunity to read books they would not have otherwise selected.