

# Why Colleges' Common Reading Lists Get an F

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February 09, 2016

A core curriculum is to a liberal education what the study of contracts, torts, civil procedure and constitutional law is to a legal education and what the rudiments of shooting and passing are to basketball—an essential prerequisite to excellence in the larger undertaking. The widespread abandonment of core curricula ensures that college graduates will mistake the smattering of information about the Western tradition and other civilizations that they randomly acquire through their potpourri of courses for the knowledge that ought to crown the education of free and democratic citizens.

Perhaps colleges and universities are suffering something of a bad conscience. They have increasingly adopted the practice of assigning a common reading, usually a book, to matriculating freshman to provide a shared introduction to higher education.

In reality, according to a report released Feb. 10 by the National Association of Scholars, the common readings tend to cater to the lowest common denominator among students and to reinforce campus orthodoxy.

“Beach Books: 2014-2016: What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?” examines programs for this year and the last at more than 350 institutions that assign a common reading, including more than half of U.S. News and World Report’s top 100 American universities over the last two years and also a quarter of its top 100 liberal arts colleges. NAS’s stringent conclusion is unsurprising but supported by a formidable array of data and analysis: “the common reading genre is *parochial, contemporary, commercial, optimistic, juvenile, obsessed with suffering, and progressive*” (emphasis in original).

In keeping with educators’ reluctance to impose requirements and make demands, incoming college students are generally told that they are expected to read the assigned book but are usually not required to and are not tested on what they might have learned.

The books that dominate are “recent, trendy, and unchallenging.” Racism has been the most popular subject the last two years. Many books feature adolescent protagonists. Works dealing with immigration and environmentalism or, to use the trendier term, sustainability, were featured frequently. Several colleges selected works about transgender identity. Books about military and diplomatic history, particularly ones that depict valor on the battlefield and prudence and statesmanship in government, are rare.

Common reading programs have little use for venerable classics: Just over 2 percent of the assigned common books were published before 1945; less than 1 percent were published before 1900.

The programs also neglect modern classics. Many distinguished living writers failed to make the grade including Martin Amis, Wendell Berry, J. M. Coetzee, Annie Dillard, V.S. Naipaul, Philip Roth, Wole Soyinka, and Tom Wolfe.

For the most part, the common readings run the gamut from center left to left. Most are “cautiously liberal,” the report finds. “A significant minority are daringly progressive,” but “books that challenge the liberal worldview in any fashion are few and far between.” Accordingly, “the presence of Sonia Sotomayor’s *My Beloved World* (2013) and the absence of Clarence Thomas’ *My Grandfather’s Son* (2007), both the memoirs of members of racial minorities who triumphed over adversity to reach the summit of success among the judiciary ... is most simply explained as a register of political partisanship.”

The NAS report advances numerous sensible recommendations for reforming the common reading programs. For example, colleges and universities should seek *intellectual* diversity in the books they assign. They should remove non-academic goals from program mission statements: By now in the university world, words and phrases such as “community,” “civic engagement,” and “social justice” have been saturated with progressive connotations. They should not place on selection committees any university officials whose offices promote ideological agendas such as those devoted to diversity (which in the current university context almost never means diversity of opinion) and sustainability and should instead place responsibility for choosing works exclusively in professors’ hands.

And they should prefer books that have stood the test of time, or highly regarded ones of the last three generations. The Modern Library’s [list](#) of the 100 best novels and 100 best works of nonfiction is an excellent source that would expose students to the complexities of human affairs, lay a common foundation of inquiry, and challenge students to formulate their own opinions.

Books from the traditional canon that are more than a hundred years old have a special advantage. “Precisely because such books are *not* contemporary, because their subject matter is either the ahistorical or the alien past” (emphasis in the original), observes the report, “they serve the excellent purpose of drawing students out of the limitations of the here-and-now, to learn about worlds which are new, alien, and wonderful.”

Would that university administrators and faculty will read “Beach Books: 2014-2016” in full, take its criticisms to heart, and adopt all its proposed reforms. But that would amount to only one small step in the right direction.

The best freshmen common reading program cannot substitute for a core curriculum that prepares students to think for themselves by providing a substantive and structured introduction to the intellectual and political history of their civilization and that of others.

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