

**EVALUATION OF THE COMMON READING EXPERIENCE PILOT
PROGRAM FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS**

Prepared for:
Common Reading Experience Task Force
Bowling Green State University
May, 2002



Prepared by:
Julie A. Fuller, M.A.
Alan G. Walker, M.A.

Supervised by:
Milton D. Hakel, Ph.D.

Institute for Psychological Research and Application
Department of Psychology
Bowling Green State University
(419) 372.2693

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of an evaluation of the Common Reading Experience pilot project initiated Fall semester, 2001. Overall, student reactions to the program were quite positive as evidenced by a student opinion questionnaire that was distributed to students involved with the pilot as well as to a matched sample of students not involved in the pilot. Results of the survey revealed that those involved in the pilot program expressed significantly more favorable responses to two items:

- I would like to learn more about protecting the environment.
- I would like to learn more about personality, political, and/or social values.

Additionally, it was found that those who positively endorsed these two items had, on average, significantly better first-semester GPA's. Furthermore, there are indications that participation in the common reading experience per se might have a positive effect on first-semester GPA, an observation that warrants further study.

Finally, nearly 80% of students involved in the program indicated they would recommend a similar common reading experience for students entering BGSU in 2002 and suggested a wide variety of possible books that could be used next year.

Based on these outcomes, we recommend:

- Implementing a common reading experience for next year's incoming students
- Expanding next year's initiative to include 800 students
- Conducting a similar type of evaluation next year

It is believed that these recommendations can lead to:

- A solid evaluation of the program's success
- An empirical data-based decision as to whether the program should be expanded to include all incoming students in 2003
- Tracking the effects of the common reading experience over time, which would allow a "linking" between program involvement and key university outcome metrics such as overall grade point average, withdrawal rates, or student satisfaction measures

Background

Bowling Green State University initiated the Common Reading Experience pilot project in Fall semester, 2002. This project involved providing a sample of about 400 first-year students a common book to read over the summer (i.e., prior to beginning their first semester at BGSU). The book chosen for the pilot was *Into the Forest* by Jean Hegland. The primary goals of the project were to provide a common point of discussion for students, to establish academics as a priority at BGSU, and to assist the college socialization process by making out-of-class learning more than just social experiences for first-year students. Selected instructors and professors in English, Environmental Sciences, UNIV 101, and the Chapman Learning Community agreed to use the book as a discussion point in their respective classes. For example, English instructors used the book as an impetus for students to write theme and discussion papers, while Environmental Studies professors used it to introduce and discuss topics such as global warming.

In addition to being used in classroom discussions, another major objective of the pilot program was to unite divergent disciplines in discussing and addressing common problems such as global warming and the destruction of the environment. As such, a panel discussion was conducted in which panel members were chosen to represent their given discipline (e.g., Environmental Sciences, Communications, a student representative, Ethics). The goal of the panel discussion was to help students, faculty, and the whole university community to better understand the power in integrating divergent bodies of knowledge to address and solve a common issue or problem. Indeed, one of the Learning Outcomes recently adopted by the university pertains to making connections. As stated in the University Learning Outcomes, “connecting is the essence of creative problem solving, shown in synthesizing knowledge within and across courses...” Ultimately, putting a sense of community into BGSU by seeking to bridge gaps and open discussions amongst divergent colleges, programs, and departments and also seeking to assist students in “making connections” amongst their various courses was the overarching goal of the Common Reading Experience pilot project.

Objective

The Institute for Psychological Research and Application (IPRA) at Bowling Green State University was contracted to evaluate the Common Reading Experience pilot project. Specifically, the effectiveness of using *Into the Forest* in generating class discussion, facilitating socialization, assisting students in making “connections,” and intellectual stimulation was evaluated via a brief student outcomes survey. In addition, an open-ended student opinion questionnaire was given to students involved in the pilot program. Concurrently, the student outcomes survey was also administered to a matched sample of students who were not involved in the pilot program (i.e., who did not read the book and in which the book was not used as a discussion point in their class). This enabled us to: (1) evaluate responses for those involved in the pilot and, (2) to compare results between the two groups for significant differences in response patterns.

Survey Development

In September of 2001, interviews were conducted with the instructors involved in the Common Reading Experience pilot program. The purpose of the interviews was to gain more information about the project, including: (1) the personal and overall project objectives of the instructors, (2) how *Into the Forest* would be used in the context of the class being taught by each instructor, and (3) the potential positive outcomes for students involved with the pilot program.

Responses to these interviews were used to generate items for the student outcomes survey (e.g., “I enjoy reading beyond what is required in the classroom”). This survey was designed to assess the positive intellectual outcomes of the students involved in the pilot program (i.e., those who read *Into the Forest*) in comparison with a matched sample of students not involved in the program (i.e., those who did not read the book). Items on the student outcomes survey were not linked specifically to the book. See Appendix A for a copy of the survey.

In addition, a student opinion survey was created to evaluate students’ reactions to the Common Reading Experience project and to the book specifically. This survey was designed to ascertain how students viewed the project, whether they felt it was worthwhile, how they felt about the book, their experience of meeting with the author, and whether they would recommend a Common Reading Experience project in future years. Students were also asked for specific book recommendations for future common reading projects. It follows that only students involved in the pilot program were given this survey. See Appendix B for a copy of the survey.

Survey Administration

For the *Into the Forest* sample (i.e., those who were involved in the pilot program) arrangements were made with individual instructors to administer the survey during regularly-scheduled class times. For the non-pilot sample, 400 randomly-selected students enrolled in English 111 had their *New Student Transition Questionnaires* replaced with the student outcomes survey. These surveys were distributed to English 111 instructors who administered the surveys during their regular class times.

Survey Results

Student Outcomes (Ratings) Questionnaire

Several different analyses were conducted in order to better understand the survey results. On a purely descriptive level, Appendix C contains a table which presents percent agreement (students who responded “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree”) to each item; responses are broken down by whether or not students were involved in the pilot project (table 1) and also by class (table 2).

In order to identify significant differences in student responses, independent samples t-tests were conducted for each item. It was believed that comparing the English 111 class

(which used the book) to the matched sample (which did not use the book, but was also comprised of English students) would offer the purest evaluation of significant differences. This is because it could be argued that Environmental Studies or Chapman students may be predisposed to be more interested in the environment or to freely engage in classroom discussions to begin with. Results of these t-tests revealed significant differences in responses for these two groups for items 20 and 22:

(20) I would like to learn more about protecting the environment.

(22) I would like to learn more about personality, political, and/or social values.

These results suggest that students involved in the common reading experience responded differently to these items. More specifically, those students in English 111 where the book was used responded significantly more favorably to these items than did the matched sample not using the book.

Additionally, we correlated Common Reading Experience participation with one key university outcome variable, namely student's first-semester GPA. Correlations between student's first-semester GPA and responses to survey items revealed that students who responded favorably towards the above two items also tended to earn significantly higher first-semester GPA's ($r = .14, p = .006$ and $r = .09, p = .08$) These correlations show an association between the attitudes expressed in the items and GPA at the end of the semester, regardless of whether one participated in the common reading experience. Therefore, we tested whether participation in the common reading experience resulted in higher GPAs. Although not statistically significant, those students in the pilot program tended to earn higher GPA's (2.74 vs. 2.56). This finding should be considered to be very preliminary and must be interpreted with extreme caution. It is a hint that deserves further research.

Student Opinion (Open-Ended) Survey Responses

In general, students viewed the Common Reading Experience project positively. In fact, 79% responded that they would recommend a common reading experience for first-year students next year (see Appendix D for books recommended by students for next year). Common themes in the open-ended responses are highlighted below. (See Appendix D for a comprehensive list of responses and quotes.)

How students felt about *Into the Forest*

- It helped them to learn about others' views and survival.
- It made them feel fortunate and appreciate the resources available to them; many mentioned that they would no longer take technology for granted.
- Negative feedback related to the sexual scenes in the book and the notion that the book was hard to follow or confusing.

How students felt about the common reading experience

- It forced them to read, exposed them to others' values, and motivated them over the summer.

- It allowed them to meet other first-year students, acting as an “icebreaker” and “bonding experience,” giving them things to discuss outside of class.
- Negative comments suggested that the common reading experience had no direct relation to classes and seemed unnecessary.

Students felt positive about meeting author, Jean Hegland

- Comments were mostly positive, suggesting that it helped to clarify points in the book, understand the author’s perspective, and learn more about her background.
- They thought it was an interesting experience to meet the author of a book they had actually read.
- A few commented that it was boring or that she was not a great speaker.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, student reactions to the common reading experience were very positive. As evidenced by the student opinion survey, nearly 80% of students recommend that next year’s incoming students be involved in a similar experience. Additional strong positive student reactions were demonstrated by their eagerness to offer recommendations for potential books to use next year (see Appendix D). In fact, 36 different books were offered by students for possible consideration.

Based on these positive student reactions, it is recommended that Bowling Green State University repeat the implementation of the common reading experience for next year’s incoming students. It is further recommended that next year’s initiative be expanded to include 800 students (as opposed to 400 in 2001). By expanding the program to include a larger percentage of incoming students next year, and by again conducting a similar type evaluation, Bowling Green State University can facilitate an empirical data-based decision as to whether the program should be expanded to include all incoming students in 2003.

Several limitations of this evaluation should be noted. First, it is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. Second, the evaluation is based mainly on student perceptions, reactions and opinions. By collecting evaluation data next year, Bowling Green State University can address both of these limitations. That is, we can begin to track the effects of the common reading experience over time and continue efforts to link program involvement to key university outcome metrics. For example, it may prove particularly useful to again examine the relationship between involvement in the program and overall grade point average. Other key metrics future research could examine might include withdrawal rates, or student satisfaction measures. Such data would provide a solid evaluation of the program’s success, as well as provide a solid foundation to decide whether to implement the program to include larger groups of students.

In conclusion, survey results provide convincing data that suggests that students had a positive experience in the common reading experience pilot program. Based on these positive reactions, it is recommended that: (1) the pilot be expanded next year and, (2)

that further, more sophisticated evaluation efforts be undertaken. Doing so will enable Bowling Green State University to make sound decisions regarding the future plans of this initiative.

Appendix A
Student Outcomes Survey
(Ratings)

Appendix B
Student Opinion Survey

P# _____

Into the Forest Questionnaire

What did you like best about Into the Forest?

What did you like least about Into the Forest?

What benefits did you gain from reading and discussing Into the Forest?

Which, if any, events did you attend while Jean Hegland was at BGSU? (check all that apply)

panel discussion public reading lunch or dinner in-class discussion

If you checked one or more of the events above:

What benefits did you gain from Jean Hegland's visit?

Would you recommend a common reading experience for first-year students next year?

Yes No

Why or why not?

Please recommend a book for students to read for future common reading experience projects: _____

Appendix C

Student Outcomes Survey:

Response Comparisons of Pilot Group and Matched Sample (Table 1)
And Response Comparisons for all Groups (Table 2)

Table 1
BGSU Student Discussion Questionnaire
% Agreement
(Strongly or Somewhat agree)

	Read book (n = 219)	Did not read book (n = 299)
I find it easy to start conversations.....	68.9	69.9
I like to get involved in group discussions.....	58.4	59.2
I enjoy asking questions.....	39.7	40.8
I find it hard to formulate good questions.....	27.4	26.2
I usually wait for others to ask my question rather than to ask it myself.....	34.7	33.0
I take active roles in classroom discussions.....	47.2	43.5
I enjoy discussing things I've learned in class with others outside of the classroom.....	51.4	52.2
Classroom discussions make me think about things I had not thought about before.....	73.5	74.2
Classroom discussions help me to understand and appreciate different viewpoints.....	84.5	77.3
I enjoy reading beyond what is required in the classroom.....	27.6	22.5
I feel comfortable approaching faculty members to discuss ideas.....	52.1	48.7
I like presenting my ideas in a public forum.....	18.3	13.4
I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.....	32.0	33.8
I find it difficult to talk about vague topics such as values.....	24.7	22.4
I am involved with campus activities outside of class.....	50.2	40.3
I have attended out-of-class events at BGSU such as listening to prominent speakers.....	48.9	32.9
I follow current events on a regular basis.....	58.9	56.2
I would like to write and publish a book someday.....	20.5	18.1
I would like to learn more about global warming. *	24.7	13.4
I would like to learn more about protecting the environment.....	44.3	25.8
I would like to learn more about culture and society.....	61.6	51.5
I would like to learn more about personality, political, and/or social values.....	54.3	51.8

*After controlling for group, class, and demographic differences, only this item revealed significantly different responses between those who did and did not read the book.

Table 2
BGSU Student Discussion Questionnaire
% Agreement by Group
(Strongly or Somewhat agree)

Items	Chapman n = 79	UNIV 100 n = 47	ENV SCI n = 35	English n = 56	Matched n = 301
I find it easy to start conversations	60.8	76.6	68.6	73.2	70.1
I like to get involved in group discussions	51.9	66.0	57.1	60.7	59.5
I enjoy asking questions	41.8	42.6	34.3	39.3	40.5
I find it hard to formulate good questions	29.1	27.7	14.3	32.1	26.3
I usually wait for others to ask my question rather than to ask it myself	34.2	29.8	31.4	39.3	33.2
I take active roles in classroom discussions	53.2	53.2	42.9	37.5	43.2
I enjoy discussing things I've learned in class with others outside of the classroom	51.9	59.6	57.1	41.8	51.8
Classroom discussions make me think about things that I had not thought about before	69.6	80.9	77.1	71.4	73.8
Classroom discussions help me to understand and appreciate different viewpoints	83.5	89.4	85.7	80.4	77.4
I enjoy reading beyond what is required in the classroom	35.4	21.3	22.9	25.0	22.3
I feel comfortable approaching faculty members to discuss ideas	55.7	51.1	48.6	51.8	48.3
I like presenting my ideas in a public forum	19.0	27.7	14.3	12.5	13.3
I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence	27.8	42.6	31.4	28.6	33.9
I find it difficult to talk about vague topics such as values	25.3	27.7	20.0	25.0	22.3
I am involved with campus activities outside of class	60.8	40.4	42.9	50.0	39.9
I have attended out-of-class events at BGSU such as listening to prominent speakers	67.1	55.3	34.3	28.6	32.6
I follow current events on a regular basis	55.7	61.7	51.4	64.3	56.5
I would like to write and publish a book someday	25.3	17.0	20.0	17.9	17.9
I would like to learn more about global warming	21.5	23.4	45.7	16.1	13.6
I would like to learn more about protecting the environment	38.0	36.2	65.7	46.4	25.9
I would like to learn more about culture and society	59.5	57.4	74.3	60.7	51.5
I would like to learn more about personality, political, and/or social values	50.0	48.9	54.3	66.1	51.8

Appendix D

Student Opinion Survey: Summary of Responses

ITF Project: Open-ended Questionnaire Responses

What did you like best about ITF?

Common responses: made me think about what I have, easy read, I can relate since the events of Sept 11, the setting, the second half of the book, meeting the author, survival lessons, thinking about the future, the sisters' relationship, better than a textbook, realistic, the plot, interesting

Some direct quotes:

"The way the girls survived against the odds."

"I loved the fact that it raised future problems with our society."

"The openness and the ability I had as a reader to get inside the characters' lives."

"Depicts accurately the consequence of social failure."

"Many parallels with today's society."

"The fact that while it was fiction, it was frighteningly believable."

"How the girls learned to live without the luxuries they once had."

"God was a woman."

"I thought it was very descriptive and it made me realize how good I have it."

"I didn't like the book."

What did you like least about ITF?

Common responses: the incest between the sisters, confusing how the author jumped around in time, too many details/ hard to follow, the ending, boring, disgusting, gruesome details, extra work, unorthodox scenes, the sisters complaining

Some direct quotes:

"Reading in the summer!"

"The incest, it was completely un-needed!"

"Hegland did a terribly bad job with the plot. Jumped from one idea to the next..."

"It took a while to get to the main points."

"It created a lot of extra work that didn't count towards this course."

"I didn't like the whole Eva and Nell 'making love' thing...I have 3 sisters and we've never bonded like that."

"I thought it was boring and hard to get into."

"I was confused at the beginning of the book."

"It was written for women."

"Reading."

What benefits did you gain from reading and discussing ITF?

Common responses: learning others' views, appreciating what I have, learning about different issues, learn about survival, reflection on self and resources, meeting the author, makes me feel fortunate, thinking about the future, taking technology for granted

Some direct quotes:

"I actually realized not all books are boring."

"What we view as important everyday need may not be necessary to survival."

"I learned to appreciate how much time goes into writing and publishing a book."

"I have a greater appreciation for what is going on around me."

"Nothing too important, although it was a nice introduction to college."

“I learned more about how and why the story was formulated the way it was.”

“I enjoyed hearing how others interpreted what I had read.”

“I learned what to do if electricity goes out and stuff.”

“Nothing I can think of.”

“About the sisters’ love scene. It is not obscene, but logical.”

“I gained a different perspective; there is always another side of view.”

Which, if any, events did you attend while Jean Hegland was at BGSU?

	Panel Discussion	Public Reading	Lunch or Dinner	In-class Discussion	Total
Chapman	53	59	1	45	79
UNIV	12	22	24	37	47
ENVS	8	7	5	30	35
ENG	8	1	16	58	58
Total	81	89	46	170	219

What benefits did you gain from Jean Hegland’s visit?

Common responses: helped clear up points in book, gave insight to her perspective, interesting to meet an author, learned more about her personal experiences (e.g., she has a lot of land), seeing what she looks like, learned why she became a writer, her beliefs were strongly reflected in the book

Some direct quotes:

“I appreciate the book so much more looking at it from her perspective and just getting to know her reasons and viewpoints on events in the book was awesome.”

“I saw how passionate she was with her work.”

“Jean’s perspective and passion for writing.”

“I have changed my technology thoughts.”

“I finally shook the hand of a real-life author!”

“She wasn’t a great speaker.”

“Her visit was boring.”

“I got to see the author of the book that made me lose time over the summer.”

Would you recommend a common reading experience for 1st year students next year?

	Yes	No	Maybe	Total
Chapman	51	28	0	79
UNIV	44	2	1	47
ENVS	33	1	1	35
ENG	45	10	3	58
Total	173	43	5	219

Why or why not?

Common responses (yes): good to meet the author, enjoyable, fun, socializing, forced me to read, icebreaker for first-year students, something in common to discuss with others, teaches values, motivating, links students and classes, bonding experience for students, helped to meet people

Common responses (no): extra work over the summer, no direct relation to classes, pointless, not taken seriously by many, many failed to read book, seemed unnecessary, overwhelming, no choice, received book too late in summer

Some direct quotes:

“Everyone should read at least one novel in their lifetime.”

“As much as I hate reading, discussions on the book helps a student learn about their fellow students.”

“Some students have never read a book from start to finish.”

“It was a great book.”

“It was just a good book in general, and we got to talk it over with the author.”

“It relates well to first-year experiences.”

“Good way to start college.”

“Good way to start discussions with other students.”

“It helped me to focus on academics during the summer.”

“It is good to read a book.”

“Most kids hating reading and don’t do it so what is the point.”

“No one wants to read over the summer.”

“This was boring and gave me a bad opinion about Chapman in the beginning.”

“It’s not fair to have to read a book to be in this dorm.”

“...we were not given homework about the book or anything like that, so I feel that many people didn’t find it necessary to read the book.”

Please recommend a book for students to read for future CRE projects:

Books (# of recommendations if greater than one):

Into the Forest (15)

Night by Elie Wiesel (7)

The Catcher in the Rye (5)

Tuesdays with Morrie (5)

The Giver by Lois Lowery (4)

The Scarlet Letter (4)

1984 (3)

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury (3)

Into the Wild (3)

A Lesson Before Dying (2)

Animal Farm (2)

Catch 22 (2)

Lord of the Flies (2)

She’s Come Undone by Wally Lamb (2)

To Kill a Mocking Bird (2)

A Child Called "It"
A Clockwork Orange
A Hope in the Unseen
Agony and the Ecstasy
And Then There Were None
Angela's Ashes by Frank McCourt
Atonement Child
Breakfast of Champions by Kurt Vonnegut
Casino
Celestine Prophecies
Chicken Soup for the College Soul
David Copperfield
Executive Orders by Tom Clancy
Exodus
Fallen Angel
Faun and Games by Piers Anthony
Flowers in the Attic by V.C. Andrews
For the Love of the Game by Bill Bradley
Fraud
Friday Night Lights
Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin
Harmful Intent by Robin Cook
High Fidelity by Nick Hornby
Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy
Huckleberry Finn
I Know this Much is True by Wally Lamb
Interview With the Vampire or Vampire Lestat
Ishamel
Island of the Blue Dolphins
Jurassic Park by Michael Crichton
White Orlander
Left Behind
Moby Dick
Never Cry Wolf
Nicholas Sparks
Odessey 2001
Of Mice and Men
On the Road
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest
Planet of the Apes
Rapture of Canaan
Red Badge of Courage
Rudy
Runaway Jury by John Grisham
Slaughterhouse Five
The Bluest Eye

The Cay

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test by Tom Wolf

The Freedom Writers

The Good Children

The Great Santini

The Inferno by Dante

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula LeQuin

The Loop

The Lord of the Rings

The Man and the Sea

The Midwife's Tale

The Most Wanted by Jacqylen Mitchard

The Outsiders

The Tempest

The Things They Carried

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Things Fall Apart

Tom Sawyer (“holds different values now than it did in fourth grade”)

Walden by Thoreau

Where the Red Fern Grows

Who Moved My Cheese

No recommendation:

Blank (83)

? (20)

“I don’t know” or “I don’t read often” (6)

“No book” (3)

N/A (2)

Non-specific recommendations:

Something nonfiction (2)

Some type of mystery novel

Any Cynthia Vogt novel

Tom Clancy Novels

Harry Potter series

A thriller

Some type of book that would appeal to college students’ interests