A Tale of Two Common Reads: Models for Developing a Successful Common Reading Program for First Year Engineering Students

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Introduction: Common Read
- Purpose is “to provide a common academic experience for all first-year students and to strengthen the academic atmosphere of the institution from the day the student arrives on campus.”
- Traditionally involves the entire first year class reading the same book and participating in guided discussions
- Few institutions have a common read for engineering students

University of Virginia, School of Engineering & Applied Science

Book Selection Process
- Committee: Faculty, staff & students
  1. Determines 5-8 semi-finalists and then narrows the list to 3-4 finalists
  2. Ballot sent to faculty, staff, and students
  3. Final book selection
  4. Announcement of the selection

Book Criteria
- Connects to engineering practice/ profession
- Contains multiple themes for the discussion (e.g., ethics, practice of the profession, personal development)
- Recently published, but available in paperback to reduce cost to students

University of Michigan, College of Engineering

Book Selection Process
- 2012: Selected by faculty & staff
- 2013: Selected by students, faculty, & staff
- 71% of students in 2013 reported reading the entire book compared to only 39% in 2012

Book Criteria
- Appeals to students transitioning from high school to college
- Connects engineering practice and profession
- Fosters discussion about social identity
- Importance of engineers developing competencies beyond the technical

Conclusion
- Initial evaluation indicates that engineering common reading programs show positive effects related to
  - modeling intellectual engagement;
  - broadening perspectives about the role of engineers in society;
  - creating connections between first-year students and the larger engineering community

Future work
- A longitudinal study or student engagement could provide additional insight into effectiveness and identify additional gains

University of Virginia

- 15,000 undergraduates; 2,200 engineering undergrads
- Started in 1993; 80% participation

Program Goals
- For students to get to know each other outside of class
- To help prepare students for the level of intellectual exchange
- To help students think about engineering outside its technical aspects

University of Michigan

- 28,000 undergraduates; 6,000 engineering undergrads
- Started in 2013; 97% participation

Program Goals
- Create the feeling of a community of scholars
- Facilitate meaningful discussions regarding:
  - the role and responsibility of an engineer in society
  - engineers developing competencies beyond the technical

Book Discussions
- Small group discussions
- Create community among the faculty leaders
  - Meeting prior to discussion
  - Sharing of ideas
  - Guidance and input for the discussion group leaders

Enrichment Events
- Connect experience to courses
- Invite the authors to discuss the book

Book
- A Tale of Two Common Reads

References