

# The Un-Common Read: Perspectives from Faculty and Administration at a Diverse Urban Community College

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Maloy et al. discuss the implementation and impact of a Common Read program at Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York, which serves one of the most diverse communities in the country. Instead of following the model at traditional colleges of a Common Read as part of pre-fall orientation, Queensborough has developed a full-academic-year model that encompasses faculty development through a Fall Book Club and planning thematic cross-disciplinary events and assignments that are integrated into spring course curricula. Through their “UnCommon Read” program, the authors define college reading as the construction of an intellectual community, arguing that this is particularly important to create at two-year colleges, where students may face unique challenges. They discuss the impact of three Common Read selections and their campus-wide themes: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot with a focus on issues of race and bioethics; Somaly Mam’s *The Road of Lost Innocence* through the lens of global human rights; and *Until I Say Goodbye: My Year of Living with Joy* by Susan Spencer-Wendel, with a theme of empathy. In addition, quantitative research is presented in the form of both student and faculty surveys with results.

Professors have long lamented that their students are poor readers and lack enthusiasm for reading. In 1960, Kingston observed in *The Journal of Developmental Reading* that the typical college reading assigned in classrooms, textbooks and anthologies did little to “develop or improve the students’ reading habits.” Few of his students at the University of Georgia reported having read a book or a magazine for pleasure or their own interests. Over 50 years later, research indicates that little has changed in terms of college students’ reading habits. In 2004, a National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) survey found that 56% of American adults had not read any books in the past year. The resulting report, titled *Reading at Risk*, drew a gloomy portrait of the decline of reading in American life, particularly for those ages 18–24, as only 42.8% claimed to have read a literary text over the course of the

year, demonstrating the lowest level of any age group other than individuals over 75. Likewise, the NEA's expansive 2007 report, *To Read or Not to Read: A Matter of National Consequence*, declares the decline in reading both a cultural and national problem (p. 6) and again finds that the decline in reading is most pronounced among Americans ages 18–24, as only 52% reported reading any book outside of school, and 65% of college students claimed that they read for pleasure less than an hour a week.

In response to its initial *Reading at Risk* report, the NEA made a push to increase engagement with the written word through the Big Read initiative in 2006, through which grants were offered to community-based organizations to create book clubs for such works as *Fahrenheit 451*. At colleges around the country, the Big Read has since been adapted into the Common Read. In the past decade, Common Read programs in which students read and discuss a pre-selected book-length text have emerged to engage students in a common intellectual experience and hopefully increase their interest in reading. Traditional Common Read programs often take place at four-year colleges and require all incoming first-year students to read a particular book prior to the beginning of the fall semester. Students then enhance their reading of the book through events that are offered as part of their first-year experience. Identified by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) as a High Impact Practice, the Common Read offers students access to active learning practices and academic engagement. However, essential to the success of such programs is a design that meets the needs of the student population of a particular college. While traditional Common Read programs offer all incoming students a unified first-year experience, we explore in this chapter how our community college has adapted and designed the Common Read in order to meet the needs of a diverse student body while engaging faculty across the disciplines, which we believe is essential at two-year colleges, where students have unique strengths and challenges. We argue that the structure of our Common Read program promotes college reading at our school as it builds an intellectual community of students and faculty across our campus. It posits college reading as a sustained collaborative, intellectual enterprise in which students and faculty critically consider the context and implications of a text across disciplines.

## Literature Review: College-Level Reading and the Common Read

In her study, “Literacy Skills among Academically Underprepared Students,” Perin (2013) argues that there is almost no research on whether students can apply reading comprehension and writing skills “in the types of holistic literacy practice that signify college readiness” (p. 9). To develop the academic literacy that ensures col-

lege readiness, students must overcome “deeply ingrained misconceptions about learning” that position students “as passive recipients of information rather than active constructors of knowledge” (Armstrong & Newman, 2011, pp. 6–7). Armstrong and Newman use Louise Rosenblatt’s (1994) schema of transmission and transactional models of reading to demonstrate the need for students to move beyond discrete reading skills and a *transmission* approach to reading in which there is only one—correct—way to understand a text. Instead, they must begin to actively engage in conversations with and about texts, through a *transactional* approach to reading, which develops the critical thinking necessary in college-level work. Likewise, Cheryl Hogue Smith (2012) also emphasizes the importance of a transactional approach in working with students who need to develop college-level reading skills, arguing that students often are so focused on detecting the *correct* reading of a text that they suffer from “inattentive blindness,” (p. 59), a term she borrows from Simons and Chabris (1999), in which students read over or through anything in the text that does not correspond to *correctness*. To be successful college-level readers, though, Smith argues students must learn to make intertextual connections, engage with ideas in texts, negotiate multiple understandings of texts, and explore confusion surrounding texts (p. 60).

As Smith (2012) states, this approach to college reading necessitates active questioning and the desire to make connections across texts, and, we would like to argue, across disciplines. Reading in all disciplines, as the following research on Reading Across the Curriculum (RAC) has indicated, has the potential to reinforce active and critical reading throughout students’ college careers. Programs and activities that support RAC ensure that faculty in a variety of disciplines have the opportunity and support to apply critical reading strategies in their classrooms (Anderson & Kim, 2011) and continually reinforce a transactional reading model that ensures ongoing development of students’ academic literacy. In “Reading Across the Curriculum as the Key to Student Success,” Horning (2007) argues for colleges to develop these types of programs in order to ensure that students interact with texts frequently and critically throughout their college careers. She states:

It seems clear that a refocused emphasis on reading as the process of getting meaning from print to be used for analysis, synthesis and evaluation, in the context of critical literacy across the curriculum could potentially address the difficulties of students, the goals of teachers and the needs of the nation for an educated, informed, fully participatory democratic population. (p. 4)

Common Read programs are one way in which these types of transactional reading practices can be promoted across college campuses, if colleges design their programs to meet the needs of the student population of their particular campus in a way that fosters an academic community for students and faculty. While

numerous articles have described the process of book selection and the logistics of program design (Ferguson, 2006; Nadelson & Nadelson, 2012; Straus & Daley, 2002), only recently have Common Read programs been analyzed to determine their effectiveness. Common Read programs have been recognized in a handful of studies as promoting student engagement and retention (Boff, Schroeder, Letson, & Gambill, 2007; Daugherty & Hayes, 2012) as well as encouraging students to make connections between their academic and personal lives (Benz, Comer, Juergensmeyer, & Lowry, 2013). However, an ongoing debate demonstrates the varying extents to which traditional Common Read programs support community on campus, with some educators and researchers indicating positive results (Benz et al., 2013; Daugherty & Hayes, 2012; Nichols, 2012;) and others indicating negligible results (Ferguson, Brown, & Piper, 2014). Nonetheless, Laufgraben (2006), Vice Provost at Temple University, argues that carefully designed Common Read programs are those that are adapted to meet the needs of students, faculty, and community and include “discussion and respect for diverse viewpoints.” Such programs, like the one our community college has carefully designed, promote academic literacy and support cross-disciplinary learning for faculty and students as well as an enhanced sense of community across the campus. As we will demonstrate in our description and analysis of our program, when Common Read programs successfully foster a reading community across the curriculum, they combat the “inattentive blindness” that causes students, particularly those at two-year colleges, to struggle in college reading situations where they are required to analyze and synthesize complex ideas and negotiate varying interpretations of texts.

## Defining College Reading: Forging an Intellectual Community at Two-Year Colleges

We see the “inattentive blindness” of our students not only as a lack of familiarity with critical literacy strategies but also a hesitancy to see themselves as members of an intellectual community. While community college students bring invaluable life experiences and knowledge to the classroom, they also may also be underprepared for the academic rigor of college, and largely unsure about how to find a place within their campus’s academic culture. Community colleges provide opportunity for non-traditional, first-generation, low-income, and minority students, and, in addition, they provide opportunity for students who may not have received adequate academic preparation for the work expected of them in college classrooms and that would make them feel like they belong to an intellectual community. Likewise, community college students often face additional challenges as they try to earn their degree: one quarter of students come from low-income households, one third graduated from high school over a decade ago, half are in danger of

dropping out of school because of financial burdens, one third are taking care of dependents while in school, and 15% are single parents. In the face of these realities, less than 40% of students graduate from community college within six years, and two-thirds of students are considered underprepared when they arrive (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 82). Research has demonstrated that community college students require resources to help them develop metacognition and academic motivation (Bailey, 2015, p. 86) and that academic supports, in the form of social relationships and informal interactions with other students and faculty, are invaluable to students' retention and success in college (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015, p. 37). We believe that unless students are able to become part of an academic community—within which they find support from students and faculty—the challenges that they face may become insurmountable.

Ideally, college calls for an embrace of the luxury to explore the life of the mind in reading, both for information and pleasure. As Carillo (2015) argues as she draws upon Morrow's (1997) topography of reading, college should cultivate a variety of enriched literacy practices such as "reading to build an intellectual repertoire; reading for the unexpected; reading for the play of language; reading for the strategies of persuasion; and reading for genre conventions" (p. 121). Reading is to take center stage in students' academic pursuits: indeed, one of a student's major expenses is textbooks. In practice, college reading is, traditionally, the expectation and assumption by professors that students will do the reading as assigned: highlighting, underlining and glossing the text, taking notes for discussion points, and gleaning meaning, all of which will be supported and enhanced by class discussion. Anecdotally, many students report feeling overwhelmed by their reading load and simply do not do it. At our diverse community college, with students at all levels of academic preparedness, some faculty are explicitly teaching college reading skills but others cannot find room in their packed curriculum for it. Other faculty members find that the more the reading material is contextualized, the better the students are able to comprehend and make connections within and without. Contextual understanding seems to be the key to connect the skills of fluent reading with the pleasure of intellectual inquiry.

With this perspective, our definition of college reading as per our *Un-Common Read* program is that college reading is a collective and holistic enterprise, such as Perin (2013) describes. The Common Read program at Queensborough Community College (QCC), the City University of New York, invites students and faculty to share and participate in the intellectual life of the college, discussing the selected text through investigations of theme, historical and cultural context, and multiple perspectives across disciplines. The value of intellectual life is highlighted as students immerse themselves in the text and in the community of inquiry the Common Read events create and nurture. We seek for students to experience the reading of the chosen texts as "transactional" (Rosenblatt, 1994) and to understand

reading to be essential across the curriculum. We hope to move our students closer to viewing college reading as foundational to their identity as college students. The skills of highlighting and note taking are important, yes, and reinforced through our final reflective assignments—but it is the opportunity to experience membership in an intellectual community that truly seeks to shift a student’s perspective from resistant or merely dutiful to a fully engaged and conscious satisfaction in developing the life of the mind. As we will demonstrate by providing perspectives on our Common Read from our administrative Common Read Coordinator as well as three Faculty Coordinators, communal intellectual inquiry is fostered each year in our program through faculty and student-facilitated events that are built into the curriculum and model critical thinking of the ideas in a text across disciplines.

## Administrative Perspective: Susan Madera, Common Read Coordinator

QCC is nestled in a quiet neighborhood in Bayside, New York. We take pride in knowing that we serve one of the most diverse populations of any college in the United States with over 16,000 students who hail from nearly every corner of the world. Our students come to us from over 143 countries and over 44% of fall 2013 first-year students reported speaking a language other than English at home. Over 64% of first-time, first-year students received some type of grant aid. Similarly to many community colleges across the country, with such diversity and an open-admissions policy come great challenges. Many come to us underprepared. According to the *Queensborough Community College Fact Book* (2014), 68% of fall 2013 first-year students were required to take a remedial math course, 22% remedial writing, and 22% remedial reading. Our mission is to provide quality services that support the intellectual, emotional, and social and vocational development of all our students. To achieve these goals we have created the Queensborough Academies, whose three-pillar approach to success includes academic advisement, technology, and High Impact Practices (HIPs).

At QCC we have identified seven instructional modalities that facilitate student learning skills and competencies, not just content or information, in the form of HIPs. The Common Read is recognized as a Common Intellectual Experience, acknowledged by George Kuh (2008) in *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* as a High Impact Practice that promotes integrative learning across the curriculum. We refer to our program as the *Un*-Common Read as it is poles apart from those offered at other institutions. Student engagement is not relegated only to those who teach first-year courses. It is, instead, a campus-wide responsibility, where reading is the main focus. In lieu of mandatory faculty participation for first-year classes, involvement is voluntary

and open to all interested faculty members regardless of discipline or course level. Participation is also offered to students in local high schools and the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP), an immersive program for English Language Learners. Ours is a yearlong initiative that includes one semester of professional development each fall (referred to as the Common Read Book Club), which is led by a team including one administrator who leads and coordinates the effort and one faculty member who facilitates the professional development series. In the spring semester, the chosen text is provided to participating students as a gift from the college. During a three-week period of co-curricular events offered to promote cross-disciplinary thinking, participating students are required to attend at least one event but are encouraged to attend as many as possible. Our program aligns with Laufgraben's definition of a well-planned Common Read as it both promotes reading and supports cross-disciplinary learning. In addition, our program also promotes faculty development opportunities.

The impetus for our Common Read was a grant application for The Big Read, a program of the NEA, which was co-written by a college administrator and a faculty member from the English Department and was submitted but not awarded. Our Office of Academic Affairs recognized the value of the application and offered to support it financially. In its initial offering, during fall of 2011 with the chosen text Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* (1990), our program was one semester long. Participants included ten faculty members from five academic disciplines, involving 240 students, and offering three events. That semester, paper surveys were utilized to garner feedback from both faculty and students. Results indicated faculty had a positive experience and felt that it added to their students' understanding of and engagement with core concepts related to their courses. Student responses indicated that they found the events both enjoyable and educational but requested that we consider offering a variety of days and times in the future to accommodate their schedules.

The next academic year we again offered an opportunity for faculty to participate in our initiative, with the chosen text Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960, 1988). The number of faculty participants grew, as did the number of academic disciplines, students, and events offered. In surveys collected at the end of the semester, a majority of students indicated that the events offered as part of the Common Read enhanced their understanding of the text and also complemented the learning that took place in their class. In addition, 60% of students who responded claimed that the events they attended helped them to make connections across disciplines.

At the end of that academic year a programmatic review took place and considerable changes were made to improve both the structure and effect of the Common Read. Our Common Read was transformed from a semester-long initiative to a yearlong initiative. Within the year-long model, the Common Read Coordinator

performed research prior to the start of the academic year to identify a book that met specific criteria: the text should be available in paperback to maintain affordability, length should not exceed 200 pages (if possible) and the text should be written at a reading level that would accommodate upper high school/early college readers.

Professional development takes place each fall semester with the collaboration of the Common Read Coordinator and a faculty member in the role of Faculty Coordinator. The role of the Faculty Coordinator is to work with the Common Read Coordinator to create the schedule for the entire academic year including professional development in the fall and co-curricular, cross-disciplinary events in the spring. The workshops are redesigned each year to align not only with the text chosen but with the disciplines of participating faculty. This type of faculty-led professional development is crucial in community college settings because it promotes integrating development into classroom practices and ensures “collaborative intradepartmental structures” that support student learning (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 105). Likewise, faculty-driven development is essential to successful Common Read programs. According to Michael Ferguson (2006), former AAC&U senior staff writer and associate editor of *Peer Review*, the Common Read “is most likely to be effective when campuses offer discussion guides or workshops to help faculty integrate the common reading into their classes.” The Faculty Coordinator is instrumental in designing workshops which focus on achieving the Student Learning Outcomes associated with the Common Read. Upon completion of participation in the Common Read initiative, students are expected to be able to synthesize meaningful connections between a general education outcome and a co-curricular experience as well as to draw conclusions by combining examples, facts, or theories from more than one field of interest or perspective.

While participants and events vary each year, the Common Read always is designed to promote participation in the intellectual life of college. As we demonstrate in the following sections, each year we focus on new themes and pedagogical approaches in our professional development workshops, and we take unique approaches to teaching the Common Read text in individual classrooms and in campus-wide events. As we demonstrate through the perspectives of three Faculty Coordinators, the benefits of this structure allow us to cater the Common Read to our diverse student body while promoting community across the college.

## Faculty Perspective: Joan Dupre, Faculty Coordinator of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, 2012-2013

As I am writing these pages about my Common Read experience using Rebecca Skloot’s 2011 bestseller *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* in an urban community college classroom, the city of Baltimore is erupting into the kind of chaos it



has not known since 1968. Thoughtful journalists, after reporting the hard facts about the case of Freddie Gray, the 25-year-old black man who allegedly died from injuries sustained while in police custody, are asking hard questions about social context and history. I wonder along with them about the status of race relations and how neighborhoods so close to Johns Hopkins University can be more mired in poverty and hopelessness than they were in 1935 when 15-year-old Henrietta Lacks, a poor black tobacco farmer, married her cousin and moved from Virginia to Maryland. Lacks died of a virulent form of cervical cancer in 1951, but her cells, taken from her without her knowledge or consent, lived on to help cure disease and generate income for researchers. Her children and grandchildren remained living in the most deplorable conditions, receiving no compensation for the contribution their mother and grandmother made to science until Rebecca Skloot herself set up a scholarship fund for the younger descendants.

Reflecting on my time with the Common Read and *Henrietta Lacks* has led me to consider the role of reading and empathy in our lives and the lives of our students. When it comes to the Common Read, the “others” through whose eyes we may see may be characters (in the case of fiction), real-life figures (in the case of non-fiction), authors, classmates – and professors and students reading the same text from different perspectives in other disciplines. In the instance of *Henrietta Lacks*, some of the other disciplines were nursing, biology and sociology. Louise M. Rosenblatt (1938, 1995), a pioneer of reader-response theory and practice, makes a distinction between what she calls “efferent” and “aesthetic” reading (p. xvii). In the former case, the reader needs to extract information from a text, such as for a biology class. In the latter case, the reader must “permit into the focus of attention . . . the personal associations, feelings, and ideas being lived through during the reading” (p. 292). Many texts, and this is certainly true of *Henrietta Lacks*, require both efferent and aesthetic approaches. Students must take information from the book, but their relationship with the text – and the writer – is complicated by a kind of reciprocity that enriches the reading process, the text, and the reader.

At Queensborough, in what is perhaps the most diverse county in the country, our population is a fascinating mix of ages, ethnicities, colors and religions. This makes it a challenge to follow Rosenblatt’s (1938, 1995) dictum that “we must seek to bring to our students at each stage of their development sound literary works in which they can indeed become personally involved” (p. 269). A text like *Henrietta Lacks*, however, makes that personal involvement relatively easy, as it presents both the writer/reporter’s journey as well as bringing Lacks’ to life.

In opposition to those critics who warned against taking the writer’s life and her intentions into account, our class looked at Skloot’s life and her intentions in writing *Henrietta Lacks*. In fact, Skloot encourages this by sharing with the reader the relevant parts of her biography and making transparent – at least in general terms—her intentions. One of the things students had to consider was the nature

of the journalistic enterprise and if objectivity was a goal – or even a possibility— in the reporting and writing of this book. Skloot establishes trust with her readers when she shares details about her personal involvement with the Lacks family over the ten-year period during which she composed the text.

One of the things students wrote in their reading response journals (a requirement that encourages engaged reading) was what they imagined Skloot intended in a given passage. The sharing of thoughts and feelings about the text and what students imagined were the writer’s intentions is the way we began our class discussions. Reading written responses aloud in class and sharing them in groups helped to move students from superficial “canned” responses to more sophisticated readings of the text that consider the unique point of view of each character.

During the semester we read the Skloot text, students participated enthusiastically in the events planned for the Common Read, as part of the required curricula of the course. We viewed a terrific BBC documentary about Henrietta Lacks, *The Way of All Flesh* (1998), directed by Adam Curtis. We also saw *Miss Evers’ Boys* (1997), a disturbing but excellent film based on the 1932 Tuskegee syphilis experiments, directed by Joseph Sargent. An engineering professor wrote and hosted a “HeLa” Jeopardy game; a biology class presented on “Cancer, Genes and Viruses”; Nursing students presented research on genetic testing, cloning, healthcare reform, hospice care and patient rights; a physician from Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center gave a talk on “Immigrant Health and Cancer Disparities.” The above is a mere sampling of the events the Common Read Coordinator and faculty from several disciplines organized.

With so much media and public attention (and political speeches) paid to the importance of STEM, the chance that the Common Read offers faculty to work across disciplines in the humanities *and* the sciences on a text that reads like a medical detective story is a value beyond measure. *Henrietta Lacks* is the perfect text to use as a jumping off point for a discussion of the relationship between the arts and the sciences; it is an excellent argument for our interdependence as faculty and students—and as human beings. *Henrietta Lacks* allowed us to focus on the connection between bioethics and race relations in a way that today seems all too timely.

As the student surveys we collected at the end of Spring 2013 demonstrate, a large majority of students who participated in the *Henrietta Lacks* Common Read responded positively to this experience. They indicated that reading this book and participating in events allowed them to connect the text to the course material in their classes as well as to their everyday lives. Four hundred and one students responded to a survey regarding their experiences (our study was judged exempt in accordance with CUNY HRPP Procedures: Human Subject Research Exempt from IRB Review). Of those respondents, approximately 98% indicated that this was the first time they were reading the book and 62% of the respondents indicated

that they attended events related to the book. Of those students who attended these events over 75% enjoyed these events and found them to be useful. Specifically, over 80% of the respondents indicated that attending the events enhanced their understanding of the reading and subject matter. Over 70% of the respondents indicated that attending an event associated with this book complemented the learning that took place in the students' classrooms. In addition, almost 70% of the respondents indicated that attending an event associated with this text encouraged them to think across disciplines: for example, to think about the text as it refers to history, sociology or biology. Some students indicated the following:

“The events focused on aspects that I did not focus on while I was reading the text. For example, I mostly focused on biological aspect of Henrietta’s cells, but others focused on the impact it had on her family, historical and the significance of African Americans being exploited, and health disparities in United States today.”

“Well the book demonstrates history in the sense that Henrietta Lacks came from a family of slaves. She also lived during the period of industrialization, she like many other people from the South begin moving into the cities in search of work. The book applies to Sociology due to the fact that it shows the racism that existed at this time. For instance, the segregation of hospitals and the unfair treatment African Americans received. It shows the biological side, because it shows how research was done and if it weren’t for the development of the HeLa cells science wouldn’t have gotten as far as it is today. So, Henrietta’s cells were like the starting point for science.”

After spending an academic year investigating the book, planning and implementing connected activities inside and outside of the classroom, and integrating themes and issues from the book into course content, a majority of participating faculty members likewise responded positively to their experience in the Common Read. Despite the level of commitment and creativity required by faculty members to design curriculum that connects course objectives to issues and content in the Common Read book, the 28 faculty members who responded to the survey expressed their satisfaction with this process in end-of-year surveys. Over 90% of the respondents indicated that the events offered as part of the Common Read enhanced students’ understanding of the text, complemented the learning that took place in their classrooms, and encouraged students to think across disciplines. Likewise, over 90% of respondents said that participation in the Common Read initiative made them feel more connected to the QCC community.

## Faculty Perspective: Jennifer Maloy, Faculty Coordinator of *The Road of Lost Innocence*, 2013-2014

In 2013–2014, the Common Read book selection, read by approximately 1300 students, was provocative and controversial: Somaly Mam's (2008) *The Road of Lost Innocence: The True Story of a Cambodian Heroine* is a memoir about a woman sold into sex trafficking in Cambodia that takes on, in graphic detail, the difficult topics of modern slavery and the global sex industry as it ends with a message of perseverance, advocacy, and hope. As we approached our professional development workshops in Fall 2013, the Common Read Coordinator and I wanted to address these issues immediately. Therefore, we designed the Common Read Book Club in a way that encouraged our 35 participating faculty members from across the disciplines to voice their concerns and apprehensions about the book in addition to thinking about both the disturbing and inspiring themes and topics in the book. One way we were able to do this in faculty book club meetings was by contextualizing conversations about the book within issues of human rights. We also encouraged participating faculty to consider how the Common Read could be integrated with other HIPs, particularly service-learning and diversity and global learning. In our meetings, participating faculty discussed how the book could generate discussions not only of human trafficking on a global scale but also an inter-cultural examination of education, tourism, health care, gender, religion, and violence against women. In addition, we discussed how these issues could be explored in the classroom through investigations of particular cultural, historical, and political perspectives in relation to global human rights issues. We worked closely with the Counseling Department throughout the year to ensure that all participating faculty and students were aware of campus resources if they encountered difficulty with the events or themes in the book. As faculty members began planning events and working with students, our Common Read program balanced events specific to human trafficking with those connected to other global issues. (We would like to thank Patricia Devaney, Leyla Marinelli, Margaret McConnell, and Constance Rehor for their tireless dedication to contributing to events and designing curriculum to support the reading of *The Road of Lost Innocence*.)

This gave us an opportunity to develop new curricula from an international perspective and to collaborate with community leaders on related local and global issues. Numerous non-profit agencies, advocates, politicians, and members of law enforcement came to campus to talk with students about the global scale of human trafficking and violence against women. For example, a researcher from Human Rights Watch talked to students about documenting the abuses of migrant women in the United States, and a representative of the non-profit LifeWay spoke to students about supporting human trafficking victims in the US through the creation of safe houses. In addition, faculty members from a variety of departments offered

their expertise to connect themes and issues from the book to disciplinary knowledge: A faculty member in the History Department provided an overview of Cambodian history in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to contextualize the events in Mam's text. A faculty member in the English Department contextualized the role that Buddhism played in Mam's life as she introduced the Buddhist figure of the Bodhisattva, an individual who devotes her life to selfless service, to illustrate Mam's positioning of herself within the story she tells.

Speakers stressed to students that while human rights issues affect people around the world, human trafficking and violence against women also are present in local communities, allowing students to make connections between events in the book as well as current events in their own Queens neighborhoods. Indeed, New York State Senator Jose Peralta spoke with over 200 students about the prevalence of human trafficking in a Queens neighborhood near campus in which many QCC students live. After the senator spoke, students asked questions that connected Mam's documentation of human trafficking in her text, the senator's description of human trafficking in Queens, and the knowledge they were gaining in a wide variety of classes. One student suggested that the senator try to raise awareness of this issue through community performances and the arts. Another student expressed her desire to address this issue by pressuring elected officials to create legislation to stop human trafficking. Yet another encouraged the senator to reach out to elementary and high school students and educate children about this issue and establish protections for vulnerable populations. Some students even spoke to the senator about events taking place in their own neighborhoods, asking how they can be more aware of who is participating in human trafficking and how they can support victims. Other Common Read events, such as a memoir writing workshop, a forum on global health issues for women, and a student-writing contest, were led by full-time and adjunct faculty from across the campus. Student-designed presentations and activities included quantitative analyses of human trafficking victims around the world, presentations by our nursing students on sexual violence and global health issues, as well as read-alouds by students across campus.

Within my own first-year composition class, I worked to create a balance between addressing the profoundly upsetting reality of human trafficking and critically considering how individuals are complicit in—and capable of raising awareness of—human rights violations across the world. As an introduction to *The Road of Lost Innocence*, students learned about the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). As students entered into the book, they had a solid foundation in current human rights violations both inside and outside of the United States. As we began to discuss the book, I focused class discussion on themes throughout the book, including gender, race, socio-economics, language, cultural norms, and cross-cultural interactions. I tried to focus an analysis of the book on Mam's creation of schools and shelters for victims of sex trafficking. I

presented Mam's description of her advocacy as a call for action, asking students, as a formal writing assignment, to write a letter to President Obama informing him of a global issue that this book raises, explaining how this issue is relevant to people in the United States, and exploring why and how the United States might work to address this issue. Students also had the choice to write a letter to Mam, who has come under criticism due to inaccuracies that have recently been identified in her memoir. After attending events where they met and conversed with politicians and activists and learned from research conducted by nursing and business students, they were engaged to share their perspective on human rights issues with a public audience.

Despite the difficult subject matter in *The Road of Lost Innocence*, a majority of participating students responded positively to this book, as in the previous year with *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Particularly pronounced in their survey responses were their responses about making connections between the themes and topics in the book and a variety of disciplines. Two hundred and seventy-three students responded to a survey regarding their experiences reading the book. Of those respondents, approximately 80% of the respondents indicated that they were able to meaningfully synthesize connections between their course and an event. In addition, 80% of the respondents indicated that participation in the Common Read helped them draw conclusions by combining examples, facts, or theories from more than one field of interest or perspective. Some of the examples of how these fields of study enabled them to gain additional perspective on the book included the following:

“Health gave me another perspective on the book because there’s a lot of health issues that occur because of sex trafficking.”

“I felt that Psychology was incorporated in ‘The Road of Lost Innocence’ because Somaly has endured severe mental trauma from the rape and abuse (physical and emotional). Some might feel that Somaly should have been in a mental institution, because how can someone go through the struggles she has endured all her life and stay sane, it seems quite impossible.”

“Within . . . reading this book, one of the disciplines of social studies helped me understand the book better. In the Cambodian history, silence is the main thing for everyone. It’s like the saying, ‘hear no evil, see no evil.’ In Somaly Mam’s book, if anyone saw something going wrong, everyone would just bypass it and not say a word. I didn’t understand this until I learnt that, in the Cambodian history once you say something you are not supposed to, you would end yourself up in dangerous situations.”

The 30 faculty members who responded to the end-of-semester survey made similar claims about students' abilities to connect the book to various disciplines. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that participation in the Common Read provided an opportunity for students to draw conclusions by combining examples, facts, or theories from more than one field of interest or perspective. Discussing this book posed unique pedagogical challenges as it required faculty to address sensitive and disturbing subject matter as well as investigate the global implications inherent in local events. While participating faculty members certainly had apprehensions throughout this process, they did acknowledge in their surveys that the book provided opportunities for students to make connections across disciplines as well as cultures, promoting global learning at a diverse community college.

### Faculty Perspective: Beth Counihan, Faculty Coordinator for *Until I Say Goodbye: My Year of Living with Joy*, 2014-2015

Written in 2011 and published in 2013, *Until I Say Goodbye* is the memoir of *Palm Beach Post* crime reporter and mother of three Susan Spencer-Wendel's choice to "live with joy" despite increasing disability and knowledge of imminent death after her diagnosis with ALS. The book details her travels with family and friends and the metaphorical journey of self-discovery and acceptance of her fate, as Spencer-Wendel died in June 2014. Our college president suggested approaching this Common Read selection not as a rumination on death but from the perspective of empathy—of having compassion for and connecting to the full humanity of others no matter what their situation. This opened up the possibilities to disciplines as diverse as Nursing, English, Biology, Massage Therapy, and Art History as well as to students ranging from those taking credit-bearing courses; to those in CLIP and Academic Literacy classes; to those in our partner high schools, Thomas A. Edison Career and Technical Education High School and Bayside High School.

For the Fall 2014 semester Common Read Book Club, the Common Read Coordinator and I drew on faculty expertise to help frame this theme of empathy. A new faculty member who had written his dissertation on the socio-biological aspects of empathy shared his research and insights with the faculty group, which grounded our reading of *Until I Say Goodbye* and our approach in designing events. Altogether faculty met four times over the fall semester: once for a book club-type discussion, once for the empathy lecture, and twice to meet in small groups to brainstorm events. As faculty members shared their knowledge of such fields as disability studies and palliative care, other faculty were inspired to integrate that perspective in their teaching of the book. It is rare for faculty across disciplines to have time to collaborate in this way but the benefits are great, especially in terms

of continued learning of the art of teaching. A particular challenge of community college teaching is that faculty members are forever teaching the same courses in isolation; however, with participation in the Common Read, curriculum, pedagogy, and sense of community are refreshed. Faculty members come away from Common Read planning meetings and feeling revitalized and we hope this transfers to our students.

The Common Read Coordinator and I encouraged faculty to devise final assignments that were reflective about the students' process of reading *Until I Say Goodbye* and the impact of the co-curricular events on their understanding of the book in light of the theme of empathy. Our intention was to explore how participation in the Common Read creates a context for a deeper understanding of students' experience reading the text itself. We particularly wanted students to explore the theme of empathy in a meaningful way. With that in mind, for the Spring 2015 semester, we expanded the reach of the Common Read beyond the 942 participating students and into the greater college community: we devised a Pay It Forward initiative, to spark good deeds across campus and beyond, and collaborated with student government, organizations like NYPIRG (New York Public Interest Research Group), and student clubs to run collections of unwanted eyeglass frames and toiletries for families living in local shelters. Five hundred students and community members participated in these various initiatives.

Indeed, students were highly engaged in the Common Read events, and at each event, students were thumbing through the book, searching for passages, connecting the text to the new learning. A good number of the events were led by students: among others, Introduction to Literature students led a discussion of disability studies; History of Photography students lectured on "Images of Illness and Beauty in Photography;" and Biology students discussed the genetic components of ALS. Attending students reported in the final survey that these student-led events were particularly impactful. Examples of such responses include:

"Photography gave me another perspective on the book, because through photography I was able to analyze other artists and see how they portrayed the theme of the Common Read as opposed to that of just words."

"Genetics . . . provided scientific insight on what was happening to Susan Spencer-Wendel."

We also invited community partners and activists to campus: 200 students attended a talk by Valerie Estess, the co-founder of Project ALS, who spoke of her group's work and the phenomenon of the "ice bucket challenge," and a representative from the United Cerebral Palsy Association, who came to speak on the subject of disability etiquette. To engage our student community further, we held a poetry contest with the theme of empathy. Thirty percent of student survey respondents



actually attended more events than were required, for reasons including “to help improve my listening and reading skills.”

For my own experience teaching *Until I Say Goodbye*, I found the book connected well with another of the College’s HIPs, service-learning. My Introduction to Literature (EN102) students partnered with CLIP students to discuss both *Until I Say Goodbye* and excerpts from Mitch Albom’s 1997 bestseller *Tuesdays with Morrie*, also about ALS, and planned a presentation on “Living the Good Life.” At the presentation attended by 70 members of the college community, students shared their own contributions to Spencer-Wendel’s “List of Little Things to Love,” and I could see the joy on their faces as students from Mexico, Turkey, China, Bangladesh, and Ecuador (to name a few) felt comfortable enough with the language and community to share their thoughts. I also found that by integrating the Common Read events into my curriculum, students experienced a deeper level of understanding of the cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1989) connotations of ALS: they learned not only about Spencer-Wendel’s experience but also about Lou Gehrig and Stephen Hawking, baseball and physics, black and white film and the universe.

Every semester that I have taught the Common Read selection (which has been since 2011), I add more to the requirements of a reflective paper I assign to submerge the students as fully as I can in this “common intellectual experience”: attending events as a class; requiring students to attend an event of their choice on their own; participating in the events themselves; and, with this semester, doing a presentation themselves. But above all, our focus is on the text itself and always making connections between events and our understanding of the text. The goal throughout the sustained intensity of the Common Read is for the students to have a meaningful deep transaction with the text and we seem to have met that goal: all of the faculty respondents for the Common Read survey indicated that participation in the Common Read provided an opportunity for students to experience deep learning; drawing conclusions by combining examples, facts, or theories from more than one field of interest or perspective.

With this rich across-campus Common Read, both faculty and students benefit from the opportunities to share in the intellectual life of the College. As one student wrote: “the shared experience of reading a book with so many others creates an invisible yet palpable sense of community.” From the most idealistic standpoint, our *Un-Common Read*, in which both faculty and students are learners, participants and makers of knowledge at the same time, represents Paulo Freire’s (1968, 1998) vision of critical pedagogy in action. As in previous years, students’ survey responses to their Common Read experience were very positive, particularly as it allowed them to make connections. One hundred and eighty-nine students responded to a survey regarding their experiences reading *Until I Say Goodbye: My Year of Living with Joy*. Of those respondents 94% of the respondents indicated that they were able to meaningfully synthesize connections between their course

and an event. In addition, 91% of the respondents indicated that participation in the Common Read helped them draw conclusions by combining examples, facts, or theories from more than one field of interest or perspective.

Likewise, the faculty surveys for *Until I Say Goodbye* also reflect the pattern that has emerged throughout the years we have offered the Common Read: a vast majority of 31 faculty members who responded to the final survey agree that the Common Read provides students with a unique opportunity to make connections in a variety of fields and to their own personal experiences. In the 2015 faculty survey, all of the respondents indicated that participation in the Common Read provided an opportunity for students to draw conclusions by combining examples, facts or theories from more than one field of interest or perspective. Ninety-seven percent of the respondents indicated that participation in the Common Read provided an opportunity for students to synthesize information and ideas from a required core general education outcome and a co-curricular experience.

## Conclusion: Refresh and Spark

As the experiences of the faculty Book Club Coordinators and the analysis of survey data over the years of the program demonstrate, the Common Read at Queensborough provides faculty with opportunities to collaborate and students with opportunities to make connections across disciplines as well as to their own lives. Even though the number of participating faculty members and students may fluctuate from year-to-year and the books chosen each year vary widely in subject matter and overarching themes, each Common Read book provides faculty and students with a unique challenge: to read a book collaboratively and make connections broadly and yet meaningfully. While the topics and issues that the books elicit are rarely easy to approach, faculty must work together to identify accessible approaches to them in the classroom, and students must work together to connect them to specific learning environments as well as to their lives in general. The type of critical work by a community of learners and thinkers is essential to making Common Read programs successful and is at the heart of what we see as college reading. It also is essential to engaging community college students, so many of whom come to college underprepared in reading and/or with a variety of out of school obligations and challenges that threaten their ability to participate actively in our college's intellectual community.

What makes Queensborough's Common Read uncommon is that it is a year-long collaborative experience for faculty participants and a curricular immersive experience for student participants. It provides much-needed community for our faculty and students—most of whom, like so many community college students, commute long distances to the college and are constrained by multiple

commitments outside of school. By integrating the Common Read into curriculum, time is carved into participants' lives for an opportunity to slow down and focus on reading and interdisciplinary intellectual engagement. Queensborough's Common Read facilitates what the AAC&U calls "integrative liberal learning": "experiences that cross disciplines, units, and campus boundaries" (2014). Reading is at the core of these experiences. As our survey data suggests, with each Common Read, faculty participants' commitment to developing curriculum and pedagogical approaches is refreshed and student interest in reading and the life of the mind is sparked.

In particular, we believe our student survey data shows promising evidence that successful transfer of such integrative liberal learning is taking place through our Common Read. As educational psychologists Perkins and Salomon (1992) state in their "Transfer of Learning" article, "the transfer of learning occurs when learning in one context or with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with related materials" (as cited in Carillo, 2015, p. 103). Each year, a majority of our students indicate, through multiple-choice and write-in comments in our surveys, that they are able to link what they learn in campus events to the Common Read text and that they are able to link what they learn in the texts to various disciplines. They accomplish this through collective enterprise: by interacting with fellow students and faculty members across campus over a number of weeks to read a text deeply and critically from a variety of perspectives. For our diverse community college students, this fosters an intellectual community with the social supports that help our students in their academic pursuits. It also fosters a community in which transfer is enacted and modeled again and again as students, faculty, and community members articulate in our Common Read events how they connect prior knowledge to what they learn from the selected text as well as how they apply themes and ideas from the text to disciplinary contexts. As Carillo (2015) describes in *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer*, this is how successful transfer of learning through reading takes place: by students recognizing a concept, generalizing it to use in a new context, and then applying that concept in a new disciplinary/textual environment.

While we believe that our survey data reveals that participating students and faculty alike are building an intellectual community on campus that successfully facilitates the transfer of learning through college reading, we also see the challenges the Common Read faces as it moves forward. We see the need to be more responsive to some of what our survey data suggests: the Common Read selection with the highest level of student survey responses was *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, a bestseller and highly awarded book. Anecdotally, students reported reading it late into the night, not wanting to put the book down. It is difficult, though, to find a book each year that can draw in faculty across the disciplines while being simultaneously academically rigorous and easily accessible for our diverse student

body, and each book we choose cannot be equally successful in engaging over a thousand diverse student readers. The selection for 2016, the bestseller *Picking Cotton* (Cotton & Thompson-Cannino, 2009), is the compelling memoir of a man wrongfully incarcerated and the female victim whose eyewitness testimony put him in jail. A record number of faculty and students participated, and we revised our student survey to include questions about students' perceptions of their reading experience and intellectual growth in relation to the text. Preliminary analysis of the responses indicated that an overwhelming majority—92%—of the 1300 participating students who responded to the survey found that participating in the Common Read enhanced their learning and inspired them to learn more. Eighty-five percent agreed that the Common Read experience promoted their intellectual growth. This suggests further research, to follow up with students to see if they did, indeed, pursue an interest inspired by reading *Picking Cotton*. With this encouraging information, the College's Common Read Selection Committee is mindful in the continuing search for the next text that the choice also resonates across disciplines and skill level but also be a great read. In the best of all possible community and senior colleges, college reading is not only an intellectual endeavor but a pleasurable one too.

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