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The Institutional Impact of Honors through a Campus-Community Common Read

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INTRODUCTION

The common reading program at South Dakota State University, coordinated and spear-headed by the SDSU Honors College, has in just three years of existence had powerful, positive, institution-wide impacts, including significant learning outcomes for both honors and non-honors students. The role that honors can play in the design and execution of a common reading program is one strategy for making an honors college or program an important contributor not only to its own students but to the mission of the institution. The specifics of SDSU's program—its background, goals, approaches to meet those goals, and assessment results—might thus serve as a model for other honors programs seeking to improve the quality of education throughout their institution.

BACKGROUND AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

South Dakota State University (SDSU) is a public land grant college founded in 1881. Enrollment is nearly 13,000 students (more than 11,000 undergraduates), with more than ninety percent from South Dakota and its neighboring states. Most students are white, and many are low-income, first-generation college students. More than 150 academic options are organized into the Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Agriculture and Biological Sciences, Nursing, Pharmacy, Engineering, and Education and Human Sciences; University College is home to undecided students. The SDSU Honors College, founded in 1999, enrolls approximately 450 students in honors courses each semester; these students represent each of the university's academic colleges.

SDSU has participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) since 2000. Data from this instrument track freshman and senior students' perceptions of key indicators relating to student engagement. NSSE data comparing SDSU to several of its peer institutions have revealed lower scores among SDSU students on indicators that include level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student/faculty interaction, and active and collaborative learning.

PROGRAM GOALS

SDSU's common reading program was designed to have a positive impact on the institution's performance on specific NSSE items. The work of George Kuh, which documented the effectiveness of the "common intellectual experience" at campuses across the country, helped guide the effort. The SDSU Honors College stepped forward to coordinate and launch this new initiative on campus, viewing it as an opportunity to provide leadership for a campus-wide academic endeavor. This role for honors is particularly important at SDSU, where honors is rapidly growing and working to enhance campus awareness and appreciation of its students, faculty, and programs.

Common read program objectives were to: (1) increase student knowledge of contemporary global issues; (2) enhance student awareness of social, economic, and cultural diversity; (3) involve students in meaningful classroom interactions with fellow students and faculty; (4) engage students outside the classroom through a series of enriching educational experiences; and (5) encourage students to become involved in campus and community service.

SDSU's common read also addressed NSSE indicators such as level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student/faculty interaction, and enriching educational experiences. All of these themes resonate with the core values of the SDSU Honors College and the objectives espoused by the National Collegiate Honors Council, many of which were recently articulated by Scott Carnicom in his 2011 essay "Honors Education: Innovation or Conservation."

PROGRAM APPROACHES

South Dakota State University implemented a common reading program for the first time during the fall semester of 2009. More than a thousand students in introductory and orientation courses across campus read Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World*. In 2010, some 1500 students in an expanded series of courses read *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace, One School at a Time* by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin. Students participating in the program's comprehensive assessment effort numbered 782 in 2009 and 1421 in 2010. Honors students participating were enrolled in Honors 100: Honors College Orientation (2009 n = 52; 2010 n = 106).

The approach to the common read varied widely depending on the subject matter and faculty associated with participating courses, which included introductory and freshman orientation classes in General Studies, Agriculture and Biological Sciences, Pharmacy, Plant Science, Animal and Range Sciences, Nursing, Engineering, and the Honors College. Outside of the academic environment, the common read texts were introduced to incoming students and their parents during New Student Orientation. Residential Life staff members read the texts and, in many cases, incorporated common read discussions in the

residence halls. In the Honors Living and Learning Community, for example, students gathered weekly for “tea times” in 2010 to discuss *Three Cups of Tea* and to share tea. Various pedagogical approaches included classroom lectures, on-line and face-to-face discussions in and outside of class, reflective essays, and service projects. A common read Facebook page and Twitter feed posed questions and program updates.

With both *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and *Three Cups of Tea*, a series of enriching out-of-class educational experiences was designed to enhance student engagement in the issues of the text. During the common read of *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, which recounts the role of Partners In Health and Paul Farmer in bringing health care to the poor in Haiti and around the world, campus events included a lecture by the SDSU men’s basketball coach, whose family adopted a child from Haiti; a lecture by the head of UNICEF’s HIV/AIDS division; and a hunger banquet/community night, which showcased local opportunities for service and involvement, including the Brookings Rotary Club’s solar oven project and a student/faculty visit to Haiti with Engineers Without Borders.

Three Cups of Tea tells the story of Greg Mortenson and the Central Asia Institute’s work building schools, mostly for girls, in the rugged mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Mortenson describes the culture of the people, in which sharing tea is significant: with the first cup, people are strangers; with the second cup, they are friends; and, after the third cup, they are like family. Out-of-class activities included a diversi-tea, in which students engaged in conversations about issues of diversity while sharing three cups of tea; an interfaith dialogue featuring Muslim, Christian and Jewish perspectives; a lecture on the history and geopolitics of the region; and a presentation by a local volunteer who had recently returned from work with a women’s empowerment project in Afghanistan. Building on the success of the first year’s hunger banquet (in which food was distributed according to actual world food distribution), panelists for the 2010 event included representatives of local literacy initiatives along with students and community members who had traveled to Pakistan doing hunger relief work.

Also in 2010, the city of Brookings’ Human Rights Commission partnered with the university to make the common read a campus and community endeavor. With generous support from local benefactors, every student in the Brookings public school system was furnished an age-appropriate copy of *Three Cups of Tea*, including a young reader’s edition for middle-school students and a children’s picture book for the elementary grades.

Both years, students engaged in service project fundraisers (featuring a competition by class) on behalf of Partners in Health’s malaria net challenge in 2009 and the Central Asia Institute’s Pennies for Peace program in 2010. The central character of each story, Paul Farmer in 2009 and Greg Mortenson in 2010, visited campus and delivered a culminating address. Funding from the SDSU Honors College’s Griffith Endowment supported these events, which were among the best-attended lectures in the history of the university.

THE HONORS EXPERIENCE

Honors Orientation was classified as a high-engagement common read course, requiring a higher level of participation in common read events and activities. For example, in lower-engagement courses, common read students might be required only to read the book, take a quiz, and attend the culminating lecture. Honors Orientation students' requirements included attending at least four of the common read events, four on-line discussion posts about segments of the book, contributions to fundraising initiatives, and reflective essays. In addition to these higher-level expectations for participation, honors students had opportunities to practice leadership by helping to facilitate common read events and discussions.

The role of our honors college's student leaders has expanded since the common read's first year. In the common read of *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, honors student involvement consisted of ushering at events, independent fundraising and attending a special reception with Paul Farmer. In 2010, honors students served as small-group discussion leaders at the diversity tea, were masters of ceremonies at the hunger banquet/community night, shared dinner with Greg Mortenson, and led the question/answer session after Mortenson's lecture, with more than 5000 in attendance. They also posed a fundraising challenge to the campus and community that raised some \$13,000 for Pennies for Peace. For the fall 2011 reading of Warren St. John's *Outcasts United: An American Town, A Refugee Team, and One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference*, honors students served on the book-selection committee and assumed leadership in helping to conceptualize and implement the semester's activities.

IMPACTS ON CAMPUS

An assessment of the common read program's impact included quantitative and qualitative data from faculty and student participants. Students involved in the common read reported positive progress toward each of the program's objectives. Student responses to survey items on Likert-type scales, with 1= not at all; 2 = very little; 3= some; 4 = quite a bit; 5 = very much, are presented in Table 1.

In 2010, variability among approaches to the common read was assessed between courses. Based on a review of course syllabi, common read courses were categorized into high, medium, and low engagement. High-engagement courses reported the strongest progress toward program objectives. While means for most of the items were lower in 2010 than in 2009, the doubling of the number of participants—many of whom were in large-section classes with low engagement in the common read—provides some explanation for the downward shift. In all cases, a minimum of "some" progress toward student learning outcomes was achieved, and, also in all cases, Honors Orientation results were higher than the average for other common read courses.

Table 1: Common Read Student Progress on Program Objectives

To what extent did participation in the common reading program . . .	Fall 2009 Mean (n = 782)	Fall 2009 Honors Mean (n = 52)	Fall 2010 Mean (n = 1421)	Fall 2010 Honors Mean (n = 106)
• Increase your knowledge of contemporary issues	4.105	4.641	3.701	4.265
• Enhance your awareness of social, economic and cultural diversity	4.052	4.482	3.901	4.234
• Involve you in meaningful interactions with fellow students and faculty	3.915	4.435	3.623	3.819
• Engage you outside the classroom	3.704	4.612	3.615	4.5
• Involve you in a campus or community service activity	3.777	4.487	3.579	4.191
• Cause you to consider how you might use your talents to serve others	3.962	4.512	3.713	4.052
• Raise the level of academic challenge in this course	3.328	3.897	3.328	3.765
• Increase the level of active and collaborative learning in this course	3.615	4.282	3.588	3.591
• Increase student/faculty interactions	3.676	4.641	3.594	3.598
• Provide enriching educational experiences	3.764	4.641	4.112	4.727

Common read students wrote evaluative reaction papers based on their experiences with the texts and common read activities. These papers helped to identify what students saw as best approaches and program benefits. Among the most popular features were the Griffith lectures (featuring Farmer and Mortenson), service projects, and class discussions. Students cited “diversity awareness,” “self-improvement,” and “helping others” as the most common program benefits. Other emergent themes included “a sense of enlightenment,” “understanding the importance of education,” “a desire to make a difference,”

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and “enhanced connection to the SDSU community.” Qualitative data were particularly compelling indicators of the program’s impacts.

Students perceived the common read as enhancing their engagement with fellow students in the campus community, as evidenced by these remarks:

This experience opened my eyes and I think opened me up to more things at State. I am more willing to get out of my comfort zone and expand through going to different campus activities.

At first I resented all the out of class activities, but now I get it. These were great opportunities I would not have taken advantage of if I wasn’t required to attend for Honors Orientation.

This [the common read] just made it [the course] better, creating an environment that everyone on campus is being a part of. This book is creating unity throughout campus. It’s fun to see Honors students in the lead of such a major campus initiative.

The texts and series of activities also had deeper impacts on honors students during the important transitions of their first year at college. In response to a prompt (“After reading the text and participating in the semester-long series of common read activities, submit an essay in which you summarize 1) what you learned; 2) which aspects of the book and experience had the greatest impact on you; and 3) what you will do as a result of your experience”), one undecided freshman wrote, “Never again will I judge another based on their culture or income level. I also hope to take time for form strong relationships with those around me”; a freshman majoring in mathematics wrote, “I now feel called to some sort of action. The common read has encouraged me to participate in service to my community. I can make a difference in the world around me”; another commented, “This experience made me want to be a better person”; and an honors student majoring in agricultural economics summed up his experience by writing, “As I go forward from this experience, I will continue to educate myself about the world and its cultures . . . thus eliminating ignorance and arrogance from my life.”

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

In its first two years, assessment results of the common read program, which was initiated and led by the SDSU Honors College, suggest that it has had a positive impact on students, faculty, the broader campus, and the community by engaging participants in a common intellectual experience and providing them with an array of compelling co-curricular learning opportunities. The effort shows promise and progress toward outcomes that include enhanced knowledge of contemporary issues, awareness of diversity, and raised levels of academic challenge and student engagement in the campus and community.

These results, along with the broad participation across campus and the quantity as well as quality of assessment data, have led SDSU to integrate the

common read as a foundational component of both its First Year Experience and its comprehensive model for Student Success. In addition, the university's faculty-led Academic Senate and Academic Affairs Committee have worked to incorporate the common read into a freshman seminar requirement as part of SDSU's new institution-wide general education core curriculum. These developments demonstrate the systemic institutional impacts of an honors college initiative and firmly establish honors at SDSU as "central rather than peripheral to the academic enterprise" (Carnicom). Best practices from SDSU's common read have been shared through presentations at local faculty development conferences, state-wide college student success meetings, and Upper Midwest and National Collegiate Honors Council meetings.

At times, honors programs and colleges are criticized for being isolated and elitist or for offering little more than "perks" (Knudsen) for top students. By providing leadership through initiating, coordinating, and assessing an institution-wide common intellectual experience, the SDSU Honors College has provided much more than perks: it has created far-reaching benefits to student learning and success at SDSU, and it has offered a potential model for other institutions.

Thus, SDSU's common read is consistent with what Carnicom describes as important reasons to value honors: "[Honors] fosters the best educational practices of our culture's history, maintains a tradition of critical inquiry that transcends disciplinary boundaries, promotes creativity and prepares students to become learners, thinkers and leaders for the rest of their lives." The comments of a freshman Honors common reader reflect these ideals:

The biggest thing I take away is a better idea of where I am in the world. The book, the events, the class . . . have all found a way to influence my idea of myself. I don't honestly know what I'll do because of my experiences. I do know, however, that these experiences will affect what I do, how I do it, and how I think about it. That's the most I can ask of any experience. I think that's the most anyone can ask of anything.

This student's spirit of inquiry and analysis is what we hope for in honors students and, ideally, in all students. A common read program is one way to pursue this ideal.

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