

Students Will Rise When Colleges Challenge Them to Read Good Books

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Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

"Plan for the students you actually have, not those you wish you had, or think you used to have, or think you used to be like."

So John N. Gardner, the creator of the term "[first-year experience](#)," advised college officials charged with making sure that the experience is a good one. In other words, be realistic; don't expect too much of students.

That mind-set contrasts with the one evoked by the *New Yorker* writer David Denby in his new book, *Lit Up: One Reporter. Three Schools. Twenty-Four Books That Can Change Lives*. [The New York Times](#) last week noted, "*Lit Up* is a refreshing lesson in what motivates students and why not to dumb down reading lists." Denby opens a window into the classrooms of several gifted high-school English teachers who assign Faulkner, Orwell, Frankl, Dostoevsky, Hemingway, Shakespeare, Poe, and Twain — and whose love of reading is contagious to their teen students.

So which attitude prevails in college today? The evidence points to the former: resignation and low expectations.

One proof is in the books colleges assign as "common reading" to first-year students over the summer. For the last six years, the National Association of Scholars has tracked these assignments and noted patterns. [Our annual report](#), "Beach Books: What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?," documents that colleges typically assign recent, easy books. Very few choose anything challenging. This year, 91 percent of the books were younger than the 18-year-old students themselves.

Most faculty and administrators who coordinate common-reading programs say their goal isn't to nurture a love of great literature. As Cheryl Spector, of California State University-Northridge, put it, coordinators "never intended to be arbiters or guardians of high culture." Instead, they just want students to read something. Coordinators also want students to read the same thing so that they have some kind of intellectual experience in common and not just common knowledge of Snapchat and the Kardashians. Because core curricula have all but disappeared, many colleges and universities want to fill the gap that remains.

Coordinators of common-reading programs are handed the impossible task of compensating for the loss of both curricular structure and good reading habits. Common-reading programs are a Band-Aid, but a Band-Aid is better than nothing. The books aren't necessarily bad — the most popular ones this year are *The Other Wes Moore*, by Wes Moore, and *Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stevenson. But they tend to be surprisingly nondiverse; most conform to the mold of inspirational memoir.

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Not every college patronizes. This year LeMoyne College students learned the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick*

Douglass; Southern Utah University students read and attended a stage performance of *The Taming of the Shrew*; and Rockhurst University included *Man's Search for Meaning* among its choices. At Columbia University, where Denby returned to take courses as a 48-year-old, each class of new students contends with *The Iliad*.

And classic books aren't just for elite schools such as Williams and Columbia. Great Books curricula thrive at community colleges such as Monterey Peninsula College and Wilbur Wright College (where there is also a Great Books Student Society in which students gather for extracurricular reading and discussion).

The author Marilynne Robinson [wrote about what we lose](#) when we underestimate our readers:

"When we condescend, when we act consistently with a sense of the character of people in general which demeans them, we impoverish them AND ourselves, and preclude our having a part in the creation of the highest wealth, the testimony to the mysterious beauty of life we all value in psalms and tragedies and epics and meditations, in short stories and novels."

The choices many colleges make impoverish their students. We can do better; here's how:

Treat students as adults. That means picking books that summon adult intelligence and that will give the students something of lasting value. So many very good books bid for their attention, but the students who have not yet entered the great conversation between writers and readers often need help with taking the first steps. To choose good books, consult with people who read widely and well and are intimately familiar with good books. Set the goal of finding books that are beautifully written, enduringly important, and true to human nature.

Reduce the size of selection committees. A few deeply read individuals much traveled in the realms of gold will arrive at better judgments than a general assembly.

Show students why good books are worth reading. Cultivate a spirit of intellectual adventure. Introduce students to some aspects of "high culture," and don't worry so much about meeting students where they are now. The reason people go to college — instead of staying home and reading what they already know they like — is to have their minds furnished by those who know more than they do. Be unapologetic in challenging students and expecting them to rise to those challenges.

Last and hardest: Choose students who are amenable to reading a challenging book for pleasure. If a college works to inspire students to meet higher standards, but most of the students still can't keep up, there is something wrong with the admissions requirements. Bring them into alignment with the academic standards, and always seek to raise the bar, not lower it. In short, plan for the students you wish you had.

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