

WPAs, Writing Programs and the Common Reading Experience

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ABSTRACT

Community colleges, colleges, and universities around the United States are instituting common reading programs. These programs often involve pre-matriculate first-year students reading a common text (or set of texts) and then, once on campus, participating in a range of related academic and/or co-curricular activities. While the goals and administrative roles of common reading experiences (CREs) vary by institution, nearly all intersect with writing programs and the work of writing program administrators (WPAs). These intersections are largely unexplored in writing studies scholarship, despite the fact that CREs are closely connected with reading and writing practices of first-year students. This article draws on three divergent WPA experiences with CREs (University of Texas at Arlington, Duke University, and Fort Lewis College) in order to explore the complexities informing how WPAs choose to productively respond to, strengthen, resist, and/or otherwise engage with the CRE.

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges, colleges, and universities around the United States are instituting common reading experiences (CREs), which often involve incoming first-year students reading a common text (or set of texts) and then, once on campus, participating in a range of related academic and/or co-curricular activities. CRE integration into the curriculum varies greatly across campuses: some implement CREs only in orientation; others recommend (but do not mandate) that all faculty incorporate the book into their courses; some theme-based courses link the book to the course theme; and others fully integrate the text into required first-year courses.

The goals of CREs also vary, tending to involve one or more of the following: to promote student engagement; to establish expectations for student success, especially with incoming first-year students but also with returning students; to develop community among first-year and returning students, faculty, staff, and institutional stakeholders; to promote literacy throughout the community; to model academic behavior; to foster cross-disciplinary discussions about a common topic or theme; and certainly (if implicitly) to promote retention.¹

Not surprisingly, writing programs (WPs) are often encouraged or mandated to participate in CREs by incorporating (in some capacity) the chosen text into first-year composition (FYC) and other writing courses. These relationships, however, have largely gone unexplored in writing studies scholarship, creating several questions for WPAs interested in participating in such programs: What roles can (or should) WPs have in relation to CREs? What possibilities and problems do CREs present for WPAs and our WPs? How do CREs and WPs work together (or not) to sponsor reading and writing practices of first-year students, as well as returning students, staff, faculty, and members of the larger communities?

We describe how WPAs at the following institutions have negotiated interactions between their writing programs and their respective CREs: University of Texas at Arlington, Duke University, and Fort Lewis College. We offer these narratives, situated contextually, in order to better understand the experiences, complications, possibilities, and problems presented by intersections between WPs and CREs. We hope WPAs and others will use these narratives to sponsor more conversations about how to best approach 1) integrating (or not) the CRE in their writing curricula; 2) preparing faculty and teaching assistants (TAs) to teach with the common reading text; 3) using the CRE to reach out to the broader community through, for example, service learning, local high schools, and public libraries; and, 4) assessing the integration of the CRE into their WPs. Our aim is to help WPAs consider the ongoing complexities involved with how they can choose to respond to, strengthen, resist, and/or otherwise engage with CREs.

Although composition offers robust scholarship within which to explore the complexities raised by CREs, most current scholarship on CREs comes from the perspective of the first-year experience and higher education. The most comprehensive examination of CREs is Jodi Levine Laufgraben's *Common Reading Programs: Going beyond the Book*, a 2006 monograph published by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transitions. Laufgraben begins by noting that "little has been written on what these [common reading] programs are" (ix) and

“there is not an established literature base on common reading programs” (11). While common reading programs originated in a desire to “intellectualize” new student orientation, Laufgraben examines how many “campuses move beyond the book as an orientation event to create an ongoing and engaging academic initiative for students” (ix). Drawing on case studies from a variety of academic institutions² and student success scholarship, especially research about first-year student success, Laufgraben argues that the best common reading initiatives target a broad audience of students, faculty, staff, and community members and “adapt the goals, structures, and activities to fit the unique student, faculty, and institutional culture of their campuses” (9). Adding to the conversation, Michael Ferguson’s short article—also published in 2006—“Creating Common Ground: Common Reading and the First Year of College,” provides a logistical overview of CREs; he discusses specific common reading programs, noting the variety of approaches.³ He maintains that the CRE has rich potential to “bridge divides on campus: between disciplines, between student life and academic affairs, between the orientation period and the first semester” (10).

Scholarship on the CRE also addresses how the CRE can bridge divides between campus and community. Pamela Hayes-Bohanan, for instance, explores public library partnerships and the CRE in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, as a case study for how the CRE can build community across a city, even during strained economic times (56). Similarly, during a 2011 MLA panel focusing on CREs, “Common First-Year Readings/Themes: Theory, Practice, Problems, Promise,” Harvey Michael Teres reported on One City One Book Initiatives, K. J. Peters addressed the history of CREs, Peter Michael Huk discussed common themes related to CREs such as sustainability or service learning, and Samantha Riley addressed interdisciplinary opportunities arising from CREs (Thorne, “MLA Panelists”).

Other scholarship on the CRE involves gathering and reporting data, such as the 2007 survey of over 100 common reading programs by student researcher Andi Twiton, “Common Reading Programs in Higher Education.” Ashley Thorne’s 2011 “Beach Books: What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?” (sponsored by the National Association of Scholars [NAS]), reports CRE text selection data from “245 colleges and universities for the academic year 2011–2012” (4). Thorne then uses CRE text-selection trends to question what books do or do not adequately advance NAS notions of student learning: “[M]ost college common reading programs . . . fail to distinguish between high and low culture; they pay service to multiculturalism, relativism, popular culture, and the primacy of self; they extol books that are critical of America and the West; and they alienate students who can appreciate really good books” (23).

Although this scholarship addresses issues of concern for WPAs, more scholarship is needed—especially from within a writing studies framework—to help WPAs better understand how CREs might impact our programs and, most importantly, student writing and reading practices. Because CREs have stakeholders in writing programs, the first-year experience, faculty, administration, students, and the community at large, they clearly instantiate Deborah Brandt’s “sponsors of literacy,” illustrating how “forms of literacy are created out of competition between (or within) institutions” (562).

Reading scholarship, in particular, provides an especially valuable way of framing intersections between writing programs and CREs. Calling for the “overt teaching of critical reading skills,” Alice Horning’s “Reading across the Curriculum as the Key to Student Success” challenges faculty to promote critical literacy by asking their students to move beyond reading comprehension and into the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of the text. Allison Harl and David Jolliffe’s scholarship on the reading habits of new college students sheds light on the greater demands that college courses place on readers. Like Horning, Harl and Jolliffe call on faculty to “teach students explicitly how to draw the types of connections that lead to engaged reading,” recommending that faculty create “curriculums, co-curriculums, and extra-curriculums that invite students to engage in their reading” (613)—all of which are hallmarks of many CREs. As composition faculty consider how to use common reading texts, the “reading-to-write” scholarship by Linda Flower et al. and Richard Haswell et al. offers insight into the foundational role that rhetorical reading plays in academic writing.

CRE texts include nonfiction and fiction, making scholarship regarding the role of imaginative literature in writing courses especially relevant. Winifred Horner’s 1983 collection *Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap* took up this issue, one that reached a fever pitch in the early to mid-1990s in the *College English* exchanges between Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate. In her contribution to the Lindemann/Tate discussions, Jane Peterson re-frames the discussion in a way that is helpful in relation to CREs, asking readers to move away from “the classification of texts assigned to the nature of reading we expect from our students and the roles of reading in the development of their writing abilities” (311). Linda Bergman and Edith Baker’s edited collection, *Composition and/or Literature: The Ends of Education*, broadens the literature-in-composition discussion, and in her foreword, Winifred Horner notes that the role of literature in composition “remains an open one” (xii).

Beyond curricular issues, the CRE conversation also raises questions regarding the roles WPs and WPAs play in the larger contexts of our insti-

tutions. How does participating or not participating affect our contribution to other campus-wide initiatives? How will decisions about the CRE affect decisions about our future collaborations? Discussing the future of writing across the curriculum programs and their relationships to their institutions, Susan McLeod and Eric Miraglia ask similar questions of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs and deftly locate these programs' various components (critical thinking, service learning, etc.) within recent trends in higher education. Attempting to work proactively instead of reactively, they acknowledge a "changing paradigm of change" that suggests individual change agents such as faculty and WAC directors can and should be at the forefront of change in higher education, an argument that applies to and raises the stakes of the CRE within WPs.

In the sections that follow, we use this first-year experience, higher education, and composition scholarship to reflect on the intersections between our own writing programs and our universities' CREs.

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON: FYC AUTONOMY AND STRUCTURE

The CRE at University of Texas at Arlington (UTA), known as the One-Book program, had a six-year run (AY 06/07–11/12), and presented a set of uniquely intertwined opportunities and challenges for FYC administrators as every benefit seemed also to pose challenges, and vice versa. A discussion of the OneBook program illustrates two key questions that can help WPAs determine whether or not—and, if so, how—to forge relationships between the CRE and FYC programs: How will required collaboration with other units affect FYC program autonomy? Are CRE goals feasible given the size and makeup of FYC program? The OneBook program illustrates the complex and often conflicting answers these questions can generate.

The CRE began as a university-wide program that involved collaboration among stakeholders across campus, most notably the Office of Student Success, the English department, and the library. The university president and provost, who suggested and funded the program, and the program co-chairs (the director of Student Success and a tenured faculty member, first in English and then in Modern Languages), had the expansive goal of "enhanc[ing] learning and campus life for the UTA community of students, faculty, and staff by promoting self-reflection and academic discourse about complex, multidisciplinary topics" ("University"). Program administrators also hoped that participating in the CRE program would increase students' involvement and identification with their entering class ("I was part of the *Maus* group") and the university. Teaching the OneBook in first-semester composition (English 1301) was, in many ways, a natural fit. The

course already heavily emphasized reading comprehension and the reading/writing relationship, and teaching the text in a course required of most first-year students meant that program administrators could count on reaching a large portion of each entering class. It is important to note that the decision to teach the OneBook in English 1301 was made in the period between the retirement of a long-time director of FYC and the hiring of Margaret, her successor. As a result, the general parameters for the collaboration between Student Success and FYC were developed without significant input from a writing studies specialist. Once those initial parameters were set, they were extremely difficult to change, particularly given Margaret's status as a full-time, professional staff member rather than a tenured or tenure-track faculty member.

Each year, a committee of faculty and staff members from across campus, including the director of FYC, selected two or three possible texts for consideration and proposed accompanying themes; the president and provost made the final decision about the text. Students received the texts for free during summer student orientation and read, discussed, and wrote about them in ENGL 1301. The CRE text was also taught in a handful of other courses, including introductory education and nursing courses. FYC administrators and instructors created a curriculum for the OneBook text each year. The program co-chairs developed co-curricular activities to support the book, including a beginning-of-year kickoff event, author visit, and a series of cross-disciplinary faculty lectures on the text and related topics. To complement instruction, a group of instructional literacy librarians provided extensive support to FYC students and instructors by creating a study guide for the text, an online library guide and instructional classes for ENGL 1301 students. Student Success also sponsored an annual writing contest related to the CRE text that featured the prompt taught in ENGL 1301.

The Push/Pull of Collaboration and Autonomy

FYC's collaboration with university administrators resulted in notable benefits for the FYC program and ENGL 1301 students, but it also posed major challenges. Importantly, participation in the CRE helped raise FYC's profile across campus. FYC served as the heart of a significant university-wide program, which meant that university administrators became more familiar with FYC goals, administrators, and instructors—unexpected and welcome outcomes. The CRE also made ENGL 1301 a richer course because of the ongoing curriculum development and the related co-curricular activities.

As Linda Bergmann reminds readers in her introduction to *Composition and/or Literature*, titled “What Do You Folks Teach Over There Anyway?,” “the relationships between reading and writing, literature and composition, must be continually reexamined and redrawn in order to maintain a vital curriculum” (10). Those relationships were revisited each year at UTA: a dedicated group of FYC administrators and Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) created a new curriculum each year that included questions for discussion and writing, an essay prompt and process materials, readings that provided contextual information or engaged the text thematically, and a rationale for instructors explaining how the new materials functioned within the course. As well, the co-curricular activities created a campus-wide academic conversation about the CRE text in which ENGL 1301 students participated.

By synthesizing the ideas expressed in the OneBook with those in the accompanying course readings and co-curricular activities, the curriculum promoted the kinds of skills for which compositionists such as Horning, as well as Harl and Jolliffe, call. As FYC administrators and GTAs have described in an unpublished manuscript about the CRE, “English 1301, in conjunction with the OneBook program, fostered a unique opportunity for students to participate in rich, interdisciplinary discourses about texts inside and outside of the English 1301 classroom, providing English 1301 students with an introduction to discourse communities, interdisciplinary activities, and writing activities for specific audiences and purposes” (Clough et al. 3). Assessment data showed that the CRE fostered students’ interactions with one another and their involvement in campus activities. A majority of FYC students surveyed in fall 2009 reported that they had discussed the book with a friend outside of class (76%) and had attended at least one co-curricular activity (85%). The CRE also raised the stakes for students enrolled in a required class because the administration’s sponsorship of this particular literacy program made it clear to them in myriad ways that the course—and students’ overall academic literacy—was important.

But FYC’s participation in the CRE also meant that administrators sacrificed program autonomy with regards to text selection. For the first several years, a university committee selected several CRE texts and accompanying themes and recommended them to the president and provost, the program’s literacy sponsors, who made the final decision. The collaborative process was meant to gain support for the text from university stakeholders, but it left text selection to committee members unfamiliar with the goals of ENGL 1301 and debates among compositionists about text selection. In time, the selection committee grew smaller, and the criteria were geared

much more specifically towards ENGL 1301 learning outcomes; however, final text selection never rested with FYC.

Administrators and instructors worked each year to create an engaging curriculum that helped students meet course outcomes—even for texts as varied as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History* and *Maus II: A Survivor’s Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*, Dana Canedy’s *A Journal for Jordan: A Story of Love and Honor*, and Bill McKibben’s *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*—but long before the final year of the CRE, administrators and instructors felt overstretched by the task. Such regular curriculum revisions, although challenging, would be more feasible for WPs such as the ones at Duke University and Fort Lewis College because of the presence of full-time employees with smaller teaching loads and benefits, who receive compensation for professional development activities. In some ways, even as the OneBook program made FYC more visible across the university, the dynamic of shaping the course to support the book framed FYC as a service course rather than an autonomous discipline with discrete learning outcomes.

Vision for CRE vs. Realities of Composition Program

The expansive vision of the CRE program also proved to be a mismatch with the practical realities of FYC, which employs approximately 40 composition instructors, at least 90% of whom are GTAs or adjunct faculty with enormous workloads. FYC instructors teach approximately 125 face-to-face and online courses each semester. The challenge of incorporating a new book into ENGL 1301 each year was particularly difficult given the size and scope of the program. FYC administrators could have made the OneBook a less central part of ENGL 1301, but they felt it was important for the text to be a well-integrated part of the curriculum. As well, Margaret did not have the institutional clout to argue effectively for increased compensation and support for FYC instructors.

The OneBook program also created mixed professional development experiences for faculty. Participation on the OneBook curriculum committee provided beneficial professional development opportunities for GTAs; however, that particular benefit was outweighed by the burdens of the overall process. Participation on the OneBook text selection committee and development of the next year’s curriculum took an enormous amount of time and resources. The ever-changing curriculum also taxed already-overworked instructors and made assessment difficult.

The OneBook program ended after six years due to a variety of factors, including university administrators’ development of new, comprehensive

programs designed to foster first-year student retention; a 10% budget cut across campus; a lack of engagement in the CRE beyond ENGL 1301 students; and an FYC curriculum redesign that reduced the role of the CRE in the ENGL 1301 curriculum. Even as the termination of the OneBook program, with its celebration of cross-curricular academic conversations, eased pressures on FYC administrators and faculty, its absence also created a loss to the UTA community. In the long term, it may also prove to be a significant loss to FYC and the English Department in terms of visibility, integration, and stature. The story of UTA's OneBook program shows how important it is for WPAs to consider institution-, department-, and program-specific goals and limitations when considering participation in a CRE. It also demonstrates the many benefits that mid-sized and large composition programs can gain if savvy WPAs can negotiate the right deal for their programs.

DUKE UNIVERSITY: CRE AS LITERACY SPONSOR

Whereas many WPAs involved with CREs work to preserve first-year writing autonomy and cohesion amidst external pressures, Denise has a different challenge with Duke University's summer reading program because it is organized exclusively by Student Affairs and has hardly any connection to the WP. Having watched from the sidelines for nearly a decade as first-year students experience their introduction to higher-education literacy through the summer-reading program, this WPA has pondered the following questions: Should she cultivate a deeper relationship between the WP and the CRE? In what ways? Would such efforts invite unwelcome encroachments into FYC? What are the disadvantages to the current dissociation between the WP and the CRE? What might be the advantages of collaborating more meaningfully with Student Affairs and of integrating writing more effectively with the CRE?

Duke University's Summer Reading Program began in 2001. Geared exclusively to first-year students, the CRE is organized and run by the Office of Student Life, which is housed under Student Affairs. The summer reading book is primarily used during orientation for community building: "Fostering [. . .] informal, peer-to-peer exchanges is at the heart of the Duke University summer reading program" (Lombardi). All Duke faculty are invited to integrate the CRE selection into their courses; however, few (if any) do since there is neither mandate nor much incentive. The timing of the text selection makes CRE inclusion into courses even less likely since it often occurs after faculty have posted descriptions and reading lists for their fall courses. No FYC course has ever used a text in conjunction with the

CRE. The extent of the WP's involvement with the CRE has been to have a representative on the CRE selection committee for six of the past ten years.

The selection committee, comprised of twelve to fifteen students, faculty, and staff members, solicits recommendations for CRE titles from the Duke community, then makes a decision based on such factors as "readability and story line . . . number of pages and topic" (Lombardi). Past selections have predominately been book-length, fictional monographs with living authors, such as Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*; Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, and Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder*. CRE activities occur primarily during the week-long August orientation and generally involve a small-group discussion facilitated by returning students and a large-group event such as an author visit. Similar to UTA, university librarians make relevant resources available to students.

Considering whether and how to forge more intersections between the CRE and FYC has been difficult because, as the narratives from UTA and Fort Lewis College indicate, many models for writing-program-CRE partnerships involve compulsory inclusion of the CRE text into the first-year writing course. While this model raises challenges on a number of levels, it could be an especially awkward fit at Duke given that it has an independent WP (IWP) without a common syllabus. Duke's multidisciplinary, full-time FYC faculty each design theme-based, one-semester academic-writing courses. Autonomous course design and multidisciplinary are cornerstones of the program, both of which could be compromised by compulsory inclusion of the CRE text.

The promises, however, of increasing collaboration between the WP and the CRE create a need to continue searching for a modified model that avoids the pitfalls of mandatory curricular inclusion. Several of these promises involve the kinds of programmatic benefits discussed by Margaret, Brad, and Erik, such as visibility, outreach, and stature. Because Duke has an IWP, the WP is especially keen to connect with the larger university community to promote conversations about reading and writing practices across disciplines and to foster effective writing pedagogies. However, a different question primarily drives the need to continue considering ways to generate more integration: What is the impact on first-year students when Student Affairs is their first academic literacy sponsor?

Asking a similar question of Oprah Winfrey's book club, R. Mark Hall emphasizes the profound influence held by such sponsors of literacy: "We must ask . . . not only what ideologies are privileged [with 'Oprah's Book Club'], but which ones are ignored—and with what consequences?" (663). Although Student Affairs is not parallel to the Oprah Winfrey Show, nor is

it what Hall labels “a ‘nonliteracy sponsor,’” Student Affairs does have a different set of priorities than the WP. Chief among these is the prioritizing of students’ lived experience. Connections between student learning, literacy, and personal lives are also central to many approaches to writing pedagogy. However, since Student Affairs acts through the CRE as the initial, and largely stand-alone, literacy sponsor for first-year students, it may in some ways inadvertently *discourage* students from cultivating the rhetorical knowledge and critical thinking, reading, and writing outcomes deemed central to FYC (“WPA Outcomes”). By not working harder to partner with Student Affairs, then, might the WPA be inadvertently reifying several crucial barriers to first-year students’ critical literacy and academic success?

Intellectual Communities

One such barrier to students’ critical literacy potentially reinforced by the CRE’s current structure is that students’ notions of academic communities are formed separately from more expansive notions of intellectual inquiry. Twiton found that the main goals of most CREs are two-fold: “to model intellectual engagement [and] to develop a sense of community.” These two goals should not and need not be mutually exclusive; however, because Duke’s CRE focuses primarily on the latter (arguably at the expense of the former), it may foster for students a sense that college-level communities are built around personal interests alone rather than around both personal as well as shared or divergent intellectual interests.

Currently, small-group conversations are the primary community-building CRE activity. These conversations occur during orientation and are led by returning students, who design and center the discussion questions around the relationship between the CRE text and students’ lived experiences and beliefs: How does [book title] intersect with your transition to college? How do you see [character name] growing up in the book? Which aspects of the book relate to/depart from your life?

Such questions are important for helping students connect personally with the text. Still, more involvement from the WP could work alongside these kinds of conversations to also help model the ways in which intellectual engagement emerges from and builds community. This enhanced CRE experience could then better prepare students for the work of Duke’s FYC, which builds intellectual communities through the exchange of competing ideas and questions as they emerge through disciplinary contexts. Perhaps a deeper collaboration between the WP and Student Affairs might also yield a more visible integration into the WP’s work of some of the more affective dimensions of reading, such as those valued by Student Affairs.

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing

The lack of substantive WP involvement in the CRE also may do a disservice to students and the WP by limiting the CRE's potential for helping students learn to engage critically with texts through thinking, reading, and writing ("WPA Outcomes"). Duke's FYC goals include helping students learn to "engage with the work of others [by] read[ing] closely and attend[ing] to context [and by] mak[ing] fair, generous, and assertive use of the work of others" ("Writing 101"). By including little if any writing in the CRE, students miss a crucial occasion to explore the value of writing, and the WP misses a critical occasion for encouraging others around Duke to consider the ways in which writing might enhance learning outcomes across disciplines.

The current CRE structure, whereby Student Affairs is literacy sponsor, may also encourage first-year students to associate college-level reading with cursory reading practices rather than the kinds of in-depth, engaged reading practices they will encounter in many disciplines and certainly in first-year writing. Ziming Liu differentiates between shallow reading practices, defined as "browsing and scanning, keyword spotting, one-time reading, non-linear reading" (700), and in-depth reading practices: "sustained attention . . . [a]nnotating and highlighting" (700). These in-depth reading practices are vital for helping students learn to "use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating" ("WPA Outcomes"). Horning emphasizes just how much critical reading practices are crucial to student success and learning retention: "Reading is a psycholinguistic process, involving the interaction of readers' thinking with the language of the text. It must involve getting meaning, but in addition, it must also entail moving beyond meaning to analysis, synthesis and evaluation. That is, as I and a number of other scholars have proposed, reading must function as part of critical literacy." In its current iteration, the CRE does not help students move toward this kind of vital critical literacy. With the current CRE model, in fact, savvy students could rely on shallow reading practices to glide through the small-group orientation discussions, perhaps having only read the book jacket or an online summary. Thus, in some ways, the current CRE is complicit in accommodating cursory reading practices that may contribute to what Robert Scholes identified over a decade ago as "a reading problem of massive dimensions" (165): "a failure to focus sharply on the language of the text [and] a failure to imagine the otherness of the text's author" (166).

Disciplinary Privilege

A final vector of influence that emerges from Student Affairs as literacy sponsor involves disciplinary privilege. The current CRE, in effect, privileges certain kinds of literacies and disciplines at the expense of others. As indicated above, the large majority of Duke's CRE selections have been fictional monographs written by living authors. While the CRE texts may have thematic content related to different disciplines, the experience could go farther in offering students the opportunity to examine the overlapping and disparate conventions, practices, and expectations around literacy that frame various disciplines.

Over the years, Student Affairs has indeed made genuine efforts to integrate multidisciplinary dimensions into the CRE: they organized a multidisciplinary faculty panel one year, and each year librarians create a bibliography of multidisciplinary supplemental materials. Still, since the CRE texts are mostly fictional and students initially approach them without disciplinary perspectives or rhetorical frames, students likely revert to what they may have learned about reading in high school: that fiction often trumps nonfiction and that reading is largely a humanities-based endeavor defined rather narrowly as literary analysis or personal opinion. More WP involvement in the CRE could help disrupt these paradigms before they take root in postsecondary experiences, helping first-year students learn to examine the ways that reading practices and inquiry work across and within disciplines.

The intention of sharing these potential negative consequences is not to lambast the current CRE. Student Affairs has structured the program successfully to achieve their primary goal: a community-building experience for students. And there is considerable value in retaining much of the Student Affairs approach. Colleagues in Student Affairs, as well, would likely be receptive to forging more intersections between the CRE and FYC. At times, Student Affairs has, in fact, reached out to the WP to explore creating stronger connections. However, the WPA has been hesitant to engage more vigorously with Student Affairs through the CRE out of concern for WP autonomy. Increasingly, though, it is becoming evident that maintaining distance between the WP and the CRE might not merely be missing a possible collaboration, but might actually be actively counterproductive for the work the WP and other units ask of students in FYC and beyond. Moving toward a voluntary, variegated partnership of some sort, while remaining resistant to less effective models of CRE and FYC collaboration, could yield significant advantages to the reading and writing practices of Duke's students and faculty.

FORT LEWIS COLLEGE: NAVIGATING PRESSURES

Since 2006, the CRE at Fort Lewis College (FLC) has remained an optional, but encouraged, text for faculty to incorporate in FYC and developmental writing courses. As both the former and current WPA have experienced, the CRE has created both rewards and challenges for the WP. Using the CRE seems especially beneficial for the WP's visibility, professional development, student learning, and programmatic assessment—creating important opportunities for two WPAs at a relatively small (4,000 students) public liberal arts college to demonstrate the significance of the WP to external audiences and to influence a variety of others ranging from new administration to community stakeholders (for a detailed examination of the role of influence over power for the small-campus WPA, see Amorse). At the same time, the CRE creates challenges including maintaining the WP's autonomy as we have navigated the pressures from CRE stakeholders, negotiating WP faculty resistance to incorporating the CRE, and recognizing the increased workload that results from revising curriculum each year as a new book is introduced.

The WP at FLC is an independent unit, composed of twenty experienced faculty members, most of whom are full-time employees with renewable annual contracts. The CRE selection process, sharing similar requirements as UTA and Duke, involves open submissions by both campus and community. The final choice is made by a committee of five to seven faculty and one student. The text needs to be accessible to first-year students, not over 350 pages, and written by a living author who is available and affordable. Themes generally involve humanitarian issues; however, the committee is flexible if the text appears to be promising. The CRE occurs during the fall semester, with a series of co-curricular activities that culminate in the author's visit to campus.

Finding a Space

Brad's first year as the WPA was also the first year of the CRE, which used Leonard "Red" Bird's *Folding Paper Cranes*, a memoir chronicling Bird's experience as an "atomic veteran" (xv). As an incoming WPA, Brad inherited a curriculum which had been in place for over a decade. The WP faculty viewed the curriculum, which emphasized academic reading and writing, with some ambivalence: some fully embraced it, while others felt it had stagnated. Moreover, very little direct assessment had been conducted programmatically even as pressure mounted to assess the WP more systematically—and immediately. Thus, in one of his first moves as WPA, Brad condoned the incorporation of the CRE into faculty syllabi and WP

classes if they wished. He did so for two reasons: 1) to open a dialogue about the WP's curriculum, particularly in FYC, and 2) to initiate a more formal assessment process in the WP. That first year, nearly half the faculty incorporated the CRE into their courses, usually in the form of assigning a chapter or two from the text.

That fall, the CRE and the curriculum were the focus of three faculty meetings. WP faculty also completed an anonymous questionnaire about their use of the CRE. The results helped to confirm the faculty's ambivalence regarding the existing curriculum and the CRE: some relished the opportunity to teach a book (and especially to develop and implement new writing assignments), while others—similar to Margaret's experience at UTA—focused on the challenges of creating new pedagogical materials each year. All the while, the campus had charged ahead with year two of the CRE, selecting Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*.

As the second CRE loomed, a new pressure emerged, this time from above: the WP's dean and assistant dean strongly encouraged further incorporation of the CRE into the FYC curriculum. The administration viewed the CRE as a vehicle to foster student engagement and retention. Encouraged by the faculty's frank discussions of the curriculum, heartened by the positive feedback from some faculty (and mindful of the resistance others felt), and fully cognizant of the benefits of cultivating a positive relationship with a supportive dean, Brad agreed to ask faculty to more fully integrate the CRE into their FYC courses. But he did so only with the dean's commitment to fund assessment and professional development activities centered on the CRE for WP faculty. As both Margaret and Denise discuss above, the CRE became a potential venue through which to enhance the WP's profile across campus and to influence—to, in Edward M. White's terms, (modestly) wield some WPA power—the programming and delivery of the CRE (3).

The third CRE, Greg Mortenson and David Relin's (at that time non-controversial) *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace . . . One School at a Time*, proved to be more successful—in the WP, across campus, and in the larger community—than the first two, culminating in a visit by Mortensen, who spent the day on campus and delivered a standing-room only lecture. The majority of WP faculty used the CRE text, and the CRE's integration was more fully realized, thanks in part to further discussion of the CRE during the preceding spring and summer. The CRE text also proved to be effective for our two developmental reading courses, whose curricula emphasize a sustained reading of one book. The CRE's co-curricular activities—including a weekly radio show, a film series, and

several panels—offered diverse pedagogical support to students and faculty alike, particularly when viewed with Harl and Jolliffe's, as well as Horning's, recommendations for promoting reading in the curriculum. Indeed, in the course evaluations, several students commented that the CRE was the first book they had read in its entirety.

The WP more formally assessed the CRE's integration in WP courses the following spring, with the faculty earning a small stipend as they spent a day reading, discussing, and assessing student writing that emerged from courses using the CRE. In this way, the CRE promoted professional development while also cultivating a dialogue about the text, about the relationship between reading and writing, and finally about the WP's learning outcomes. Furthermore, the WP's participation in the CRE was clearly an integral part of the CRE's success, which did not go unnoticed by the administration.

Nonetheless, the CRE was not an unmitigated success. In spite of the CRE being an optional curricular item, some faculty still resisted—and ultimately did not teach—the text, feeling that it was imposed upon them. Similarly, the largest concern was again about the pressure to create new writing assignments for each new CRE, a legitimate concern for an underpaid and hardworking faculty. In hindsight, the problem of faculty resistance could have been avoided by better scheduling. For example, CRE-resistant faculty could have been assigned to teach courses that did not use the CRE (including the sophomore-level research writing or technical writing courses) each fall, which would have pleased the instructors and enabled the WP to more successfully align with CRE curricula.

Attempting to Normalize

Upon becoming WPA at FLC two years later, Erik inherited a similar scenario: under an interim WPA, WP faculty had still been encouraged—but not required—to teach the next selections (Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother* and Warren St. John's *Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference*), and several faculty still resisted using the texts in their curriculum. Adding to these challenges is the obvious significance of text selection—if increased participation is the goal, it helps to have a text that faculty are interested in using. Erik joined the reading board in an attempt to better represent the WP and raise questions of 'teachability' to the text selection process, and this conversation has proven influential in text selection and WP faculty interest.

Because the CRE had been proven to be an excellent means for improving the WP's visibility on campus, Erik required WP faculty to participate in curriculum design but still did not require all instructors to include it in their courses. This was feasible because WP faculty have mandatory service commitments. Logistically, one of the largest challenges in making this program-wide collaboration happen, though, was timing. When would WP faculty be able to design curricula? The spring semester offered the only real opportunity to work together.

During the end of the fall semester, copies of the following year's text (Eric Greiten's *The Heart and the Fist: The Education of a Humanitarian, The Making of a Navy Seal*) were purchased for WP faculty, and a collaborative curriculum project was designed for the entire writing program. WP faculty partnered with each other and identified where CRE instruction could fit into a particular course's outcomes and then created sample assignments and lessons that would be shared with the entire campus. Building upon the assessment culture Brad created, each assignment was directly rooted in course outcomes, creating opportunities for faculty better assess how their assignments and curricula were satisfying the program's recently articulated outcomes. The project encouraged faculty to discuss potential themes and assignments ahead of time and, because all materials would be made public on the WP's webpage, play to faculty's strengths as curriculum designers and writing specialists. These assignments could then be utilized by the entire campus and would encourage faculty involvement. Finally, it was hoped that more WP faculty would consider using the selection in their courses as they had spent time designing instructional materials. In this situation, the CRE created an opportunity to align curriculum to recently revised outcomes and offered the WPA concrete measures for program evaluation as we documented student learning through the CRE.

Initially, the project was a success. WP instructors invested in their work, created excellent materials, and disseminated their work to a variety of audiences at on-campus events. Several faculty claimed the resources were helpful in their courses, and recently hired faculty were appreciative of the instructional materials. A brief look at assessment data confirms this success. When asked "has reading *The Heart and the Fist* made you feel part of a larger community of readers, writers, and thinkers?," 82% of the nearly 300 students surveyed responded either "agree" or "strongly agree." And, when asked "has participating in this year's Common Reading Experience allowed you to make connections between your college courses and activities and your personal life?," 85% responded "agree" or "strongly agree." However, CRE-resistant faculty still resisted both by not including the CRE text and instructional material in their curricula and by considering

the CRE as a potential interference with the academic freedom and ability to develop their own curriculum, which resulted in uncomfortable meetings and discussions that disrupted the WP's positive climate.

At present, and similar to Brad's experience, external pressures from different stakeholders to include the CRE in the WP still exist, which makes navigating the CRE a challenge. The CRE has thus become both an opportunity to bring the WP closer together by working collaboratively on a common project and a means of division that challenges individual faculty autonomy and departmental purpose. As we continue to develop ways to successfully integrate the CRE, the WP will continue to experience the challenges of fitting a common project into our curriculum, service expectations, and assessment practices.

CONCLUSION

CREs will likely remain a common part of students' first-year experiences, if not also their first-year writing experiences. Creating and revisiting deliberate conversations about the relationships between CREs and writing programs is especially important now, not only because of CREs' prevalence across campuses, but because people outside of writing programs are becoming more aware of the potential of CREs to shape first-year students' literacy practices. Recently, in her NAS-sponsored report, Thorne offers several recommendations to "make the most of the common reading experience," including: "Make reading the book mandatory, and enforce the assignment with a test" and "Require that students submit a list of new words they learn from the book" ("Beach Books" 27). While such recommendations may work in the service of NAS goals, they seem deeply problematic from the standpoint of promoting effective writing and critical reading practices among first-year students.

The shifting terrain on which we might build and renovate more strategic intersections between writing programs and CREs, however, involves complicated tensions for WPAs. Mandatory and/or intensely embedded inclusion of the CRE into FYC can reify misconceptions that FYC is a service course or a skills course without content. It can compromise FYC program autonomy and stress administrative and labor resources. At the same time, wide-scale disconnects between the CRE and FYC may engender missed opportunities—or perhaps even counterproductive ways—for WPAs to cultivate first-year student writing practices. A lack of integration may cause WPs to miss an opportunity to gain more institutional and community-wide stature and visibility. Finding productive relations between FYC and the CRE might benefit first-year students as writers,

while enhancing the possibility of increased resources as well as collaboration with units across campus, including the library, student affairs, student groups, and faculty in other disciplines. Such an alliance might have the potential to increase FYC prestige and power.

The optimal contexts through which WPAs might successfully navigate these tensions would likely include writing programs with WPAs who can argue effectively for their programs and writing-program faculty. Such leadership, in conjunction with experienced full-time faculty members, offers the most amenable circumstances from which WPAs can choose to respond to, strengthen, resist, and/or otherwise engage with the CRE. But we all know ideal situations are, unfortunately, too rare. Most WPAs continue to face variations of the “naked power” White encountered over twenty years ago when the then-dean of Humanities “soothingly” communicated a decision “beyond his control” to reroute in its entirety White’s WAC budget (3). The complexities surrounding the CRE’s relationship with FYC illustrates, yet again, just how much “power and the various uses of power are centrally important to most WPAs” (5). WPAs, moreover, must be careful of how they wield such power as different contexts naturally contain different power dynamics. As the above narratives—drawn from three different institutions with different power structures—have demonstrated, WPAs must work within their contexts to make appropriate decisions about their programs’ mission, vision, and future. We hope these narratives demonstrate how much can be at stake programmatically, pedagogically, and administratively as WPAs consider the various options for integrating (or not) the CRE into FYC.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This article is dedicated to Gary Tate, whose scholarship and teaching shaped the conversation in which we are now participating.

NOTES

1. Compare the program descriptions found in Ferguson; Laufgraben; Lombardi; Thorne; and Twiton.

2. For example, Temple University, LaGuardia Community College, University of South Carolina, Kalamazoo College, and Appalachian State University.

3. For example, Albion College, Ball State University, Northern Arizona University, and others.

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