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## A Common Book: A Novel Approach to Teaching and Learning

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# A Common Book: A Novel Approach to Teaching and Learning

## **Abstract**

Most research on common book programs focuses on student outcomes. This paper presents a study about the impact of a common book program on teaching and learning practices at a small mainly undergraduate university. This study consists of two phases. In Phase 1, we surveyed faculty members ( $N= 32$ , a response rate of 21.3%), about the influence of the program on teaching practices and dialogue with colleagues as well as their perceptions of the program's impact on student learning. In Phase 2, we conducted interviews with business faculty, who were early program adopters ( $N=8$ ). Most respondents believed that students benefited from the program. Faculty members perceived the common book program as a tool that facilitated course content and enhanced students' literacy. While responses were mixed about the perceived impact on teaching practices, faculty members interviewed felt that the common book program created opportunities for discussion about teaching and learning.

La majorité des recherches menées sur les programmes de livre commun se concentrent sur les résultats des étudiants. Cet article présente une étude qui a porté sur l'impact d'un programme de livre commun sur les pratiques pédagogiques dans une petite université offrant principalement des études de premier cycle. Cette étude s'est déroulée en deux phases. Au cours de la Phase I, nous avons mené une enquête auprès de professeurs ( $N = 32$ , avec un taux de réponse de 21,3 %) concernant l'influence du programme sur les pratiques d'enseignement et le dialogue avec les collègues, ainsi que concernant leurs perceptions de l'impact du programme sur l'apprentissage des étudiants. Au cours de la Phase II, nous avons mené des entrevues avec des professeurs d'administration des affaires qui avaient adopté le programme dès sa phase initiale ( $N = 8$ ). La plupart des répondants ont déclaré que selon eux, les étudiants avaient bénéficié du programme. Les professeurs ont considéré le programme de livre commun comme un outil qui simplifie le contenu du cours et améliore l'alphabétisation des étudiants. Bien que les réponses aient été variées en ce qui concerne la perception de l'impact sur les pratiques d'enseignement, les professeurs interrogés ont indiqué que selon eux, le programme de livre commun avait créé des occasions de discussion sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage.

## **Keywords**

common book, common reading, literacy, freshmen

A recent article in the *New York Times* reported that 40% of colleges in the United States have a common reading assignment during orientation (Goldstein, 2017). While common book programs (also known as freshman reading, summer reading, common book, and one book programs) have been a staple of campus life in the U.S. for some time, common book programs have also been cropping up on post-secondary campuses across Canada (e.g., McMaster University, n.d.; Queen's University, n.d.; University of Calgary, n.d.).

This popular campus reading program has incoming first year students all read a common book, which is usually a work of fiction or a biography that is related to a theme of social justice. As Moser (2010) notes, while all common reading programs are shaped by their respective post-secondary institution's context and culture, the basic tenets of a common reading program is to promote social cohesion and academic engagement with a text. Everyone reading the same rich book creates a common ground for academic discussion. Thus the often stated general goals of campus common reading programs are to create a sense of community among students, faculty and staff and to introduce students to post-secondary level literacy and thinking skills (Ferguson, 2006; Fidler, 1997).

Common book programs are usually set up in one of two models. In the first and most popular model, incoming students read the common book before the start of the first semester and participate in activities during orientation week (Ferguson, 2006; Grenier, 2007). Activities and events often include lectures, film viewings, guest speakers, writing or creative work contests, and author visits (Moser, 2010). In the second model, students are asked to read a common book and the book is integrated into first-year classes. Professors use the common book in courses, and students can see how one book can be used in different contexts and examined through different subject lenses (Ferguson, 2006; Maloy, Counihan, Dupre, Madera, & Beckford, 2017; Moser, 2010). In these course-based common reading programs, professors' use of the common book is usually encouraged but ultimately voluntary. Like the orientation model, the course-based common book program model usually includes out-of-class activities, such as guest speakers, author talks, and contests.

### **Impact of Common Book Programs on Teaching Faculty**

The extant research includes a number of studies that outline the practical elements of designing and implementing a common book program (Brown, 2014; Straus & Daley, 2002). There are also published studies that examine the student outcomes of common book programs such as student satisfaction and improved student skills (e.g., Goldfine, Mixson-Brookshire, Hoerrner, & Morrisey; 2011; Liljequist & Stone, 2009; Stone, Higginson, & Liljequist, 2004). For instance, the recent study conducted at Queensborough Community College (Maloy et al., 2017) found that the common book program enhanced student sense of community on campus, helped students make connections across courses and disciplines, and was generally a well-liked program by students.

Very little prior research examines the impact of common book programs on faculty. Maloy et al.'s (2017) research consisted of narrative accounts of administrators and faculty coordinators of the common book programs, but this study did not collect data from faculty members. Benz, Comer, Juergensmeyer, and Lowery (2013) also used narrative accounts of perceptions of common book programs, but these narratives were those of writing program administrators rather than professors.

The State University of New York, College at Brockport's series of research reports about the common reading program published on the college's webpage (Boaz, 2005, 2006; Price, 2005) collected data from both students and faculty. Boaz (2005, 2006) and Price (2005) asked Brockport instructors whether they received and read the common book (and if they didn't read it whether they would have been more likely to read a book about a different topic); whether they integrated the book into their classes; whether the topic of the book made it difficult to integrate into classes; whether they were comfortable with someone else selecting a book for their classes; and whether or not faculty members thought the program should continue. The researchers also asked instructors several open-ended questions about book selection, improvements to the program, and ways to make it easier to integrate the book into their courses. In response to the 2004 program, Price (2005) reported that the majority of faculty received the common book (*Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich); 76% of academic planning seminar professors integrated the book into their courses while 35% of those teaching other courses integrated the book into classes. In terms of book choice, 33% of all instructors indicated that the topic of the book made course integration difficult. The majority of instructors also believed that the common book program should continue (85%) and felt comfortable with someone else selecting a book for their class (54%). Instructors commented in the open-ended responses that they would like more on campus events related to the book and more instructor resources, such as lesson plans (Price, 2005). Professors also indicated that the topic of the book or the quality of the book was challenging to integrate into courses, with many instructors commenting on book choice.

The following year, the College at Brockport adopted *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon (Boaz, 2005). Sixty-seven percent of academic planning seminar instructors indicated that they used the common book in their classes compared to 17% of instructors who taught other courses. In terms of subject matter, 39% agreed that the topic of the book made course integration difficult, but 100% suggested that the program continue. In the open-ended section, faculty members made suggestions about book selection and stated that they were overall satisfied with the supports to integrate the book into courses. Professors stated that they would have preferred receiving the book earlier to better plan for their courses (Boaz, 2005).

Similar findings were reported by the College at Brockport for 2006 (Boaz, 2006). The common book was *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien and 50% percent of academic planning seminar instructors reported integrating the book into their courses, compared to 42% of instructors of other courses. Most instructors remained comfortable with someone else selecting a book for their courses (56%) and 83% felt that the common book program should be continued. The topic of the book proved challenging for course integration for 28% of instructors. Open-ended responses found that professors were particularly satisfied with the book choice this year while others felt the book choice was too complex for freshmen. Instructors were also generally satisfied with the supports for them to include the book in their courses (Boaz, 2006).

### **Common Book Program at Nipissing University**

At Nipissing University, the Faculty of Applied and Professional Studies introduced a common book program in 2010 with the goals of enhancing a sense of community and improving literacy and student critical thinking skills. The program eventually spread over the

years to be a campus-wide initiative, involving all in-coming first year students as well as students in the one-year Bachelor of Education program. Various books have been selected for the program including: *Three Day Road* by Joseph Boyden, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, *Feed* by M.T. Anderson, *Speaking My Truth: Reflections on Reconciliation and Residential School* edited by Jonathan Dewar, Mike DeGagné, and Shelagh Rogers, and *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. While the program was ultimately voluntary for faculty members, professors were provided with resources and support to integrate the common book into their courses. Supports and resources included a program coordinator, workshops for faculty, presentations, and links to materials (e.g. articles, videos) related to the book. The book selection process for the program also evolved, moving away from the program coordinator selecting the book to a committee (consisting of students, faculty, staff, and administrators) shortlisting books, followed by a campus-wide vote to select the common book for the following year.

### **Purpose of the Research**

We have been researching various aspects of the common book program at Nipissing University, including student and faculty member satisfaction with the program, the book selection process, whether or not a common book can create a sense of community among students, and the lasting impact for students years after participating in the common book (Ferguson, Brown, & Piper, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018). However, we wanted to delve further into faculty members' perceptions of the effect of the common book program on their teaching and learning. There is little in the research regarding the professor impact beyond adoption and challenges of the common reading programs (Boaz, 2006, 2006; Price, 2005). Thus, the research questions guiding our study are:

- Do faculty members perceive a change in their teaching practices as a result of participation in the common book program?
- Does the common book program create discussion about teaching and learning among faculty?
- Does the common book program impact faculty members' sense of self- and collective efficacy as teachers?
- Do faculty members perceive a change in student achievement as a result of participation in the common book program?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Perceptions of improved teaching and learning are significant because according to Bandura (1993, 1997), perceptions of efficacy can be influential in determining outcomes. The relationship between student achievement and teacher self-efficacy has been documented by Anderson, Greene, and Loewen (1988) and Ashton and Webb (1986). Bandura (2000) notes that a sense of collective agency is important in schools because educators may work together with shared and common beliefs, and group perception may impact group outcomes. Teachers' collective self-efficacy has been linked to positive outcomes on student achievement (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2000) and as well as school-level achievement (Bandura, 1993). Moreover, the two concepts intertwine. Goddard & Goddard (2001) report that collective efficacy is a

positive predictor of teacher self-efficacy; i.e. a teaching group's positive perception of its capabilities will predict an individual teacher's positive perception of his/her capability. In this study, we hypothesize that the common book program positively impacted faculty members' sense of self-efficacy and collective efficacy.

## **Method**

### **Data Collection**

We applied for and received Research Ethics Board approval at Nipissing University for our study. Our study consisted of two distinct phases. In Phase 1, all faculty members at Nipissing were emailed a link to a voluntary, anonymous online survey about the influence of the common book program on their teaching practices, conversations with colleagues, as well as their perceptions of the program's impact on student learning. Out of the 150 full-time faculty, 32 completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 21.3%.

The survey included both open- and close-ended questions. Close-ended questions included 5-point Likert-type items about the perceived impact of the common book program on teaching practices, teaching effectiveness, student engagement and performance, self- and collective efficacy as teachers, and discussion among faculty members. For example, participants were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements such as:

- Adopting the common book changed the way I think about teaching
- I am more effective as a teacher because I adopted the common book
- I was able to extend my students' learning beyond the classroom
- The common book program improved [students'] literacy skills
- I was able to make connections with other faculty to compare teaching method.
- I engage in more discussion on teaching and learning with colleagues because of the common book program.

Faculty members were also asked to indicate the ways in which the common book program made them more effective as a teacher and the ways in which they believed the common book program impacted their students.

In Phase Two, we conducted face-to-face interviews with business faculty members ( $N = 8$ ) to glean more information about the impact of the common book program from a faculty perspective. Business faculty were targeted for interviews as they were early program adopters and had been using the common book for a longer period of time than other departments at Nipissing.

### **Data Analysis**

The quantitative data from the online surveys were analyzed using SPSS 24. The qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and sorted by interview question. Each researcher then read and reread all responses, making notes in the margins and grouping data into themes. Each researcher made a preliminary set of codes individually. We then all met to review the data and agreed on a final set of codes based on themes that emerged from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

## Results

### Phase One

The majority of respondents were female (78.3%) with more than five years of teaching experience (87%). Most (72.7%) had experience using the common book in their courses, and most (65.2%) had attended out-of-class activities or events associated with the common book program. Responses to items on perceived impact on teaching practices and teaching effectiveness are presented in Table 1. Faculty members perceived that the common book program had little impact on their teaching practice or effectiveness, with some believing that it may have improved their courses.

Table 1

*Perceived Impact on Teaching Effectiveness and Teaching Scores (N = 20).*

Adopting the common book ...	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean score
... changed the way I think about teaching	3 (15.0%)	5 (25.0%)	8 (40.0%)	4 (20.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2.65
... changed my teaching practice	3 (15.0%)	6 (30.0%)	6 (30.0%)	4 (20.0%)	1 (5.0%)	2.70
... bettered my course	1 (5.0%)	2 (10.0%)	8 (40.0%)	6 (30.0%)	3 (15.0%)	3.40
... made me more effective as a teacher	3 (15.0%)	4 (20.0%)	7 (35.0%)	5 (25.0%)	1 (5.0%)	2.85

Responses to items on perceived benefits on collective teaching efficacy and students are presented in Table 2. Faculty members were fairly neutral on whether the common book program made them more effective as a group or encouraged them to engage in more discussions on teaching and learning. However, their responses were more positive when it came to students benefitting from the program in their courses.

Table 2  
*Perceptions of Benefits of the Common Book Program (N = 19).*

Benefits of the common book program	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score
Faculty members as a group are more effective	2 (10.5%)	2 (10.5%)	10 (52.6%)	4 (21.1%)	1 (5.3%)	3.00
I engage in more discussion on teaching and learning with colleagues	1 (5.6%)	6 (33.3%)	4 (22.2%)	4 (22.2%)	3 (16.7%)	3.11
My students benefitted in my course	1 (5.3%)	1 (5.3%)	4 (21.1%)	7 (36.8%)	6 (31.6%)	3.84

Figure 1 shows the percentage of faculty members who thought that the common book program yielded specific benefits to faculty members, while Figure 2 shows the percentage of faculty members who thought that the common book program yielded specific benefits to students.

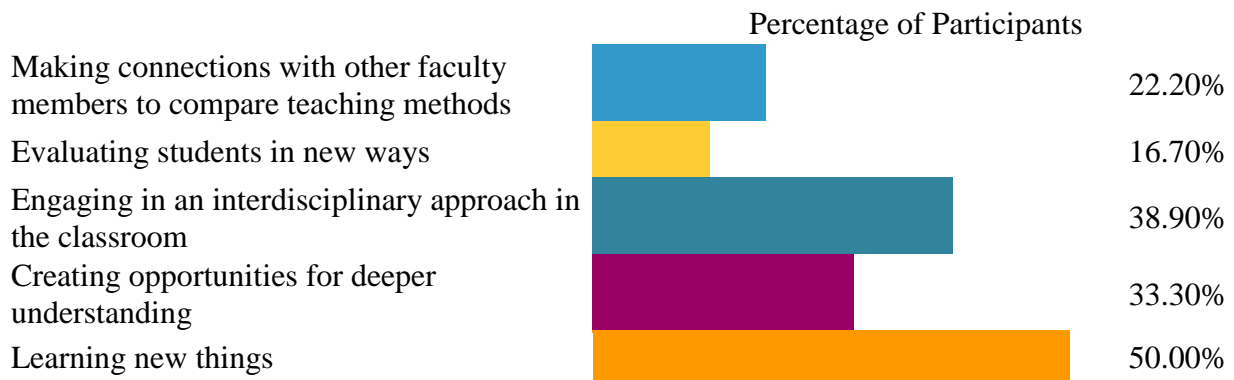
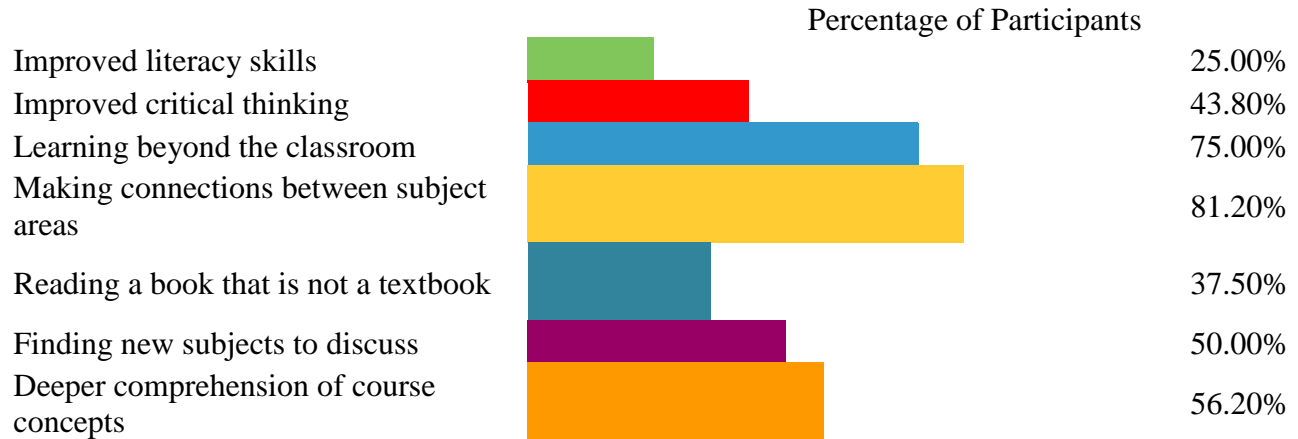


Figure 1. Perceived benefits of the common book program to faculty members.





*Figure 2.* Perceived benefits of the common book program to students

While a small number of faculty members felt that the common book program allowed them to make connections with other professors, more believed that the common book program allowed them to learn new things themselves and, to some degree, engage in interdisciplinary approaches in the classroom. Only one-quarter of faculty members felt that the common book program improved students' literacy skills. However, the majority believed that students benefitted from making connections across subject areas, learning beyond the classroom, and gaining a deeper comprehension of course concepts.

## Phase Two

Interviews of business faculty ( $N=8$ ) provided further insight into if and how common book programs impact students and teaching practices. We began our interviews by asking if the common book program changed teaching practices. For five of the eight professors, the common book program did indeed change their teaching practices, and three themes emerged as to how their practices had changed. First, the common book was a way to provide illustrative examples for course content. One professor explained, "I'm always looking for examples of events and sometimes the theme of the book would coincide with an economic event in the past." It also changed the evaluation scheme of courses as professors included the common book as a part of students' grades: "It [my teaching] was changed quite significantly ... the students were given an additional assignment that was based specifically on the book ... and it also showed up on term test questions." Finally, the common book changed teaching practices by discussing the book in class and the book became a part of class time. One professor stated, "I had to incorporate the common book into my lecture ... we would spend ten or fifteen minutes talking about the book and how it applied to the actual course we were taking." For three professors, however, the common book did not impact their teaching practices and it was just another pedagogical tool: "It's just another avenue so I wouldn't say that it changed my teaching practice. It's too big of a statement."

Faculty members were split when asked if the common book program made their courses better. Four professors felt that the program did make their courses better and two ways the program did so emerged from the interviews. First, professors felt that the program was a way for students to make connections between courses: "In one aspect it was better because they saw the connection between courses in the curriculum so they could relate that book to a number of

places.” The second way that the common book improved these professors’ courses was providing illustrative examples to course concepts. One professor stated, “I was looking for a new way to make the class more relatable outside the classroom to the students and more interactive so it helped.” The other four professors felt that the program did not make their courses better but simply different. For instance, one faculty member explained, “I’d say actually it didn’t change ... I think it was a new tool for trying to accomplish the things that I already wanted to accomplish.”

Professors were also split when asked if the common book changed the way they thought about teaching. Half of the professors stated that the common book program was a good way to add emphasis on literacy skills. For example, one instructor said that the common book was an opportunity to add more literacy components to the course: “I wanted to incorporate more essays and more writing assignments in my courses and I wanted to improve my students’ presentation skills.” Another professor expressed that the program puts a greater emphasis on literacy within their course: “[The common book] puts a greater emphasis on literacy ... they were very math oriented and there was not really a lot to do with literacy at the time so it completely changed the way that the class progressed.” For the other four professors, the common book program did not change the way they thought about teaching; for example one stated, “It fits perfectly with the way that I already think about teaching” and another “It was one extra example, it was one more discussion point.”

We also asked professors if the common book created opportunities for discussion of teaching and learning among faculty. Six of the eight professors agreed that it did create opportunities for discussion and did so by facilitating conversations. One professor explained,

I was definitely saying to people, “How are you using it? What kind of essays are you doing? ... How are you relating it to your topic?” It really created a lot of discussion. It was really good ...it really does create conversation amongst the faculty.

While one faculty member was unsure, the final faculty member felt that the common book did not create opportunities for discussions about teaching and learning because there was no sharing among professors:

I didn’t find that there was any discussion about the common book with other faculty members that were implementing it. I had no idea what they were doing in their classes and there wasn’t really a sharing of information across the faculty members

We asked faculty if self- and group efficacy increased because of the common book program. For self-efficacy, two faculty members believed that it did increase their own self-efficacy as teachers. They cited that the common book program allowed them to “take risks” and allowed them to have academic conversations “in my area but also beyond my area.” Four faculty members did not believe that it increased their self-efficacy. For these faculty members, the common book was only a teaching tool: “I don’t think it really has to do with teaching effectiveness ... I just see it as a particular tool to accomplish those goals.” Others who also felt that the common book did not increase feelings of self-efficacy believed that the book did not fit well with their course content. For instance, one faculty members stated, “it’s a stretch ... you’re stretching a novel that doesn’t always apply to you.” Two faculty members were undecided about whether the common book increased their self-efficacy as teachers. One of these

professors stated that it helped her look at the bigger picture rather than just focusing on course content: “I think more effective probably at ensuring that what I’m doing is relevant to the entire program of study as opposed to [just] my course.”

In terms of collective efficacy, three faculty members felt that the common book program improved their sense of collective efficacy. These faculty members believed that the common book creates dialogue among faculty: “I think [the common book] facilitates conversations about what we’re doing and then the idea sharing.” Two faculty members did not feel that the program improved collective efficacy and stated that this was because they were part-time instructors or that they had other priorities: “I probably didn’t leverage all of those networking or collegial opportunities that were presented.” The remaining three faculty members felt that the common book program perhaps increased collective efficacy but professor “buy in” impacted this potential benefit: “I don’t know. Maybe as a collective we would benefit from it if there was more cross-faculty collaboration.”

When asked if the common book program was a benefit for students, all eight business professors agreed. When asked how, three main themes emerged. First, faculty members felt that the common book increased the time students spent reading. For instance one professor stated, “I just like to see them reading, period.” And another “I think that it’s good that students read and read for interest. So even if it’s comic books or magazine articles or anything like that, reading outside of the curriculum is always a good thing.” The second theme that emerged as a student benefit was that reading a novel was different than textbook reading:

I was keeping a close eye on how the students were reading the textbook and they were reading textbooks for answers as opposed to reading the chapter to understand it ... at least with the common book, they’re reading the whole book and they’re gaining the context of what’s being said.

The final way that professors indicated that the students benefited from the common book was integrated learning. For example, one faculty member explained that the common book “helps to integrate learning across classes; it’s a shared common experience.” A few faculty members also noted that the benefits to students may not be immediately noticeable: “Maybe they [the benefits for students] didn’t show up in the first-year class but as the students matured they started making some links and connections.”

## **Discussion**

In our survey of all faculty members, the common book program did not have an overall impact on teaching practices. Surveys did, however, show that faculty members were more positive in regards to the common books’ impact on students. This may not be that surprising given that the publicly-stated goals of the program are singularly focused on student outcomes. Faculty may have perceived that the common book program really was not about them.

Business faculty interviewed had mixed experiences about whether the common book program impacted their teaching. While the majority thought it changed their teaching, only half of professors thought that the common book bettered their courses. Like Price (2005) and Boaz (2005, 2006) a number of professors interviewed mentioned that integrating the books into their courses was challenging. Professor buy-in and book choice remain a key component to course integration, as is also found in the literature (Boaz, 2005, 2006; Price, 2005). While some faculty

members found the book to be just another tool, others felt that it impacted their course assessment scheme, changed how they used class time, provided illustrative examples of concepts, and made connections across courses. Moreover, half of the business faculty interviewed felt that the common book did change the way they thought about teaching in terms of literacy skills. Professors were pleased with the added emphasis on literacy in their courses, as they felt literacy skills of students were lacking.

While the faculty-wide survey found mixed results for the common book creating faculty conversations, most business professors felt that the common book program created opportunities for faculty discussion about teaching and learning. The common book as an avenue for the discussion of teaching was the most pronounced finding from our interviews in terms of benefits for faculty members. The common book provided an opportunity for professors to talk with colleagues about their courses and how they were using the book.

The literature demonstrates that perceptions of self- and collective efficacy are important in determining student outcomes (Bandura 1993, 1997, 2000) and reinforce each other (Goddard & Goddard, 2001). In terms of impacting their self- and collective efficacy, business professors interviewed were mixed in their feelings about the impact of the common book. While the results were somewhat more positive in terms of collective efficacy, our interviews found unclear results in terms of the common book's impact on both self- and collective efficacy. Just discussing the common book and course integration with colleagues does not appear to be enough to substantially increase feelings of collective efficacy among professors. Professors also need more than a common teaching element to improve collective efficacy. Thus our hypothesis that the common book program could increase self- and collective efficacy (Bandura 1993, 1997, 2000) is inconclusive.

However, despite uncertain results about self- and collective efficacy and the common book, both our faculty-wide survey and the interviews with business faculty revealed that faculty members believe that the common book program benefited students. As research shows that college students are reading less than ever before (Applegate et al., 2014; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007), many professors felt that students reading any book besides a textbook was a positive impact of the program. Integrated learning across courses was another benefit perceived by faculty for students. As others who have researched common book programs have noted (Maloy et al., 2017; Nichols, 2012), common reading programs support the idea of a common intellectual experience, which is an identified high impact strategy for college student success (Kuh, 2008).

## **Final Thoughts**

Our study is limited by the small sample size. The number of surveys restricted our analysis of the questionnaire to descriptive statistics. While we interviewed business faculty because they were early adopters of the common book program, voices from other departments would have enhanced the research.

Most research on common reading programs focuses on student satisfaction and outcomes for students, and indeed, our study found that professors do see a direct benefit of the common book for students. However, our research is unique in that we explore the perceptions, experiences, and teaching practices of faculty members using a common book in their courses. Our research finds that the common book program does have the potential to change some teaching practices, increase conversations about teaching and learning among professors, and

possibly better courses by incorporating more literacy. In light of our findings, we suggest that those implementing common book programs consider making the professorial side of the program more deliberate in the goals of the program rather than as a by-product of a program aimed at students. The potential benefits in terms of professional development should be communicated to faculty. This could improve faculty buy-in, which may improve the effectiveness of common reading programs.

We feel that there is much potential for faculty teaching and learning from participating in and using a common book in post-secondary level classes. Therefore, we encourage other researchers who are investigating common book programs at their institutions to explore the program's impact on faculty members and not just students. For instance, future research could explore the impact of faculty engagement and student outcomes when common book programs are designed with faculty in mind, and when instructors are explicitly told that the common reading program is for their benefit too. Research could also seek to identify the most effective types of support and extra-curricular activities for improving teacher self- and collective efficacy when using a common book program. As one of the faculty members interviewed stated, "When you design a program like common book, you're not thinking so much about the teachers; you're thinking about the students, and one of the biggest surprises has been the benefit to the teachers."

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