

OREGON ASSOCIATION of SCHOLARS

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of SCHOLARS

Issue Brief #5 (15 September 2021)

Common Reading at the University of Oregon



Executive Summary

The common reading program for freshmen at the University of Oregon intended to prepare incoming college students for intellectual rigor and academic excellence achieves neither aim. Since its launch, it has veered sharply in the direction of polemical and didactic works of the far left and is taught in a way that amounts to political indoctrination. If the program cannot be effectively reformed, it should either be made voluntary or abolished.

The Issue

Incoming freshmen at the University of Oregon have since 2014 (2009 in the honors college) been required to complete a common reading as part of their first year studies. In recent years, the university has veered sharply in the direction of assigning partisan, ideological works that reflect the political extremism and rising identity politics of the university. Rather than providing students with access to classic works that have proven their value to developing intellectual rigor and a variety of viewpoints over the years, the university has increasingly used the common reading program as a thinly-veiled mechanism of political indoctrination. Common reading programs are an important litmus test for academic freedom and excellence, political neutrality, and vigorous debate at any college or university. By those criteria, the University of Oregon has shown a continued failure and decline.

Some defenders of common reading programs (CRPs) argue that these criticisms mirror what they assail: trying to impose one ideological view and to block others rather than allowing students to be exposed to multiple perspectives so that they can make up their own minds. This response, however, ignores the reality of CRPs, as opposed to their hypothetical liberal ideal. Across the country, including at the University of Oregon, CRPs have never offered students a variety of perspectives. Nor have they adopted instruction practices that encourage students to challenge the premises of the assigned works or engage in open debates. There are no CRPs that, for instance, alternate between left/liberal and right/conservative works, or that provide one of each in a given year. There are also no CRPs that provide instructors with guides that encourage students to question the premises of the works chosen, quite the opposite. It is in this context that the criticism of CRPs arises. In a perfect world, students would be exposed to books holding a variety of perspectives. In practice, CRPs, including that of the University of Oregon, have descended into political indoctrination that makes students less informed and less prepared for academic life.

Background

Common reading programs for incoming freshmen gained popularity in American higher education in the 2000s because of their perceived value for creating meaningful intellectual engagement and demonstrating academic behavior, both of which could increase student success. Books are typically chosen by committees and then form the basis for ongoing student meetings, speakers, and activities during the freshman year.

In 2007, the National Association of Scholars began tracking and analyzing CRPs under its *Beach Books* project. Over the period 2010 to 2018, it tabulated and studied such programs, finding little change in dominant patterns. As it summarized those patterns in the 2018 *Beach Books* report:

Common reading programs still overwhelmingly select a narrow range of books: politically progressive, designed to promote activism, confined to American authors, literarily mediocre, juvenile, recent, and mostly nonfiction. The predilections of committee members are hardwired by mission statements that require committee members to choose books of this sort. Common reading programs run by co-curricular administrators, such as Offices of Student Life, Sustainability, and Diversity, usually skew even further toward choosing progressive propaganda.¹

One research project found that the NAS *Beach Books* critique was largely true, including the finding about the juvenile nature of most readings. The study found that the mean reading level of assigned works was suitable for 9th graders. However, the authors

¹ David Randall and National Association of Scholars, *Beach Books: 2018-2019: What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?* (2019), p. 11.

defended the use of such works on the grounds that that they reflected “modern ideas, content, and sensibilities.”²

NAS president Peter Wood worried that in their current form, CRPs were intended “to soften up students for the PC juggernaut they are about to encounter.” Rather than socializing students in the conduct of academic inquiry, CRPs were socializing them in how to be politically progressive or, failing that, in how to remain silent and self-censor. The aim of “thought reform” was often explicit. For instance, a vice provost at the University of Baltimore argued in a presentation that one measure of the success of CRPs was: “Was there any change in [student] attitudes/behaviors about a theme that was emphasized in the book?”³



The focus on books recently published on “topical matters” means, according to a report by the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal in 2019, that “the books are often left-leaning and these programs signal what political ideas campus administrators want students to hold.”⁴ Whatever the good intentions and hypothetical benefits, in practice these programs have achieved the opposite of what is at least formally intended, even if they fulfill the implicit aims of faculty and staff to indoctrinate students into progressive thought patterns.

Despite such criticisms, CRPs have become worse not better in recent years. An Oregon Association of Scholars analysis of a compilation⁵ of 475 CRP books for the 2020-21 academic year by publisher Penguin Random House finds that the most frequently adopted books were consistent with the NAS description of being politically left-wing, recent, and activist (see table below). Assigned works with five or more adoptions are all far left, centered on identity politics, and recent. The only book that focuses on Europeans is *Educated*, which is an virulent attack on Mormons and conservatives more generally. The *only* example of a non-left wing common reading in the entire list is from the Christian-based Florida College, which assigned the 1791 “A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly” by Edmund Burke in which he responds to criticisms of his now classic *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

² Alexander Kafka, “Mean Reading Level of Freshman Summer Books Is Suited to 9th Graders,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2018).

³ [Link Here](#)

⁴ Chris West, “Common Reading Programs: Political Fluff for Freshmen,” James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, 1 July 2019.

⁵ [Link Here](#)

Book/Work	Frequency	Identity Politics?	Left Wing?
<i>How to Be an Anti-Racist</i>	22	Yes	Yes
<i>Educated: A Memoir</i>	20	Yes	Yes
<i>What the Eyes Don't See</i>	16	Yes	Yes
<i>Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption</i>	15	Yes	Yes
<i>There There (Tommy Orange)</i>	14	Yes	Yes
<i>Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood</i>	13	Yes	Yes
<i>The 1619 Project</i>	5	Yes	Yes
<i>Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen</i>	5	Yes	Yes
<i>Exits West</i>	5	Yes	Yes
<i>So You Want to Talk About Race</i>	5	Yes	Yes
<i>Tell Me Who You Are: Sharing Our Stories of Race, Culture, & Identity</i>	5	Yes	Yes
<i>The Book of Unknown Americans</i>	5	Yes	Yes

The 2021-22 University of Oregon Common Reading

The common reading chosen by the University of Oregon for the 2021-22 academic year is *Braiding Sweetgrass* by SUNY Syracuse environmental science professor Robin Wall Kimmerer. It confirms and deepens the evidence that CRPs have gone disastrously wrong in the hands of radical faculty and staff. The subtitle of the book provides clues about its content: *Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer encourages students to take seriously various alleged oral traditions of native American groups about the environment as a supplement or even alternative to natural science. She urges them to pursue spiritual wisdom from plants (see picture) by listening to them talk “even if we’ve forgotten how to hear their voices.” As she noted recently: “I’ve spent a lifetime asking the plants for their guidance on any number of issues.”⁶



The book encourages white students to feel guilty about the fate of native American communities. Kimmerer also makes no secret of her loathing for capitalism (“greedy”) and for the American story (“colonialism”). Like many on the American left, she remains unhinged about former President Donald Trump (“a vile Windigo”).

⁶ Robin Wall Kimmerer, “The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance,” *Emergence Magazine*, 10 December 2020.

The University of Oregon materials for the reading focus entirely on Kimmerer’s claims to native American identity. She had a grandfather who was a Potawatomi in Oklahoma. His parents sent him off the reservation to gain a non-native education. Kimmerer was not raised in native American society, and nor were her parents, who, by her own account, switched to an Indian identity only late in life, as did she. Kimmerer’s book has gained significant traction for its promise of offering some form of native American spirituality.

In addition to its unapologetic political tilt and New Age religiosity, *Braiding Sweetgrass* is chalk full of juvenile bromides like “reciprocity is a key to success”, banalities like “the community creates ceremony and the ceremony creates communities,” and botanical insights like “weeding and care for the habitat and neighboring plants strengthens its growth.” Finally, virtually all of the reviews and responses to the book are by women, which seems at odds with one of the core principles of common reading programs, namely that books should be chosen that appeal to both women and men.

Previous University of Oregon Common Readings

While the 2021-22 selection is a disappointment, it continues a recent trend in the University of Oregon CRP of being exclusively about identity politics (with the attendant focus on group belonging, victimization, and entitlement) as well as politically very far to the left of the American mainstream. As the table below shows, while the University of Oregon CRP initially had the occasional book that was not about identity politics and not left wing, such selections have disappeared in recent years.

Year	Book Title	Subject	Identity Politics	Political Orientation
2021	<i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i>	Anti-science; Native American victimization; hippie spiritualism; hatred of America	Yes	Far Left
2020	<i>The 1619 Project & This Is My America</i>	Black victimization; hatred of America	Yes	Far Left
2019	<i>Under the Feet of Jesus</i>	Mistreatment of migrant workers; evils of capitalism; hatred of America	Yes	Far Left
2018	<i>The Best We Could Do</i>	Asian victimization; anti-Vietnam War; hatred of America	Yes	Far Left
2017	<i>The Round House</i>	Native American victimization; criminal justice	Yes	Left

Year	Book Title	Subject	Identity Politics	Political Orientation
2016	<i>Between the World and Me</i>	Black victimization; anti-white racism; hatred of America	Yes	Far Left
2015	<i>Station Eleven</i>	Pandemic thriller	No	Center
2014	<i>The Emotional Life of Your Brain</i>	Neuroscience; human psychology and emotions	No	Center
2013	<i>The Grace of Silence</i>	Black victimization; race politics	Yes	Left
2012	<i>In Defense of Food</i>	Nutrition; food science; eco-activism	No	Left
2011	<i>The Death of Innocents</i>	Anti-death penalty; criminal justice activism	No	Left
2009/2010	<i>Mountains Beyond Mountains</i>	Global public health	No	Center

Common Reading as Political Struggle Session

While most of the focus on CRPs has been about the selection of books, less time has been devoted to critique of the formats in which the books are taught. As the NAS has noted, these sessions are often driven by the extremists in the staff rather than by faculty experts.

At this writing, the University of Oregon had not made public any instructor guides for *Braiding Sweetgrass*, but the supplementary materials offered by university administrators make it clear that students will be



forced to accept its political and pseudo-religious claims and to engage in social justice activism based on its prescriptions. This represents a lost opportunity for students to debate such works by being exposed to counter-arguments such as the chapters entitled “Teach It If You Must, But Don’t Call It Science” by Professor James Trefil and “Is Indigenous Science Pseudoscience?” by Professor Massimo Pigliucci in the recently published edited volume *Indigenizing the University: Diverse Perspectives* edited by Professor Frances Widdowson.

The Oregon Association of Scholars has examined the instructor guides for previous years of the University of Oregon CRP and found that the general critiques of CRP book

selections are confirmed in their use. For instance, instructor guidance notes⁷ written by staff at the university's "Accessible Education Center" for the 2020-21 book *This Is My America* advises making sure that students agree with the officially approved view of the author, accept the contentious claim of mass incarceration⁸, and take time to "support" the demands of black activists on campus:

Who is Kim Johnson writing for? What does she want this book to do?(if not named by participants, name that she is writing especially for and to Black youth, and that some of the objectives of the book include illustrating the criminal-legal system's injustice in a way that can be used by educators.)

Questions that could also go into the chat:

- Who does the criminal-legal system and mass incarceration benefit? Who suffers under it?
- What work do we know about that youth—especially Black, Indigenous, and POC youth—are doing on this campus to create the world they deserve?
- How do the different communities in this book make justice—or make harm—possible? What implications does this have for any of us as we think about communities we belong to?
- We asked what work do we know about that youth—especially Black, Indigenous, and POC youth—are doing on this campus to create the world they deserve? What actions might we take—as individuals with our own positionalities—to center and support their demands?"

Meanwhile, the library guide⁹ for the reading of *The 1619 Project* tells students that the project may "challenge" them, not because they are allowed to challenge its premises but because they will agree so much that they will be traumatized and may need counselling – if, that is, they can spare time from their resultant activism for "black liberation and social change":

From the first group of enslaved Africans brought to Virginia in 1619, the US was founded on violence and theft against Black people. This history creates and undergirds the racism and White colonial supremacy culture that structures the everyday lives of everyone in the US today. This history is upsetting. It's upsetting for those of us who have benefitted from it — everyone who has written this guide — and for those who have suffered from it. Stolen labor made stolen land more valuable, and the demand for land

⁷ [Link Here](#)

⁸ See the recent article by Barry Latzer (Professor Emeritus at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY), "The Mass Incarceration Bogeyman," *Academic Questions* (Spring 2021).

⁹ [Link Here](#)

among White slaveholders accelerated the drive to force Indigenous peoples in North America off their land. We hope these resources inspire readers toward actions for Black liberation and social change.

The reading guide¹⁰ for the 2018 selection *The Best We Could Do* includes the suggestion to make students believe the fact that “freedom” in the United States is a “mythos” especially for non-white people like the Vietnamese refugees of the book:

*How does *The Best We Could Do* handle the paradox of freedom as it is commonly played out in the United States: that it is least available to those who are most in need of its abstract promise?*

Instructors are also given resources for “for pre-empting the issue of ‘positive’ stereotypes” about Asian-Americans.

Not surprisingly, the most egregious indoctrination guide¹¹ was issued for the 2016 selection *Between the World and Me*. The guide begins with a suggestion that all sessions begin with deep-breathing exercises in order to prepare students for the indoctrination they are about to receive:

To put it simply, this is key for a predominantly white institution engaging a text critical of “people who believe they are white.” ... Rather, we should all feel shame in discussing and thinking about America’s history of racism and learn to live with it rather than deny it.

Students are given several examples of ongoing racism in America including: “Bobby Jindal’s conservative politics for Louisiana.” Suggested student skill-building activities include learning “how to operate a reparations board.”

Policy Recommendations

When the NAS was analyzing CRPs under the *Beach Books* project, its recommendations changed over time. At first, the recommendations were to liberalize book selections to ensure they represented better and more intellectually diverse books. Later the focus shifted to the selection process to ensure that faculty specialists rather than staff activists had the final say. Little was written about the instruction process, but, as this report shows, this has closely mirrored the book selections in having a strong ideological orientation towards identity politics and social justice activism.

Today, as the University of Oregon example shows, the books are getting worse and the teaching is getting ever more illiberal. Whatever its noble purpose, the common reading

¹⁰ [Link Here](#)

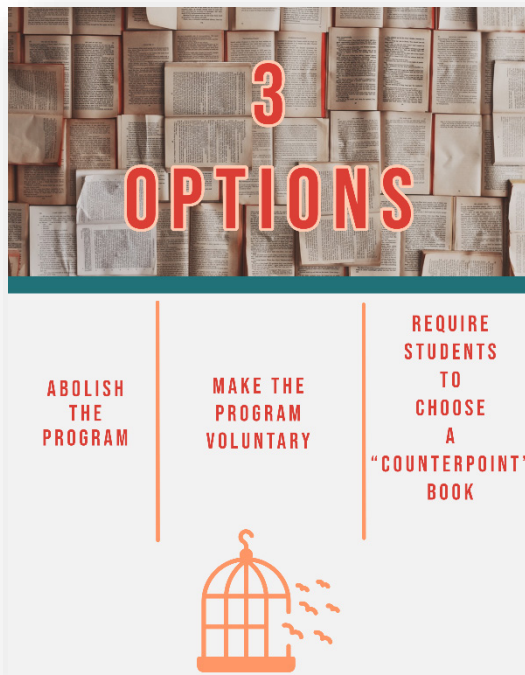
¹¹ [Link Here](#)

program at the University of Oregon is today nothing less than a political indoctrination camp. This reflects more general trends across the country. Despite its avowed intent to improve student learning, the Oregon CRP has done the opposite and violated the trust of the people of Oregon.

Ideally, the University of Oregon CRP would be reformed with an explicit focus on intellectual diversity by ensuring either an alternation of left/progressive and right/conservative books, or by allowing students to choose or select from counterpoint works that challenge the premises of the assigned reading. But it is unlikely that a staff and faculty that is overwhelmingly liberal¹², and that is often explicit in seeing the university as a place of political indoctrination, will reform itself. Rather, pressures for reform are more likely to spark a moral panic on campus about “right-wing organizations” trying to “attack academic freedom”.

The second-best option would be to make the program voluntary so that activist students who are intent on this sort of course experience can continue while others are freed. This option has the advantage of upholding the academic choices of faculty and students while removing the political indoctrination of the program. Based on evidence from other institutions, it would also save money.

Failing that, the best option would be to abolish the program. As the James G. Martin



Center for Academic Renewal advocated 2019: “Given the track record of common reading programs, the best action may be abolition, not reformation.” Several universities have abolished their CRPs citing a variety of reasons, all of which ultimately have to do with their failure as educational programs. In 2014, for instance, the president of Purdue University and former Indiana governor Mitch Daniels terminated the university’s CRP. Daniels claimed it was a budgetary requirement. But reports on campus suggest he also had concerns about the unvarnished political indoctrination the program had become. Other CRPs across the nation have been suspended for a variety of reasons, all related to low levels of student engagement. Absent meaningful reforms to its CRP, the University of Oregon should follow suit.

¹² See Oregon Association of Scholars, *The Partisan Imbalance of Campaign Donations From Faculty and Staff at Major Public Universities in Oregon*, Issue Brief #4 (15 July 2021). [Link Here.](#)

About

The Oregon Association of Scholars is the Oregon affiliate of the National Association of Scholars, a network of scholars and citizens united by a commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education. Membership in NAS is open to all who share a commitment to these broad principles. NAS publishes a journal and has state and regional affiliates. Visit NAS at www.nas.org, and OAS at www.oregonscholars.org. Contact: Dr. Bruce Gilley, OAS President, info@oregonscholars.org