

Reading Builds Community:

The Honors College Common Reading Program

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Overview of The Honors College

The mission of The Honors College is to foster an enduring spirit of inquiry and discovery so that artistically and academically talented students develop the courage to address uncommon challenges and the commitment to promote social responsibility throughout their lives. A strong and thriving Honors College is imperative to attract, retain and educate distinguished undergraduates from wide-ranging backgrounds. Honors is the third largest college on campus following Social and Behavioral Sciences and the Eller College of Management, yet The Honors College occupies a unique niche in that all of our students are members of at least one other college. Through Honors courses offered across the curriculum, research opportunities, and co-curricular programs, The Honors College enables talented students to reach the highest levels of excellence, instills a life-long passion for learning, and strengthens the quality of undergraduate education at UA. Honors students achieve high levels of academic success during their undergraduate years and beyond. 56 percent of Honors students graduate in 4 years and 79 percent graduate in 5 years compared to UA students overall with 33 percent for a 4-year graduation rate and 51 percent for a 5-year rate. The Honors College assists students in reaching their career goals. Forty-two percent of graduates of The Honors College continue on to graduate or professional school immediately upon graduation from the UA with another 10 to 15 % deferring their post-baccalaureate work. Overall, three-quarters of the students graduating with Honors plan to attend graduate or professional school within five years of graduation. An important challenge faced by The Honors College is building community across 800 to 1,000 incoming freshmen representing 13 academic colleges and living off campus and in every hall on campus. No single event or venue can accommodate everyone. The Honors College adopted a Common Reading to involve new students in the life of the College from New Student Orientation throughout their first semester at the UA.

Abstract

The Honors College Common Reading Program creates community among Honors students, helps new students make connections in their first semester, and engages students in the intellectual life of the College. The Common Reading builds community by providing each new student (approximately 800 freshmen) with a common text at orientation and offering a series of fall events around the theme of the text. If funded, each book would include a plate stating "Gift to the class of 2012 from the University of Arizona Parents & Family Association." This program has at least four benefits. First, it is a significant community-building experience, uniting our entering class and providing opportunities to meet and bond with each other and with faculty through a series of diverse events. Second, this community-building experience is inherently intellectual; we engage students with each other and with faculty, staff and alumni through ideas, encouraging not just unity among our students, but thoughtful exchange. This is the enrichment that makes The Honors College a special destination on campus. And, third, the Common Reading Program is an outreach effort strengthening the link between Honors and other units around the University, including faculty, research centers, residence halls, alumni and now the UA Parent and Family Association. Fourth, the Family Weekend Convocation provides a point of engagement for students and their families creating opportunities for discussion and exploration of global issues. Hopefully, more parents of Honors students will be familiar with the UA Parents and Family Association and participate in its activities.

Statement of the Proposal

Honors students enrolled in a one-unit colloquium, Reading Builds Community, started with a list of over 200 books to select the Common Reading for 2008: *Ishmael: An Adventure of Mind and Spirit*. Daniel Quinn won the Turner Tomorrow Award's half-million-dollar prize for this The Honors College Common Reading Program

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fascinating book about a man's search for truth. Students will resonate with the quest for knowledge and the extraordinary relationship between the teacher and student. The hero of this novel answers an ad from a teacher seeking serious students and arrives at an abandoned office building to find a full-grown gorilla chewing on delicate branches. "You are the teacher?" he asks and Ishmael replies telepathically, "I am the teacher." The philosophical lessons modeled on Plato's *Republic* cover in the lifespan of the Earth and raise important questions about the relationship between the human and natural worlds. One reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* notes "Through Ishmael, Quinn offers a wide-ranging if highly general examination of the history of our civilization, illuminating the assumptions and philosophies at the heart of many global problems."

Now students in the Honors colloquium are creating a reader's guide for the Common Reading text and designing a series of programs for the fall semester that will provide opportunities to engage the text in small group settings, from residence halls, to classrooms, to the living room of Slonaker House, the home of The Honors College. The Honors College will provide each incoming Honors freshman (approximately 800 students) with a copy of the text and will supply copies for faculty, residence hall assistants, alumni and staff who are interested in leading discussions of the book or using it in their teaching. The first Honors Forum lunch, held in September, will feature a UA faculty member whose research intersects with themes from the text. A film screening, poetry reading, or art exhibition will provide opportunities for students to engage the themes of the Common Reading using different learning styles and multiple intelligences. The Common Reading program culminates in a talk during the Honors College Convocation held during Family Weekend. Because Daniel Quinn is elderly and does not travel to lecture, Professor Jonathon Overpeck, Director of the UA Institute for the Study of Planet Earth, will provide remarks during the Family Weekend Convocation. This convocation will provide an opportunity for all UA families and students to learn about ecological and social issues facing our planet and to be inspired to make changes in our own human behavior that will impact the environment.

Although all the activities for the 2008 Common Reading program have not been finalized, the program from this year provides a flavor for the range and diversity of engagements. The 2007 Common Reading program focused on *Living in Two Worlds* based on Tamim Ansary's *West of Kabul, East of New York*. Program events began with an Honors Forum lunch featuring Professor Richard Eaton from the Department of History. Professor Eaton provided a global context discussing "West of Kabul and the diaspora of Muslims in the contemporary world." Each of the eight Book Talks focused on different issues depending upon the facilitator: Adrian Shelton, wife of President Shelton, Jeff Goldberg, Associate Dean of Engineering, Spike Peterson, Professor of Political Science, Cat Clinton, Center for English as a Second Language, Shirley Oppenheimer, UA alumna, Sallie Marston, Professor of Geography, Kevin Kemper, Assistant Professor of Journalism and Linda Darling, Associate Professor of History. Students interested in popular culture enjoyed popcorn and a screening of *Khuda Gawah*, a Bollywood musical about love, fate, war and honor. A poetry reading celebrated the 800th birthday of the renowned Persian poet Mawlana Jalaladdin Mohammed Rumi. A competition where Honors students responded to the Common Reading text through verbal or visual creativity selected four students for lunch with Tamim Ansary during his visit to campus for Family Weekend. Over 240 students and family members attended the convocation. Ansary clarified many stereotypes about Afghanistan and gave a picture of the "lost world" of Afghanistan before the wars. Freshman students found a connection by comparing the choices he has made learning to "live in two worlds"; the world of his Afghani boyhood in his father's country and the world of his American mother and the

ongoing tensions he negotiates from identities, geographies, cultures, and nations. The Honors College plans a similarly full and diverse program for 2008.

Itemized Budget

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| 1. Books for incoming freshmen and faculty
(900 copies @ \$12 each; list price \$17) | \$10,800 |
| 2. Family Weekend Convocation
Reception for 500 and AV equipment | \$ 1500 |
| 3. Forum lunch
Lunch for 100 students and faculty @ \$14
and AV equipment | \$1500 |
| 4. Common Reading events
8 -12 Book Talks, Residence Hall events,
Movie night and Arts event. | \$1000 |

Total \$14,800

Additional sources of funding:

The Honors College provides Administrative Assistant to organize Common Reading events, confirms participation and leadership, leads student response competition, coordinates residence hall activities, hosts Book Talks, and facilitates instructors' use of the text. Approximately 4 hours per week spring semester and 8-10 hours a week fall semester.

Honors students select the text, create readers' guide, decide on overarching theme and outline activity and publicity plans. 8 students for 3 hours per week for 15 weeks.

Events coordinator reserves rooms, creates posters and messages for publicity, orders food and audiovisual equipment. Approximately 30 hours during fall semester.

Associate Dean introduces Common Reading at each New Student Orientation session during the summer. 15 minutes at each of 13 New Student Orientations.

Alumni sponsorship. Alumni are invited to participate by purchasing a book for themselves and one for a student. In 2007, \$2250 was contributed by alumni. These funds provide books for new students and resident assistants in Honors halls.

Assessment of Desired Outcomes

Strength of Community

1. Number of new students officially joining Honors during fall semester
2. Number of new students attending at least one Common Reading event
3. Number of faculty, alumni and staff attending at least one Common Reading event
4. Number of students and family members attending Family Weekend Honors Convocation
5. Number of opportunities for students to interact with faculty in small group settings

Feeling of engagement

1. Student report of engagement and belonging on fall semester survey of satisfaction
2. Level and quality of student responses to the Common Reading text
3. Student report of connections between Common Reading and material in classes