

A Suggestion for a Minot State University First-Year Experience

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I would like to share with you some of my initial thoughts about a first-year experience, or as it was often referred to at other schools or even at our own, the “freshman seminar.” These are my thoughts, and I share them with you only to encourage others to share ideas and thoughts on this important initiative for our first-year students.

My intention is nothing more than to add to the dialogue about a first-year experience, which is one of many features of the Foundations of Excellence (FoE) for First-Year Students self-study and plan our campus completed last year. I share my thoughts, too, with full recognition that there will be countless ideas about first-year programs—what will work for us, what will not work, and how we can move ahead to implement this key feature of a first-year program. For instance, on one hand, there are those who value these courses or experiences for their practical aims of showing students how to succeed in college (e.g., library and research training, personal and fiscal management techniques, making prudent and safe choices for one’s health, and knowing how to find and use specific services on campus). Those practical courses are often referred to as student success courses. On the other hand, there are those who value first-year experiences as means to engage students in essential academic skills, like critical thinking, art appreciation, and the like. I do not pretend to know what is best, but I do have my opinions about what would be good for us. But whatever approach we follow in the process of developing this course or experience, the model, it seems to me, must be one that we believe in, support, and one that is academically powerful, effective, and aligned with who we are and where we’re going as a university.

A year ago an essay by the writer and poet Ursula K. Le Guin appeared in the February 2008 Harper’s Magazine, titled “Staying Awake: Notes on the alleged decline of reading.” Le Guin cites sobering statistics revealing the decline over the past 15 years in the number of people who read a book in one year. The statistics underscore her concerns about the amount and quality of reading, which she emphasizes, in a self-evident explanation, is a much different act from that of watching television. She makes this distinction and explains that “readers aren’t viewers; they recognize their pleasure as different from that of being entertained. Once you’ve

pressed the ON button, the TV goes on, and on, and on, and all you have to do is sit and stare.” She highlights the difference in the two acts this way:

But reading is active, an act of attention, of absorbed alertness—not all that different from hunting, in fact, or from gathering. In its silence, a book is a challenge: it can’t lull you with surging music or deafen you with screeching laugh tracks or fire gunshots in your living room; you have to listen to it in your head. A book won’t move your eyes for you the way images on a screen do. It won’t move your mind unless you give it your mind, or your heart unless you put your heart in it. It won’t do the work for you. To read a story well is to follow it, to act it, to feel it, to become it—everything short of writing it, in fact (37).

Of course, those of us in higher education know these differences, but I would hazard a guess that many first-year students do not. I hear often about the decline in reading, about the inabilities of many students to read well. We all know too that without those skills and appreciation our students will face great challenges in their studies and classes. It is well established that reading skills impact writing, thinking, speaking, listening, and thinking.

For those reasons and many more, I think that a first-year experience should require our students to read actively and thoughtfully, and then to interpret, share thoughts about meaning and implication with other readers and with the guidance of a faculty member. I think that the students in a first-year experience should be asked to **read a book**, a full and intellectually challenging, interesting, and provocative book, so that all of our first-year students are in some cases introduced to the full experience and shown that the greater experience of reading plays a central role in the life of our campus and their future career and life in general. A first-year experience with this focus can be one of many ways for us to demonstrate and emphasize this key academic activity. It will certainly serve as a good introduction to what we value and what they will encounter throughout their studies at Minot State University.

There are many ways we can create that experience for our students. We might collectively decide on a book with those qualities to match a campus theme, or we could select the book with only the experience in mind, and then arrange for a few meetings in a month, perhaps through dinner with a professor and a book, learning community discussions in a

residence hall, or reading and attending lecture series on campus dealing with the book or the subject. There could be other activities allowing the small group of students and the faculty member to get to know one another better, to participate in a service activity, volunteer in the local community together, and in the end experience and appreciate our own commitment to reading, writing, and thinking, and service. If we would keep our focus on the purpose of learning and living what we value and who we are, then I think that students—both accomplished readers and others who are less accomplished—will be able to develop an appreciation and understanding of this central academic experience we all value.

Many questions could be discussed and answered later, for instance: How big will the classes be? How many credits does it carry? Do those credits apply toward graduation? Do we require this for all? Do all faculty participate? Do faculty and staff participate? Does it last a full semester or just a month? How do we create a campus-wide atmosphere supporting engaged reading and learning for first-year students? How would we know if it is doing any good?

I'll end this little paper with a striking observation from Le Guin's essay: "I like knowing that a hard-bitten Wyoming cowboy carried a copy of *Ivanhoe* in his saddlebag for thirty years, and that the mill girls of New England had Browning Societies. There are readers like that still. Our schools are no longer serving them (or anybody else) well, on the whole; yet some kids come out of even the worst schools clutching a book to their heart" (37). We recognize the varied experiences students have before coming to a university and the different reading levels, but that should not discourage us from expecting all of our students, regardless of how well they have been served, to become engaged deeply in the experience of reading a book in a first-year seminar.

Wouldn't it be something if we could get our first-year students collectively to understand and appreciate reading and engage in it for its active and intellectual qualities, and then in the end "come out clutching a book to their heart"? Such a common experience on campus would also be enjoyable and rewarding for all of us. That's my idea. I'd encourage you to share your ideas about what we can do to engage our first-year students in the genuine academic experiences we all know make our lives more intellectually enjoyable and rewarding.

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