

## Proposal for a Common Reader Program

*Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire.”*

*Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar”*

According to a recent Associated Press poll, reported in the *Huntsville Item* on August 23, 2007, one in four adults read **NO** books last year. In November, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released its *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* which reported that younger Americans continue with the downward trends of reading less and reading with less reading ability. The summary concludes that these have “demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications.” The 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) found that students who spend more time reading outside class score higher on deeper-learning scales. Thirty-one percent of students who scored in the top quartile indicated they had read five or more books for their own personal enjoyment or academic enrichment during the school year compared to only 17% in the lower quartile. Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, and Nora (*Influences Affecting the Development of Students’ Critical Thinking Skills*, 1993) found that ‘the number of hours students spent studying and the number of non-assigned books read during the year were positively related to gains in critical thinking’ (p. 9).

Because common reading programs bridge curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular dimensions of learning, they are the one vehicle for enhancing critical thinking in college. Given this, the common reader program (CRP) is one of the proposals for Sam Houston State University’s Quality Enhancement Plan. The CRP initiates a common intellectual experience among students, faculty, staff and administrators that strengthens the academic atmosphere and introduces a common literary text to beginning first-year students to read the summer prior to entering the university. A book is chosen that relates to material in a number of first-year courses, and faculty members have the opportunity to work with each other to integrate the material into the academic course content. The goals of a CRP link to many course goals and include increasing students’ motivation to read, improving students’ reading skills, enhancing students’ critical thinking skills, promoting habits of discussion, increasing students’ understanding of texts, improving students’ ability to justify a position in a written or oral assignment, and connecting knowledge between the text, the course, the world, and the student. Co-curricular and extracurricular activities include author visits, guest speakers, debates, essay contests, fine arts productions, film series, etc.

Various national survey instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, Beginning Survey of Student Engagement, and Faculty Survey of Student Engagement would serve as potential ways to assess the success of the program. Other assessments on critical thinking skills and reading could also be utilized.

## Proposal for an Integrated Science Course “Myth Busters”

*“If we teach only the findings and products of science – no matter how useful and even inspiring they may be – without communicating its critical method, how can the average person possibly distinguish science from pseudoscience? ... The method of science ... is far more important than the findings of science.” ” Carl Sagan, “The Demon Haunted World” p. 21*

We live in a period in history in which scientific discoveries and their applications profoundly influence all of our lives. Unfortunately, many studies have shown that the average American citizen is scientifically illiterate, including college graduates (78% illiterate). For example, at a recent Harvard University commencement, an informal poll revealed that fewer than ten percent of graduating seniors could explain why it's hotter in summer than in winter. One-half of the American public does not know the earth goes around the sun once a year. Half of Americans believe that the earliest humans lived at the same time as the dinosaurs. Billions of dollars are spent each year in the United States on quack medicines. Millions of Americans believe that there is some truth to astrology – a pseudoscience whose validity has been completely negated by science. In addition, many people simply do not understand the significance and importance of the methods of science and how it pertains to them on a personal level. They do not understand the importance of being skeptically minded; i.e., of requiring evidence to serve as a guide in our thinking about the world.

Given this state of affairs, we are proposing a 4-hour science course that *would be taught by all science departments* using a common set of lectures (but which could be customized to some degree based on disciplinary expertise). The goal of this course is to enhance student understanding and appreciation of science as a proven and reliable method of acquiring factual knowledge about the world. **This will be done by using the scientific method and scientific information to critically examine both pseudoscientific claims and extraordinary claims that are common in our culture.** Such claims include those pertaining to astrology, UFOs, alien abductions, legendary creatures, Atlantis, the Bermuda Triangle, non-traditional medicines, paranormal phenomena, and others. Through an examination of these fun topics, students will learn some of the basic facts, principles, and theories from many different disciplines of science. In the process, students will learn more about the nature of science and the scientific method, how to more reliably evaluate evidence, and how to avoid common errors in reasoning that lead to erroneous conclusions. This knowledge can help protect students from fraudulent and misleading claims that come not only from advocates of pseudoscience, but from advertisers, politicians, cult leaders, and ideologues. Finally, students will learn more about the beauty and wonder of the real world as revealed by science. **The effectiveness of this course can be easily evaluated using existing science surveys and readily available institutional data.**

## **Proposal for Integrating Writing in the Disciplines**

*How can I know what I think till I see what I say?—E.M. Forster*

Students most often do not see the link between their writing and their learning. Because a university's product is seen as formal knowledge, students often do not recognize that knowledge results from a process, or that professionals use preliminary and informal strategies to explore, elaborate, and test that knowledge in writing before it is communicated to larger audiences (WIP, U of Georgia). If faculty make special efforts to integrate writing-to-learn strategies, students would be more likely to develop the process skills that professionals and scholars alike use to develop their thinking. The more courses that encourage students to make the writing/thinking link, the more likely students are to be engaged with course material and use their writing to increase their knowledge.

Research through the Harvard Assessment Seminars, among other studies, finds that the amount of writing in a course is the one course characteristic that correlates most strongly with student engagement. "When asked what they considered 'the most effective, important course they had taken in their four years at college,' student after student spoke of classes structured such that writing for fellow students was an integral part of the course [...]" (Light 17).

Courses that integrate principles from Writing in the Disciplines (WID) encourage students to use their writing as exploratory tools to understand and interact with disciplinary concepts. Faculty who allow writing to be used in informal situations, and shared with others in the class, find that students can make stronger connections to disciplinary content. Likewise, faculty members are happier with the results than those who assign formal research papers to use as an assessment tool. Principles of WID also help students to recognize that writing in the disciplines is about acquiring disciplinary knowledge and help students understand how written communication shapes knowledge in any given field. Writing and learning, thus, become integrally linked.

The WID program at SHSU can train faculty to integrate writing-to-learn strategies within existing classes; we also need to structure a program that allows individual disciplines to decide their most important writing needs and requirements. Working within the disciplines we can continue to build upon proven writing-to-learn methods, and collaboratively decide which are most appropriate for implementation at SHSU.

### Reference:

Light, Richard. "Strengthening Colleges and Universities: The Harvard Assessment Seminars." Educause. 1999-2007. Transforming Education through Information Technologies. 7 Nov 2007. <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ff0603S.pdf>>.

Writing Intensive Program. 2006. The University of Georgia. 7 Nov 2007. <[http://www.wip.uga.edu/wid\\_writing.htm](http://www.wip.uga.edu/wid_writing.htm)>.