

Selecting the Common Book: Anarchy and Ambiguity in Action

By
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Abstract

Using a framework derived from institutional theory, this study investigated the purposes and motivations behind selections of common books during the last three years. Thirty-one face-to-face and phone interviews were conducted with selection committee members at three public, flagship institutions. The overarching takeaway from this study was that common book selection procedures exhibited characteristics of organized anarchies. That is, interviewed selection committees felt that common books were supposed to achieve multiple, ambiguous goals; selection committees had difficulty describing how selected common books achieved those goals; and participation in the common reading experiences (e.g., by selection committee members, organizations who sponsored book-related events, and readers) fluctuated each year. I also found that interviewed faculty, staff, and students described similar yet idiosyncratic procedures for selecting common books. Interviewed selection committee members felt that the common books they selected reflected unique characteristics of their institutions and included symbolic messages about institutions' aspirations. The findings add to what is known about how and why institutions choose common books.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Common reading experiences¹ are campus programs intended to promote student success, with objectives that aim to engage, retain, and inculcate first-year students with institutional culture (Laufgraben, 2006). These types of campus programs spread rapidly in the last decade: a 2007 study collected survey data from 130 common reading administrators (Twiton, 2007) while more recent studies examined common text selections at 315 institutions (Keup & Young, 2015) and 481 institutions (National Association of Scholars [NAS], 2018). The total number of common reading experiences on United States (U.S.) college campuses is likely much higher when one considers all institutional types.

Yet, research reveals a dearth of evidence linking common reading experiences (CREs) and student success outcomes (e.g., persistence, GPA, likelihood of on-time graduation) threatening the viability of such programs but also raising the question—why have they spread so widely? That these programs appear to not only survive but thrive is more surprising given that CREs have inconsistent goals across all campuses and that themes and topics guiding CREs change frequently (Laufgraben, 2006).

The key component of a CRE is the selected reading material—the book. Like readings for any course, the common book communicates something about how the chooser thinks about the material. It signals to students what is important in a particular course. Likewise the choice of a common text says something, but it is not clear what. Unlike a major course, CREs have goals other than conveying a particular content the student is to master. Rather, common texts say

¹ Common reading initiatives, common book programs, common reader programs, common reading experiences, one book programs, and one book, one campus are used interchangeably in the literature and in practice. The term common reading experience is becoming more common, especially among foremost scholars in the field. For the purposes of this study, the term “common reading experience” will refer to all iterations of such programs.

something about the program goals and the institution's educational priorities (Laufgraben, 2006; NAS, 2013). This multi-site case study asks, What, if anything, are institutions trying to accomplish by selecting a common text in any given year?

Purpose of the Study

This study investigated the processes and motivations underlying common text selections using signaling and institutional theories. Unexplored in the research literature to this point, the purpose of this qualitative, multi-case study was to move beyond the publicly stated criteria for choosing a text to explore unstated processes and motives behind text selection over the last three years at three public, flagship institutions.

This study explored a) whether common text selections are intended to address institutional objectives; b) if common texts do address institutional priorities, who or what influences which objectives are important to address through common text selection, and c) how institutions determine whether the selected common text achieves objectives set out for it.

Research Questions

I began this study by proposing an overarching research question that was sufficiently broad to permit additional themes and questions to emerge during the study. From there, I came up with a list of procedural and issue-based questions to guide the study's research design and data collection procedures, leaving room to develop more specific and relevant questions during the inquiry phase (Agee, 2009).

My overarching research question was, What, if anything, are institutions trying to accomplish through freshman book text selection?

To answer that question, three related research questions guided the investigation. They are:

1. Are common text selections intended to achieve certain kinds of objectives, whether educational, institutional, societal, or other?
2. If common text selections address certain objectives, who has decision-making authority or what factors influence decisions about which objectives are important?
3. How do institutions determine whether a common text selection achieves the objectives set forth for it?

Statement of the Problem

CREs are widely-utilized programs in higher education. One recent article suggests that one in three institutions of higher education implement a CRE (Kafka, 2018). The majority of CREs are implemented at large, research-intensive institutions with large undergraduate populations (Keup & Young, 2015). At these kinds of institutions, first-year students have fewer opportunities than at other institution types for meaningful involvement, peer interactions, and faculty interactions (Astin, 2003; Chang, Astin & Kim, 2004) and are less likely to take required general education courses that instill in them important academic skills (e.g., critical thinking, composition, reading) and knowledge (e.g., U.S. history, philosophy, math; American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2017; Leef, 2013). CREs are purported to address some of these student success predictors.

As such, a burgeoning research literature undergirded by theories of student success, like Kuh's theory of engagement (Kuh et al., 2007), Astin's theory of involvement (Astin, 1984), Tinto's theory of integration (Tinto, 1987), is emerging to support these programs. To date, the scholarly literature on CREs falls mainly into two categories: The first category includes descriptions of processes, rationales, and recommendations for implementing CREs (e.g., Burkhalter et al., 2008; Delmas & Harrell, 2014; Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2016; Keup &

Young, 2015; Keup, Young & Andersen, 2015; Laufgraben, 2006; Liljequist & Stone, 2009; Nadelson & Nadelson, 2012; Twiton, 2007). The second category deals with the effects of CREs on students' attitudes, behaviors, and academic outcomes (Daugherty & Hayes, 2012; Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2014, 2015, 2016; Gerlich, Drumheller & Mallard, 2012; Goldfine et al., 2011; Mallard et al., 2008; Soria, 2015; Young & Stolzenberg, 2017). On the surface, this nascent literature base suggests that CREs are promising strategies that address demands from the institution's environment. Specifically, research indicates that first-year college students who participate in CREs develop college-level academic skills (Daugherty & Hayes, 2012; Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2014, 2015; Goldfine et al., 2011; Soria, 2015), report a greater quantity and quality of peer and faculty interactions than students who do not participate (Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2016; Young & Stolzenberg, 2017), and perceive CREs positively (Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2014; Gerlich, Drumheller & Mallard, 2012; Mallard et al., 2008).

Upon closer examination however, research demonstrates an inconsistent link between CREs and student success outcomes. For instance, current research on the topic suffers from technical and methodological deficiencies that undercut its findings. Namely, results are locally-embedded, unreplicated, or largely anecdotal. Additionally, there is a dearth of high-quality data and assessment tools in the field (Keup & Young, 2015; Laufgraben, 2006; Twiton, 2007).

Although this study did not address student outcomes, it was important to understand how institutions judged the effectiveness of CREs and the books that guide those programs.

One possible explanation for the uneven empirical support for CREs relates to the highly variable nature of program goals between and within institutions and the fact that many campuses provide few incentives to students to participate (NAS, 2016). Two studies demonstrate that first-year students must read the common book in order for the program to have

an impact on their academic success (Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2014, 2015). Yet, researchers estimate that only 28% of CREs are mandatory (NAS, 2016) and 35% of CREs are integrated into first-year seminars (Keup & Young, 2015). Thus, students who participate do so inconsistently and the majority of first-year students miss the academic opportunities that CREs are purported to offer (Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2014; Liljequist & Stone, 2009; NAS, 2016). These factors foster uncertainty about program effectiveness and may threaten the viability of CREs. Notably, a spate of CRE program cancelations in 2013 and 2014 put campus administrators on alert (Cheston, 2013; Grasgreen, 2014). Since then, scholars in the field have called for improved implementation and more rigorous research over concerns that the continued absence of a rigorous research base invites campus decision-makers to draw uninformed conclusions about CREs that could lead to another spate of program cancelations.

That these programs survive and thrive is surprising when one notes inconsistent program goals, frequent changes to program themes and topics, and inconsistent participation in program activities. Why then are CREs so common and persistent in the face of moderate—at best—“proof” that they lead to significant student outcomes? Alternative approaches are necessary in order to explain how and why CREs survive and thrive.

Although implementation processes and program goals vary to some degree, all CREs revolve around a selected text. In fact, “[w]hile common reading programs are about more than a book, the book in many ways defines the program” (Laufgraben, 2006, p. 43). When I began this study, I hypothesized that the selected common text was one avenue for exploring why and how these programs survive and thrive.

The stated, fundamental criteria for selecting a common text are that it be readable, brief, engaging, and appealing to a wide range of students (Laufgraben, 2006). Beyond those generic

requirements, researchers point to cost, connection to co-curricular events, alignment with student development milestones, consistency with institutional mission, and interdisciplinarity are consistently-noted considerations that guide selections of common texts. Along these lines, Keup and Young (2015) reported that common texts selections frequently focus on current topics that relate to institutional goals (e.g., preparing students for a multicultural society, community service, research production), like science and environmentalism, gender and sexuality, race/ethnicity, and economics. As such, Keup and Young lend evidence to the idea that the content and topic of selected common texts can say something about program purposes and institutional priorities.

As further evidence of the central role of common texts in defining CREs' purposes, publishing companies play a sizeable role in common text selection processes. Selecting common texts is big business, and many major publishers (e.g., Penguin, Random House) now have websites, blogs, and catalogs dedicated specifically to assisting and guiding common reading administrators in selecting texts, promoting authors and their books, and connecting program administrators to other institutions that select the same text. The central role of publishers and the increasing focus on the commercial and monetary aspects of CREs has not gone without criticism (NAS, 2016; Tierney, 2018); but, it illustrates the importance and deliberation that goes into selecting common texts.

The purpose of this study is to move beyond the publicly stated criteria for choosing a text to explore the specific processes and motivations behind text selection at three flagship universities. What, if anything, are institutions trying to accomplish through text selection? More to the point, how are common texts selected? Who decides which common texts are selected?

Why do institutions select particular common texts? How do selectors judge their choice of common text?

Conceptual Framework

This study is informed by two theoretical perspectives: signal and institutional theory. Signaling theory is more commonly used in economics and sociology. The main idea behind signaling theory is that when information in the marketplace is insufficient for judging the quality of a product, an information asymmetry exists between the seller and consumer (Ross, 1977; Spence, 1973). When information asymmetries exist, sellers send deliberate signals in order to inform consumers about the unobservable quality of said product, thereby improving the chances that consumer will see the product as legitimate and worthy of purchase (Certo, 2003; Connelly, Certo, Ireland & Reutzel, 2011; Ross, 1977). Applied to the present case, signaling theory would suggest that common reading administrators select particular common texts that communicate information to students and faculty about the program's quality since empirical evidence is unavailable. In doing so, the common text itself could be conceived as a tool that addresses information asymmetries between insiders (i.e., CRE administrators) and outsiders (e.g., students and faculty) about the quality of CREs, or more broadly, the institution.

Signals can serve a dual purpose. If signals can communicate unobservable quality, they can also improve the chances of organizational survival by demonstrating legitimacy (Certo, 2003). Here, a link between signaling theory and institutional theory is highlighted. Applied to the current example, one could suggest that common reading administrators choose common texts that signal alignment with institutional priorities, which would then improve perceptions of program legitimacy by institutional decision-makers, which in turn would help to preserve CREs.

In another hypothetical situation, common texts could signal institutional priorities to prospective students that would attract them to campus.

According to institutional theory, in order for institutions of higher education to maintain legitimacy and survive in the face of economic, political, cultural, and competitive forces, institutions imitate the norms, practices, and values of other institutions (Bess & Dee, 2008; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 2012; Stensaker & Norgand, 2001; Vught, 2008). This process of homogenization is referred to as “isomorphism.” In short, institutional theory describes how institutional actors respond to dual pressures to meet external demands and maintain institutional identity (Stensaker & Norgand, 2001).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe three types of isomorphism: coercive, normative, and mimetic. Coercive isomorphism is imitation in response to pressure from external agencies that institutions depend on (e.g., accrediting agencies, government agencies, laws) (Bess & Dee, 2008; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Normative isomorphism is emulation as a result of social and cultural pressures related to legitimacy. Finally, mimetic isomorphism is modeling in order to be perceived as similar to peer organizations and their legitimacy (Bess & Dee, 2008).

Institutional theory suggests that this study should attend to the types of signals CREs send, to whom the signals are sent, and the impact of those signals. If institutional theory is a good explanation for common text selections, campus administrators facing external demands will seek to emulate innovative programs that promote and communicate institutional priorities. Literature shows that CREs, which are defined by the common texts, spread by word-of-mouth processes and emulation of exemplary peer institution models (Anthony et al., 2008; Burkhalter et al., 2008; Delmas & Harrell, 2014). Similarly, campus administrators’ interactions in community discussions and listservs, conferences and published research, and publishers’

information all inform the adoption processes of particular common texts. Hence, it is possible that text selection will have normative components.

Next, mimetic isomorphism may prove germane as well. Campus administrators implement CREs and adopt common texts at their own institutions after evaluating programs at peer institutions (Anthony et al., 2008; Burkhalter et al., 2008; Delmas & Harrell, 2008; Laufgraben, 2006). Anecdotal evidence suggests that, during the course of this process, common reading administrators look to similar institutions and “aspirational” institutions for implementation strategies. Whereas institutional peers are seen as exhibiting similar levels of legitimacy, aspirational peers are defined as higher quality institutions that are worthy of imitation and emulation (Brinkman & Teeter, 1987). From this perspective, any presumptive signal that CRE administrators send would serve multifaceted purposes. That is, it is plausible that an ulterior motive of adopting a CRE or more narrowly, a particular common text, could be to change the institution’s environment by improving institutional legitimacy relative to its peers. Here, the potential role that signaling theory could play in addressing an institution’s legitimacy relative to that of its peers is underscored.

Finally, coercive isomorphism implies that market pressures or government agencies force institutions to respond in prescribed ways. On the one hand, coercive isomorphism does not appear to provide explanatory power for adoption of particular common texts, given the slow, gradual, or oppositional change processes that characterizes higher education’s responses to external dictates (Thelin, 2011). On the other hand, some of the more boisterous criticism of common text selections are that they are too easy or too political (NAS, 2016). Thus, this study should consider what, if any, is the role of coercive isomorphism in the processes and motivations that underlie the selection of common texts.

Significance of the Study

This study addresses a gap in the knowledge by a) examining how and why campus administrators choose particular common texts and b) exploring what influences judgments about the text's effect on campus and beyond.

Advocates and critics alike see potential value in CREs (Grasgreen, 2014), yet the lack of evidence about program effectiveness means CRE administrators face internal and external demands for accountability. That CRE administrators face calls for accountability suggests an integral facet of institutional theory is at play: once CREs are implemented, no matter how unevenly, those programs themselves become organizations that strive for survival. By exploring the potential role of institutional theory in CREs, this study has the potential to deepen the field's nascent understanding of the role that these programs play between and within institutions.

When programs are cancelled, administrators report that CREs fail to survive because of vague program goals, inability to accomplish stated goals (e.g., sustained co-curricular interaction with peers), resistance or low buy-in from students and faculty, topic fatigue, and inability to produce anything more than anecdotal evidence of success (Cheston, 2013). Indeed, when Mitch Daniels, President of Purdue University, canceled the institution's CRE midway through the 2013-14 academic year, he noted, "Let me put it this way: no one produced any evidence it was having great success...[t]he common reading program is really being replaced by things that we think will be more valuable to incoming students" (Grasgreen, 2014).

Further, critics point to instances of program cancelation as harbingers of a failing program model (Cheston, 2013; NAS, 2016). Beyond instances of failed implementation, outsiders proffer criticisms of common text selections. Critics say the majority of common text selections are too easy, too politically liberal, or too controversial, and imply that texts selections

are the straws that will break the proverbial camel's back. Without an understanding of the processes and motivations underlying common text selections, those critiques may go without rebuttal. This study has the potential to explain whether and to what extent the complex and deliberate selection processes behind common texts play implicit or explicit roles in program survival mechanisms.

Finally, that the majority of CREs are flourishing suggests that these programs' most integral component—the text—is to be selected with utmost care and deliberation. To this point however, we know very little about whether, why and how common texts could possibly contribute to the popularity of CREs. By investigating whether and to what extent campus administrators perceive that the choice of a common text can advance institutional priorities, this study has the potential to advance what is known about what makes these programs so popular, and more broadly, about how recent campus initiatives demonstrate legitimacy and promote survival.

Methods

This study used qualitative research methods to investigate an emerging phenomenon. In particular, I conducted a multi-case study of CREs at three institutions. The sample was pulled from a pool of large, research universities that are members of the Higher Learning Commission. For my sample, I invited a purposeful sample of three flagship institutions with CREs, each of which competes for students with a state-funded, land-grant institution in the same state that also had a CRE. The logic behind the sampling choice was that, if common texts are indeed intended to send signals about unobservable quality, one might reasonably expect signals underlying common text selections would distinguish an institution from its closest competitor. To investigate my research questions, I gathered multiple forms of qualitative data (i.e., interviews

with CRE administrators, faculty senate representatives, faculty and student selection committee members, CRE event co-sponsors, and public and private documents relating to CREs). A preliminary pilot study was conducted at a geographically-convenient institution that shared characteristics with my sampled institutions (e.g., Carnegie classification, size) in order to develop effective research instruments, collect preliminary data, identify potential obstacles, and maximize limited resources.

I chose a case study approach because they are ideal when understanding context is a necessary precursor to understanding a particular phenomenon, yet the two are not readily separable (Yin, 1994; Yin, 2003). Furthermore, case study is a preferred method of inquiry when research questions revolve around the *why* and *how*, when the researcher cannot manipulate relevant events or behaviors, and when the investigation focuses on “a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 1994, p. 1).

Organization of the Study

This manuscript contains seven chapters. The first chapter includes an introduction and general overview of the project. The second chapter is a review of current literature that provides context for the project and explores more deeply the conceptual framework that guides the study. The third chapter details the study methodology and includes a description of data collection and data analysis procedures. Included in the chapter is a description of the sample, the selection method, and sample interview questions. Chapters four through six present case portraits for each of my three sample institutions and their CREs. The final chapter summarizes the findings of the study and expounds on the potential implications the findings present for higher education policy and practice.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

According to the authors of the National Association of Scholars' (NAS) 2012-13 *Beach Books* report (NAS, 2013), which examines common book selections among a large sample of institutions of higher education on a near-annual basis, "...the choice of a single book for [CREs] can be a powerful signal to students (and to faculty members) about the college's educational priorities" (NAS, 2013, p. 6). The researchers concluded in 2013—and indeed, in every subsequent report they published—that common books choices were largely homogenous and promoted left-leaning political views. Given the "powerful signal" that books can send, researchers and practitioners from within and without academia have debated which kinds of common books are appropriate for students as these types of programs have grown in prevalence over the last decade (Kafka, 2018; Keup & Young, 2015; NAS, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2018; Tierney, 2018). Furthermore, that many institutions choose the same kinds of common books—ones that NAS argued carry progressive sentiments—suggests that isomorphic and signaling influences may help to explain selection processes in CREs.

The purpose of this study was to determine what, if anything, institutions are trying to accomplish through common book selection. In this chapter, I begin by describing the two theoretical frames that guided my study, institutional and signaling theories. Then, I review the research and literature on common book selection procedures—specifically, who selects common books, why and how common books are selected, and which common books are selected. I conclude by examining literature on how institutions determine whether common books are successful.

Institutional Theory

Systems theory is a useful framework for understanding, explaining and analyzing the behaviors of institutions and individuals in higher education (Bess & Dee, 2008). Systems theory focuses on the institution, individuals within the institution, and the environment that affects institutions (e.g., other institutions, potential students, governments). Systems theory “permits the identification of key inputs, outputs, and transformative processes in organizations such as colleges and universities at both the institutional and individual levels: (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 91). As such, institutions are open systems able to receive inputs from their environment and produce outputs (Bess & Dee, 2008; Vught, 2008).

Evolving from similar theories in the fields of biology, psychology, sociology, and education, systems theory permit researchers to “...make very broad generalizations about the character of an organization or a worker and his or her activities [while it] avoids some of the problems of localized, disconnected attention to subproblems. (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 92-3).

Decision-making processes under systems theory is informed by interactions across the institution-environment boundary. The environment contains social, economic, political, and cultural trends and advances in technology. It may also contains customers-students and competing institutions that exert a direct influence on the institution. The interactive nature of the concept places institutional action on a continuum of environmental pressures (i.e., determinism) and perceived strategic choice in responding to those pressures (Bess & Dee, 2008).

When institutions face situations of high environmental pressures and low perceived choice, decision-making processes are best explained using institutional theory (Bess & Dee, 2008). According to institutional theory, institutions must balance the drive to distinguish themselves from the competition (i.e., innovate in order to gain a competitive advantage) and the

need to appear the same as peers, which serves to avoid criticisms of legitimacy and improve marketability (Bess & Dee, 2008). HEIs maintain legitimacy by a) taking account of other institutions and b) imitating the norms, practices, and values of other institutions (Bess & Dee, 2008; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Stensaker & Norgand, 2001; Vught, 2008). This process of homogenization is referred to as “isomorphism.”

Institutional theory recognizes institutional choice in how it responds to the environment. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe three types of isomorphism: coercive, normative, and mimetic. Coercive isomorphism is homogenization in response to pressure from external agencies that institutions depend on (e.g., accrediting agencies, government agencies, laws) (Bess & Dee, 2008; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Normative isomorphism is homogenization as a result of social and cultural pressures related to legitimacy. Finally, mimetic isomorphism is homogenization in order to appear similar to peer organizations.

One facet of CREs where the influence of other institutions seems substantive is in the rapid spread of these types of programs. Though explanatory evidence for the dissemination of CREs is sparse, anecdotal evidence suggests that CREs spread by word-of-mouth processes and emulation of exemplary peer institution models (Anthony et al., 2008; Burkhalter et al., 2008; Delmas & Harrell, 2014). This seems to suggest that isomorphic influences (i.e., institutional theory) played a role in the spread of these types of programs. Another area where isomorphism may play a role is common text selection. Mentioned above, many CREs choose similar text topics and titles (Keup, in progress; NAS, 2018); thus, I began this research study to test the assumption that institutional theory—in particular, isomorphism—provided a plausible explanatory framework for why institutions select the common texts they do. If institutional

theory is indeed plausible, it suggests that selection committees choose common books that reflect institutional legitimacy and prestige relative to other institutions.

The literature in this section informed my analyses and discussion of collected data. The next section in this chapter pertains to signaling theory, the second theoretical framework that informed my study.

Signaling Theory

The economist Michael Spence first conceived of signaling theory as a concise way to describe what happens when two individuals have access to different information (Spence, 1973). Fundamentally, signaling theory is concerned with the reduction of “information asymmetries” between two parties (Connelly et al., 2011). In simplest terms, signals are sent in order to communicate quality, which is socially-constructed. In his seminal piece, Spence (1973) described how individuals in the labor market deliberately send signals to employers, who have incomplete information about the quality of job candidates. For instance, individuals signal that they are high-quality candidates by completing a costly and rigorous higher education degree while candidates who do not have a degree are considered lower quality. Signaling theory stands in contrast to human capital theory, which asserts that individuals invest in education and training in order to improve productivity so that they may earn higher wages for their work in the labor market (Connelly et al., 2011; Weiss, 1995).

Signaling theory extends beyond the individual and beyond the economics sphere. It has been used to describe how institutions communicate unobservable qualities in the marketplace (Ross, 1977). Currently, signaling theory has broad application, from management to entrepreneurship to sociology (Connelly et al., 2011). Certo (2003) investigated signaling mechanisms behind board composition among organizations that introduced public stock

offerings. He found that institutions send signals about positive aspects about themselves (e.g., prestige) in order to improve legitimacy, increase profitability, and improve their chances of survival. Thus, signaling theory aligns with- and augments the explanatory power of institutional theory.

Connelly and colleagues (2011) underline five components of signaling theory that guide current research: signal, signaler, receiver, feedback, and signaling environment. Signalers deliberately communicate positive institutional attributes to receivers to reduce information asymmetry in the signaling environment. Signalers then look for feedback about the signal's quality. The authors asserted that effective signals must be observable to receivers and difficult to replicate (i.e., costly) by other signalers. Other feedback factors were the signal's frequency, its correlation with unobservable quality (i.e., fit), and its place in a sequence of multiple signals.

The research highlighted above provided a framework for my study on the “powerful signals” that common books sent at three flagship universities in the United States. The literature informed my analyses of data and discussion of the findings. Below, I include information from the research literature on how common books are selected in order to provide additional context for my study's methods, analyses, and discussion of signaling principles in common book selection processes.

Information on Common Book Selections from the Research Literature

Previously mentioned, this section provides information from the extant literature on how CREs select common books. I begin this section by discussing who selects common books, then follow it by reporting what the literature says about why, how, and which common books are selected. I finish the section by presenting research on how CREs determine how institutions determine whether achieve objectives set out for them.

Who selects common books?

Laufgraben (2006) asserted that CREs are administered by a shared leadership team of campus stakeholders. One of the earliest research studies, Twiton's (2007) study, surveyed 130 common read administrators on U.S. campuses. Survey respondents reported that most CREs were administered out of offices of academic affairs or students affairs or by faculty in the disciplines and academic and student affairs staff (Twiton, 2007). CRE administrators are responsible for planning and promoting the program, developing book-related events and activities, selecting common texts, integrating the common book into the curriculum, and evaluating the program. Selection of a common book was typically the charge of a committee of faculty, staff, and students, though other approaches exist (e.g., a Provost of Student Affairs or First-year Experience Office may select a text; Laufgraben, 2006).

There is a dearth of information on who selects common books. Some institutions publicize the names of CRE selection committees on their websites; but beyond Laufgraben's seminal piece, there are sparse few publications that discuss who selects common books save for generalities (i.e., "committees," "administrators"). In a rare example to include specifics about who selects common books in higher education, Ferguson, Brown, and Piper (2016) conducted a qualitative case study at a Canadian institution that included interviews and observations with a "diverse" selection committee of four faculty, four staff, and two students. The authors discovered a power imbalance on the committee that gave more decision-making authority to faculty and students but minimized the authority of staff members. This literature informed my data collection and discussion to include specific information about the composition of selection committees and who exercised decision-making authority on those committees.

Why do institutions select common books?

Though CREs are offered at many institution types, one study suggests that the majority of these programs are offered at public, four-year institutions with more than 1,000 first-year students (Keup & Young, 2015). There may be good reason for this. At these large, research institutions, there are not as many opportunities for students to interact with peers and faculty as there are at other institutions (Astin, 2003; Chang, Astin & Kim, 2004). Literature on CREs suggests that the programs developed out of first-year experiences. First-year experiences are intentional efforts by campus leaders to create academic and co-curricular programs that improve the quality of student learning in the first year of college (Koch & Gardner, 2014), when the largest proportion of dropouts occur (Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2004). Like first-year experiences, CREs are meant to promote student success and persistence to the second year of college by introducing students to academic expectation of higher education, helping students develop college-level academic skills, connecting incoming students to peers, faculty, and campus resources, and fostering integration into the campus culture (Laufgraben, 2006). Thus, existing literature on CREs tends to rely on theories of student success.

Researchers (Keup & Young, 2015; Laufgraben, 2006; NAS, 2016; Twiton, 2007; Young & Stolzenberg, 2017) primarily point to three student-oriented goals when discussing common book selections: to promote academic skills that are necessary for college success (e.g., reading, critical thinking, discussion skills), to create a sense of community around a common intellectual activity, and to communicate an institution's identity, educational priorities, and mission. Others, like promoting meaningful learning opportunities and setting high academic expectations (Laufgraben, 2006), are mentioned as well.

Relatedly, Nadelson and Nadelson (2012) viewed common books as a mechanism for promoting student development. They posited that selecting a common text with “engaging” themes fostered student development along Chickering & Gamson’s (1987) seven vectors. In reflecting on the common reading program at their own institution (but collecting no data), the authors recommended including students in the selection process. These recommendations were seen as ways to increase student engagement and prevent students from seeing the CRE as an additional burden (Nadelson & Nadelson, 2012). Working from the assumption that signaling theory is an accurate lens, the above-cited research implies that common books may be selected in order to send messages about institutional and educational priorities for first-year students.

By contrast, critics contend that CREs have opaque, inconsistent goals and goals that are misaligned with institutional missions. Critics argue that selection committees overwhelmingly choose common books that explore trivial or politicized content, fail to engage students, attempt to indoctrinate students, and do not demonstrate a clear benefit to students learning (Cheston, 2013; NSA, 2016; Tierney, 2018). In fact, the former director of the NAS (Thorne, 2016) asserted that college administrators cater to the lowest common denominators on their campuses. That attitude, Thorne averred, was reflected in selection processes of common texts are tailored to “...the students that have the lowest abilities” (NAS, 2016, p. 219). The director concluded that, with rare exception, common reading selections are unchallenging and condescending. Overall, critics believed that signals sent by selection committees were ill-defined (Cheston, 2013; Kean, 2009) and questioned CREs’ true effects on students, such that they doubt that the effort required to implement CREs are worth the financial cost (Shreve & Burke, 2017).

For the purposes of my study, the body of research in this section underscored a need to explore how selection committees factor in messages (e.g., about student outcomes) to their

deliberations, if at all. For this, I paid particular attention to CRE program goals in analyzing and discussing my case study data. Additionally, my analyses and discussion took into consideration whether and how selection committee members interpreted signal reception and critiques vis-à-vis selection procedures.

How common books are selected.

It was important to understand how common books are selected in order to understand what role signaling theory might play in selection processes and arrive at an answer to my central research question: what, if anything, are institutions trying to accomplish through common book selections? Researchers point to particular facets of common books as criteria for selection. Books that are readable, engaging, not too long, and appeal to a wide range of students (Laufgraben, 2006; Nadelson & Nadelson, 2012) are frequently chosen. A book's cost, the possibility for developing relevant co-curricular events around the text, consistency with institutional mission or program goals, interdisciplinarity, potential for the inclusion of many campus stakeholders in designing and assigning book-related activities and assignments, and books that could promote a love of reading among students (Anthony et al., 2008; Burkhalter et al., 2008; Grenier, 2007; Howrey & Rachelson, 2009; Keup & Young, 2015; Liljequist & Stone, 2009) were other criteria noted by researchers.

Research on CREs also suggests that explicit and implicit criteria guide selection committees. For example, Ferguson, Brown, and Piper (2016) conducted interviews and observations with faculty, staff, and students on a selection committee as part of a case study at a Canadian institution. The authors concluded that clearly articulated criteria for selecting the common text (e.g., academic rigor, likelihood of engaging students) were important for achieving program goals and facilitating the text selection process. Counterintuitively though,

the authors found that when the selection committee members could not agree on how to balance explicit criteria like promoting academic rigor and student engagement, they set aside agreed-upon criteria in favor of arbitrary rationales. It is surprising that foundational literature underscores the rationality of common text selection processes (Laufgraben, 2006) yet Ferguson and colleagues pointed to a notable role of unofficial criteria in decision-making procedures. Thus, my investigation of common book selection processes considered how selection committees attempted to balance explicit and implicit selection criteria. Also, like Ferguson and colleagues' study (2016), my study methods used case study approaches and focused on selection committee members as data sources. This approach has not been used widely in the literature but on the surface it seemed to offer contextualized and nuanced information about selection and signaling procedures.

Next, an emergent theme in the literature is the role of external actors in determining which common books are chosen. Three studies suggested that publishing companies played an outsized role in text selection processes (NAS, 2016, 2018; Tierney, 2018). While I did not accept on face value that publisher activity was grounds for criticism of CREs, the economic aspect of selection processes cannot be ignored. Selecting texts for CREs is big business, and many major publishers (e.g., Penguin, Random House) now have websites, blogs, and catalogs dedicated specifically to assisting CRE administrators in promoting common books on campus, providing a platform for authors to share their latest books with CRE audiences, and connecting CRE administrators to other institutions that use texts they are considering. In fact, my interactions with publishers at the 2017 Annual Conference on the First-year Experience made me the recipient of frequent publisher promotions of their latest works. For this reason, my

research study aimed to explore the role that publishers might play in selection processes at sampled institutions.

In sum, the studies in this section provided a point of reference for my investigation. In my analyses, I included information on the factors and external influences that selection committee considered when choosing common books and how those related, if at all, to desired signals for their audiences.

What books do selection committees choose?

A majority of publication about common book titles emanates from the National Association of Scholars. The organization, which publishes a near-annual summary of selected common texts at institutions with publicly-available information, is critical of the majority of common book selections. In its reports, NAS (2013, 2014, 2016, 2018) concluded that common books were too easy, too recent, and moreover, homogenous across institutions. In its research, the organization classified books by type, noting that nonfiction, memoirs, biographies, and novels predominated. They also classified common books by topic. The most popular books in the 2017-18 dataset were books dealing with “civil/rights/slavery and crime and punishment/police” (NAS, 2018, p. 6). A central conclusion by the organization is that chosen common books send “one-sided political messages” to students by choosing common books that with progressive political signals.

Using a similar methodology and cross-referencing with publisher data, Keup and Young (2015) investigated selected common texts in a sample of 242 institutions with first-year seminars that integrated common books. They authors came to similar conclusions as NAS. Namely, among sampled institutions, books were somewhat short (i.e., 310 pages on average), were recently published, and the most common subjects of texts were

science/environmentalism/technology, women/gender, history, psychology/self-help, and race/race relations/ethnic studies. A later study by Keup (in progress) concluded that common books were below a college reading level (in agreement with NAS) but that ease of reading encouraged students to engage with “complex” themes and topics. Whereas Keup contends that the types of books chosen have merits and pursue CRE program goals, there is no doubt that NAS advocates for selection committees to choose different books (e.g., pieces of classic literature).

These sources influenced my study in that I investigated whether selection committee intended for common book topics or genres to communicate specific messages to CRE participants (e.g., first-year students) and whether and to what extent selection committees factored in selections at other institutions into their own deliberations.

How do selection committees know if common books are successful?

Although an investigation of CRE evaluation procedures goes beyond the scope of my study, the literature base concerning assessment of CREs provides some benefits to my study by providing a frame of reference for understanding how selection committees come to understand whether selected common books achieve goals set out for them.

Literature on CRE assessment is, to this point, sparse. Much of the research on CRE assessments were based on survey data developed and gathered at single institutions (Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2014, 2015; Gerlich, Drumheller & Mallard, 2012; Goldfine et al., 2011; Liljequist & Stone, 2009; Mallard et al., 2008). Though such instruments are useful for answering specific questions about CREs in specific contexts (i.e., whether a program is successful on a given campus), local assessments do little to offer generalizable conclusions and may face issues of reliability and validity (Laufgraben, 2006). Further, the nascent literature base

contains methodological deficiencies that may hinder researchers' ability to draw generalizations (e.g., reliance on unvalidated surveys, lack of contextual information about student participation experiences). Still, that student surveys are the most frequently-used data collection mechanism (Twiton, 2007) suggests that institutions primarily look to students to assess the efficacy of common book selections.

Extant research suggests that students participating in CREs gained academic benefits. Specifically, students who participated in CREs demonstrated critical thinking skills (Declue & Kusch, 2008; Goldfine et al., 2011; Howrey & Rachelson, 2009), engaged with peers in interactive discourse (Declue & Kusch, 2008; Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2016; Mallard et al., 2008; McCrickard, Winchester & Lemons, 2010), and a gained an awareness of social issues (Anthony et al., 2008; Gerlich, Drumheller & Mallard, 2012; Nadelson & Nadelson, 2012). Results in the literature produced mixed evidence of students' beliefs that CREs foster a sense of community (Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2014, 2015; Goldfine et al., 2011; Mallard et al., 2008; Twiton, 2007; Young & Stolzenberg, 2017).

Two studies in the extant research base stand out for rigorous methodological approaches. One of those rigorous research studies is Soria's (2015) investigation. In it, the researcher surveyed (n=1,237) students at six, large public institutions and used factor analyses and regression to investigate whether participation in CREs predicted certain academic skills controlling for input variables. The author found that participation in CREs was statistically associated with first-year students' developing academic skills (i.e., think critically, write effectively, analyze and comprehend readings). However, students' abilities, academic engagement, sense of belonging, and interactions with faculty were stronger predictors of

developing integral college skills like reading, writing, critical thinking, and speaking than CRE participation (Soria, 2015).

Another study using advanced statistics to investigate CREs, Young and Stolzenberg (2017) constructed a sample of first-year students who participated in a CRE and completed a pre-post survey (n=2,656). The authors found that participation in CREs statistically significantly predicted sense of belonging, interactions with faculty, satisfaction, and intellectual and practical skills (Young & Stolzenberg, 2017). These findings align with other multi-institution studies (Soria, 2015; Twiton, 2007). However, the authors' finding that CREs do not statistically significantly predict critical thinking skills and academic adjustment contradicts Soria (2015).

Finally, literature emanating from practitioners and CRE administrators seems to point to the importance of book reception when selecting common books. One study (Daugherty & Hayes, 2012) found that students who read all of the common book self-reported statistically significantly higher community connection than students who did not read the entire book. Another study suggested that student participation in co-curricular events was low (Liljequist & Stone, 2009). In other studies, CREs were deemed successful when students enjoyed participating, when book-related events were well-attended, and when student feedback was positive (Anthony et al., 2008; Burkhalter et al., 2008; Dennis, 2012; Twiton, 2007). These findings may suggest that signal reception is not only important but also that it is perhaps a two-way street. That is, the majority of the extant literature points to the prevalence of students' academic and social outcomes as key signals for selection committees; however, some studies imply that signal reception is influenced by students' self-selection and participation patterns. The subtext that reception of a common book is an important consideration is something I attempted to track in my investigation. I attempted to understand to what degree students

participated in CREs at sample institutions in hopes of gaining a fuller understanding of how student participation (or lack thereof) contributed to selection procedures.

In analyzing and interpreting my data, two studies informed my study by providing a basic understanding of CRE assessment approaches and expectations. The first, by Twiton (2007), provided a general view of how administrators gather feedback about how and whether CREs achieve program goals. In the study, a sample of 131 surveyed CRE administrators felt that the goals of CREs were generally achieved. They reported hearing faculty, staff, and students say common books gave incoming students something to talk about, built community, added an academic element to orientation, and gave students opportunities to explore diverse perspectives. Surveyed administrators cited challenges like funding, students not reading the text, and selecting an appropriate text. The author concluded that without student and faculty commitment to participation, achieving community and intellectually-oriented goals were difficult (Twiton, 2007). From Twiton's study, I was able to explore nuances and additional insights with CRE administrators about how they gathered and interpreted program feedback.

The second study, authored by Liljequist and Stone (2009), demonstrated that student responded ambivalently or in open opposition to CREs and the signals administrators felt the programs sent (e.g., explicit program goals). In the study, the authors used a longitudinal design, analyzing five years of student surveys, to investigate whether a summer reading program at Murray State University met its program goals for incoming students (e.g., a common intellectual experience, an introduction students to the institution's intellectual life, a sense of community, valuing reading, connecting reading and other cultural events on campus). Surveyed students reported that they read, discussed, and completed assignments related to the common texts at statistically significantly different rates in each of the five years. The rate of reading and

discussion generally decreased over the entire period. The majority of surveyed students did not discuss common books at all off campus (i.e., with their families). While about half of students attended author talks in each of the first two years, attendance decreased during the evaluation period. The same trend was reflected in reported attendance at book-related, co-curricular events: attendance peaked early and tailed off during the study period. Finally, students said they valued the program when the book was short, the reading level easy, and the book was assigned in a class. But, the majority of students said they did not “value” the common reading program in four of five years (Liljequist & Stone, 2009). Ambivalence or outright resistance to CREs among students provides an interesting (if not concerning) example of how feedback about reception of common books might complicate selection committees’ deliberations rather than add clarity. Thus, my study explored how sampled selection committees incorporate negative reactions, if present, into ongoing selection deliberations. Further, the study (Liljequist & Stone, 2009) underscored the fact that reception of common books may change year to year. Thus, my study focused on three years of CREs at sampled institutions to provide a fuller picture.

Closing Remarks

In summary, critics and supporters see potential value in CREs (Grasgreen, 2014). Yet, the common text is expected to fulfill expansive campus objectives (e.g., orient students to campus life, instill academic skills, expose student to diverse perspectives). This may complicate selection processes, dilute the potency of common books’ messages, and influence reception of common books. In this chapter, I began by describing institutional and signaling theories. From there, I summarized current literature on which common books institutions select for CREs, factors that influence institutions’ selection processes, who selects common books on U.S. campuses, and how institutions gauge whether common books are successful.

After reviewing the literature, I felt I had enough evidence to draw initial conclusions regarding my research questions. The research outlines many of the factors that selection committees at institutions of higher education consider (e.g., promoting critical thinking and introducing students to the campus culture) in the process of choosing common books. Yet, I was perplexed by how institutions used similar yet ambiguous objectives to pick common books. This literature review showed me that much of the existing research focuses on the product of selection processes (i.e., common book titles) and that few researchers have sought to understand selection processes in-depth. Thus, I opted to utilize my knowledge of qualitative research to explore multiple perspectives and allow for the development of emergent hypotheses so I might be able to draw cohesive and contextualized conclusions about what, if anything, institutions are trying to accomplish through common book selections. The next chapter describes the qualitative, multiple case study design I used to complete the study.

Chapter Three: Procedures

The purpose of this study was to answer the question: What, if anything, are institutions of higher education trying to accomplish through common book selection?

In order to arrive at an answer to the research question, the following subquestions served as guardrails for my data collection and analyses:

1. Which kinds of objectives, if any, are common text selections intended to achieve, whether educational, institutional, societal, or other?
2. If common text selections address objectives, who has decision-making authority or what factors influence decisions about which objectives are important?
3. How do institutions determine whether a common text selection achieves the objectives set forth for it?

In this chapter, I explain the full research methodology I used to conduct this study. The following sections describe qualitative research, the case study approach, and how I addressed researcher bias and ethical concerns in this study. From there, I describe the settings and participants of my study. Last, I outline data collection and analyses procedures.

Qualitative Research Paradigm

Qualitative research is an iterative inquiry process by which a researcher seeks to understand a social phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). Distinguished from quantitative research, qualitative research is conducted by a researcher who collects data in the field. The researcher collects multiple forms of data and utilizes an inductive, bottom-up analysis strategy to discover the meaning that participants assign to the phenomena under study. The research design is emergent and may change throughout the study period. The researcher begins with a theoretical lens to interpret data and themes. Then, once the first piece of data is collected, data and theory

exert mutual influence on each other throughout the analyses. The resulting dynamic relationship between data and theory leads to a holistic and complex account of the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2009). In this case, my theoretical assumptions, including the signaling and institutional theory frameworks, served only as a point of departure for my interpretation of collected data. Once data were analyzed and new questions arose, I left room to reinterpret, reanalyze, and explore the influences of complementary or alternative theories on my initial conclusions.

Case Study Research Design

Common text selection processes are informed by- and embedded in the local campus context. When understanding context is a necessary precursor for understanding a particular phenomenon, case study approaches are ideal (Yin, 1994; Yin, 2003). Case study is a preferred method of inquiry when: a) a researcher's questions revolve around the *why* and *how*, b) when the researcher has little or no control over events (i.e., the researcher cannot manipulate relevant events or behaviors), and c) when the research study focuses on "a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (Yin, 1994, p. 1). In this case, since I sought to understand the *why* and *how* of common book selection at three similar yet unique institutions, I opted to use a case study approach for this study.

Case study has five applications: to explain, describe, illustrate, explore, and meta-evaluate. A unique strength of the case study is its ability to use a wide array of evidence types, including documents, interviews, artifacts, and observations. In this study, I relied heavily on interviews and used documents primarily to triangulate interview data.

In case study, theory is used to guide research design, to define the unit of analysis, and to inform data collection. My study was no different. I looked to theory to guide the study plan

so that the study's findings were framed in the appropriate literature, the results might be generalized, and the study might advance what is known of the phenomena under study (i.e., CRE selection processes; Yin, 2003).

My study included multiple cases. Multiple-case studies are seen as more compelling because more evidence is collected, thus providing enough information to provide robust conclusions (Yin, 2003). Further, multiple-case study approaches avoid some the criticisms leveled against single-case studies (e.g., units of analysis are chosen because of special access or convenience rather than a theoretical consideration). Multiple-case studies are guided by replication logic, which implies that each case predicts similar results (i.e., literal replication), or produces contrasting results for predictable reasons (theoretical replication) (Yin, 1994). I began this study with the assumption that the three cases would exhibit literal replication (i.e., use similar common book selection processes, choose similar common books, etc.).

In any case study, case selection should incorporate specific reasons for inclusion (e.g., exemplary cases or contrasting cases) (Yin, 2003). For this study, I screened a pool of potential cases. I used Merriam's (2001) four criteria for selecting cases for qualitative research in education as a frame of reference in selecting this study's cases. *Maximum variation* selects cases that represent opposite ends of the spectrum on a dependent variable; *typical* selects cases that are representative of the population of possible cases; *unique* selects cases that stand out from the population of possible cases; and *purposeful* selects cases that exhibit important and information-rich characteristics of the dependent variable.

Because research literature describing CREs and the processes used to select common books is sparse, my study's sample is a *purposeful* sample taken from a pool of flagship institutions that a) enroll a large number of first-year students (>3,000), b) have institutional

missions that address state-level goals; c) have a CRE; and d) compete (e.g., for students, for state appropriations, etc.) with a same-state, land grant institution that also has a CRE and shares similar characteristics (e.g., size, admissions).

To this end, I emailed CRE administrators at seven institutions that fit my criteria. Among the seven, two did not respond to email requests; one was eliminated because its CRE only targeted first-year students in STEM majors; and one withdrew after initially accepting my invitation due to imminent programmatic changes to its CRE. Three institutions that fit the selection criteria accepted the invitation to participate: The University of Iowa, the University of Kansas, and the University of Mississippi.

The Researcher's Role

Creswell (2009) notes that the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection in qualitative research, so it is necessary that she or he identify biases, values, and assumptions at the outset of the study. My perceptions of CREs were initially influenced by my experience evaluating a CRE at the University of Kansas. From summer 2016 to fall 2017, I helped CRE administrators conduct a survey assessment of learning outcomes at orientation-based discussion groups around the 2016-17 common book, *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. During this time, I worked closely with administrators to develop a survey instrument and develop preliminary codes in the data. Looking back on my experiences, I gained preliminary (but admittedly superficial) insights into how common books' themes and content can shape perceptions of program effectiveness, the inevitability of both positive and negative perceptions of the common text selection, and the variable participation of the books' target audience (i.e., first-year students).

Given these experiences, I brought certain biases to the current study. Although I made concerted efforts to limit the role my biases played in the study, I understood that my biases implicitly and explicitly shaped my interpretations of the data. I began this study believing that CREs were well-meaning campus programs for first-year students directed by well-meaning administrators who served students in spite of institutional characteristics beyond their control (e.g., resource limitations, social and political forces, institutional power dynamics). Nevertheless, I maintained what I believed was a healthy skepticism about whether and to what extent common text selections were capable of addressing (at-times ambiguous and difficult-to-measure) program goals and confronting students' needs—a skepticism that I found was shared by some of the selection committee members I interviewed. To this day, I perceive the implementation of CREs as emergent, iterative processes and I view the processes and motivations for selecting common texts as crucial for understanding any real or potential impacts of these programs.

Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research, ethical considerations should be taken into account during data collection and the dissemination of findings (Merriam, 2001). Specifically, researchers are obligated to consider the rights, confidentiality, and needs of study participants. For instance, case study can be intrusive at times; interviews and document collection require a time commitment from participants and could reveal sensitive information; and publication of findings may expose study participants to scrutiny or unexpected consequences.

I took the following precautions to protect study participants' rights (as suggested by Creswell, 2009): I informed my participants of the objectives of the study in writing. I submitted my study to my institution's Institutional Review Board and received approval. I informed

participants about data collection and analyses procedures before our interviews and received their consent to use their interview data for my study. I also used generic descriptors of participants (i.e., “administrator,” “committee member,” “faculty committee member,” “student committee member”) to protect (or at least conceal) interviewees’ identities. Only in cases where it added value to the conclusions I drew would I add additional descriptions of respondents. For instance, I might describe an interviewee as “a student of color” when discussing his or her perceptions about the impact of a common book with themes about racism in the U.S.

I include here an additional note on identity. When I finished data collection and began writing up the results of my study, I realized that I would need to take additional precautions to protect my interviewees. At the beginning of my study, I intended to maintain the confidentiality of each institution from which I sample. In other words, I might have described the University of Kansas as “Midwestern University,” or some other generic label. However, I soon realized in writing up my results that I would have to call selected common books by name if I intended to present clear and coherent results about selection processes.

I opted for the above-described approach after a review of three studies (Guenther, 2009; Jerolmack & Murphy, 2017; Lahman et al., 2015) that discuss minimizing the risk of violating external and internal confidentiality when naming interviewees and institutions in qualitative research. I explain how the three studies contributed to my decision to call institutions by name.

In the research literature, masking is “the practice of hiding or distorting identifying information about people, places, and organizations” and often a default methodological approach in qualitative research (Jerolmack & Murphy, 2017). The approach is seen as satisfying an ethical obligation to research participants and presenting the particulars of organizations as neutral or irrelevant. But, masking can lead researchers to erase “sociologically significant”

institutional information and inhibit the generalizability of a study's findings by diminishing replicability and comparison (Jerolmack & Murphy, 2017). Because I began this study with the assumption that historical and geographical facets of the institutions are important to understand how common books are selected, I felt that naming institutions was important for my study.

Naming the institution required that take additional precautions to protect the confidentiality of study participants. I initially confused *anonymization* with *confidentiality*. Anonymization means I, as the researcher, wouldn't know the source of the data (Lahman, et al., 2015); that was clearly not the case in my study. Confidentiality, on the other hand, means that I would take deliberate measures to minimize the risks of identifying my participants in spite of naming their institutions. Today, confidentiality is difficult to maintain with advances in technology (Guenther, 2009; Jerolmack & Murphy, 2017). For instance, readers of this dissertation study will likely assume (correctly) that one of my sample sites is my home institution. In addition, I felt confident in assuming that many of my readers would possess a rich knowledge of the higher education landscape, so much so that just a few generic details about institutions would narrow down or even expose which institutions I sampled. In other words, masking institutions seemed an effort in futility.

Thus, I took a number of additional precautions in my study. I first submitted a study modification to my institution's Institutional Review Board and received approval to name institutions. I also chose to provide an additional member check opportunity to a CRE administrator at my home institution. While I provided all participants with the opportunity to review transcripts of their interviews, I provided a KU administrator with an early draft of that institution's chapter in order to check my treatment of confidentiality. I made a deliberate effort to reflect on how and to what extent my analyses were affected by the second member check

because I wanted to ensure that my analyses were not compromised or altered greatly as a result. Providing the chapter draft resulted in the administrator raising concerns not so much about my treatment of confidentiality but my treatment how of CREs are implemented and how interviewees' quotes were presented as supporting evidence. That is, the administrator pointed out that perceptions about program implementation and book selection by non-administrators (e.g., students, staff) were given equal—or in some cases, greater—weight than administrators'. If I constructed the chapter in that way, the administrator argued, I would incorrectly represent how and why CREs selected common books. Upon reflection, I agreed. I thus resolved to structure my case chapters to give more authority to how CRE administrators described program implementation in relation to how other interviewees perceived CRE implementation procedures.

Second, the administrator also questioned whether some interview quotes I included in the results section were taken out of context to potentially damaging effect. I wanted to make absolutely certain that I interpreted my results faithfully and accurately, so I did two things to address the critique. I reviewed interview transcripts repeatedly and extensively to ensure that I provided enough contextual information so interviewees' quotes spoke for themselves. I also paid particular attention to the content of quotes that I included in the results. That is, I worked from the worst-case assumption that any quote might be traced back to its speaker in spite of my attempts at confidentiality. As such, I asked myself whether quotes included might be seen as inflammatory or result in negative repercussion for its speaker (there were very few instances of this, admittedly). In writing up the results, I made explicit when interviewees' quotes seemed to contradict or undercut the overall conclusions of the other interviewees.

In the end, I felt that the additional interchange with the administrator added clarity to how I wrote up the results for all three of my sample institutions, provided additional context that

supported conclusions I had already drawn, and enabled me to explore additional themes and hypotheses.

Settings

I began this study with the assumption that same-state institutions compete, so I wanted to investigate whether CRE selection committees take into account same-state programs' selections when determining which common texts are used at sampled institutions (i.e., institutional theory) and whether selected texts were intended to say something about the institutions (i.e., signaling theory). For that reason, this multi-case study investigated a purposeful sample of three CREs at doctorate-granting, highest-intensity research, flagship universities (i.e., University of Iowa, University of Kansas, University of Mississippi) that compete with a same-state, land-grant institution for students and state appropriations (i.e., Iowa State University, Kansas State University, Mississippi State University). All three flagship institutions are R1 institutions, enroll a large number of freshmen each year (i.e., >4,000), and admit incoming students who demonstrate high aptitude (i.e., 75th percentile score >28 ACT). The study's sample is similar along Birnbaum's (1983) seven dimensions of external diversity (i.e., differences between institutions). Specifically, the sampled institutions share similar characteristics on the following dimensions: systemic (i.e., institution type and size), structural (i.e., authority structures resulting from legal and historical foundations), programmatic (i.e., mission, degree level, and program emphases), procedural (i.e., instruction, research, and service provisions), reputational (i.e., status and prestige), constituents (i.e., type of students served, faculty, and administration), and values and climate (i.e., culture and social milieu).

Generalizations drawn from qualitative studies depend on the extent to which readers feel the described settings, actors, events, and processes align with their own institutions (Creswell,

2009). Since I began this study with the assumption that sampled institutions were similar, any generalizations drawn from this study should be guided by readers' perceptions about the extent to which institutions outside my sample demonstrate similarities with sampled institutions, either along Birnbaum's dimensions or the degree to which descriptions in the qualitative data match the readers' own institutional contexts.

Participants

I began this study wanting to know why and how institutions choose common books. To this end, from my three sample sites I invited a) directors and lead administrators of CREs, b) at least two faculty members of the committee responsible for selecting common texts (if applicable), c) at least two students members of the selection committee (if applicable), and d) one representative from the faculty senate. My rationale for conducting interviews with faculty senate representatives at each campus was to provide a high level administrators' perspective on CREs and common books.

My sample included 31 individuals. Interviewees' titles are described in Table 1. To recruit, I used a snowball sampling technique. All of my interviewees were recommended by a CRE administrator and invited for participation in the study. First developed by Goodman (1961), researchers who use snowball sampling begin with a small sample of known population members that subsequently connect the researcher to other members of the population (Heckathorn, 2011). The technique became a preferred qualitative sampling method for "hard-to-reach" or hidden populations (Heckathorn, 2011). I chose this approach because the two groups specified for sampling—selection committee members and campus partners who use the text—vary widely from institution to institution and are not widely publicized (i.e., hard-to-reach; Laufgraben, 2006). Thus, I began the study with a small sample of known institutional figures:

Table 1

Title and Number of Interviewees at Each Sample Site

<u>Title</u>	<u>University of Iowa</u>	<u>University of Kansas</u>	<u>University of Mississippi</u>
CRE Administrator	3	2	2
Faculty Member	2	4	5
Student	0	4	2
Faculty Senate Representative	1	1	1
Community Organization Representative*	4	0	0
Totals (N=30)	10	11	10

Note. Interviewees represented the public library, a performance arts center, a prison facility, and a philanthropic women's group.

CRE administrators and faculty senate presidents. I relied on CRE administrators to connect me to additional selection committee members. After introducing myself via email and explaining the purpose of my study to CRE directors, I asked if they would recommend of additional selection committee members whom I could contact.

At two institutions (i.e., University of Kansas, University of Mississippi), all the participants helped to select common texts during the study period. At a third sample site (i.e., University of Iowa), four of the participants represented community organizations that participated in- or co-sponsored common book-related events during the study period (i.e., public library, campus performing arts center, community philanthropic group, a nearby prison facility). Though some had helped to select common texts before the study period, their contribution to the selection process varied.

Table 2

<i>Common Books Chosen During the Study Period at Each Sample Site</i>			
<u>Year</u>	<u>University of Iowa</u>	<u>University of Kansas</u>	<u>University of Mississippi</u>
2015-16	<i>Just Mercy</i> , Bryan Stevenson	<i>A Farewell to Arms</i> , Ernest Hemingway	<i>The Education of a Lifetime</i> , Robert Khayat
2016-17	<i>Without You, There Is No Us</i> , Suki Kim	<i>Between the World and Me</i> , Ta-Nehisi Coates	<i>Ten Little Indians</i> , Sherman Alexie
2017-18	<i>The Butterfly Mosque</i> , G. Willow Wilson	<i>Citizen: An American Lyric</i> , Claudia Rankine	<i>Just Mercy</i> , Bryan Stevenson

Data Collection Strategies

The primary mode of data collection in this study was the interview (e.g., face-to-face, telephone). I chose this as my primary method because interviews allowed me to control the line of questioning about CREs, about which I did not know much before beginning my study. Interviews also allowed me to ask follow-up questions of interviewees to provide historical or contextual information about programs and book selections. Creswell (2009) notes that interviews are limited in that information is influenced by interviewees' perceptions, recollection of events, and the presence of the researcher. I attempted to address these weaknesses by creating what Yin (1994) calls an audit trail, cataloguing data systematically so that others have access to data that leads to the researcher's conclusions.

An audit trail ensures that conclusions are thoroughly explained by detailing how data are collected, how themes are derived, and how inquiry decisions are made. It also makes sure that conclusions drawn from the data are consistent and dependable (Merriam, 2001).

My audit trail included transcribing recorded interviews verbatim using *Dragon Naturally Speaking* software. I was unable to schedule face-to-face interviews with every contact that CRE directors gave me. In those cases, I attempted to find time to speak by phone. On phone interviews, I received verbal consent but was unable record interviews using my audio recording

device. Instead, I took contemporaneous notes during phone interviews and compiled additional field notes upon conclusion.

Creswell (2009) and Yin (1994) suggest collecting multiple sources of data. I also collected public and private documents as data points. Frequently, interviewees referenced key events or information that influenced CREs at their institutions. Public information came primarily from institution or CRE program websites. In some cases, I tracked down newspaper or blog articles that discussed institutions' CREs. When relevant, I requested that interviewees share private documents. In most cases, interviewees obliged. I have included those documents (e.g., book resource guides, syllabi) as appendices and attempted to describe documents that were not shared after request in the interviewees' own words. I reviewed public and private documents and cross-referenced with themes described in interviews.

Interview Procedures

In spring 2018, I conducted face-to-face and phone interviews for this study. I recruited participants by contacting CRE administrators by email and phone to explain the intent of my study and invite participation. Upon acceptance, I requested that CRE administrators share names and email addresses of other selection committee members that might be interested in participating. From there, I sent out email invitations to listed individuals and followed up once with those who did not respond to the first round of email invites. If individuals expressed an interest in participating, I requested they share their availability for the time period I planned to visit their campuses. In the case of my home institution (i.e., University of Kansas), I had more flexibility to schedule interviews. I used participant responses to draw up a schedule of face-to-face and phone interviews. I emailed the schedule to participants at each institution, shared my

contact information in case there was need to reschedule, and sent reminder emails in advance of our meetings.

I created an interview protocol with the intention of exploring the processes and motivations that informed the selection and implementation of common texts, paying particular attention to the mechanisms that institutions use for selecting common texts and the motivating factors and messages that underlay selection committees' choices. In the interview protocol, I asked interviewees to describe how they perceived the process for selecting common texts and whether that process changed in the last three years. I asked study participants about the decision-making processes and factors that contributed to the selection of common texts during the last three years. The interview protocol can be found in *Appendix A*. I also asked interviewees about the perceived intent behind selected texts and how they perceived that those messages were received by their intended audiences. I piloted the interview protocol in a phone interview with a CRE administrator at Kansas State University in December 2017. Pilot studies can improve reliability and validity in qualitative research by assisting the researcher to develop adequate research instruments, identify potential obstacles, collect preliminary data, develop research questions likely to get at the phenomena of interest, practice conducting the research process efficiently, and maximize limited resources (e.g., time, money) (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). After my pilot, I amended the wording of some of my interview questions in order to narrow in on relevant themes and combined some questions to shorten the protocol.

During data collection, I conducted interviews in January and February of 2018 with participants at the University of Kansas. Then, I drove to Iowa City, IA and conducted interviews in February 2018 with University of Iowa participants. Finally, I drove to Oxford, MS in March 2018 to conduct interviews with University of Mississippi participants.

Analyses of Data

Merriam (2001) states that data collection and analysis are simultaneous, interactive processes in qualitative studies. In qualitative research, reliability and validity are determined before the investigation and rely on triangulation of data, thick descriptions, and interpretations of participants' perceptions. In order to faithfully execute simultaneous data collection and analyses, I used the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2001). Using this approach, I began by inferring themes and hypotheses as soon as I started collecting data. From there, I continually compared those inferences between and within levels of newly-collected pieces of data until conclusions can be drawn (Merriam, 2001). I categorized data thematically and chronologically in order to generate a list of emerging themes. When all data were collected, I performed single-case and cross-case analyses, seeking to build a comprehensive conceptual framework that fit all cases while accounting for variation among the single cases (Merriam, 2001). I drew comparisons between and within levels of data throughout the analysis phase until I feel confident in drawing conclusions and ruling out competing explanations.

Verification

To address internal validity, I used the following strategies (as suggested by Merriam, 2001) in my data analyses:

1. Triangulation: I included multiple sources of data to confirm and test emerging themes and hypotheses.
2. Member checks: The transcribed interviews were emailed to interviewees to verify data and interpretations.
3. Peer examination: I spoke with colleagues, researchers in the field, and my dissertation advisor about the emerging findings in order to check my interpretation of data.

4. Researcher's biases: I made deliberate attempts to articulate my biases and assumptions at the outset of the study.

The use of specific inquiry procedures in multi-case studies improves the external validity (i.e., generalizability) of findings. To improve the ability to draw working hypotheses from this multi-case study, I used the following strategies in my data analyses (as recommended by Merriam, 2001):

1. Rich, thick descriptions: In my results, I made every effort to provide enough description, interview quotes, and background information so that readers had adequate information to determine whether the study's findings were relevant in other contexts.
2. Typicality or modal category: I described how CRE implementation approaches at each of my sample is so that readers could draw comparisons to their own contexts.
3. Multisite design: I used purposeful sampling to present a maximal variation in describing the phenomenon under study.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the procedures I used to conduct my study. I began the chapter by describing qualitative research and the case study approach. I continued by explaining how I approached researcher bias and ethical concerns in the study. I then described the settings and participants before finally outlining the data collection strategies and analyses procedures that I used.

Chapter Four: The University of Kansas Common Book Program

In the next three chapters, I present the results of my study, with a chapter devoted to describing each of the three sampled institutions. Each of the case write-ups are split in two sections: in one, I introduce the institutional context and provide a description of how the institution's CRE is intended to be implemented. The data for this section comes primarily from administrators' interviews. In the second half of the three chapters, I describe the results of my analyses, which were guided by the following research questions:

1. Which kinds of objectives, if any, are common text selections intended to achieve, whether educational, institutional, societal, or other?
2. If common text selections address objectives, who has decision-making authority or what factors influence decisions about which objectives are important?
3. How do institutions determine whether a common text selection achieves the objectives set forth for it?

The chapter analyses explain how all sampled interviewees at each institution perceived the CRE's implementation during the study period, underscore points of agreement and disagreement on how and why common books were selected, and explains how interviewees arrived at those conclusions.

At the end of each chapter, I offer summarizing remarks that underscore important findings and provide preliminary conclusions to the overarching research question of this study: What, if anything, are institutions trying to accomplish through freshman book text selection? As a final note, because so many references to the selected texts are made throughout the next three chapters, I present here Table 2, which shows chosen texts at each of the sample sites.

Introduction to the Campus Context and Program Overview

The University of Kansas (KU) is a four-year public, flagship institution serving more than 27,000 students, 19,000 of whom are undergraduates. It is an R1, doctoral university conducting highest intensity research (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, n.d.), business, engineering, health professions, and communications are the most commonly studied academic programs. KU uses selective admissions standards, according to its admissions website (<https://admissions.ku.edu/freshman-requirements-deadlines>). Incoming students must demonstrate a GPA of 2.0 (or 2.5 for out-of-state) in high school college-preparatory curriculum (i.e., natural sciences, social sciences, math, elective) and qualify for one of the following: score a 21 or higher on the ACT (or 1060 SAT) and demonstrate an overall high school GPA of 3.25 or higher; or, score a 24 or higher on the ACT (or 1160 SAT) and demonstrate an overall high school GPA of 3.00 or higher. In fall 2016, 93% of applicants to KU were granted admission and 31% accepted. Admitted students that fall included 4,507 freshmen and 1,240 transfer students (NCES, n.d.), the primary targets of first-year programming like the CRE.

KU's student population is majority white (71%), traditional age (i.e., 24 years of age and under; 90%), enrolled full-time (89%), and comes from Kansas (57%). Eighty-one-percent of first-time freshmen persist to their sophomore year. The 4-year and 6-year graduation rates are 42% and 63%, respectively. Disparities exist by student type, with 66% of females graduating with a bachelor's degree in six years versus 60% of males. Race differences are also present, with 6-year graduation rates at 66% for White students, 58% for Asian students, 52% for Hispanic/Latino students, and 47% for Black students (NCES, n.d.). According to institutional

data, 66% of first-time freshmen lived on campus in the 2017 academic year (Office of Institutional Research & Planning, 2017).

According to the KU's website (University of Kansas, n.d.), the Common Reading Experience (CRE) at KU is a year-long, campus-wide initiative that uses a common book to engage first-year and transfer students as they enter their first semester at KU. According to selection committee members² I interviewed, incoming students receive a free copy at orientation and are encouraged to read the common book on their own. When they arrive on campus for their first year, they can attend voluntary, book-related events (e.g., discussion groups, lecture series, films, art exhibits) throughout the academic year and may encounter the common book in introductory coursework or in first-year seminars. A list of book-related events appears on the CRE's website for each year of the program (University of Kansas, n.d.). For example, in the 2017-18 year, the keystone event was an author's visit. The lecture was held in September in a large, performing arts center on campus. Common books were chosen by a committee, typically composed of staff, faculty, and students. During the study period, KU's common books were Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2016), and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2017). The full list of common books and a detailed description of the selection process is provided later in this chapter.

CRE program history.

The history of KU's CRE is detailed on the Provost's Office's webpage of the institution's website (<https://provost.ku.edu>). In 2011, the undergraduate, general education curricula at KU changed in favor of an outcomes-based model. This process included the

² Unless otherwise noted, all "interviewees," "faculty members," "administrators," and "students" in this chapter took part in the selection process for common books during the study period (2015-2017).

creation of a First-Year Experience Office (FYEO), implementation of first-year seminars, and development of experiential learning opportunities (Provost's Office, 2011). One administrator with knowledge of the CRE's development noted that a CRE was one of the components outlined for promoting the student success initiatives that the Provost's Office identified for "energizing the education environment" (Provost's Office, 2011). According to the CRE's website, "[a] steering committee began meeting in October 2011 to develop, plan, and implement the KU Common Book" (University of Kansas, n.d.) The director of the FYEO recalled during our interview that the steering committee included faculty, staff, and students from various offices (e.g., Provost's Office, Libraries) and departments (e.g., English, Ecology).

According to the aforementioned administrator, the committee's development of the CRE proposal included investigations of programs at peer and aspirational peer institutions (e.g., University of North Carolina, Washington State University, Iowa State University). The selection committee developed a proposal outlining an implementation plan, which included book nomination and selection processes, and submitted the proposal to the Provost. After review, the Provost's Office approved the CRE and provided financial support that would last for the first five years of the program. From there, the steering committee began accepting book nominations and selected the inaugural common book in the fall of 2011. Since then, support for the program has spread from the Provost's Office to other top offices on campus: administrators report that the Chancellor helps to reveal the common text each spring and CRE programming is supported by various campus administrative offices.

Current program format.

I interviewed the director of the FYEO and the director of the CRE, both of whom have extensive knowledge of the program. According to the administrators, KU's CRE was funded by

the Provost's Office for its first five years and is now sustained by "a portion of the student enrollment deposit." The program budget is used to purchase copies of the book for incoming students and to help defray costs of authors' and speakers' visits and book-related events on campus throughout the year.

Copies of the common book are passed out at summer orientation and first-year students are asked to read the book before returning in the fall. When they arrive on campus, incoming students can attend book-related events. Examples of book-related events include film screenings, concerts, and art exhibits, many of which have been sponsored or co-sponsored by other departments, offices, and student life spaces (University of Kansas, n.d.). For many incoming students, the first events they attend are facilitated discussions on campus during orientation week to discuss the common book in groups of peers. In those facilitated discussion groups, student and administrator interviewees reported that first-year students discuss their perceptions of the common book, examine the text from multiple viewpoints, and get a preview of college-level discourse.

After orientation week, related common book events occur throughout the academic year. The two program administrators I interviewed reported that they had built a wide network of event co-sponsors on campus, including campus museums, a center for humanities research, residence halls, and academic departments. As one administrator specified:

...[W]e have so many partners [in other campus units] bought-in who are willing to partner on resources (monetary and human) to bring somebody [i.e., visiting scholars or authors], put them up, host them, give them a platform, and communicate with campus

about the opportunity. I think that we're getting better and better on that.

The network of partnerships, the administrator reflected, "...has lent itself to tremendous growth for Common Book over the last 24 months." Indeed, KU's website showed that book-related events had expanded recent years (e.g., three events in 2012; six in 2014; 21 in 2016; fifteen in 2017) (University of Kansas, n.d.).

In addition to offering more events, the number of students, staff, and faculty who attended book-related events had increased during the study period, according to administrators. One administrator suggested that multiple book-related events throughout the year had allowed students to extend learning beyond the classroom and build "deeper meaning." The administrator asserted:

Numbers are sometimes a big part of it. When you have a common reading experience and the idea is that it is university-wide conversation, it makes sense that you want some things like the author talk to be heavily attended. Because it's part of the building of community. So there are times when numbers are important; the flip side of that is that we've had a number of programs that are smaller programs or small conversations around the book.

CRE events were also provided to non-student audiences. A faculty interviewee told me that her department organized a professional development day around themes in the 2016 common book (*Between the World and Me*). In 2013, an administrator recalled that KU's CRE partnered with the local public library's citywide reading program to choose the same book (i.e., *The Worst Hard Time*). The CRE's website details open-to-the-public events in 2016 and 2017

sponsored by an off-campus research center. And, administrators reported that discussion groups were hosted for KU alumni in two urban Kansas cities in 2017 and 2018.

Finally, interviewed administrators and faculty reported that two introductory course sections in the English and Communications Departments had integrated the common book into their curricula in the past three years. Specifically, one faculty member reported that informal writing assignments using common book themes and topics were used by instructors of introductory English courses as a pre-assessment of student writing abilities. Another faculty member told me graduate teaching assistants in Communications had the option of supplementing required texts with the common book. In spite of the common book not being mandatory in either department, one administrator reported that integration of the common book into introductory courses had improved readership among first-year students.

The Process of Selecting Common Books

KU's CRE is entering its seventh year. Selected texts were: *Notes from No Man's Land* by Eula Biss (2012-13), *The Worst Hard Time*, by Timothy Egan (2013-14), and *The Center of Everything* by Laura Moriarty (2014-15). The focus of my study revolves around the selections of the last three years, which includes *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway (2015-16), *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2016-17), and *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine (2017-18). At the time of writing, KU's CRE chose *Create Dangerously* by Edwidge Danticat for the 2018-19 academic year.

Selection process.

The two interviewed administrators described a two-stage process used to select a common book from a pool of nominated texts, which I summarize below. The administrators

disclosed that the selection process had remained largely unchanged since the program's inception.

Potential common books are nominated on the CRE's website. In the program's history, the nomination pool included from 50 to 120 titles. After a CRE administrator removed texts that are not appropriate for the program (e.g., children's books, textbooks), a large committee of about twenty representatives from various campus units reviewed nominated books using publicly-available information about them (e.g., book reviews, academic publications on the book). One administrator described additional criteria that the committee considered when culling the nomination pool:

Some of what they are thinking about [in narrowing down the nomination pool]—they really go back to the goals for the program: What are the books that are going to introduce students to what it means to study in a university (sort of the rigors of college-level reading)? They look for books that have the opportunity to plug in to many different disciplines. How many different programming opportunities are potentially associated with them? And they also look for books that are going to build community in some way for our incoming students.

The large committee eventually culled the list down to approximately twenty titles. From there, they divided responsibilities so each of the approximately twenty books was reviewed by two committee members. Using a rubric (described below), the committee subsequently met to determine a finalist list. In that meeting, as one administrator described, “[p]eople advocate in some cases. If they read something that they think would be a particularly good fit, they’re going

to share that with the committee. There's a lot of discussion." Typically the finalist pool includes three to six books.

Taking the finalist pool, a second, smaller committee (i.e., the selection committee) of students, faculty, and administrators from campus units and academic departments read each finalist book over winter break. When they returned to campus for the spring semester, they met to develop an extensive list of strengths and weaknesses for each title, which generally helped to identify titles that were "particularly strong," as one administrator put it. The committee then sent its recommendations to the Chancellor who, typically following the advice of the committee, made the announcement of the following year's common book around spring break.

Selection criteria.

The goals of KU's CRE undergird an overarching goal of improving education experiences for first-year students, as outlined in the institutions long-term, strategic plan (<https://boldaspirations.ku.edu/>). The CRE's website reads:

A key component of...the KU strategic plan is investing in first-year intellectual experiences. As part of this emphasis, KU Common Book will generate opportunities for shared intellectual experiences that invite analysis, foster critical thinking, and reflect the type of reasoned discourse expected at a university.

Three specific goals are then outlined for the CRE: "build community among faculty, staff, and students; create a shared academic experience for first-year students; and encourage intellectual engagement through reading and discussion" (University of Kansas, n.d.) One administrator noted the central role of the program's goals in the selection process:

Beyond the program goals, which you've seen on our website, I don't think that we go into any given year and say there's a particular message that we want to communicate or that we want to put forward. I will say though that—I'm not sure this is the best way to put it—we want the book to, for our students, be challenging in the sense that we know it's important to have challenge when you enter a university.

As such, the administrator suggested that common books were primarily selected for their ability to provide an introduction to the academic environment at KU.

Other interviewees agreed with the administrator's belief that common books were chosen in order to engage first-year students academically. For example, the interviewed faculty members reported that recent common books reinforced department-level learning objectives for first-year students, like developing critical analysis skills, by making connections between course material and topics in common books. One student interviewee seemed to encapsulate the academic intent of common books, suggesting that common books conveyed messages to first-year students that the CRE is an interdisciplinary, academically-rigorous endeavor:

[I]t's not just a side experience that you can participate in for this particular year or for this particular book; this is a learning experience that we're incorporating in whatever you're doing. But we're also taking this and saying: this is what we're using [to promote] a deeper knowledge and understanding as well.

Other interviewees shared nuanced beliefs the goals of selected common texts. For one student committee member, the common book was a welcoming gesture, intended to show

students at an early stage that KU "...is a welcoming space: We want you here at our university, to thrive." For another, the common book was an opportunity for incoming students to experiment ("dip their toes") with new topics that could pique intellectual curiosity

To facilitate the process of identifying books that satisfied the program's explicit (and implicit) goals, KU's selection committee developed a rubric to score nominated texts. I made repeated but unsuccessful attempts to acquire a copy of the aforementioned rubric. Thus, I will describe the instrument in the words of my interviewees. One administrator listed the dimensions of the rubric:

We use a rubric that has seven different dimensions: richness of content and themes, accessibility of content, appropriate for first-year college students, readability and literary quality, flexible for inclusion in first-year courses and adaptable across multiple disciplines, potential for extra or co-curricular and programming, and timing and community.

From my interviews, it seemed that the instrument helped the selection committee to organize the different facets of nominated books. The need for such a tool was exemplified by another administrator, who put into words the many considerations the selection committee attempted to balance in making its selections:

We have to remember that our students come from lots of different spaces and places. They may not have the familiarity with certain topics or questions or things that we're wrestling with in the same way that we do. From that standpoint, there's a balance with the selection. Something that is going to be accessible, challenging,

and engaging for a student [but if it comes] in a way that is so fundamentally unfamiliar to them or polarizing in some ways, then that is going to be a challenge.

The two administrators I interviewed provided illustrations of how the rubric's dimensions helped identify books that satisfied the program's goals. For instance, one way KU's CRE attempted to engage and challenge students was through the selection of different writing styles.

One of the administrators told me:

We have picked books that have a certain level of acclaim. It's not just the acclaim, but we want students to be able to talk and to think about the content as well as how it's written, how it's delivered.

This administrator clarified though that "Recognition is not the same as popularity." For example, the interviewee cited a same-state institution's selection of a young adult bestseller about a survivalist competition set in a dystopian future. By highlighting the book choice, the administrator implied that KU's CRE would not choose popular, easily digestible texts if they lacked an academic focus.

The last dimension of the rubric (i.e., *timing and community*) intrigued me, since it did not appear to explicitly refer to a book's ability to engage or challenge first-year students. When asked about the dimension, an administrator recalled that the "timing and community" criterion was amended to the original rubric so that common book selections would be more likely to be "relevant" and "matched who we [KU] are as a community." As the administrator put it:

...we're trying to choose books that match who we are as a school.
Are these books about stuff that we have historically cared about?

That we are currently engaged in conversations [about]? Does it map onto other initiatives that are taking place at the same time?

Indeed, a book's relevance to the local context appeared to be a key criterion for selecting the common book in the last three years. Another administrator seemed to agree, stating, "We continue to pay a lot of attention to what conversations are happening on our campus." In that sense, it seemed that that particular rubric dimension reflected a belief that the common book could introduce incoming students to issues (deemed relevant by the selection committee) affecting the institution.

Based on this assumption, I looked back to investigate what other selected books had focused on. It seemed that common books chosen before the study period had a particular focus on Midwestern and Kansas settings (e.g., *Notes from No Man's Land* by Eula Biss (2012-13), *The Worst Hard Time*, by Timothy Egan (2013-14), and *The Center of Everything* by Laura Moriarty (2014-15), though not necessarily any institution-specific messages. During the study period however, the focus of common books appeared to shift away from geographical relevance to contemporary topics of interest to a broader public. For KU, the books chosen during the study period included topics evoking strong public sentiment, like racism and war. One administrator seemed to feel that KU's selection committee had chosen recent common books because their topics had a particular relevance on campus:

What's been more important to us are, 'what are the books that make sense for our community right now?' We want students to feel that the things that we pick are, in some way, specific to the experience that they're having here on campus. Or we can provide programming around the book that will have students go places

and talk with people and see things that are helping them to get to know campus.

The same administrator suggested that recent common books, namely *Between the World and Me* and *Citizen*, introduced first-year students to the institution's aspirational identity as well. The administrator stated, “[w]ith the selection of those books, it helped our new students to understand some of what we’re talking about and the type of university that we’re trying to be.” By including the timing and community criteria then, it seemed CRE administrators wanted to improve the rubric’s ability to identify common books that were relevance to the campus community.

A few of the other interviewed committee members shared distinct but related ideas about how *timing and community* influenced common book selections. One faculty committee member, in speaking about two recent common books that dealt with racism and prejudice in the U.S., shared the belief that there was a “real need to consider contentious topics as important for critical thinking and the need for our curriculum to respond to topics that are unfolding locally, nationally and internationally.” Continuing, this faculty interviewee opined that the “common book is a vehicle—unlike a lot of programs across campus—that can fill that need to harness those conversations [about “contentious topics”] across the curriculum.” As such, the interviewee suggested that common books might serve multiple audiences, benefitting students’ through intellectual engagement opportunities and perhaps benefitting faculty by providing opportunities to update curricula to reflect current events.

Finally, some selection committee members noted that the *timing and community* dimension had not always hit its mark. For instance, an administrator described the tepid

response to a classic text chosen in 2015, despite deliberate efforts to tie the book to current campus initiatives:

...people were so caught up in their disappointment in the choice of *A Farewell to Arms*—or even more in their disappointment in the choice of a book by the author (Hemingway), whose personal life of misogyny and hypermasculinity is certainly something that people have written about and do not favor. It was interesting because we had moved Common Book along to make sure that we were looking at social justice issues...But people didn't notice that we had done this.

Putting it all together, although interviewees provided illustrations of specific criteria that influenced the selection of recent common books at KU, they and other interviewed committee members seemed to all agree that no single criteria played a consistently outsized role the selection process. One administrator explained that the ultimate aim of the selection committee (and the rubric) was to identify books that could connect incoming students to relevant, intellectually-stimulating, educational experiences:

We want books that are going to generate excitement, but a big part of any intellectual endeavor is having to read things that you don't want to read or that may not be of interest to you. In the case of some books, students or others may not initially be excited; but is there enough of an experience that we can build around it so, over time, the value and relevance and what we can do with this conversation energizes students? So that's something that we

continue to think about. Big questions, what are the big questions, the big issues that we are facing? We're talking about bringing students into a university. When they come here, they become part of how this community responds to some of those grand challenges, whether it be climate change or poverty or whatever the case may be.

Uniqueness of selection.

In the course of my interviews, administrators pointed to what seemed to be an unwritten criterion that went beyond the selection rubric: uniqueness. I first noted the implicit rule when one administrator told me, "we pay attention to what's being picked in other places, but I don't think that it heavily influences what we select in any given year. We do look at what's being selected regionally." The same administrator went on to explain that the decision to lean toward lesser-used common books was deliberate and even ignored some benefits of using oft-selected books:

...there is some value in picking a book that has been used at lots of other institutions because when you do that, you can rely on those institution to share materials. There is a very good sense of community around these programs. [For instance,] I have been contacted by people at other institutions about books that we've used that they are considering using and want to know our experience. So there is some value in picking something that has been used in lots of other places because there are materials out

there and there's already a community of people you can talk to about how we are going to implement this.

Another administrator agreed that uniqueness was important and in fact seemed to favor it more strongly than the other interviewees. This administrator appeared to imply that a common book would not be selected if it had already been used in regional and national CREs, stating:

[W]hen you look at the broad spectrum of what schools are choosing what books, we're a little bit of an outlier because we have not chosen texts that have been picked up by many, many other schools. As you know, there are some books that have been done by 70 or more schools. We seemed to have not done that...So I would say that that's a consistent point of debate [on the selection committee]. But I would say it's mostly a point of debate when we get a text like *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (which we have had in the pool), and it has been done at another state institution right down the road, and at least 70 other schools nationally. That doesn't mean it would be eliminated for those reasons but there certainly would be a conversation around what it means if we do this and all these other schools have done it.

Looking closely at the previous selections, it appeared the selection committee had largely observed the uniqueness criterion. I did not, however, find interview evidence to suggest that the criterion was as explicit in the early years of the program as it appeared to be during in the study period. One administrator who was familiar with the selections in other institutions' CREs gave the following example:

I think our book choices make us unique because most of the books we've chosen are not being done at other schools. I think Eula Biss's book, *Notes from No Man's Land*, was done at the University of Cincinnati; so one other school. I think Tim Egan's book [*The Worst Hard Time*] was done at Texas Tech, but I'm not sure it was done any other place.

Although the interviewee quickly qualified the examples by saying, "...maybe I should do a better job monitoring where it might get picked up after us," the conjecture that few institutions have used the same common books as KU was not far off base. In an attempt to triangulate the above claim, I found that the University of Cincinnati's website did not list Biss's book as one of its common book selections (University of Cincinnati, 2018). I dug further to investigate whether the book had been used at all by other institutions. The National Association of Scholars, which has published an extensive record of common reading titles since 2010-11, showed that since 2013 when KU chose it, Biss's book was used by only two institutions (American University and Washington University in St. Louis; NAS, 2014). For Egan's book (i.e., *The Worst Hard Time*), the NAS reports (2013, 2014) confirmed it as one of Texas Tech University's selections. It also showed that Egan's was used twice more (at Amarillo Community College in 2012 and the State University of New York-Oswego in 2013). For the remaining selections, NAS data (2012, 2013, 2016) illustrated that KU's selections generally have not been widely used after KU's selection. Specifically, KU's 2014 (*The Center of Everything*) and 2015 (*A Farewell to Arms*) selections have not been used as common books by any institution in NAS's dataset between 2012 and 2016 and KU's 2017 pick (Rankine) was only used in five instances the year before KU chose it (NAS, 2018). At the time of this writing, the selection

committee announced the 2018 KU common book, *Create Dangerously* by Edwidge Danticat, a book that has been chosen in only one previous instance (Hampton College; NAS, 2018).

There was one exception to the uniqueness criterion: KU's 2016 pick (Coates) was used in CREs at nineteen institutions the same year (NAS, 2018). While the book's recognition was notable (e.g., 2015 National Book Award, #1 *New York Times Bestseller*, *Pulitzer Prize* finalist; Penguin Random House, 2018), it seemed that KU's selection committee set aside its uniqueness criterion to choose a book that reflected themes that were notably present on KU's campus during the time it was selected. I investigate this conjecture more fully in the section, *Common books reified institutional priorities on racial climate*.

In close, KU's choice of common books set the institution apart from other institutions. Whether intentional or not, one administrator speculated that the selection committee seemed to consistently choose unique common books, "...because of the rubric and how we've arranged the choice process." In other words, the administrator seemed to feel that perhaps the combination of rubric's dimensions and selection processes had led the committee to select books that reflected something uniquely KU.

Authors' visits played an implicit role in which common books were selected.

Another factor that seemed to play an important though implicit role in the selection process was the author's visit. In fact, authors of common books visited KU's campus to speak in four of six programming years. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2016) and Ernest Hemingway (2015) were the exceptions. Suggesting the author's visit's centrality to the CRE, one administrator told me, "Similar to other institutions, the author visit (assuming that we have a living author) is sort of the main thing that we engage students with." As an illustration, the most recent visiting author,

Claudia Rankine, gave a lecture that was open to the public and spoke to students, staff, and faculty at two additional campus events (KU News, 2017).

Though the practice of bringing authors to campus is not unique, KU appeared to adapt the author's visit to better fit the specifics of the program's goals and the needs of local participants. One administrator voiced how pros and cons had influenced the timing of an author's visit to KU:

I also sense that there are some institutions that tend to bring their author as part of convocation. I think there are good reasons to do that: it's a common experience for students, it's the start of their academic experience, and certainly common reading programs support that really important moment. We typically do not have our author to campus until—I think the earliest we've had an author is in September; I think maybe the latest we've had an author here is November. That was on the recommendation of faculty. They wanted time to read parts of the book with their students, whatever discipline they may be in. Sometimes there are programs happening in [student] housing. We want the students to have some time with the book before the author gets here. So that's something important that we've established for our program.

When common book authors did not visit KU as part of the CRE, important figures were invited to campus to present at book-related events. In 2015, for instance, when Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* was chosen as the common book, a renowned

photojournalist's was invited to campus. The photojournalist's speech that year was one of the most noteworthy events in the program's history, according to one administrator:

...one of the things that was great about [James] Nachtwey's³ visit was that he does not give public talks very often; it's, in fact, pretty rare. When we first approached him through the School of Journalism, one of the first things he said was "Hemingway is one of my favorite writers." I think that's one of the ways we were able to hook him. When he came, he gave a wonderful talk about his work but it really used the book, it felt very crafted specifically for KU.

In sum, while I did not get a sense from my interviews how or when the author's visit factored into the selection process, it was clear that the author's visit played a vital role in CRE programming each year. Even in instances where authors have not been available, KU's CRE invited notable figures to campus with connections to common book themes and topics.

Selection committee membership.

Common books were selected by committees made up of faculty, staff, and students. During the study period, one administrator reported that around twenty members made up the initial committee that sorted and culled nominated texts and nine to ten members made up the smaller committee that read and selected the common books.

³ The link between Nachtwey's keynote speech and Hemingway's novel is described on KU's website (KU News, 2016): "KU's Common Book for 2015-15 is Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms," the story of an American ambulance driver serving on the Italian front during World War I. The novelist bears witness to war, as do Nachtwey's photographs of wars, conflicts and social issues around the world, most recently the Syrian immigration crisis in Europe...During his lecture, titled "The Unvanquished," Nachtwey will talk about how Hemingway influenced him personally and how his work is in conversation with themes in Hemingway's novels..."

One administrator whom I interviewed provided examples of which campus units are represented in the initial committee that reviews and culls nominated texts:

The membership on that committee has varied a little bit year by year but typically they are individuals that work with campus programs and units that have some connection to Common Book; for example, the Libraries. Or Student Housing has always had representation because so many of our first-year students live in campus housing.

Another administrator expanded on the list of CRE partners on campus, highlighting partnerships with "...the art museum, the Natural History Museum, the Honors Program, the Alumni Association, the Center for Teaching Excellence, two departments...The Commons (which is this collaborative, creative space across museums), and the Hall Center [for Humanities]."

The diversity of member representation was perceived as a strength of the program, particularly by administrators I interviewed. One of the administrators noted that the committee who reviewed nominations continued their work beyond the selection of the book and into the planning of book-related events on campus:

Part of it is that committee does a lot of work. They're involved in 'How do we take that big nomination pool and pull that down into a more manageable set of books to review?' They also loop back into the process after the book is announced and then they really become 'What are we going to do with this book? Who are the speakers we're going to bring?'

Administrators felt that the inclusion of long-term partners suffused the selection process with knowledge about best practices, gleaned from trial-and-error, with other first-year programs. The same administrator interviewees told me, “So that group brings a high level of thoughtfulness to some of those issues because they’ve worked with so many students and they’ve seen what has been successful with other folks—and what’s not been successful.”

The second, smaller selection committee that evaluated the pool of finalist nominations included administrative staff from campus offices, faculty from academic departments, and students at different points in their undergraduate and graduate careers. The selection committee membership was transparent (i.e., committees were listed on KU’s website) and, on the surface, reflected the same diversity of membership (i.e., campus units and academic departments) as the larger committee that reviews nominations.

Although CRE administrators seemed to feel they had deliberately chosen a qualified committee membership and worked to ensure its membership was transparent, I was somewhat surprised when an interviewee raised questions about the committee’s membership. Specifically, the ethnic diversity of the committee was a concern for one faculty senate representative with whom I spoke, who had no program affiliation and confessed to having only a peripheral awareness of the CRE. Referring to recent common books that dealt with issues of race and diversity (e.g., *Between the World and Me*, *Citizen*), the interviewee posed the hypothetical question of why two particular offices dedicated to diversity, equity, and multicultural issues on campus were not represented on the selection committee:

It seems like, if one of the major goals is to go in the direction of a book to talk about these issues—especially about diversity, equity, and inclusion—that [the selection committee] might as well talk to

the people who maybe know the most about it and are trying to do something about it at this university. And not just talk to probably a very small group of people who are really well-intentioned.

Interested to know what other interviewees thought, I asked a handful of selection committee members to opine on who might have the authority to choose common books that dealt with topics that could be perceived as divisive or contentious. One faculty committee member agreed that transparency of membership was important and reflected on how the identities of the selection committee, in addition to where they worked or studied on campus, were important to consider when choosing common books that might lead to difficult or contentious discourse:

It surprised me that it was predominantly women on the selection committee. And it was predominantly a white selection committee. I wouldn't say those things surprised me necessarily given the real role that women play from an administrative perspective on campus. But something that I think is important, and in many ways brought that concern to the forefront for me, [is] asking predominantly-white graduate students to partake in those conversations. So needing to think about the transparency of the selection process—that *Who's selecting* and *Who are we selecting these things for*—was important for me to think about in that process.

Other selection committee members spoke more directly to the critique, opining that they did not see anything out of order with the ethnic makeup of the committee on which they had served. One faculty committee member of color stated:

From my experience—and of course, part of it also is sometimes you don't see everyone at the table because of scheduling—it was my experience that I thought there was a diversity both in terms of racial diversity, but also in terms of like students, in terms of departments, in terms of staff who interact with students, and students themselves.

In summary, although the selection committee changed membership on an individual basis each year, administrators and selection committee members noted a similar committee membership profile in terms of both campus unit representation and also in terms of ethnic diversity during the study period.

Selection Committee's Perceptions about Common Books

Earlier in this chapter, selection committee members I interviewed (especially administrators of KU's CRE) explained how common book were chosen for their ability to accomplish program goals, like challenge incoming students in a way that engages their intellectual curiosity. I wanted to know how selection committee members perceived the selection process, whether common books achieved particular goals, and what kinds of information influenced their opinions. I noted two overarching themes: first, selection committee members felt that common books selected during the study period reified institutional priorities with regards to the campus's racial climate; second, some committee members seemed to think that common books could advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus.

Common books reified institutional priorities on racial climate.

Selection committee members interviewed reported that two recent common book selections were influenced by regional and local events regarding the racial tensions on U.S.

college campuses during the period under study (i.e., 2015-2017). Media coverage of tense moments regarding the racial climate at Yale University and neighboring University of Missouri spread. One publication (Brown, 2018) summarized the events of 2015:

...people across the country tuned in to cable news networks and saw a much different Mizzou. As black students protested the tepid response of the university's leaders to racism, the campus became a hotbed of racial unrest. Depending on one's perspective, Mizzou was either an unsafe place for people of color or a bastion of political correctness where campus officials had ceded control to whiny students. Those perceptions took a firm hold and helped touch off a 35-percent decline in freshman enrollment over just two years.

Racial tensions on that campus led to public sit-ins, a hunger strike, and the football team's boycott. Student protestors, who were primarily Black, called for the resignation of the university system president. In November 2015, the University of Missouri's Chancellor and President resigned (Brown, 2018) and as mentioned above, the beginning of a precipitous decline in enrollment at the institution ensued.

At the same time that University of Missouri's protests culminated in November 2015, KU itself experienced a period of student protest in response to the campus racial climate. As a response, KU's then-Chancellor (an African-American woman herself) "...moderated a campus-wide forum on race, with 1,000 students, faculty, and staff in attendance. Many students of color described discrimination they had experienced, both on and off campus" (Brown, 2015). At the forum, a student activist group, composed primarily of Black students, took the stage and issued

a list of demands aimed at sweeping institutional changes that would improve the campus climate (Shepherd, 2015), similar to the demands of protestors at the University of Missouri. (Brown, 2015).

A few days later, the Chancellor (Office of the Chancellor, 2015) issued a message calling students, faculty, and administrators to action and underscoring the institution's objectives.

Diversity and equity are foundational values for our university. But as we heard [November 13, 2015], we are not living up to these values. Not when our own students, faculty and staff feel unsafe or unwelcome on our campuses. We can do better. We must do better. And we *will* do better...At the same time, we must all understand that, when it comes to racism and discrimination, change is unlikely to happen from the top down. Change has to happen from *within* our university, and it must involve all of us — administrators, students, faculty, staff and alumni — working together.

A week after that, the Provost (2015) issued another campus-wide message detailing action steps and a plan for ensuring that the student protestors' demands would be met:

Messages from offices, units, and groups across the University of Kansas have expressed solidarity with the [student protest group] and other speakers at the forum and have declared a readiness to embrace change.

We are assembling a small advisory team of faculty, students, staff, and administrators. The group will deliver an action plan by mid-January that addresses challenges put forward by [the student protest group], as well as concerns from others at the forum. The action plan will target retention and graduation rates of students, in addition to mandatory education, through facilitated sessions, on inclusion and belonging for all students, faculty, staff, and administrators and a plan for accountability.

On the heels of the events surrounding the protests and the calls to action by students and top administrators, KU's selection committee chose Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* as the common book for the 2016 academic year. In a way, the common book appeared to play a role in maintaining the critical dialogue around the racial climate on campus that had begun in 2015. One administrator felt there was a direct link between the student-led protests of KU's racial climate and the common book selection. The administrator told me, "[t]he student activism that happened—not just here but because of broader national and global conversations and context, that paved the way for the choice of *Between the World and Me*."

Another administrator did not go so far as to draw a causal link between campus protests and book selections, but rather elaborated on the supporting role that recent common books played in reinforcing ongoing institutional objectives:

We were similar to many other universities across the country, seeing a higher level of student activism and new initiatives based on equity and inclusion. So, with the selection of [*Between the World and Me* and *Citizen*], it helped our new students to

understand some of what we're talking about and the type of university that we're trying to be.

A student committee member added insights from committee meetings to administrators' views, indicating that the selection committee considered national and local conversations about race when deliberating the finalists in the 2017 nomination pool:

In the selection process for *Citizen* specifically, I know we had discussed that we already did *Between the World and Me*; should we stick with that type of book? Or is it too much? And I think it kind of came down to: this is what's happening in the world and this is the world that we live in. Are we going to shy away from it? Or are we going to be real and say this is how it is? It's not even like the university is sending a specific message; it's just that people are trying to say that these are conversations that should be had.

Although some interviewees perceived common book selections as responsive to social forces, other selection committee members were cautious in drawing such conclusions. For instance, when I asked another student committee member if the selection of Coates's and Rankine's books were understood as building off of current local and national events, the student seemed to imply that the lag between the selection of the common book and its use on campus made choosing books that responded to current events difficult. She reflected:

[I]n reality, I felt like it came down to chance honestly. Because with the way that *Citizen* was picked, there was no way to predict

the events of this past year. But it ended up being the perfect book. So, I think it ended up being by chance, ultimately.

Whether by chance or not, CRE administrators believed that the selection of Coates's book had provided campus stakeholders, including students and faculty, with an opportunity to address an important issue. By doing so, the selection of the book seemed to have brought some additional notoriety to the CRE. One administrator thought back:

When we selected *Between the World and Me*, that number [of courses adopting the common book] increased significantly. I think that was because we had had the campus town hall on race at that point [and student protestors] had given their list of action items to the Provost and Chancellor. I think there were a lot of parts of campus that we are trying to find ways to do something, to have conversations around campus climate. The book provided campus partners with one way to do that. Like I said earlier, it's not the function of any given book to be the single way that we talk about anything, but I think a lot of people saw that selection as very timely.

Taken together, it seemed clear that the common book selection committee was in some way influenced by social forces on campus and beyond. Given the media coverage and top administrators' outreach, it stands to reason that would be so. Though administrators seemed to be in agreement that the 2016 and 2017 common book reified explicit institutional messages about diversity and equity on campus (e.g., as outlined by the Chancellor's message), other committee members expressed differing opinions as to what extent the common books could

respond- or were intended to respond to ongoing social events. In any case, the 2016 and 2017 common books played a seemingly direct role in the growth of the CRE at KU.

Some committee members felt common books could promote diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus.

In the preceding section, I summarized administrators and selection committee members' perceptions about common books as reactions to contemporary social forces on campus. In this section, I outline committee members' notions of whether and how common books could advocate for social change, whether on campus or beyond.

Many of the interviewees, primarily students and faculty, seemed to feel that the social critique in the two memoirs about racism in the U.S. was successful in reflecting an institutional desire to improve the campus climate and were optimistic about the potential for meaningful change. Some expressed particularly strong beliefs on the topic. One committee member shared a strong opinion that transforming a primarily-white institution like KU into a more inclusive institution required deliberate messaging. Responding to a question of why she felt it important for KU's CRE to send messages about social issues, the faculty committee member replied:

I think we live in a global world. We need to go beyond just saying we are diverse. We need to put our money where our mouth is. If you look at the business model, it's clear that businesses are way ahead compared to academia in understanding that, whether we want to or not, we live in a global world with diversity. And diversity in all senses of the word, whether we're talking about religious diversity, gender diversity, sexual orientation, racial,

class, I think it's important for us to arm our students with the tools for understanding how to function in those spaces.

Others shared similarly strong opinions about the importance of selecting common books that dealt with social issues. One administrator I interviewed enthusiastically declared that common books would continue to center on social commentary that promoted critical discourse:

[A]s long as I sit in the chair that I'm sitting in, we are always going to make programming that's about social justice issues.

There's not a book we're going to choose, regardless of what the subject matter is, that [won't] have programming in that vein.

We're committed to that.

Next, a student committee member shared with me a belief that the messages in common books, like those in *Between the World and Me* and *Citizen* could be vehicles for institutional change. When asked why KU's CRE chose Coates' and Rankine's books, the interviewee, a student of color, said, "...the ideas present in whatever work we're choosing really reflect KU's path and trajectory." That is, the student explained that through recent common books and their book-related programming, "KU is trying to show that they care about things that are concerning real people in our society and in our communities." In that sense, the student perhaps saw the common book and the CRE as a potent mechanism for engaging other students of color and improving the institution's climate.

At the time of my interviews, some selection committee members perceived that institutional changes were beginning to appear, in part due to messages in common books. When asked whether the messages and conversations that came from *Between the World and Me* and

Citizen were leading to action, another student of color summarized what seemed like cautious optimism that the campus's climate was beginning to change for the better:

I think that the past three years have been really good for the institution because it gets these conversations to happen that didn't happen before. And I definitely feel like there's progress being made. But I feel like you can only get better; it's something to keep improving upon.

Still, members of the subgroup who felt common books could promote social change held reservations that the common book's message were leading to extensive change at the institution. Multiple student committee members seemed to believe that broader participation in the dialogue around social issues had not yet been achieved but was necessary for institution-wide changes. One student committee member attested that, although she believed awareness about important social issues had increased, ongoing dialogue on the topics were still the responsibility of a small but committed group (i.e., campus offices dedicated to diversity and multicultural issues):

I definitely think that there are conversations every day on campus about things of this nature. But what I will say is that it's always the same people. It's also certain people, in certain offices and departments. And it doesn't always reach everywhere else. When you're having a conversation about the whole of campus, it should be reaching everywhere.

Other committee members shared a similar belief, concluding that common books could only promote critical discourse about the institution—and subsequently, lead to systemic change—if common book messages were tightly coupled with institutional priorities. One

student committee member “I think it’s really important that what we do choose is being reflected in our policies and curriculum and what we’re doing on campus.” A faculty committee member seemed to agree with the sentiment, hinting that meaningful change required top-down action that was not yet visible:

I think those messages [about the importance of diversity and equity] are starting to be received from the undergraduate population. I don’t know if I believe those messages are translating to other sectors of the university: leadership [and] policies for example.

In summary, many interviewees noted that they saw social critiques in recent common books as a tool for fomenting systemic change around diversity and equity issues on campus. Though some of the committee members felt that critical messages in common books had not led to extensive action yet, interviewees seemed optimistic about the program’s potential to inspire change through discourse and debate on contemporary issues. In any case, what seemed clear from my interviewees’ responses was that many shared academic (and perhaps political) interests in recent common books’ themes, such that I might even speculate that their interests drew them to the CRE.

Summary of the Findings

The information presented in this chapter described the common reading experience at the University of Kansas. After describing the campus context, I provided a brief history of the founding of KU’s CRE. Then, I discuss the current implementation and features of the program. Next, I outlined the decision-making processes that guide the selection of common texts, including the criteria used, contextual influences from the surrounding campus and community,

and the persons responsible. Finally, I presented a discussion on how selection committee members perceived recent common books. In so doing, the results offered preliminary answers to the question: what is KU trying to accomplish through common book selections?

At KU, the CRE was developed as a component of a comprehensive student success initiative. The committee that developed the program investigated CREs at other institutions before determining an implementation model for the program at KU. During the study period, the year-long CRE targeted first-year students through orientation discussion sections, book-related events in the fall and spring semesters, and the book's use in first-year coursework. The author's visit was included in yearly programming in four of the first six completed years of programming and seemed to play an implicit role in the selection process. Other book-related events were primarily contained on-campus but occasionally included community-based events.

During the study period, KU's CRE used a two-stage process to select texts. A large committee of about twenty staff, faculty, and students reviewed a large pool of nominated books (i.e., up to 120 titles) and culled the pool down to a finalist list of three to six titles. From there, a smaller committee of nine or ten staff, faculty, and students read and debated the strengths and weaknesses of each finalist before sending the list to the Chancellor to announce the selection. Committee members were representatives of academic departments and campus offices that have incorporated the book into first-year coursework and partnered with the CRE to co-sponsor book-related events, respectively. Unit representation on the committee remained stable while individual members cycled in and out during the three years' study period.

Committee members communicated that many criteria factored into the selection of common books. Overall, the committee set out to select common books that they perceived would achieve the program's goals (i.e., build community, create common intellectual

experiences, encourage academic engagement). Two implicit criteria were highlighted in my interviews: uniqueness and relevance to the campus community. In the program's history, KU's CRE chose books that were not widely used at other institutions' CREs. Additionally, it seemed that recent selection committees were influenced by ongoing dialogues on campus about race and other social issues. Committee members reported that recent common books were one mechanism for communicating KU's institutional priorities after a period of racial tension in 2015 and 2016. For the committee members whom I interviewed, social commentaries in recent common books were seen as reifying the institution's stated commitment to diversity while for some students and faculty specifically, recent common book selections seemed to signal suggested improvements for the institution's climate to institutional leaders.

Chapter Five: The University of Mississippi Common Reading Experience

This chapter is the second of three describing the results of my qualitative, multi-case study. In this chapter, I describe my results from the University of Mississippi. Like the previous chapter, I introduce the institutional context and provide a description the institution's implementation of its common reading experience. The data for this section comes primarily from administrators' interviews. In the second half of the chapter, I describe how sampled interviewees, including administrators, faculty, and students perceived the common reading experience's implementation and text selection during the study period. In those sections, I underscore points of agreement and disagreement on how and why common books were selected and provide evidence of how interviewees arrived at those conclusions.

At the end of each chapter, I offer summarizing remarks that underscore important findings and provide preliminary conclusions to the overarching research question of this study: What, if anything, are institutions trying to accomplish through freshman book text selection?

Introduction to the Campus Context and Program Overview

The University of the Mississippi (UM) is a four-year public, flagship institution serving more than 23,000 students, 19,216 of which are undergraduates. It is an R1, doctoral university conducting highest intensity research (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). Business, health professions, and education are the most commonly studied academic programs (NCES, n.d.) In fall 2016, 84% of UM applicants were granted admission and 25% accepted. Admitted students that fall included 4,354 freshmen and 1,628 transfer students, the primary targets of first-year programming like the common reading experience. UM's undergraduate student population is majority White (77%), female (56%), traditional age (i.e., 24 years of age and under; 92%), and enrolled full-time (93%). Fifty-six-percent of the

undergraduate student population come from outside Mississippi and 43% are in-state residents. Eighty-five-percent of first-time freshmen in 2015 persisted to their sophomore year. The 4-year and 6-year graduation rates are 39% and 60%, respectively. Disparities exist by student type, with 65% of females graduating with a bachelor's degree in six years versus 60% of males. Differences exist between students of different races too, with 6-year graduation rates at 64% for White students, 76% for Asian students, 55% for Hispanic/Latino students, and 42% for Black students (NCES, n.d.). According to U.S. News & World Report data, 29% of all students live on campus (U.S. News & World Report, 2018).

According to UM's website (University of Mississippi, 2018), the institution's CRE is an orientation-based program. Information about the program's history and implementation was primarily provided by two administrators I interviewed, one a director of the FYEO and another an executive in Student Affairs. According to the administrators, students receive a copy of the common book at orientation and are asked to read it during the summer. Students' parents are invited to read along with their child. Students arrive on campus in August for orientation events, which culminate in a convocation ceremony. It is here that the author of the common book typically addresses the crowd of mostly freshmen and transfer students. For example, in the 2017-18 academic year, Bryan Stevenson, the author of *Just Mercy*, gave a speech during the convocation event (Smith, 2017). After convocation, students may attend book-related events on campus or complete assignments on the common book in introductory coursework (e.g., composition, First-year seminars).

CRE program history.

Though UM's website (University of Mississippi, 2018) shows that the CRE began in 2011, my interviews with administrators revealed that the CRE at UM was informed by earlier reading initiatives at the institution and by CREs at other institutions.

First, UM's CRE had roots dating back to 2009 as a community-based initiative administered by UM libraries. As one interviewed faculty member remembered, "The librarians, in the early days, were the initial champions for the common read program. They labeled it *One Book, One Community* at first. This was before it became really big and institutionalized."

Another faculty member who helped to pilot the program on UM's campus told me that she worked on campus and in the community to develop readership and partnerships for the program. The community-based CRE was received enthusiastically by the Provost (an "avid reader," as one interviewee told me) and the previously-quoted faculty member summed up the reception of the pilot program, "[a] lot of people were nodding their heads that this was a brilliant idea and [saying] that the University of Mississippi in Oxford, with the whole literary history laying at our feet, 'Why [aren't] we already doing this?'"

In my interviews with faculty and administrators, I discovered that while the community-oriented, library-administered CRE was being piloted, first-year seminars on UM's campus were using a distinct common book in its courses. The current CRE model was conceived when the two disparate reading programs combined. Another faculty member I interviewed summarized the transitional moment from the community model to the campus model:

The emphasis at that time was as much on the outside community around us here as on the internal [i.e., on-campus] community.

That was an early difference. We really took off, if my memory is correct...when we made the formal attachment of the common read program to the [first-year seminar] course.

At the same time, UM established a First-year Experience Office as part of its long-term planning initiative: *UM 2020*. The strategic plan, developed by the former Chancellor and Provost, outlined a comprehensive plan for improving students' academic success (University of Mississippi, 2014). According to one administrator, making UM's CRE a campus-wide program was the first task of the FYEO. Indeed, in 2010-11, the current CRE began to take shape. The same administrator recalled that a partnership was formed between the newly-established FYEO, UM libraries, and the newly-formed Center for Writing and Rhetoric (separate from the Department of English, the Center oversees introductory composition courses; University of Mississippi, 2017c). The project received temporary funding from the Provost's Office and four administrators and faculty members (all of whom I interviewed) joined a planning committee to move the CRE to a campus-wide model.

With funding and campus partners for the new version of the CRE, a steering committee investigated CREs at other institutions to inform the UM program. One administrator recalled, "We tried to model [our CRE] after those that we thought [used] best practices." Speaking with administrators at institutions with thriving CREs as well as those with canceled programs, the same administrator summarized the experience, saying, "...we learned a lot of what not to do." Exploration of other institution's programs led to the selection of the first common book. That is, the steering committee chose *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* after speaking with CRE administrators at a neighboring state's flagship institution, who spoke

glowingly about the book's readability, the text's ability to be interwoven across disciplines, and the author's engagingness as a speaker on campus.

Current program format.

According to one administrator, UM's CRE reaches almost 5,000 students each year, including about 4,000 freshmen and 1,000 transfer students. Each year, all faculty members receive a copy of the book as well. The decision to provide copies to faculty (a practice that has been in place since 2011) was intended to garner buy-in, as the administrator recalled. During the study period, the program was funded through an add-on orientation fee, which covered the cost of book copies and the authors' speaking fee.

Administrators reported that first-year students' primary exposure to the common book came at fall convocation, which takes place during the first week of the fall semester. At a typical convocation during the study period, first-year students heard speeches by institutional leaders (e.g., Chancellor, Provost), took part in induction ceremonies (e.g., receive a commemorative coin, recite an honor pledge), and heard a speech by the common book author (Smith, 2017). Many faculty and administrator interviewees expressed the view that integrating the common book author's speech into convocation set an early, academic tone for first-year students.

After convocation, incoming students are exposed to the common book through its use in first-year seminars and composition courses—two courses that enroll a majority of first-year students. That is, 75% of the incoming freshman class of 2017 enrolled in first-year seminars (University of Mississippi, 2017a) and 70% of incoming students enrolled in first-year composition courses, according to one faculty committee member's estimate. An administrator reported that annual common book resource guides, developed by a team that included three of

my interviewees, had facilitated the integration of the book into introductory courses. As an illustration, a resource guide for UM's 2017 common book, *Just Mercy*, was provided to me (*Appendix B*). In the 37-page PDF, an introduction to the CRE is provided, as is a rationale for selecting the year's book. Also included in the guide are tips for teaching the book in courses (e.g., "How do I deal with controversial topics?"), examples of class activities and exercises (e.g., in-class debate, character investigation), and additional book-related resources (e.g., School of Law initiatives, definitions of key concepts, library resources).

Interviewees provided insights into how the common book was used in those courses. An administrator told me that instructors of those courses had autonomy in how to use the book. For instance, the administrator estimated that the common book was worth about 15% of a student's first-year seminar grade. In an example syllabus found on the institution's website (University of Mississippi, 2017b), students were asked complete a group project on the common book and achieve relevant student learning outcomes like "analyze a complex issue while acknowledging multiple perspectives." Next, an interviewed faculty member reported that introductory composition courses includes:

...a major assignment that invests...almost three weeks' worth of our time in the class. Additionally, some of our teachers—and they're welcome to do this—will use the text as a focus for other assignments in class.

Overall, interviewed administrators and faculty members seemed to agree that integration of the common book into introductory courses with high enrollments of first-year students increased the likelihood that students engage with- and complete assignments on the book.

Additional program features.

UM's CRE partners with other departments and campus office to sponsor common book-related events each year, typically during the fall semester. UM Libraries' website maintains a listing of common book resource guides, which includes listings of book-related events (University of Mississippi Libraries, 2017). During the study period, UM's CRE sponsored lectures, museum exhibits, cultural demonstrations, film screenings, walking tours, and panel discussions. Beyond convocation speeches by authors, five book-related events were held in 2015, ten in 2016, and nine in 2017. One administrator told me that the program had recently begun offering book-related events in the spring semester as well, extending the CRE to year-long format and providing additional opportunities for first-year students to encounter the common book.

Book-related events appeared to focus primarily on students and the UM campus, which surprised me given the fact that UM's CRE had roots as a community-based program. Interview data suggested however that that might soon change. At the time of writing, the 2018 common book was announced: a collection of short stories by Oxford's most famous resident, Nobel prize-winner, William Faulkner. Noting historical community connections, faculty and administrators whom I interviewed spoke enthusiastically about extending common book-related events into the surrounding community. For example, faculty committee members told me that first-year students would be able to visit William Faulkner's former home (now a university-owned museum) and complete a scavenger hunt in the community for Faulkner-related artifacts.

The Process of Selecting Common Books

UM's CRE is entering its eighth year. UM's website (The University of Mississippi, 2018) provides a list of books that have been chosen for the program: *The Immortal Life of*

Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot (2011-12), *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter*, by Tom Franklin (2012-13), *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education* by Craig Mullaney (2013-14), and *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Won World War II* by Denise Kiernan (2014-15). The focus of my study centered on the selections of the last three years, which includes *The Education of a Lifetime* by former UM Chancellor Robert Khayat (2015-16), *Ten Little Indians* by Sherman Alexi (2016-17), and *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson (2017-18). Recently, UM's CRE chose ten short stories from *Collected Stories* by William Faulkner for the 2018-19 academic year.

Selection committee membership.

Common book selections at UM were made by a committee made of faculty, staff, and students. An administrator provided me with a recap of the selection committee's evolution. First, four or five individuals made the selection of the first common book in 2011 (referred to as the steering committee in the previous section). After that selection, the Provost formed a common read committee of six individuals, who oversaw a larger committee (i.e., the selection committee) of twenty to 22 individuals. Four of my interviewees served on both the common read- and selection committees. The remaining interviewees served on the selection committee.

One administrator described the selection committee as "a volunteer army of people who care." Committee members represented campus departments that used the common book in courses, administrative and executive offices, campus libraries, and campus units that sponsored book-related events. The same administrator told me that selection committee membership remained largely unchanged during the program's lifespan. Indeed, I was able to infer that all of my faculty and staff interviewees had served on the CRE selection committee for multiple years. Student inclusion appeared to be a recent addition to UM's selection committee. Undergraduate

student committee members were enthusiastic students in first-year seminars invited to participate by a faculty committee member. A graduate student in Higher Education also served on the committee. Although students cycled out of the selection committee each year, about half of my administrative and faculty interviewees voiced the opinion that student input had helped the committee to predict how well potential common books would be received by the students. One student committee member recalled an experience where her input had influenced the selection process:

I think it's essential to have students [on the selection committee]...Because it was me (I was a freshman), then there was one sophomore girl that I knew, and then it was all faculty members. Sometimes they would make suggestions and the other student and I would speak up and be like, 'No, students probably won't read that'...Because at the end of the day, the main goal is to just get [incoming students] to read the book. So I think it's important to consider what they actually will read.

In summary, decision-making authority for choosing common books at UM was shared by a committed group of faculty, staff, and students in each year of the study period.

Selection process.

Interviewed administrators described the selection process. Common books at UM are chosen through a nomination and review process during the study period. Online nominations are accepted from students, faculty, staff, and community members. From there, the selection committee divides responsibility to review each nomination and meet monthly to cull the list—typically consisting of more than 100 nominations—down to a “short list” of five to six titles.

Then, the selection committee reads the finalists over the winter break before meeting to decide on a common book early in the spring semester. At the end of the process the committee's decision is submitted to the Provost, who typically approves the committee's choice.

Selection criteria.

One administrator explained the basic criteria for common books in UM's CRE to me in our interview. Common books in the study period were no longer than 400 pages, were available in paperback, were published in the last five years, and were written by author who is alive. Additional criteria are stipulated on the CRE's webpage, where book nominations are accepted: "accessible to students at all levels, accessible to community readers, multiple themes which are applicable to many disciplines...written by an author available to speak on campus in 2019... [and] available to interact with students on campus in the fall of 2019." These requirements, as many selection committee members suggested, were intended to identify books that incoming students would read.

In spite of the fact that previous selection met stated criteria, some selection committee members seemed to carry alternative definitions of the book criteria. For instance, one faculty member reported that some selection committee members informally adhered to a much lower page limit, after reading a research study on common book selection at a conference:

...we look for books that are 400 pages or less. And to be honest, we usually go far less than that page number. I was actually at a session on common reads at the First-year Experience Conference several years ago...They did a study that found that basically any page after 250, the readership goes down substantially. [Another faculty committee member] and I do a lot of work on these areas

together and we have brought that point up over and over again in our meetings here on this campus. For the most part, we do try to be more in that ballpark [of 250 pages].

An interviewed student committee member seemed to agree that the selection committee a lower page limit would encourage first-year students to read the book before arriving on campus. As such, alternative criteria seemed to be used when selection committee members thought they would result in improved readership among first-year students.

Notably, many of my interviewees explained that the committee had recently elected to completely forego its selection criteria. As one administrator told me, the selection committee “suspended the rules” in making its 2018-19 selection (Faulkner’s *Collected Stories*), which had just been announced at the time of my interviews. That is, the anthology was long (around 900 pages), stories were set in the past, and the author was deceased. One administrator justified the decision, noting that campus events had already been planned for the 2018-19 academic year to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the introduction African American slavery in North America. Citing the opportunity to connect the CRE to pre-existing campus events, the administrator told me, “...we wanted a work that we could coordinate with other programming and events...” Thus, under what appeared to be exceptional circumstances, the selection committee did not perform its typical selection process but rather, a common book was selected first and the committee then worked backward to identify which short stories in the collection would be included in common book programming and coursework.

Interviewed committee members, though excited about the selection for its potential to connect incoming students to the Oxford community, expressed doubts about how the common book would be received by incoming students. More than half of my interviewees expressed

some amount of skepticism about whether incoming students would read the compilation of classics. In particular, interviewees feared that the historical distance between the world about which Faulkner wrote and the one incoming students live in would push students away. One faculty committee member succinctly explained the committee's concern:

The problem with Faulkner is selling him to eighteen-year-olds who have a hard time reading him. Or don't want to. Any of the books [we choose], we have people that don't want to [read them]...[But] I worry a little bit more with Faulkner that it's going to be more difficult to sell it.

Nevertheless, most committee members I interviewed believed the pros of connecting first-year students to Oxford's literary community through CRE programming outweighed the cons of departing from the established selection protocol.

The committee's knowledge of common book selections at other institutions informed the selection process.

Interviewed committee members seemed to share a knowledge of common book selections at other institutions that informed UM's selection process. Many interviewees referred to other institutions' CREs as a guide for judging the success of UM's common book selections.

For those interviewees it seemed, knowledge of common books used at other institutions provided anecdotal feedback about whether UM's CRE chose books that were appropriate or challenging enough, for example. Referencing highly-regarded or aspirational peer institutions seemed to me to underscore the role of normative isomorphism in UM's CRE. One faculty committee member stated:

You take a look at a school like Stanford: it's an incredible academic institution. I think they do three books, very challenging stuff; but they're doing the same things [in terms of program implementation]. If you look at some of the best schools in the country, they're doing something like this [i.e., implementing a CRE].

Secondly, awareness of other programs also appeared to serve as a point of reference in fine tuning the selection process and implementation of the CRE at UM. Referenced previously, one faculty committee member cited a study by Ball State University researchers⁴ that explored the statistical relationship between the length of a common book and its readership. The findings stated that student readership of common books falls off after the 250-page mark, as the faculty member recalled. Now, the 250-page limit is considered during deliberations on the final pool of nominated books.

For other interviewees, references to other institutions' CREs served as a caution of how not to go about selecting common books. A faculty member on the selection committee cited a contested book selection at another institution that started a chain reaction that eventually led to the program's cancelation:

So far, we've never had a situation in which a Chancellor steps in and say no [to a book chosen by the selection committee]. Or even a situation in which the Chancellor says, 'I'm going to go with your third choice.' The day we do is the day the program dies. And I have evidence for that. If you look at [a peer institution]...they

⁴ I attempted to find the study in a scholarly search to affirm the findings but was unable to locate it. Thus, I have provided as much contextual information about the research study as possible.

had a common read program and I hear through the grapevine from a reliable source that one year the Chancellor said, ‘This is what we’re going to do’ and he vetoed the selection committee. And I think it died. It didn’t survive. It lasted that one last year and then went away.

When I attempted to confirm the Chancellor’s veto or program’s cancelation on the institution’s website, I could find no supporting evidence. Thus, I have redacted the institution’s name from the above quote. Nevertheless, the anecdote stuck with the selection committee. Almost half of the selection committee members I interviewed made reference to how UM’s CRE tried to avoid controversy with its selections. In another example, an administrator felt UM’s program was lucky because it had avoided political blowback for the types of common book its selection committee had chosen. The administrator pointed to controversies on other campuses (e.g., University of North Carolina, University of South Carolina) caused by the selection of books that dealt with topics that university or state administrators saw as unfavorable. As such, I was left with the impression that the UM selection committee worked to vet nominated book throughout the selection process to avoid a potential any potential disagreement with the Provost or Chancellor.

In all, knowledge of common book selections at national and regional CREs seemed to play at least an implicit role in refining UM’s selection processes.

The author’s speech industry seemed to play an important role in selection processes.

Noted above, one criterion for selecting common books at UM is the potential to have the book’s author visit. One reason for this is that administrators, faculty, and students whom I interviewed all perceived that the author’s speech provided above and beyond benefits to

incoming students. One faculty committee member summarized the collective belief when he explained why the author's visit factored into the selection committee's annual deliberations:

The reason [we want a living author] is that we like to have that author on campus to speak. We think that makes a difference when the author speaks at our first-year convocation, which is usually in the first few days of the fall semester. It's been a really good experience for students to meet the author. I think they have some sort of raised interest in the text when they hear that authors speak.

Since the program's inception, UM's CRE has been able to schedule an author's visit for all but one common book. Interested, I asked administrators how they had recruited authors to campus. One administrator I interviewed expressed the belief that Oxford's rich literary scene gave the CRE an advantage in attracting authors to campus. The lone exception occurred when the author of the 2016 common canceled his speaking engagement at UM due to his opposition of a recently-passed "religious freedom" bill in the state legislature (Knirnschild, 2017). Though CRE administrators had enough time to find a replacement speaker for convocation, selection committee members were disappointed in the author's decision to cancel.

The importance of the author's speech seemed to play an ongoing role in the program after the perceived success of the first author's visit (Rebecca Skloot). From that first author's visit, UM's selection committee even seemed to identify what characterized a successful author's speech. One faculty committee member provided examples of how Skloot's speech informed the selection committee's deliberations about particular authors:

So one way, for example, that we learned works very effectively with our students is to talk not about the book *per se* but about the

process of writing the book. So one of our first selections was *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and when Rebecca Skloot came, she assumed everybody had read the book. But what they didn't know anything about was what it took to produce it. And it was really amazing for adults in the room as well students to hear her tell the back story of the investigative reporting it took to pull together the information that she needed to write. And how she'd be driving on these country back roads in Virginia and Maryland looking for Henrietta Lacks' relatives and, once they realized what she was doing, what that moment was like for her as an author as well as for them as people who had otherwise been forgotten by people who knew something about their relative. So that was really exciting.

Although many selection committee members commented on the characteristics of a successful author's speech, they did not go so far as to suggest telling the author what to talk about. The same faculty committee member described a "delicate dance," where the committee explained what had worked well in the past and what UM students were like to visiting authors. The faculty member believed that this preview helped that authors tailor their speeches to UM students while preserving their autonomy.

Though interviewees described the author's speech as an additional engagement opportunity for students and a hedge against an unengaging book, they also spoke bluntly about financial realities of the author's visit criteria. One administrator told me, "[Our CRE] usually run out of money. The killer thing is the speaker fees. That's a wild card variable that can kill

your budget.” Others interviewees shared similar budgetary concerns. One faculty committee bluntly stated what many other interviewees had implied:

The drawback is there are authors that are basically out of our price range. We’re not going to have Toni Morrison come in here because it’s like \$100,000 for her to come on campus. We normally try to stay within about a \$20,000 range for a speaker fee. Which is nice: that gets us some interesting people here on campus.

By understanding the costs of authors’ visits, the selection committee seemed prepared to find work-arounds. Selection committee members mentioned two lessons learned that would might inform future considerations of hosting a common book’s author: selecting an author who would command a lower cost or saving program funds for future projects that included expensive authors. One faculty member familiar with the program’s history provided an illustration:

Now over time, we’ve mitigated the problem and reduced costs by occasionally choosing local authors. Some of our best years were devoted to local authors [and] campus authors. Of national prominence, but they weren’t [as] expensive to bring here because they were already here. And next year, Faulkner isn’t going to charge us a dime.

In summary, the selection committee for UM’s CRE outlined criteria that they believed helped to choose books that incoming students would read. The selection made at the time of data collection was an obvious exception. Most selection committee members spoke about the importance of hosting the common book’s author each year. Despite the positives outcomes that

they perceived, some selection committee members harbored concerns about the cost of authors' visits and the industry that seemed to be developing around them, such that one administrator concluded by saying, "It's a big business and potentially one that...could be a danger [to the CRE]"

Selection Committee's Perceptions about Common Books

In the preceding sections, selection committee members I interviewed (especially administrators) explained how and why common book were chosen. During my interviews, I also asked selection committee members how they perceived the selection process, whether common books achieved particular goals, and what kinds of information influenced their opinions. Committee members I interviewed relied on varied forms of quantitative, qualitative, and anecdotal data to draw inferences about the success of book selections. I noted three overarching themes, which I will cover in the subsequent sections. First, selection committee members felt that common books introduced students to academic skills that would help them be successful in college. Second, selection committee members shared beliefs that common books, especially those with themes germane to the South, introduced students to the unique historical context of the institution's community. Lastly, selection committee members felt that common books could encourage students to think critically about antiquated notions characteristic of the South. Selection committee members seemed to think that common books selected during the study period reified institutional priorities with regards to race, in particular.

The CRE functions as an academic icebreaker.

Administrators and faculty I interviewed underscored the academic goals of the UM's CRE as well as common books' potential to achieve those goals. UM's website (University of Mississippi, 2018) describes five learning outcomes of the CRE.

By reading, writing, and learning together through the shared experience of the UM Common Reading Experience, students: (1) develop critical thinking, reading, writing, and research skills and abilities; (2) gain an emerging sense of confidence as learners, thinkers, readers, and writers; (3) develop a sense of community among peers, neighbors, and instructors; (4) develop connections among ideas, experiences, disciplines, and academic and personal goals; [and] (5) relate the issues raised by the common book to their lives as new or returning students.

Interviewed committee members, especially faculty members, shared beliefs that common books achieved the program goals. In particular, interviewees touched on the idea that common books could promote a sense of community and interdisciplinary connections among incoming students. To illustrate, one faculty member communicated the belief that the common books could serve as a common point of reference for incoming students. The faculty member explained the logic behind her idea in a hypothetical address to first-year students:

[The common book] is your one big connector here. You all may go off down different paths, do different athletic events, or show up to the [different] cultural events or concerts, but you are all going to go through this [CRE] together. So I hope that they take that as an opportunity [to say to themselves]: this helps connect me to this other person holding the book in their hand.

In a second instance, another interviewed faculty member saw the common book as a tool for highlighting connections between different disciplines, sharing an anecdote about how first-

year students had reflected on similarities and differences in instructional approaches to the book across disciplines. Using *Just Mercy*, the faculty member recalled:

I also think that [the common book] offers a freshness across disciplines that allows you to have conversations with other [faculty] and to understand their approach...I'm thinking about this year: a lot of my students talked about how they were approaching this book in their sociology course and it gave me a chance to think about how a sociologist would approach this. It's very different from the way we would approach it. In that way...it pushes [faculty] to think about that approach to a topic and the ways in which students might be influenced by that approach...

Though examples of non-academic objectives were shared, all of my interviewees agreed that the main thrust of the program was academic. Interviewees shared three related-yet-different perspectives on the topic. One was that the common book conveys an early, "academic tone" to incoming students; two was that the CRE introduced incoming students to skills they'd need to succeed in college; and three, the common book was seen as a tool for promoting reading for pleasure to incoming students who were perceived by committee members to have desultory reading habits.

In the first-year seminar text (Banahan, 2017a), the chapter titled "Common Reading: Building Community Through Books reads, "The common reading assignment is an early signal that college is about learning (*despite the many distractions*) [emphasis added] and that UM students are expected to read and discuss a wide range of materials during their time at the University" (Banahan, 2017a, p. 136). While administrative and faculty interviewees all seemed

to feel that incoming students had competition for their time and energy when they first arrived on campus, one faculty committee member in particular felt that the common book conveyed a clear, academic message for new students:

On the academic side, what I really love about [the CRE] is that it sets an immediate, positive, [and] academic tone. Our orientations, (which I've participated in) are not academic. Hardly at all...the orientation leaders dance and they throw out T-shirts; [students] get a tour of our campus; they get talks about fraternities and sororities, and alcohol; they get their football tickets. It's more about fun. There's a lot of good information. Our orientation is great but it's so student-life heavy...Exacerbating that is the fact that we are known as a party school. That's just a reality. So at orientation, we don't do a whole lot to disabuse the students of that idea. One thing we do do now is hand out that book. It's a great way to set the tone.

Indeed, non-academic distractions seemed to me to be particularly notable to the UM student experience, such that the first-year seminar textbooks for freshmen and transfer students (Banahan, 2017a, 2017b) are suffused with sections describing best practices for football tailgating, Greek Life, alcohol use, renting an apartment, and social media use. As such, the same faculty member concluded that it was important to engage students in the academic as early as possible:

That is just a lifecycle of the college student. And we don't have to solve all of this with the common reading experience. But if [the

CRE] can provide a common [academic] experience for every first-year student here, and that experience goes beyond a football game (I like football but football is not important)...then great.

Thus, some committee members seemed to feel that the CRE had the potential to make an early impact while new students were not yet immersed in non-academic sectors of student life. Selection committee members also seemed to recognize that simply asking incoming students to read the book was not enough to engage students academically. For this, messaging around UM's CRE was explicit in framing the common book as a mandatory exercise. In the first-year seminar textbook (Banahan, 2017a), the chapter called "Common Reading: Building Community through Books" described the common book as a "first assignment." Yet, most of the interviewed committee members saw the common book as going further than an assignment. Rather, they seemed to view the experience of reading the common book, hearing the author speak at convocation, and encountering writing assignments using the common book in introductory coursework represented as a comprehensive experience that introduced first-year students to skills necessary for academic success. As examples, one faculty committee member explained that, "[The CRE] is really more, in their first days of college, coming to understand what college is; getting a feel for it with a book that is intentionally designed to spark interest" while another faculty committee member expressed a similar thought: that the CRE offers students "...the language of academics, the tools that academics use."

Still, it seemed to me that the most explicit message about academic skills revolved around students' reading habits. That is, nearly all of my interviewees expressed a belief that incoming students did not read as much as committee members expected. One faculty committee member opined about the ubiquity of incomplete reading proclivities among incoming students:

...we also want to be realistic about the demography of our first-year students. Many of them have never actually read an entire book. I'm talking about even the ones who have good ACT scores. I think there's some national research on this, but the current generation is not reading a whole lot: they'll skim books; they'll read summaries of books; but they're not sitting down and reading a book from cover to cover.

Another faculty committee member made a similar point, further elaborating on the role of the common book as addressing students' short attention spans in the digital age:

Also, I think you kind of know this reality: it's a little embarrassing but we have students that say, "I haven't read a full book before." Or, "I haven't read a full book in a while. I've read the Harry Potter books but I haven't read anything in a while." You know, read something cover to cover. A lot of studies show that students these days read more than ever but they say that's digitally, through social media, that kind of stuff. They're reading a lot of things, but they're not reading texts cover to cover, so [the CRE is] an opportunity to do that too.

Curious whether the CRE had influenced student reading patterns as committee members hoped, I attempted to triangulate the program's goal (as one student committee member succinctly put it, "the main goal is to just get [incoming students] to read the book") with information interviewed administrators provided me about common book readership. According to one administrator, UM's CRE relied on quantitative data from student surveys and anecdotal

data, like student opinions about books and book-related events in written assignments, to judge the readership of common books. Specifically, administrators and selection committee members shared with me that surveys given to students in first-year seminars in 2017 showed that 40-44% of incoming students read 2017's common book, *Just Mercy*. The administrator estimated that 40-50% of students read common books during the study period, which as he understood, was similar to readership rates at peer institutions (e.g., University of Texas, University of Virginia). Curious why consistently half of incoming students did not read the books, I looked to other interviews for additional context.

Based on my interactions with other committee members, it seemed that students who did not read common books did so for a number of reasons. One reason noted by interviewees was that students simply did not like the book, so they did not read it. One faculty committee member related his surprise to learn that students did not read the book for such a simple reason:

[W]e asked students if they read the book. The less popular books they will say no. Which is surprising to me and for many people on the committee because, let's face it, we weren't slacks when we were in college.

Interestingly, students were not the only group to voice displeasure over common books. That is, three interviewees reported that parents and alumni have at times complained when common books dealt with particular topics (e.g., sexuality). Though notable, I did not get the impression that parents or alumni presented a consistent or formidable obstacle to student readership of the book.

Student committee members, in particular, were able to share nuanced reasons for why some students didn't read common books. One interviewed student suggested that her peers

could find online resources about common books that were sufficient for completing book-based assignments. The student described told me:

We had a whole project to do in [my first-year seminar] and a lot of people in the class still hadn't read the book [but] still got good grades on it. They didn't even read the chapters they had to do.

Overall, I finished my data collection believing that the interviewed committee members aimed to choose books that might enrich the intellectual experiences of all incoming students (i.e., not just the 40-50% who read the book each year) rather than narrowly focusing on high readership rates. Although some committee members frequently pointed to reading the common book as an entry point to the CRE, readership rates seemed to be stable across years (and institutions) regardless of chosen book titles. In any case, selection committee members the CRE as a means to remediating incoming students' perceived underpreparation and conveying the message that college is an "academic enterprise."

A recent common book reified the unique historical context of the community.

At a basic level, UM's CRE seemed to reify the rich history of the institution's community. Anecdotally, many of my interviewees shared cultural tidbits with me about the surrounding community, whether a piece of historical trivia or a recommendation where to spend leisure time. Pride in the local community seemed to me to be ubiquitous. In the supplemental text for first-year seminars for transfer students (Banahan, 2017b, p. 60), Oxford, MS is called the "Cultural Mecca of the South...home to Nobel Prize-winning author William Faulkner and other authors such as Larry Brown, John Grisham, Barry Hannah, and Willie Morris [*sic*]."

In my interview with one administrator, he elaborated on the extensive and distinctive literary community in and around the college town, including nationally-recognized, independent

bookstores inhabiting three historic buildings in the town square (awarded *Publishers Weekly's 2013 Bookstore of the Year*; Rosen, 2013), a weekly radio show dedicated to literature and storytelling (i.e., Thacker Mountain Radio), and two renowned, literary conferences per year (i.e., Conference for the Book, William Faulkner Conference). Committee members' pride was palpable, especially since the selection committee recently chose a collection of short stories by the community's most famous author, William Faulkner. The choice of Faulkner, for some interviewees (particularly faculty) was seen as imparting a something fundamental to the UM student experience. One faculty member exemplified this line of thinking, saying:

I've always thought that if you are connected to the University of Mississippi you should know something about- and have read a little bit of Faulkner. Just like if you going to the University of Nebraska you should know something about- and have read Willa Cather. Why? They're great American writers that come from those communities. But also for the rest of your life, educated peers will expect you to know something. And you'll be at a party and somebody will say, *Oh Faulkner!* And if you don't know anything, you don't look like an intelligent graduate of that university.

For other interviewees, the choice of Faulkner seen rather as something that would connect incoming students to Oxford's literary community. As one faculty interviewee succinctly shared, "Faulkner is such an integral part of Oxford. It's a way for them to get an understanding of the community that they are entering." Indeed, most of my interviewees noted that many of Faulkner's stories took place in a fictionalized Oxford and were excited to tell about

planned book-related events that might connect incoming students to the community's rich history. One faculty member told me about a book-related scavenger hunt:

There are some local artifacts that Faulkner touched when he was around. The one I know about that we've been talking about on the committee is: he was not very good about paying bills; apparently he owed some of the local merchants money even when he died. So one of the stores on the square, which is kind of our central area in Oxford, that's been around since the 19th century, still has a letter that was written by Faulkner acknowledging what he owed to them but promising he would never pay.

In talking to interviewees about a Faulkner common book, I also got the sense that a committee members saw a Faulkner selection as an opportunity to plan book-related events that might be as well-attended or well-received as notable events from previous years. At the time of my interviews, committee members seemed to be searching for a replicable formula for drawing in students to book-related events. Like one faculty committee member said, "...you never know if you're going to have two people sitting there or 200."

Throughout my interviews, selection committee members pointed to previous book-related events that had created excitement among students. For instance, two selection committee members pointed to a particularly noteworthy event 2016. For that year's book, *Ten Little Indians*, the CRE planned multiple events that explored Native American heritage in Mississippi. One faculty member recalled:

We invited a group of Choctaw Indians from Jackson [MS] to come up. They had their native clothes on, they did a big dance in

front of the union (which drew a big crowd), and they played stickball. They invited people to play, pulled people into their dancing. It got a ton of social media attention... That was one of my favorite events because it was a lot of a-ha moments on both parts [UM students and the CRE event planners] of what was happening.

Still, committee members seemed to understand that attendance at book-related events did not always equate to success. For example, the aforementioned faculty committee member recalled a recent *Just Mercy* event that, though well attended, suffered from unforeseen technological issues that prematurely ended a Skype session between students and inmates at a nearby correctional facility.

In spite of previous shortcomings, it seemed that selection committee members felt that Faulkner could be used to create buzz-worthy events that attracted students' attention and engagement to the CRE while also conveying an element of prestige that distinguished the institution from others.

Some selection committee members felt that common books reinforced institutional priorities about diversity and equity.

Selection committee members seemed to feel it important to convey the institution's unique cultural history to incoming students. In the same way, committee members also seemed to feel it important to choose books that challenged popular notions about the institution's and region's history.

Throughout my interviews, it was evident that committee members wished to impart a knowledge about the university's history to incoming students. Beyond my interviews, it seemed

that communicating the institution's history to newcomers was at least an implicit institutional goal. For instance, the supplemental textbook of first-year seminar (Banahan, 2017a) contained sections titled "University History," "Race and the University of Mississippi," and "Hotty Toddy and Other Traditions"—over a quarter of the entire book. Further, many of my interviewees shared anecdotes and tidbits about the institution's history, traditions, and values with me. One administrator took me on a walking tour of campus of the original campus Circle, dating to 1848, while a student allayed my curiosity about the institution's catch phrase, *Hotty Toddy*, by recalling two accounts of its suspected origins, which date back to World War I and the 1920s.

Beyond the superficial, I got a clear sense from interviewees and supplemental documents that communicating to newcomers the less savory aspects of the institution's history, especially concerning race, was of paramount importance. One of the first-year text's (Banahan, 2017a) chapters, "Race and the University of Mississippi," detailed the history of race at the institution while the subsequent chapter (e.g., "Diversity and Inclusion: Exploring Similarities and Embracing Differences") made explicit the institution's values with regards to diversity and equity. The content of these chapter drew parallels to the institution's mission. On the institution's website (University of Mississippi, 2019), its mission reads:

The mission of the University of Mississippi is to create, evaluate, share, and apply knowledge in a free, open, and inclusive environment of intellectual inquiry. Building upon a distinguished foundation in the liberal arts, the state's first comprehensive university serves the people of Mississippi and the world through a breadth of academic, research, professional, and service programs...

Similar to the first-year seminar textbook's apparent support of institutional priorities concerning inclusivity, I came to feel that some interviewed selection committee members felt that UM's CRE also played a role in reifying the institution's "open and inclusive" mission.

Though the institution has moved steadily toward its mission and away from divisive symbols of the past (i.e., removal of the state flag on campus, which bears the Confederate symbol; retirement of the "Colonel Reb" athletic mascot, who resembled "a white plantation owner...dressed in a Confederate uniform" [McCausland, 2017]; prohibition of singing the song "Dixie," due to its racist connotations at football games; foundation of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation; and hosting of the first presidential debate of 2008, which included the first Black candidate of a major party [i.e., Barack Obama]), it seemed some at the institution, including committee members, felt there was work yet to be done. Illustrative of the point, the authors of the first-year text's chapter on race highlighted administrative irresolution and public opinion of the state's (and institution's) history as obstacles still to be overcome:

Sometimes the University has been too hesitant to move forward, forced to negotiate between alumni who have nostalgic views of the past and new students who bring differing perspectives on race. And sometimes, its efforts have gone unnoticed by a nation that would rather keep Mississippi as a scapegoat for negative race relations. (p. 62)

Examples of the challenges presented by public opinion and administrative reluctance were present in a recent NBC News piece, titled "The Confederacy Still Haunts the Campus of Ole Miss" (McCausland, 2017). The article described the "contentious balance" the institution sought in pursuit of its diversity and equity mission in spite of its troubled past with race. The

author wrote, “[t]he school wants to appeal to a new diverse student base without disenfranchising its conservative students, or infuriating the wealthy political groups and alumni that are pressuring the university to uphold its white heritage.” McCausland detailed recent events that challenged the institution’s diversity mission. In 2012, White students protested the re-election of Barack Obama; in 2014, a noose and state flag (with the Confederate symbol) were tied to the statue of James Meredith [the first black student to enroll at the institution]; in 2015, the Ku Klux Klan protested on campus in response to the student body government’s vote to remove the state flag from campus; students recently petitioned for the return of the Colonel Reb mascot; and in 2017, university administrators paid to have a statue commemorating soldiers of the Confederacy repaired rather than removed after a car crash damaged it. The author drew the blunt conclusion that a lack of institutional leadership not only stood in the way of the institution’s diversity mission but was also to blame for a decrease in minority student enrollment over the last five years.

Noting that the first-year text and McCausland’s article present similar conclusions (though to varying degrees), I wanted to hear the perspectives of selection committee members on the topic. On the surface, recent common book selections touched on related topics (e.g., treatment of Native Americans, race, criminal justice). Another recent common book chronicled the life of former Chancellor Khayat, who led notable inclusivity efforts during his 14-year Chancellorship, including the erection of the James Meredith statue and the issuance of an apology for the institution’s history of excluding black students (Banahan, 2017a). In our interviews, many selection committee members seemed to feel that common books could introduce first-year students to viewpoints they may not have encountered to before arriving in Oxford.

For nearly all of the interviewed committee members, recognizing students' political perspectives was an important first step to bridging the gap between long-held beliefs and open-minded discourse that characterized a liberal arts education. One faculty committee member provided some background about UM students' political views:

We have a very conservative student body. I know this because my colleagues and I are just finishing a [research study on UM's campus that collected data on students' political orientations]. A really substantial number of students said that they were right of center or moderate centrists. But also during 2008 in the presidential election, we are one of the few campuses whose the college newspaper endorsed the McCain-Palin ticket. Which is really unusual: I think there was one other across the country...So a lot of students here are looking to reify ideas about the way the world works that they already believe 100%.

Many of the interviewed selection committee seemed to agree that an implicit goal of selected common books was to expose first-year students to perspectives or ways of thinking that they perhaps hadn't encountered at home. An interviewed administrator exemplified the belief, saying:

That's the only place where we've gotten a little bit of negative feedback: some of the parents have taken exception [to selected common books]. They are very conservative, right-wing it would be described. They don't like some of the language, some of

themes...But that's okay. They don't want their child exposed
[but] this is the place for them to be exposed.

Many interviewees agreed that it was important to select books that challenged new students' previously-held beliefs. None, however, suggested that common books were intended to change students' political beliefs. As one faculty member emphatically asserted, "It is in no way an attempt to convert anyone from one political party to another. Or from one ideology to another. It's just an attempt to stimulate critical thinking." Indeed, other committee members shared a similar belief that challenging ideas in common books could promote program goals centering on academic skills, like critical thinking and discourse. An interviewed faculty member elaborated how common books that "go beyond the familiar" could achieve the program's goals:

I really want to help disturb students in a pro-social way. I want to make comfortable students less comfortable. There are people in our committee who like nice stories; if we chose a book that was nice, I wouldn't think we were using this opportunity to its full potential. Because it more reifies what students would be exposed to anyways, as opposed to challenging their way of looking at the world. To me success starts with having a book that opens students minds to the value of seeing the world and seeing people through a more open-minded, more liberal⁵ perspective.

⁵ Whereas the use of the word "liberal" may seem to suggest that the selection committee wants to influence students' party affiliations, I came to feel that the correct connotation of "liberal" in the quote meant "open-minded" or "open to new beliefs" for many in the selection committee. In the opening pages of the first-year textbook, UM is described as a "flagship liberal arts university" and defines a liberal education not as "...an education that indoctrinates students in the political ideology of liberalism..." but rather "...an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change" (Banahan, 2017a, p. 15-16).

Seeming to bring the line of thinking full circle, the same interviewee, a faculty member of color, provided an example of how the common book could challenge a largely-conservative student body's views while avoiding overtly political undertones:

I think these books do provide a tangential lead-in to difficult conversations. Because as people in the committee have said before, you can talk about difficult issues without the conversation being difficult if the central focus is the book, as opposed to an issue that's difficult. If you're talking about characters and what happened to certain characters in a book, then you can hit race without saying, "Okay, for the next 50 minutes were going to talk about race." Which is terribly off-putting to lots of our students.

And to many instructors, I think.

After my interviews, I came to feel that selection committee members believed that common books promoted students' critical engagement with topics that challenged their beliefs in an open-minded way. In doing so, the common book, at least indirectly, seemed to reify the institution's open and inclusive mission while walking the fine line between the competing interests detailed in McCausland's article. The above-quote faculty member lent evidence to my notion, explicitly connecting the institution's mission and the common book:

So I do think that the book is a great vehicle for enabling the kind of conversations that would be very difficult to have if you didn't have an entryway that everyone buys into. And in fact, it's on the syllabus, and is celebrated by the convocation, the Chancellor comes in and supports it, and there are free books (and for a lot of

students, that's a novelty). So those are ways that the institution kind of implicitly suggests that talking about these things is really okay without having to talk about them directly. So in that sense, I think we [the selection committee] do serve a really important social justice mission without saying we are or appear to be beating the drum and waving the flag for social justice.

Overall, selection committee members at UM provided evidence that selection criteria, to some extent, focused on a book's potential to present new or contrasting perspectives (as judged by selection committee members) to incoming students.

Summary of the Findings

This chapter presented the case of the University of Mississippi's common reading experience. The CRE at UM was implemented in 2011 as one component of a student success initiative and now reaches around 5,000 first-year and transfer students each year. The program gives incoming students free copies of the book at orientation and invites the common book's author to speak at the fall convocation ceremony. Students may also attend book-related events throughout the academic year or encounter book-based assignments in introductory coursework.

Common books were selected by a committee of faculty, staff, and students from a nomination pool. My interviewees reported that the committee membership changed little year to year, only inviting in new students each year. Students were seen as providing important feedback to the rest of the committee, for example how likely incoming students were to read nominated books. Common books were selected using a list of criteria, which included a page count, a publication date cut off, and a living author requirement. The importance of the author's campus visit seemed to have always been important to the selection process. However, during

the study period some committee members had begun to express skepticism that the authors' costs were sustainable for the CRE. Notably, the selection committee reported that they had chosen to overlook selection criteria for the coming year in order to choose a work by a famous (but deceased) local author. That selection was seen as an opportunity to enrich students' engagement with the CRE by connecting the program to the community's rich literary culture. A minority of interviewees also expressed the hope that the local connection would attract student attendance and participation in book-related events.

Next, selection committee members shared varied but related perceptions about the kinds of messages that selected common books were supposed to convey to incoming students. Two trends were notable. Many selection committee members believed the common book and the CRE could provide incoming students with a preview of the skills and practices that are important for success in postsecondary education. Most interviewees cited promoting reading habits in particular as an implicit goal of the program. Finally, selection committee members were aware of the institution's and region's complicated history with race. Seeming to support the institution's stated mission to improve the racial climate, many committee members felt that the CRE could serve a complementary role to the mission by promoting open-minded discourse among incoming students through book topics and book-related events without promoting a particular political ideology among incoming students.

Chapter Six: The University of Iowa One Community, One Book Program

This is the third and final results chapter of my qualitative, multi-case study. Here, I present the results from the University of Iowa. Like previous chapters, the case write-up is split in two sections: in the first, I introduce the institutional context and provide a description of how the institution's CRE is intended to be implemented, drawing primarily from interview data with program administrators. In the second half of the chapter, I describe how interviewees at the institution (i.e., administrators, faculty members, representatives of partnering community organizations) viewed the CRE's implementation and book selection processes during the study period, underscore points of agreement and disagreement on how and why common books were selected, and explains how interviewees arrived at those conclusions.

At the end of each chapter, I offer summarizing remarks that underscore important findings and provide preliminary conclusions to the overarching research question of this study: What, if anything, are institutions trying to accomplish through freshman book text selection?

Introduction to the Campus Context and Program Overview

The University of Iowa (UI) is a four-year public, flagship institution serving more than 32,000 students, 24,000 of whom are undergraduates. It is an R1, doctoral university conducting highest intensity research (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, n.d.), business, engineering, health professions (including fitness studies), communications, and social sciences are the most commonly studied academic programs. In fall 2017, 86% of UI applicants were granted admission and 21% accepted. Admitted students that fall included 5,824 freshmen and 1,201 transfer students (NCES, n.d.).

UI's student population is majority white (71%), traditional age (i.e., 24 years of age and under; 92%), enrolled full-time (87%), and comes from Iowa (50%) (NCES, n.d.). According to the institution's student housing website, 95% of first-time freshmen lived on campus (University of Iowa, 2017). Eighty-six-percent of first-time freshmen persist to their sophomore year. The 4-year and 6-year graduation rates for the 2011 cohort are 54% and 74%, respectively. Small disparities exist by student type, with 76% of females graduating with a bachelor's degree in six years versus 71% of males. Race differences are also present, with six-year graduation rates at 75% for White students, 71% for Asian students, 66% for Hispanic/Latino students, and 59% for Black students (NCES, n.d.).

According to the program's website (University of Iowa, 2018), the CRE at UI is an annual, community-based initiative administered by a university-affiliated research center. The CRE, called One Community One Book (OCOB), is described on the program's website as a "collaborative effort between the campus and community to promote human rights education through the reading of literature." It represents one component of the research center's human rights-focused outreach, community engagement, and partnership-building efforts. Other components include educational programs for prison inmates, a partnership with the Iowa City Human Rights Commission to promote adoption of human rights principles in city policies, and provision of college courses on human rights topics that result to a Certificate in Human Rights (University of Iowa, 2018).

The program's website describes the goal and implementation of the CRE in the following way:

The program encourages community members to read and discuss the same book with human rights or social justice themes at

organized book discussions, in the classroom or in books clubs. A capstone event is always held and is usually a talk by the book author. Other activities are often held that are related to the books such as film screenings or children's activities.

From my interviews and the program website, I learned of numerous examples of annual, book-related events. The CRE's website provides an illustration of the program's yearly focus on author's speeches and community events, underscoring notable book selections from previous years of programming:

Highlights of the program over the years include a visit by author Khaled Hosseini whose debut novel set in Afghanistan, *The Kite Runner*, was chosen in 2004 well before this book became an international bestseller. In 2008, copies of the book, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah, were given to each incoming first-year student. Partnering with the Provost's Office and the Lecture Committee made possible a visit by the author who spoke to approximately 1500 people at First Methodist church in Iowa City. Subsequently, One Community One Book has partnered with the City of Literature, Geneva Campus Ministry, and other campus and community groups to fully integrate the program into the life of the community. In 2015, more than 1100 people attended the keynote lecture delivered by author Bryan Stevenson, who spoke on his best-selling book *Just Mercy*.

In addition to the author's speech, the website (and my interviewees) highlighted the regular occurrence of book discussions with "[g]roups from around the City and County, such as public libraries, the Oakdale correctional facility, and the Iowa City Senior Center."

During the study period, UI's common books were *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson (2015), *Without You, There Is No Us* by Suki Kim (2016), and *The Butterfly Mosque*, by G. Willow Wilson (2017). The full list of common books and a detailed description of the selection process is provided later in the chapter.

Why a community-based common reading experience in Iowa City?

UI's CRE's community focus was unique to my dataset and I attempted to discern whether the implementation approach reflected something unique to the community. Investigating the conjecture, I collected data from sources beyond my interviews. One of the first sources I noted was the City of Literature organization. As the organization's website (Iowa City of Literature, n.d.) details, in 2008 Iowa City was designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (*UNESCO*) as a City of Literature, one of only three at the time (Edinburgh, Scotland and Melbourne, Australia are the others). The website describes the community in the following way:

...Iowa City, for its size, may be the most literary city on earth. It has a unique set of influential literary institutions, which explore new ways to teach and support writers. At the same time, it has long been, quite simply, a place for writers: a haven, a destination, a proving ground, and a nursery. Together...the writers and the institutions...have created a history and identity in which its

citizens take enormous pride, prizing a role in celebrating and honoring writers and good writing.

Curious about the history of the “influential literary institutions” in Iowa City, I also watched a recent documentary entitled *City of Literature* (Hill, 2012) which provided a history of the community’s and university’s literary infrastructure, which has produced 40 Pulitzer Prize winners and hosts the oldest creative writing academic program in the U.S. Hill’s documentary described the emergence of literary societies on UI’s campus in the late 19th century. Led by faculty and involving students, the workshops centered on the development of reading and writing skills in small, intimate groups and had the aim of developing a regionalist literature that celebrated the Midwest. The early literary societies laid the groundwork for establishing creative writing as an academic field at UI. Since establishing those academic programs, famous authors like Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas, Flannery O’Connor, Phillip Roth, and Kurt Vonnegut participated in Iowa’s creative writing programs (i.e., The Writer’s Workshop; Hill, 2012).

During my data collection, my interviewees seemed to share the beliefs expressed by the City of Literature organization and the documentary. In some cases, I explicitly asked interviewees why the community was the focus of the CRE while in other interviews, my interviewees preempted my questions, speaking openly about the community’s literary interests. Their responses, set against the backdrop of the supplemental data I collected, seemed to suggest that the city’s rich, literary infrastructure undergirded UI’s CRE in some way. One interviewed CRE administrator, illustrating my point, suggested that the UNESCO designation and Writer’s Workshop made the community particularly receptive to a CRE, telling me:

We’re designated as City of Literature...I mean, we can draw amazing authors here. Not just to visit, but they spent time as

visiting professors. Prairie Lights [a community bookstore] is also amazing... We have a huge step up because we already have such a literature-focused community. It's not hard to persuade a person to read a book. But! "Which book are you going to read?" is the hard part. Not, "are you going to read one?"

Other interviewees seemed to agree that a deep interest in literature was ubiquitous in the community. An interviewed representative of the community's public library called Iowa City a community "full of deep readers" while another interviewee looked around a busy coffee shop during our interview and told me:

This town is also unique in that sense because—well, I don't see any at the moment--but there are probably three or four authors here [in this coffee shop] with us right now. That's just the nature of the town. So reading programs have a little bit of cover because of who people think we [i.e., resident of Iowa City] are.

The same interviewee later tied Iowa City's purported literary inclinations back to the CRE goals, speaking effusively about the role that literature could play in improving the community:

What I love about the fact that our [CRE] program continues to roll along is that it's an indication of that hope, that belief we have that a community of reading can change the individual and that community of reading can advance the community.

In sum, most of my interviewees shared a notable pride in the community's interest in literature and tended to point to two community institutions (e.g., City of Literature designation, Writer's Workshop programs) as examples of the particularly fertile ground for a CRE:

CRE program history.

The history of UI's CRE is detailed on the institution's website (University of Iowa, 2018). Interviews with three program administrators (i.e., current CRE director, former CRE director, former research center director) provided additional information about the program's history. UI's CRE was launched in 2001 as an outreach program of the University of Iowa Center for Human Rights. The center itself was established in the late 1990s and early 2000s by a two professors and a community member with a career in the United Nations. The founding members had career interests in social justice issues, especially on an international scale. Since its inception nearly 20 years ago, the research center has gone through leadership changes, operated on a shoestring budget, and survived a close-call with permanent closing. Still, the center's longevity is reflected in its community-based CRE, which was developed and implemented as one of its earliest endeavors (University of Iowa, 2018).

The research center was founded in the late 1990s. At the time, the founders had just completed a year-long program that commemorated the anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which brought many well-known international social justice experts to the UI community. On the heels of the year-long human rights program, the organizers initiated fundraising efforts to found a research center for the study of international human rights topics on UI's campus. A few years later, a CRE was conceived as a way to build off of the critical community dialogues around international social justice topics human rights conference (University of Iowa, 2018). One interviewed administrator in particular recalled the early years of the center:

[The founder of the Center for Human Rights] had put together a program called Global Focus '98 during 1998 and 1999, which

brought in a lot of famous people from around the world to talk about human rights issues. That sort of morphed into, “What can we do with this kind of effort?” and the reading program grew out of that.

From its earliest years, I pieced together from my interviews with administrators that common books and book-related events were funded through intermittent donations and small grants. The above-quoted administrator elaborated on early funding and community outreach efforts:

We were all feeling our way along. And every year we started the project with lots of people interested, but very little money. It used to be that they never paid authors to come. Of course, as you can imagine, it didn't take long to realize that just couldn't continue. Every year we tried to get donations. People are pretty good, from the public libraries and some of the banks, about giving donations. But, you know, it's never lots of money. So [a program volunteer] and I both would write grants to supplement what we could and try to get community donors. And that has helped.

In its early years, the CRE appeared to reach audiences through partnerships with organizations in the community (e.g., community book clubs, the public library, local arts and literature venues) and, as the administrator implied, centered on the author's visit. In spite of slim budgets, the administrator recalled that the program attracted notable authors to Iowa City to speak about the common books, including Khaled Hosseini (*The Kite Runner*), T.C. Boyle (*The Tortilla Curtain*), and Timothy Tyson (*Blood Done Sign My Name*).

In 2013, the research center that administered the CRE experienced a funding interruption that resulted in significant administrative changes at the center. Detailed on the center's website, funding for the research center from the Provost's Office was discontinued and the center's administrators moved quickly to search out new means of support. In the end, an ad-hoc committee accepted a proposal to move the research center to the College of Law (University of Iowa, 2018). As the same administrator recalled, the transition brought on "a big change" to the CRE as well:

That's when we were no longer reporting to International Programs and we were put under the College of Law... The College of Law changed the Center's focus in a lot of ways and some of the ways that we had done things. It probably [gave] us some structure that was needed. But there wasn't money to hire more staff [so] I think for working on this project, it made it really hard because this project is a lot of work and you can spend a huge amount of time on it.

Indeed, the other CRE director appeared to agree that the most significant changes to the CRE's administration in recent years were fewer staff hours allocated to the program and fewer center dollars to fund the program.

In summary, my interviews with the administrators gave me the sense that the CRE was able to leverage the high-profile human rights conference to attract well-known authors to speak in Iowa City on a tight budget.

A short-lived campus integration of the CRE.

I was surprised to learn from my interviewees that the program included only minimal on-campus integration. When I questioned administrator interviewees, they shared that the only attempt to integrate the CRE into the student community was short-lived and ultimately, discontinued.

As administrators recalled, after about seven years of CRE programming provided by the campus research center, campus leaders decided to integrate the common book on campus in 2008-09. An administrator described the thought behind the decision:

[The research center] was still reporting to International Programs at that point. The Dean of International Programs was working with the Provost's Office and another group of people on campus to attempt a student read. I think that's a great idea; I know it works very well at many, many schools.

Another administrator told me that two objectives were central to the forming a campus CRE. One was strategic for the research center: the CRE was seen by research center administrators as a way to integrate the work of the small center into course curricula and to promote its course offerings to students (i.e., non-degree, certificate programs). The other objective was to provide a shared academic experience for incoming students.

With funding assistance from the Provost's Office, a copy of *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah was purchased for all incoming freshmen. Although one of interviewed administrators reflected that the campus partnerships that were formed were a "phenomenal success" because they enabled the program to bring the author to Iowa City, the campus component of OCOB seemed to face obstacles early and often. Two obstacles were specified by

interviewed administrators: ambivalence to the program and damage on campus caused by a flood.

In speaking about ambivalence, one administrator told me that the common book was integrated to campus curricula on a voluntary basis. As the administrator recalled, though its integration into course curricula was encouraged widely by the research center, it became evident that the book was only used in one course (i.e., introductory rhetoric courses) and book-related resources for teaching assistants in those courses were sparse. In addition, the administrator seemed to perceive some degree of administrative and departmental reluctance to promoting student engagement with the book. The administrator remembered:

They [Provost's Office and International Programs administrators] didn't want the students to have to read something over the summer. The other piece of it was: it was hard to find a class required for all incoming, first-year students to make this a requirement for all of them. And the best they could come up with was the rhetoric course, which the majority of first-year students would take. The downside was that most of the first-year students in rhetoric are taught by T.A.s. No one really [told] the T.A.s that this is what we're going to require the students to read and the T.A.s were supposed to develop everything. This book was only strongly suggested. But we don't know that everyone required it, or read it, or if they read all of it or only part of it. It was uneven. It was the best we could do.

Another administrator I interviewed elaborated, suggesting that perhaps it wasn't ambivalence or reluctance that hindered the CRE's rollout but rather competing student success programs with similar objectives. This administrator recalled that UI was experimenting with multiple student success initiatives at the same time the CRE was integrated on campus. In hindsight, the administrator concluded that the CRE "was not the primary mechanism identified for pushing student success." For instance, UI instituted first-year seminars and living-learning communities concurrent to the CRE pilot. In describing programs' goals and administration, the administrator seemed to imply that the CRE and its student-centered objectives (i.e., promoting critical thinking, shared academic experiences) may have been redundant. The administrator explained:

[UI] opted for first-year seminars that are topic-based and more individualized by topic. Living-learning communities, another student success component, were mandatory for a year or two but now that has backed off even though many first-year students live on campus. Both are still offered, of course. First-year seminars are optional, but are somewhat connected to living-learning communities thematically.

The administrator continued, stating that first-year seminar themes were typically things that faculty members who lead the sections were passionate about. Some were even "quirky," and the administrator saw that as an opportunity to attract students' interests. For instance, a "serious" faculty member in economics led a first-year seminar on Economies in Sci-Fi Novels. Overall, the administrator concluded that, "Buy-in was better on first-year seminars and was easier to come by than [it was for] the CRE while still serving as an academic icebreaker."

Judging from other interviews, the CRE pilot experienced challenges beyond administrators' control as well. For example, the rollout of the campus component of the CRE coincided with the stock market crash that signaled the beginning of the 2008 Great Recession. Interviewed administrators suggested that the economic strain felt on campus impacted the program, at least indirectly. In addition, that year the campus was severely damaged by record flooding shortly before fall classes began. The flooding caused significant damages, closing or limiting access to many buildings on campus. A different administrator remembered some of the challenges that the flood presented to the CRE pilot:

This was the year that the Iowa River flooded in a major way.

There were so many [campus] buildings out of service, which went on for years. Picking the venue [for the author's speech] was very tough. We ended up in a very large church near campus that had a second level that students could sit in like a balcony and look down. We probably had 1,500 people in there. If the fire department would've come in, we would've been busted because people were sitting all over the floors. There were no aisles to get in and out. It was tremendous!

In spite of the "tremendous" turnout for the author's speech, the challenges that the CRE pilot faced seemed to be too much to survive. Whether ambivalence, economic worry, or some other obstacle, the CRE was not revisited on campus the next year. The aforementioned administrator recalled, "[t]he next year when the program was ready to start choosing again, we could not get any commitments from the departments on campus like we had had [the year prior]

to make this an ongoing program.” When I pressed the administrator to reflect on why departmental commitments to the CRE were not extended again, the administrator opined:

The idea of having someone dictate what would be taught in any particular program was a sticking point. And I’m not on that side [i.e., curricular] of things so I can’t even argue for us when it comes to that. But I think it was brought up here and there over the years and nobody ever really wanted to do anything about it. And there have been leadership changes here and there where we thought things would be more favorable.

Both of the interviewed administrators who were present at the time seemed to agree that the combination of obstacles ultimately ended the CRE’s campus experiment. One of the administrators concluded our interview by reflecting that the CRE was an entirely new idea at UI when it was piloted and, although instances of buy-in were noted, the CRE was not a tradition on campus. So, when a change in leadership at the research center and campus-wide funding challenges occurred (exacerbated by the Recession and the flood), there was no convincing campus leaders to continue funding the CRE as a campus-wide program. Later, by the time UI and the research center had overcome challenges and there was an opportunity to revisit the idea of campus-wide CRE, the administrator opined that first-year seminars had grown with student and faculty buy and, by extension, had supplanted the CRE’s potential role on campus. The other interviewed administrator agreed that revisiting the CRE on campus had never received any support, saying “After a while, you quit beating a dead horse.”

Seeming to disagree with the other administrators, a third interviewed administrator seemed to hold a more optimistic view about reviving the CRE on campus. For this

administrator, it appear that re-integration of the CRE was rather a matter of identifying new partnerships on campus. The administrator opined:

I wish I'd been there because I feel like [another administrator's] interpretation of events didn't jive with what I understood of how things went. I feel like something wasn't quite right because there are plenty of folks on this campus that have the power to make it happen again, if we just pushed the right button I guess. I've toyed with the idea of trying again. And I do know folks who would be on board with that.

To summarize, CRE administrators recalled that a campus component of the CRE was implemented and promptly discontinued a decade ago, citing lack of buy-in and uncertain financial conditions. Still, at least one interviewed administrator expressed some optimism that integration of the CRE on campus remained a possibility for the future. In any case, interviewed administrators noted that the CRE would maintain its community orientation moving forward.

The Process of Selecting Common Books

UI's CRE is entering its eighteenth year. The books that have been chosen are: *The Last Summer of Reason* by Tahar Djaout (2001), *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* by Loung Ung (2002), *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett (2003), *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (2004), *When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka (2005), *The Tortilla Curtain* by T.C. Boyle (2006), *Blood Done Sign My Name* by Timothy B. Tyson (2007), *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah (2008), *Animal Vegetable, Miracle: A Year in Food Life* by Barbara Kingsolver (2009), *Gardens of Water* by Alan Drew (2010), *Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers (2011), *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* by Kao Kalia Yang (2012), *The Boy*

Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope by William Kamkwamba (2013), and *The Distance Between Us* by Reyna Grande (2014). Books selected during the period under study were *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson (2015), *Without You, There Is No Us* by Suki Kim (2016), and *The Butterfly Mosque*, by G. Willow Wilson (2017). At the time of writing, the program selected *Reading with Patrick: A Student, A Teacher, and A Life-changing Friendship* by Michelle Kuo for the 2018 common book.

Selection committee membership.

Noted previously, in 2013 the research center experienced a funding disruption that brought changes in how the CRE was implemented. Among the changes was a shift in who chose common books. One administrator recalled, “Up until we went under the College of Law, we had a committee that helped to choose the book.” I pieced together from my interviews with two administrators that common book selections made before the center’s transition were made by a committee that included research center leadership and community agencies that co-sponsored book-related events (e.g., performing arts center, public library). At the time, administrators told me that the selection committee’s membership was growing at this time. As a result, balancing the committee members’ interests and coming to consensus on which common book to choose became an increasingly-difficult task. As the aforementioned administrator remembered, there were times when the selection committee’s choices were perceived as falling out of line with the research center’s human rights focus:

I think we had some pretty iffy years. We were getting a lot of pressure on some fronts. It was hardly a human rights book...Choosing a book is an extraordinarily hard process because, as you know, you cannot please everyone. And some

books really lend themselves to the community or to the Center in a way that others do not.

Thus, when the College of Law took over the center's projects in 2013, the selection committee membership was "streamlined," (i.e., reduced), as another administrator put it. That is, the CRE director began working with a smaller group of faculty and students within the center to receive book nominations, cull through suggested titles, and eventually come to decision on which book to selection for each year's programming. The above quoted administrator described how the selection process worked in the smaller committee:

Up until probably about [2016], I was reading the [nominated] books and encouraging my colleagues to read the books. I would kind of whittle it down to a small number and ask my colleagues in the Center to read them. [The center's director] suggested that we have research assistants at the College of Law read them. We would all kind of work on this together to come up with a final choice.

The process of selecting common books with input from a small review committee remained in place at the time of my data collection. Though it was evident from my interviews that community partners continue to assist with the program and make recommendations to CRE administrators, the streamlined selection process left responsibility for choosing common books primarily with program administrators. This smaller committee membership seemed to help obviate the perceived competing interests that hindered the former selection committee, which one administrator recalled as being "too big" and "unwieldy."

Selection criteria.

Two CRE administrators described the selection process in our interviews. Books can be nominated on the CRE's website. From that pool of nominations, potential common books were generally selected based on a number of requirements. For instance, one administrator described common books' format:

We try to keep it a book that was no more than 400 pages. We wanted it to be in formats besides hardcover. At first, of course, that was paperback; but now, it's audible, e-book, other forms where people can have access. The problem with just hardcover is that it's expensive. As a community read, we wanted it to be something that people could easily purchase it if they wanted to. Or get it from the public library.

In addition, potential books were expected to align with the research center's human rights focus, though the human rights angle was not strictly defined by administrators (as evidenced by the previously-quoted administrator's opinion that some selections were "hardly a human rights book"). In order to find books that fit the criterion, CRE administrators did not report a heavy reliance on publication date to inform selections. The above quoted administrator elaborated on how themes and publication dates had contributed to past common book selections:

There are other factors that we used to take into account. We wanted to have a human rights theme. Human rights and social justice is how we always phrased it. And sometimes that was stretched...But others it wasn't very hard at all. These were books

that could be used. But it also meant that hot off the press wasn't necessarily going to be our choice because of the factors that we needed to keep in mind. You know, there are some great books out there that I've heard of and thought, 'Maybe we will use it in a future year,' because it was really good book and I know lots of people are using it. But it doesn't meet the criteria that we need to follow for now.

By contrast, other interviewees seemed to feel that the CRE had at least an implicit criterion to choose books that were published recently. In speaking on the recency of selected common books, one interviewed faculty member opined that publication date might be related to participation, "I think they are going to get slightly less participation if it's not something that is written within the last five or so years." Another interviewee, the representative of the public library, suggested that the recency of chosen common books had more to do with the authors and publishers than it had to do with the CRE's selection criteria. The interviewee disclosed:

Largely, whom we bring is dictated by who has new work out, so to try to find themes is [difficult]. We're not big enough that we have the budget where I can say, 'Our theme is poverty [for instance]' and go out and get five amazing authors that have written about that, whether they have a new book out or whether they're on tour and bring them in. We're bringing authors in who are on tour so the publishers are paying some of the freight, or the authors are in self-promotional mode so they're willing to come through for much less money that they [normally] would.

In summary, administrators reported that the CRE at UI had experienced changes and modifications to its selection process, both during the study period and, more notably, before the period. Administrators noted that the size and composition of the selection committee had changed and that selection criteria had changed or, at the least, had been stretched. Though some differences of opinion existed amongst my interviewees, administrators seemed to view the program as consistently oriented toward its human rights education goals. Finally, consideration of the authors and publishers seemed to be an emergent theme when discussing UI's selection process.

Common Book-related Events in the Iowa City Community

I interviewed a former director and the current director of the community-based CRE to inform this section. Additional details about the program components were provided by representatives of community organizations that previously partnered with the CRE on book-related events (i.e., the public library, a campus performing arts venue, community-based book club, an education program at a prison facility in the community) and faculty members who used the common book in their courses.

During the study period, I got the sense from my interviewees that community discussion groups were integral CRE events. One administrator recalled the rationale for establishing common book discussion groups during the early years of the CRE:

We really wanted to have discussions of the book. We would try to set those up. Most of the libraries around here would sponsor discussions. Sometimes we get some classes to use the book and they would have discussions. We would try to set some of them up around town that the Center perhaps would lead.

Faculty members and CRE community partners whom I interviewed provided additional details about discussion groups. A faculty member told me that common book discussion sections were held annually at a correctional facility in the community as well as other community locations. The faculty member stated, "I'm pretty sure that one of the senior centers has pretty regularly been a host site. Its members do [the program]. I think the public schools [participate] some years but not all years." A community member lent evidence to the faculty member's supposition, adding that the public library also held regular book discussions.

Curious what the book discussions looked like, during my data collection I spoke with representatives from two community-based book clubs that read the common books each year. One interviewee, a member of a philanthropic women's organization with a long-running monthly book club component, reported that her organization participated in the CRE each year. The group reads the common book, invites a CRE administrator to an organizational meeting to discuss the book, and attends authors' visits. The interviewee asserted, "The OCOB book would always be on our list [and]... Whenever they can afford to bring in an author, we're always there."

Another community reading group I learned about was a men's book club in a nearby correctional facility. The correctional facility is notable for its education program offerings, which one administrator told me had recently grown to include credit-bearing college courses for inmates. Speaking by phone with an education director at the correctional facility, I learned that the inmates' book club started around 2004 when UI's CRE approached the correctional facility about hosting a common book discussion group. Building off of the research center's (which administers the CRE) human rights education objective, the reading group was seen by correctional facility administrators as a way to improve education opportunities for inmates. The

education director recalled that monthly reading group went through periods of low participation with CRE books and has since then moved away from choosing strictly books with human rights topics. Still, the interviewee reported that the reading group has been recently reinvigorated through the outreach efforts of the research center. For example, a CRE administrator led common book discussion sections with inmates during the study period and, as one press release described, integrated UI students into the correctional facility's book-related education programming (Iowa City of Literature, 2018). Admittedly, I was impressed by the integration of the inmates' book club in the CRE. The prison's education director reported that the inmates in the book group felt their ability to participate in the CRE provided them with a freedom of choice and connectedness to the outside world. For those inmates, according to a CRE administrator who worked with them regularly, the book club provided a "humanizing" experiences in spite of the backdrop of their incarceration.

Though it seemed to me that most of the book discussion groups operated fairly autonomously, CRE administrators reported that they provided resources and trained facilitators for community discussion groups. For instance, resources included a downloadable list of discussion questions on the CRE's website. Questions invited discussants to express opinions on passages in the book and to think critically about human rights topics in the books. As an illustration, two questions from the 2015 discussion guide for *Just Mercy* (University of Iowa, 2018) were:

[1.] Throughout the book we are presented with examples of courts refusing to review new evidence or to grant new trials in light of new information, defending their decision with "it's too late." Why wouldn't courts jump to analyze new information with

the constitutional promise of “innocent until proven guilty”? What is holding them back and what can be done to reverse this hindering stance?

[2.] Based on Stevenson’s work, your interpretation and understanding of it, combined with your past experiences before reading this piece, what is your definition of “just mercy?”

Next, CRE administrators reported me that UI students and research center staff volunteered to lead discussion groups in the community. As an example, I interviewed a faculty member who had incorporated the CRE into coursework as a community engagement experience and “hands-on learning” opportunity for her master’s students. The faculty member recalled:

[When I arrived at UI,] I started to hear more and more about the OCOB project and I decided initially just to incorporate it into one of my classes...So I decided that I would have my students participate. They would read the book. They would go to the public program to observe. I contacted the director...and we started talking about the idea of coming to [class to] talk to my students about how this thing works so they could get a sense for the how the program is built. So we started as observers and from there, the next year we shifted gears and [students] were working as program discussants—they were helping to lead discussions the following year.

Interviewed CRE administrators revealed that other college courses used the common book as well. For instance, one administrator described a course she taught in 2017 that used the

common book, *The Butterfly Mosque*. In the one-credit course, students were required to read the common book—a memoir about a white, American woman’s conversion to Islam—and attend the author’s speech. In class each week, the administrator invited Muslim community members to come speak to the class. In addition to her own course, the administrator identified other courses that had used the common book in 2017:

I know that library [sciences] classes involve their students, two to three rhetoric classes, maybe. They had the choice so I never know [that they have incorporated the common book] until I know. Our certificate students in the Center for Human Rights. And then research assistants in the Law College.

Overall, UI’s CRE provided multiple opportunities for participants on campus and in the community to discuss the common book during the study period. Talking with interviewees about the discussion sections also revealed a number of long term partnerships between the CRE and organizations in the community. The author’s visit, which appeared to play an equally important part in year-to-year programming during the study period, will be discussed next.

Paying for authors’ visits necessitated cost-reduction approaches.

As previously mentioned, the author’s visit played an important role in the selection of common books during the study period and beyond. Almost half of my interviewees expressed the opinion that bringing the common book’s author to speak in the community was a positive for participants. For example, one administrator told me that when author’s visit, “things flow more smoothly, you get better participation, and you’ve kind of fulfilled what people want to see and hear.” Two faculty members seemed to agree with the notion, expressing a belief that their students were more engaged intellectually with the common book when they attended the

authors' lectures. One faculty member provided an example, saying this about her students' perceptions of the 2011 common book author:

A Long Way Gone was really interesting. That one works well with younger readers. It's actually on the teen book list by ALA [i.e., American Library Association]. That one was one of the popular ones and that was definitely a year where they were able to bring him to campus. I read the book and it's an interesting read. I think [author Ishmael Beah] does good work in balancing *Here's the difficulty and here's the experience and how do you not inflict that on someone else?* At the same time, I'm not sure that my students really got it [when they read it]. But when you hear him in person, he is—he is soft-spoken, he is understated, he is a very warm and personable human being...They [i.e., students] agreed that seeing him made such a difference in the perception of the book.

Indeed, all of my interviewees, save for one who had only recently arrived at UI, shared anecdotes about a common book author's speech that had moved them, inspired them to action, or was positively memorable. As such, the author's speech occupied a central role in the CRE's yearly programming.

Although fundamental to the CRE, administrators spoke explicitly to the cost of authors' visits and, given the program budget, shared anecdotes about recent cost-sharing arrangements used to afford common book authors' visits. Administrators pointed specifically to two cost-reduction strategies they had used: one was to work through "a literary event consultancy" firm

that specialized in contracting authors and the other was to partner with Iowa City community organizations to share the costs of the authors' visits.

First, I mentioned earlier in the chapter that the research center that administers UI's CRE nearly shuttered its doors in 2013. Despite a new funding commitment by UI's law school, an administrator recalled that cost-saving mechanisms were integral to the survival of the CRE. This administrator described reaching out to a consulting firm that could help defray the costs of authors' visits between 2012 and 2014. The administrator remembered:

I discovered a place in Oregon called *Books In Common*⁶. Somehow I got on their email list and they can help you get authors for better prices. They helped me get Kalia [Yang, in 2012]. I'm trying to remember who gave me a copy of *The Late Homecomer*, but I was so taken with the book. And Kalia is in St. Paul [MN], not far away. It was a great experience and she was a very powerful speaker. Hers is a tremendous book. I started working with *Books In Common* from that point on. They also helped me get Reyna Grande [in 2014].

The administrator provided evidence that this practice continued into the study period. She noted that the consulting firm helped negotiate authors' speaking fees in 2015 (Bryan Stevenson) and 2016 (Suki Kim) as well.

More recently in the study period, administrators communicated that UI's CRE relied on partnerships with community organizations to share the cost of authors' visits. One of the

⁶ Books in Common's website (<https://www.booksincommon.org>) describes itself as "an independent clearinghouse supporting Community Reads, All Campus Reads, Freshman Class Reading Programs, literary festivals, writers' workshops, and more." They provides services that include fee negotiations for authors' honoraria, inquiries about author availability, and logistics and promotions.

primary partners, I deduced from my interviews, was the public library. Iowa City's public library has hosted an annual book festival since 2012 (after inheriting the festival from UI's library), bringing dozens of authors and publishers to Iowa City for a week-long festival of events, book talks, and more. When the public library took over direction of the festival, an interviewed representative of the public libraries recalled that one of its first partnerships was with UI's CRE:

One of the things that we did then was to seek out a lot of partners in the community to enhance the programming. One of those that we reached out to—I don't remember if we reach out or if they reached out to us; it's been five or six years—was the Center for Human Rights, with their OCOB project.

Though the interviewee remembered that the CRE-public library partnership took time to develop due to differing program goals, the two organizations formed a partnership that enabled them to share costs of authors' visits. The public library representative recollected a cost-sharing agreement partnership in 2014:

[UI's CRE] had always done their program in the fall. And we moved the Book Festival to the fall when we took it over. So it aligned very well, schedule-wise... They asked if we would be interested in trying to do something. That was for Reyna Grande's book... We partnered with [the CRE], and some other funding organizations, and brought her here as part of the book festival programming. Everybody kind of agreed that it was a rousing success. So every year since then, the author of the book has been

somebody that we have presented at our book festival. It's been a great partnership for us, and I think beneficial for them as well.

CRE administrators seemed to agree that the partnership was fruitful for both sides. One administrator opined that integrating the author's visit into the community book festival had improved participation in the CRE:

The book festival is always in the fall, so partnering with...the book festival has really given the OCOB a big boost. It's sort of an audience already, because a lot of people are downtown listening to different authors and they can just come in and listen to the Sunday afternoon presentation [i.e., the common book author's lecture]. That has been terrific.

In time, the annual book festival seemed to attract other community organizations who wanted to collaborate to bring authors to Iowa City. Interviewed administrators and representatives of community organizations pointed to co-sponsorship agreements in each of the three years of the study period. Partnerships included a campus-based faith organization and the campus performing arts center.

Co-sponsorship arrangements brought on unique challenges like fluid partnership and less decision-making authority.

Although it seemed that interviewees felt that cost-sharing partnerships had benefited all the organizations involved, none of the co-sponsors (beyond the public library and CRE) continued into the next year. Interviewees speculated that that was due to differing organizational priorities. The public library representative, speaking about the campus faith organization who had partnered to bring Bryan Stevenson to Iowa City in 2015, said, "That was sort of a one and

done for them. We keep in touch with them. But their mission is very different from ours so we haven't had alignment since." In essence, it seemed that co-sponsors displayed fluid participation patterns during the study period.

The CRE-public library partnership provided an additional example of fluid participation of co-sponsors, though to a different degree. In 2016, the public library was able to provide financial support and event space for the author's lecture but was not involved in the book selection process. Though one CRE administrator recalled that turnout for the author's lecture was "pretty good," the public library representative admitted that they "thought it was going to be a much bigger event than it was..." In this example, attendance at the author's lecture may have been a proxy for the degree of buy-in co-sponsors displayed. I came away from my interviews with administrators and co-sponsors with the sense that the 2016 event aligned more with the CRE's priorities than with the public library's objectives. If my understanding were correct, it might imply that CRE co-sponsors are less willing or less interested to display a high level of buy-in when common books are selected without consideration of their program objectives.

The 2017 common book selection process was also informative to my understanding of co-sponsorship arrangements. That year, the selection of the common book seemed to originate outside of the CRE, thus exposing a lack of decision-making authority about the common book selection. Specifically, UI's performing arts center was planning a year-long program about art inspired by Islam. One of the artists whom the performing arts staff identified was G. Willow Wilson, who is the creator of the comic book character, Miss Marvel⁷. As a representative of the performing arts center told me, the artist's speaking fee was high enough that they sought out co-

⁷ According to a Los Angeles Times article (2013), Ms. Marvel, or Kamala Khan, is a Pakistani American teen superhero. She is the first Muslim American superhero to get her own series in in the Marvel Comics universe.

sponsors for the event, including a local comic book store, the public library, and the CRE. An interviewed public library representative explained that since the performing arts center had already decided on the author, the CRE had to work backwards to find one of the author's works that fit the program's human rights objectives:

[The performing arts center] wanted to bring G. Willow Wilson. But it was kind of outside their budgetary abilities. So [they] asked me if we'd be interested in doing along those lines... Then, as I was more fully exploring her—because to be honest, I was more knowledgeable about her graphic novel work—I realized she had this book, *The Butterfly Mosque*. I looked at it again, with Muslim faith and the new [presidential] administration that was in power at that time, it just seemed like an interesting topic. So I pitched this to the Center for Human Rights earlier than they had done their selection process and just said, 'Here's an opportunity. I want to do this anyway. But I think that it would be a good opportunity for you guys because it's a timely book. She's going to be here. It's the most high-profile event that this program will have ever had. You can get an author that neither of us would ever be able to afford otherwise but we can partner with these other organizations to make this happen.'

The CRE joined as a co-sponsor and, although a CRE administrator appeared to view the partnership as a unique opportunity ("...we were lucky enough to be included in the negotiations. They could have done it without us easily"), the administrator also seemed to feel

that choosing an author before selecting the book had introduced challenges to the CRE. For instance, the administrator confided that “There were some upset people in the community who misinterpreted who [the author] was and why she was here.” To illustrate, this administrator recalled that the author’s speech drew a large crowd of people interested in her graphic novels, such that her lecture did not cover as much of *The Butterfly Mosque* as the CRE would have hoped. Another interviewee reiterated the point, recollecting that, “She talked a lot more about *Miss Marvel* than she did *The Butterfly Mosque*.” Thus, I began to get the feeling that that year’s exceptional selection procedure had led CRE administrators to feel that the program’s objectives were compromised in some way, or at the least, confused.

Others whom I interviewed seemed to interpret the 2017 selection process in similar ways. One faculty member seemed to feel quite strongly that the process of working backward from an author to select the book had compromised the CRE’s goals. After a CRE administrator visited class to speak to the interviewed faculty member’s students, this faculty member provided the following interpretation of the selection process:

It sounds like they basically lost control. There’s been this problem with how much can we afford to pay to bring in a speaker, how do we cooperate with other entities to bring them in, [and] to create draw? And someone else was paying to bring the speaker, so then the question became has she written something else where we can piggyback? So I feel like this is the first year that we’re coming off where they’ve lost control of the selection process, where it wasn’t this negotiation [like in previous years].

A CRE administrator seemed to agree, appearing to imply that working backward from the author to find a common book was not favorable for the program and would not be an approach that was used again. Speaking about the upcoming year of CRE programming, the administrator underscored a desire to select an author (and by deduction, an author's fee) whose work aligned with the CRE's objectives:

This year, I'm inclined to go with the smaller author...the biggest [reason] is that I don't have the time and resources this year to devote to the fundraising that would be necessary for a bigger name. I have identified an author that is really committed not only to the content of her book but to how we might apply it in events in our community. ...I think we're going to be able negotiate something really reasonable. Her willingness to be here for several weeks will raise expenses just because you need to stay somewhere. But I think we'll get a lot more bang for our buck because she wants to be here. So that's my strategy.

Overall, the selection of common books at UI during the study period were influenced by the ability to afford to bring an author to Iowa City to speak. Given the CRE's admittedly-slim budget, I felt confident concluding from my interviews that the ability to find co-sponsorships for paying authors' fees became an implicit selection criteria. Co-sponsorships during the study period went both ways: the CRE chose a common book then recruited co-sponsors, as they did in 2015 and 2016; the CRE also joined pre-existing partnerships then worked backward to select a common book, as in 2017. Though my interviewees expressed varying degrees of feedback with

the 2017 common book, they all seemed to be in agreement that compromises were part and parcel to co-sponsorships.

Fluid participation patterns were noted based on yearly text selections.

Implied in the preceding section, the study period seemed to suggest that participation patterns among co-sponsors, readers, and event attendees were somewhat fluid. From my interviews, I inferred that interviewees perceived fluid participation in different ways. One CRE administrator shared insights about the extent of control she felt she had to influence participation with the CRE:

The promotional reach that we can get from the public [author's] lecture—we'll hope [community participants] read the book or buy the book beforehand or after. Whether we'll ever catch them again in some kind of [event] is a big question mark. I will do our [research] center-specific promotion for events happening in public libraries but anything beyond that, that they would do locally in their own space, is up to them. And some do and some don't.

Other interviewees shared the belief that potential CRE participants demonstrated a high level of autonomy so participation was hard to predict year to year. One of the interviewees seemed to summarize the overall sentiment in saying, "I tend to think that the community either embraces or doesn't embrace [the selected text], just depending on their level of interest..." As such, what my interviewees seemed to suggest was that CRE participants self-selected. For instance, a faculty member speculated that "...the people who show up to something like that [CRE events] are probably listening to NPR," implying that CRE participants are predisposed to be interested in the kinds of topics that selected texts cover. A public library representative

seemed to agree, elaborating that although CRE participants self-select, the common book represented an opportunity to engage with the book's topic:

...at a certain point, it's like a funnel: the number of people who are initially interested in the topic that you introduce is pretty broad. And they get the information they want. But in terms of the people that want to continue to look into that, to discuss that, it kind of winnows down until you get a core of a certain number of people who are like, 'This is an important issue. We are going to continue the conversation that Bryan Stevenson started [or] that Suki Kim started.' And then you tee it up again with the next author, the next book, and you start with that wide group. So you find people with a certain affinity for dealing with an issue and keep going on that. One thing with this [CRE], because it is so issue driven, even if you were going to stick with the same topic—we could deal with mistreatment of incarcerated people, recidivism, the lack of training for people who put back on the streets, mandatory minimums, what have you—for a decade and have ten amazing books, [you still would] not really scratch the surface of that topic.

Though some of my interviewees seemed to accept that they could affect CRE participation only to a limited a degree, fluid participation patterns appeared to make interviewees' judgments about common books' success difficult. The aforementioned interviewee elaborated on the thought:

It was kind of mercenary just thinking of having people in seats as the key metric of success of the program. But that fluctuation means that some years we'll hit it out of the park and some years maybe it's a little more focused in terms of the audience it's going to reach

In summary, the focus of the community-based CRE at UI seemed to be to engage a readership perceived by CRE administrators and event partners as autonomous and self-directed. Judging from my interviewees' perspectives on fluid participation, it was apparent that program planners accepted that participation would ebb and flow year to year given based on (what I inferred as) competing interests in the literature-centric community. In that sense, anticipated participation did not seem to be as strong a factor in common book selections as the author's visit or the program's stated goals.

Summary of the Findings

The University of Iowa's common reading experience is a community-focused program administered by staff in a campus research center focused on human rights education. One of many reading and literature programs in the community that interviewees mentioned, UI's CRE seemed to have a wide and diverse readership during its 18-year history. In most years, the CRE included an author's visit and facilitated book discussions in the community.

A decade ago, a campus component of the CRE was introduced, purchasing copies of the common book for all first-year students and inviting the author to speak. Unexpectedly, the pilot coincided with financial obstacles on campus and the campus component of the program was discontinued. In its current form, interviewees reported that the CRE provided a variety of

community-based book events and counted on numerous community organizations to participate yearly in book-related discussions.

Selected common books at UI were less than 400 pages and available in multiple formats. Books were selected by a large committee of community co-sponsors and staff in the research center until about five years ago. At that point, managing the large selection committee had become “unwieldy” and a CRE administrator took over, reading, vetting, and guiding the selection of books that met the program’s objectives.

Last, the ability to attract a common book’s author was a strong selection criterion in recent programming years. However, given the high costs of attracting some authors, UI’s CRE grew to rely on cost-reduction strategies (e.g., consulting firms) and co-sponsoring community organizations (e.g., the public library, a campus performing arts center) to afford the authors’ fees. During the study period, administrators and interviewees shared that the CRE had had to compromise when working with co-sponsors. Two notable examples were identified. In 2016, the CRE seemed to encounter low buy-in from a co-sponsor who had not participated in the common book selection. In 2017, the CRE worked backward to identify a book by an author that was already booked to visit Iowa City by other co-sponsors. That year, some interviewees shared their beliefs that the CRE’s loss of decision-making authority had adverse effects on the year’s programming. Finally, interviewees also suggested that participation patterns fluctuated year to year, depending on the chosen book and potential readers’ self-guided interests.

Chapter Seven: Discussion, Implications and Conclusions

Summary of the Study Findings

The purpose of this study was to move beyond the publicly stated criteria for choosing common books to explore the specific processes and motivations underlying common text selections. I set out to answer the overarching research question, What if anything are institutions trying to accomplish through common book selections? Three specific questions guided my investigation: 1) Are common text selections intended to achieve certain kinds of objectives, whether educational, institutional, societal, or other? 2) If common text selections address certain objectives, who has decision-making authority or what factors influence decisions about which objectives are important? 3) How do institutions determine whether a common text selection achieves the objectives set forth for it? In this chapter, I will return to these questions by drawing on findings that emerged from the three cases. Then, I will summarize the main conclusions, describe the limitations of the study, identify implications for research and practice, and suggest future directions for research.

Research question 1 asked whether certain objectives guide institutions in choosing common books. After reviewing the data, it appears that the process for choosing common books is similar across the three sample institutions but criteria are idiosyncratic. In other words, this study suggests that normative isomorphic influences play a role in how CREs are implemented. This study produced evidence of normative influences in two sample institutions' (i.e., KU, UM) early investigations of other CREs (and other student success initiatives) at peer institutions and later in their adoption of standardized program approaches for their own CREs. Further, selection committees at all three sample institutions seemed to choose books in similar ways. Interviewees in this study reported that they chose books from a pool of nominated texts. Committees culled

nominations down to a finalist list, from which one interdisciplinary text was chosen. That CREs choose books in similar ways across institutions lends evidence in support of previous research showing that CREs are academic programs that choose common books to achieve multifaceted objectives (Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2016; Laufgraben, 2006; NAS 2016, 2018).

Normative influences seen in this study seemed limited to broad principles of CRE implementation. One might expect that, if normative influences were comprehensive, that institutions would choose the same books because they outlined similar objectives for their CREs. Though NAS (2016, 2018) might argue that CREs do indeed choose the same *kinds* of books, this study seemed to produce a nuance perspective that suggested the contrary. For instance, institutions intended to achieve different objectives even when selecting the same common book. This was seen when both UI and UM chose *Just Mercy* during the study period but outlined distinct objectives for the book (i.e., start a community dialogue around human rights in criminal justice at UI, introduce students to critical discourse using a compelling, complex topic like criminal justice at UM). At the end of this study, I came to the conclusion that selection committees chose books for a wide diversity of reasons and as a result the chosen books contained a wide variety of points of view and potential interpretations (e.g., as one KU administrator said, "...it's not the function of any given book to be the single way that we talk about any [topic]"). By choosing books that inherently contained multiple perspectives and potential interpretations, CREs in this study seemed to be guided by flexible-though-institution-specific goals. Bearing in mind the variegated goals behind common book selections, one could reasonably argue that the institutions guarded themselves against the oft-cited criticism that institutions' singular focus for choosing common books is an attempt to indoctrinate

impressionable students with left-leaning political ideologies (NAS, 2014, 2016, 2018; Tierney, 2018).

Another takeaway from this study was that CREs and selection criteria evolved to reflect the institutions' idiosyncrasies. When I began this study, I expected that I would find, as Laufgraben (2006) did, that selection criteria generally reflected broad educational priorities; though I indeed found that, this study demonstrated that formalized selection criteria would occasionally be treated as optional or flexible among my sample institutions in pursuit of idiosyncratic objectives (e.g., UI working backwards to identify a book by an author due to visit Iowa City, KU intentionally choosing books not widely used in other CREs, UM foregoing selection criteria to select William Faulkner, because he is a famous local writer that reflects UM's history and culture). In other words, I found in this study that each institution's goals were innately complex, multifaceted, and ambiguous. Whereas critics like NAS (2016, 2018) might frame "ambiguous" goals as a negative aspect of CREs, it seemed that interviewed selection committee members saw ambiguous goals as a net positive for the flexibility they allowed in planning book-related events. To me, it seemed that interviewed selection committees saw the whole of the common reading experience as potentially greater than the sum of its component parts. Whether my speculation is true or not, what seemed certain in his study was that selection committees interpret and utilize formal and informal selection criteria in unique ways so that distinctive facets of CREs reflect each institutions' independence, autonomy, and academic freedom, which parallels Grenier's (2007) conclusions.

Research question 2 addressed who decides which objectives common books should address. Selection committee makeup at all three institutions was similar with slight variations by institution. For example, all three institutions composed selection committees of staff, faculty,

and students. For campus-focused programs (i.e., KU, UM), committees included roughly the same number of committee members with equal representation among faculty, staff, and students. UI's program, distinctive for its community focus and research center origins, was composed primarily of CRE staff. The formal makeup of the selection committees parallels conclusions from previous research highlighting the roles of administrators, staff, faculty, and students on selection committees (Laufgraben, 2006; NAS, 2016, 2018) and again suggests some level of normative influences on how these kinds of programs are implemented.

Another notable takeaway regarding who decides which book to select was the apparent correlation between program costs and selection committees' decision-making authority. All three institutions explicitly or implicitly referenced how their CRE was funded. A theme that emerged was the high costs of acclaimed authors' visits and that programs' financial limitations affected whose books could be selected. One potential interpretation of this trend is that publishers' and authors' costs may play a coercive role in influencing which books institutions might select. This interpretation aligns with recent conclusions drawn by NAS and one of its affiliates that CREs' costs and relationships with publishing houses are reaching a critical point (NAS, 2018; Tierney, 2018). Though a plausibly valid critique—and one that some interviewees touched on—I might speculate that an alternative and more accurate interpretation is that many selection committees gauged authors' speeches in terms of their performative values more so than their monetary costs. For example, the selection committee at UM chose *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* for its first campus-based common book because a peer institution spoke highly of Rebecca Skloot's lecture. Furthermore, UM interviewees even seemed to have begun to outline elements of a successful author's speech that might contribute to their annual book

deliberations. In that sense, interviewed selection committees seemed to consider more heavily the potential for indirect benefits of authors' speeches than the author-related costs.

If my speculative interpretation that authors' costs were not particularly coercive in selection processes, it nevertheless seemed plausible that there were coercive elements at play in CREs and selection procedures. When I began this study, I underlined the dearth of evidence linking CREs to student success outcomes as a potential threat to CRE viability (i.e., seen in the *Statement of the Problem* in Chapter One). At the conclusion of this study, I would postulate that the broader requirement that CRE administrators justify the cost of the entire common reading experience by measuring program results on students is coercive. Lending support to that notion, all of the CRE administrators with whom I spoke perseverated to some extent on the pressure to define and measure exactly how CREs achieved their stated goals. Yet, all of them recognized implicitly or explicitly that some of the CRE's results were intangible (e.g., students' a-ha moments about social issues, faculty members' improved interdepartmental communication via book-related programming). In a way, I ended up feeling that the fundamental coercive element at play in this study was the specter of program cancelation (e.g., for lack of student results). If there is a kernel of truth to my interpretation, it may raise questions about whether the current research literature takes too narrow a view on what impacts CREs should have on their intended audiences, campuses, and communities.

Research question 3 dealt with how institutions know if common books achieve the goals set out for them. Though an evaluation of CRE outcomes was beyond the scope of this study, it was important to investigate how selection committees determined whether common books were successful. Though interviewees cited many tangible and intangible outcomes of CRE participation, I was surprised that sample institutions struggled to define what exactly about the

CRE benefitted readers beyond the ethereal (e.g., promote enjoyment of reading, being informed). This fact was compounded by fluid and somewhat unpredictable participation rates among target audiences. Thus, I came to feel that CREs and the decisions selection committees make about which books to choose reflected characteristics of organized anarchies (Birnbaum, 1988; Bok, 2013; Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972). Like organized anarchies, the CRE choice process in this study exhibited three characteristics: ambiguous or ever-changing goals, lack of clarity on the mechanisms by which common books impacted students, and fluid participation (Birnbaum, 1988; Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972).

Though interviewed selection committee members recognized that CRE choice processes had ambiguous goals, unclear mechanisms for achieving goals, or fluid participation, none appeared to perceive selection procedures as anarchical. Yet for me, taking up an organized anarchy lens contextualized and clarified decision-making outcomes seen in this study. Cohen and March (1986) cited five facets of decision-making in organized anarchies, all of which were reflected by selection committees at the three sample institutions. First, selection committees seemed to understand that common books were judged more on symbolic significance to their institutions than on content. Second, selection committees implicitly understood that common book selections could be misinterpreted—in spite of their best intentions—depending on the co-occurrence of other issues affecting the institution, such as political flashpoints on campus (e.g., removal of the state flag with its Confederate symbol from UM's campus). Third, selection committee seemed to understand that institutions were quick to forget the past. For example, I encountered upperclassmen at KU and UM who had forgotten what the common book was during their freshman year. Further, some on the selection committees (e.g., at IU, at UM) themselves saw the next book selection as an opportunity to rewrite program goals and/or

explore a new facet of the program. Fourth, selection committees recognized that resistance was inevitable if they attempted to change the CRE and selection procedures. For instance, administrators at UI felt this inertia at times during the program's lifespan. In a somewhat surprising example, UM selection committee members confided that they thought that the CRE was so much ingrained on their campus that any hypothetical attempt at cancelation would be met with much resistance. Finally, selection committees understood that decision-making processes were susceptible to overload if (and when) even the most rational deliberations were forced to consider many competing interests (e.g., when UI's selection committee membership grew too large to manage; Cohen & March, 1986).

That CREs and selection committees in my study faced decision-making obstacles brings up an additional parallel between CREs and organized anarchies: feedback is often drawn from anecdotal data, previous experience, trial and error, and imitation (Birnbaum, 1988; Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972). Interviewees from all three institutions shared multiple examples of how anecdotal data, previous experiences, and imitation contributed to perceptions about goal attainment. In spite of the many tangible and intangible goals that interviewees cited, I was initially surprised that the most oft-noted goal was growth of readership. Though the desire for expansion itself was not unusual, the notion that *more* was a proxy for program success struck me. After reflecting on the lack of decision-making control inherent to organized anarchies and the difficulty of measuring CRE outcomes, it made more sense that CRE administrators saw participation as one of the few factors they might expect to influence, which runs parallel to what is seen in other higher education programs with difficult-to-measure outcomes (e.g., study abroad).

Finally, the overarching research question guiding this study asks what institutions are trying to accomplish through common book selection. When I began the study, I purposefully selected three flagship, public institutions located in a state with another land grant institutions because I suspected that selection committees chose common books that were intended to send messages to prospective students (i.e., outsiders) about prestige or legitimacy relative to peer (i.e., competing) institutions. After my analyses however, I found no evidence that common books were seen as mechanisms for attracting new students.

What I found instead was that sampled selection committees seemed to choose common books that highlighted institutional or community characteristics that were unique or important to incoming students' understanding of the institution's identity (e.g., works by graduates of UI's Writer's Workshop, Midwestern themes and authors at KU, hometown authors at UM). Interestingly, it seemed that that was where student-centric messages stopped. Rather, interviewees in this study seemed to tailor messages to other, non-student audiences. This may be because interviewees seemed to at least implicitly understand that college students may not recognize the benefit of common reads until much later (Scott McCrickard et al., 2009) or more broadly that college students don't hear the messages institutions send them (Herron, 2011). In any case, none of my interviewees explicitly stated that common books represented who the institution or community thinks it is; however, it seemed evident that selection committees interpreted some level of responsibility for speaking for their institutions. To this point, I found evidence that selection committee members at the three institutions wished to send indirect or symbolic signals to institutional leaders (or community leaders in UI's case) that touched on aspirational goals (e.g., improve racial climate, altruism). This notion seemed to be reinforced by

data showing that institutions shouldered the blame when bad things happened on campus (i.e., acts racism perpetuated on KU and UM campuses during the study period).

That selection committees wanted to send symbolic messages makes sense since leaders of anarchical institutions may decide to focus their efforts on factors that symbolically indicate success when faced with ill-defined goals and mechanisms (Bok, 2013). Upon further reflection, that may be an extreme interpretation of what I discovered, since most of my interviewees recognized that any one book is susceptible to infinite interpretations. Though on this front, KU was a distinctive case in my study sample. That is, I was surprised to find that some of the interviewed students at KU explicitly anticipated that common books could affect the campus's racial climate. Many interviewed administrators and faculty at KU expressed similar but measured impressions. For this group of interviewees, common book messages went beyond the symbolic and the selection process served the purpose of expressing what a small group of institutional actors wanted to the institution to be. I was curious if this were a reflection of a larger trend or if it were an outlier. Looking for an explanation, I went to the literature. Tierney (2018), describing his perceptions of presentations at a national conference underscored one session by KU's CRE administrators about KU's recent common book-related programming. Tierney argued that KU's common books were intended to foment student activism and reflected a larger trend in higher education. The author's article hinges on an argument that first-year experiences (and by extension, CREs contained within them) indoctrinate students with politically-left ideologies and encourages activism. Though the article begins with a sound (and reasonably convincing) line of deduction connecting first-year experiences to college student activism in the 1960s, I believe the author subsequently makes liberal use of hyperbole—and errors of misattribution in places—to confirm a bias rather than present a reasoned, careful

conclusion. In short, the article did not present sufficient evidence to support the author's conclusion that KU's common books promote activism. In fact, KU administrators told me just the opposite: interviewees highlighted that student activism on campus in 2015 and 2016 had increased the visibility of the CRE's book choices. As such, recent common book selections took into consideration the interest generated by campus demonstrations, not vice versa. Nevertheless, after my consultation of the available literature, I came to the conclusion that interest in social justice became a *raison d'être* for KU's CRE after a period of student protest while it played only an indirect or implicit role in the selection processes at UI and UM. Whatever the case may be, if selection committees do in fact wish to send symbolic or aspirational messages, they will want to be very conscientious about which books they choose.

From a theoretical perspective, the basis of this study relied on an investigation of the purposes and signals underlying common text selections at complex institutions in a complex and dynamic environment. This study, like Vught's (2008), assumed that the explication of social phenomena (e.g., signals, isomorphism) was possible through the analysis of behaviors and/or opinions of institutions and the real persons that carry out the operations at those institutions. The theories that guided my study (i.e., institutional theory, signaling theory) explained much and yet explained little. Specifically, institutional theory seemed a good fit because it describes how institutions attempt to maximize prestige in order to guarantee survival in a competitive environment (Bess & Dee, 2008). This study suggested that CREs choose books that reify institutional legitimacy for internal audiences (i.e., students, institutional leaders) perhaps to improve the institution relative to itself. Yet, I found no evidence that institutions choose books to directly gain a competitive advantage relative to peer institutions. Rather, it seemed that sampled CREs' normative or mimetic behaviors (e.g., borrow implementation

procedures from other institutions' CREs, choose the same book as another institution) only served to launch a new CRE on a campus before it was altered to suit the individual context of the institution. That common book selections do not factor into equations of institutional prestige makes intuitive sense, since public, flagship institutions like those I sampled already have well-worn legacies. An extension of this emergent idea found in the literature (Grasgreen, 2014) is the fact that Purdue University, a very prestigious institution, is one of the most notable instances of CRE cancelation in recent years. When the CRE was canceled, Purdue's prestige did not seem to change in any substantive way as a result of CRE discontinuation. Going further, I believe the notion could be extrapolated to include the idea that prestigious institutions would have a difficult time finding a common book that *could* harm its legitimacy if selected for its CRE. For example, Stanford University could reasonably choose a children's book series as its common book (or, any book title that a reader might consider "low brow" or "uncultivated," for that matter) without altering its standing relative to its peer institutions. All that is to say, I noted limitations of the applicability of institutional theory to my study.

Next, signaling theory presented me with a neat framework for describing how messages are tailored to improve audiences' perceptions of products in the marketplace (Spence, 1973). In this study, selection committees seemed to weave messaging about academic and institutional objectives into book selections. However, signaling theory is much more complex than what a signal sender intends. Use of the theory may include analyses of signal strength, signal frequency, and whether signals are received by intended or unintended audiences. That depth of analysis goes beyond what was possible in my study. I was only able to scratch the surface of signal reception in my study. For example, at all of my sampled institutions, it was unclear from my analyses whether symbolic messages in common books were received by their intended

audiences. To illustrate, the interviewed faculty senate representatives at each institution generally knew little of their institution's CRE and selection procedures. Though nowhere near representative of all institutional actors, that missed signal reception suggested there was a disconnect or at least a tenuous relationship between selection committees' messages and signal receivers. In sum, signaling theory was useful to this study only to a limited extent.

Tying it all together, the late addition of organized anarchy (described above) to my analyses seemed to enrich my descriptions of CREs and selection procedures. Though an excellent fit for interpreting my results, the organized anarchy lens also clouded the conclusions that I might draw about the purposes and motivations behind common book selections, given the characteristics of organized anarchies (e.g., ambiguous goals, fluid participation). As such, the best answer that I can provide to the overarching question of what institutions are trying to do by choosing common book is, "it depends on whom you ask."

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include sample size and sample selection approach. First, sample size should be noted because case study is, by nature, a narrow lens. Inability to generalize and lack of rigor are common critiques of case study (Yin 1994). I addressed those criticisms by gathering multiple sources of data at multiple institutions and integrating verification procedures in the research design (e.g., audit trail, rich descriptions, member checks) so that readers had ample evidence to determine the applicability of the findings to their own contexts.

Second, the snowball sampling technique that I used relied on gatekeepers at each of the three sample institutions to connect me to other interviewees. Because I relied on gatekeeper for access to informants and information, there is a chance that gatekeepers suggested I speak with

individuals who had positive feelings about book selection procedures or that recommended interviewees were more likely to say what the gatekeeper would want them to say rather than their objective perceptions. Even though it is possible that another sampling procedure would produce different outcomes, I believe this limitation was mitigated at least in part because I noted a diversity of opinion at each sample institution, including individuals who shared a healthy amount of skepticism about book selection processes.

Implications and Recommendations

CREs are treated almost as a high impact practice. In fact, Keup and Young (2015) posited that CREs lay at the nexus of two high impact practices: first-year experiences/seminars and common intellectual experiences. Keup, Young and Andersen (2015) found that first-year seminars using common books used more high impact practices than first-year seminars without common books. Yet, fluid participation by target audiences might mean that CREs (and the academic benefits presumed to result from participation) are only experienced by the 40-50% of first-year students (i.e., the predominant readership rate reported at UM and its peer institutions) who self-select as CRE participants. Ferguson, Brown and Piper (2014, 2015) contended that students must read the book to benefit. Does that mean that institutions should carefully consider whether money from student fees used to fund CREs could be better used to support other high impact practices (e.g., first-year seminars, undergraduate research) or to support programs that have higher student participation rates? I'm not so sure that is the case and further, I don't know that Ferguson and colleagues were absolutely correct. To illustrate my point, in this study one interviewed UM student reported that her peers did well on book-related assignments without having read the common book. Thus, it might be reasonable to question whether reading a common book cover-to-cover is a necessary condition for gaining some benefit from a CRE.

Further still, are student outcomes all that CREs should care about? As I suggested earlier, student-oriented goals might be too narrow a focus. Interviewed faculty at UM, for example, reported that common books had improved their teaching practices and bridged interdepartmental communications. Taken together, the results of this study began to shed light on the existence of intangible benefits that common books and CREs have on campuses. I would strongly recommend that CRE administrators put forth intentional efforts to explore and document these intangible benefits (as well as the tangible ones, of course) to improve our understanding of how common books affect target audiences.

Next, in the introduction to this study, I noted that although CREs are thriving in the current higher education milieu, there is scant evidence linking these programs to student outcomes. At the completion of this study, I concluded that CREs appear to have ambiguous program goals, the process for choosing common books is itself unclear, and outcomes of participation are unclear and/or not assessed. Given these challenges, these programs may face calls for retrenchment or cancelation the next time institutional budgets tighten. For this, I would first recommend that institutions develop procedures for more systematically assessing CRE outcomes, echoing the call for improved assessment procedures by Twiton (2007) more than a decade ago. Admittedly, fluid participation and ill-defined outcomes can complicate even the most rigorous (and imaginative) evaluation procedures. Yet, higher education faces the difficult task of identifying and measuring indicators of educational quality (Bok, 2013) and CREs are no different. For this, it would be prudent for CRE administrators to search out meaningful mechanisms to report on the benefits that common books and CREs have on their audiences. If CRE administrators and selection committees do not have the time or expertise to conduct rigorous evaluations of CREs, they may be able to collaborate with faculty and students in other

campus offices, departments, and programs to conduct evaluations. In theory, it is possible that this approach could be achieved without incurring additional program costs. For instance, institutions might redirect one year's author's fee to an evaluator or team of evaluators to conduct a thorough, mixed methods assessment of the program that takes into account student and faculty perspectives, student outcomes, and . As a secondary approach, institutions may look to the (admittedly sparse) literature for evaluative approaches that could be replicated. In sum, the integration of rigorous and replicable assessment procedures into CREs is a consistent and persistent concern for the continued success of these campus programs.

Finally, selection committees, knowing that book selections will be judged on symbolic significance, should accept that alternative interpretations of the book's symbolic meaning will exist (any selection committee member who is familiar with the NAS *Beach Books* reports already knows this). For this, I would (perhaps counter intuitively) echo one of NAS's (2016, 2018) recommendations for CREs: to experiment with selection approaches that go beyond the one book per year model. By allowing for new approaches (i.e., select multiple books per year, reuse books over multiple years), selection committees can satisfy multiple of Cohen and March's (1986) recommendations for effective leadership in organized anarchies: to manage unobtrusively by allowing for alternatives and to provide multiple "garbage cans" so that any and all scrutiny does not become attached to one book title. Furthermore, experimentation and suspension of selection criteria (e.g., UM's selection committee used to select William Faulkner's short stories) can lead to re(de)defined program goals (Cohen & March, 1986). New approaches should of course come with the preconditions to not result in significant, additional program costs. For instance, an institution might select multiple books focused on one topic or theme that present multiple points of view so that criticisms do not all get thrown into the same,

proverbial garbage can. Or, institutions might build a year's program around a theme that the common book presents (e.g., courage, rebellion).

Future Research

Noted above in *Limitations*, this study investigated a small number of CREs at public flagship institutions with a same-state, land grant competitor. Further research on CREs at other institutional types (e.g., baccalaureate colleges, community colleges) might reveal different book selection procedures, uncover unique perceptions about what purposes common books serve, and provide additional context to how CREs develop over time.

The field may also benefit from investigations of CREs and common books as perceived by different campus or community audiences. For example, a more robust, qualitative exploration of how sophomore students perceived common books' impact on their academic abilities or how participating faculty members perceived common books' impact on their instructional practices might further what is known about successful CRE programming. Or, a quantitative study that adapts Twiton's (2007) survey for institutional leaders (i.e., Chancellors, Provosts) might help to clarify ambiguous program goals or provide guidance on how to align CREs more closely with institutional and educational priorities. A third, related option might be to compare how a common book title chosen at multiple institutions is intended, received, implemented, and perceived by campus actors.

Given the presumed link between a dearth of CRE evidence and the specter of cancelation, it may be fruitful to explore CREs that were canceled after a time. Exploring the reasons why CREs did not work may provide a rich, if not slightly counterintuitive, information base for CRE administrators and institutional leaders who wish to institute a CRE or to administer a CRE more efficiently.

Finally, CREs are intended to promote student success, with objectives that aim to engage, retain, and inculcate first-year students with institutional culture (Laufgraben, 2006). These types of campus programs spread rapidly in the last decade and are now implemented on approximately one in three U.S. campuses (Kafka, 2018). In spite of the idiosyncrasies and varieties of CRE programming noted in this study, research to date has focused primarily on which books are selected (i.e., common book as a product) and not enough on how institutions go about structuring the common reading *experience* (i.e., common book as a process). This line of research would add complexity, elaboration, and nuance to a notably thin research base. This kind of research could—and in fact, should—investigate what impact CREs can have on students (or other target audiences) and how participation in CREs can lead to tangible and intangible outcomes. If anything, this study’s conclusion that selection procedures are anarchical should serve as a call to researchers to delve deeper into whether, how, and why these types of programs work.

Summary and Conclusions

During the execution of this research study, all three institutions chose a new common book and completed nearly a full year of CRE programming. Each additional year of programming is another opportunity to investigate the effects of these programs. Unfortunately, the extant literature continues to be dominated by a narrow focus on books titles.

It is my hope that the current study informs readers in its demonstration that selection committees, though small, make complex, symbolic decisions. Though any common book selection is likely to attach itself to other problems, the findings of this study suggest that each common book is chosen with the purpose of benefitting the institution and the community through intellectual engagement.

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Appendix A

General Interview Questions:

1. What is the process for selecting the common text? Who selects?
2. Please describe the criteria for selecting the common texts.
 - a. Does the committee look at what other institutions choose?
 - b. Are some criteria more important than others?
3. Has the selection process changed at all during the last three years? If so, how?
 - a. What factors influenced the change in selection process? (e.g., Internal/external criticism, feedback from constituents)?
4. Overall, what distinguishes your Common Read Program from others? What is unique?
5. What is working well in your Common Read? What challenges/criticism does the program face?

For each of the last three years:

6. Please walk me through the thought process and what you did to select each text.
7. What other books were up for consideration in those years?
 - a. Why was the common text chosen and not the others?
8. By choosing each of the common texts, what kind of messages were you/your institution sending? To whom?
 - a. Why was that an important message to send at the time?
 - b. How effectively was that message conveyed in your opinion?
9. How do you feel that common text selections have been received/perceived by campus audiences?
 - a. Are there audiences who were particularly supportive of the selection? Critical?

Appendix B

2017-2018 University of Mississippi Common Reading Experience Resource Guide

2017-
2018

The University of Mississippi Common Reading Experience Resource Guide

Integrating
Just Mercy
into the Classroom



Written by Faculty and Staff of
EDHE, Library, School of Law,
and Writing and Rhetoric
2017-2018

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**An electronic version of this Guide is available in the EDHE_105-305_Instructors_2017-2018_Fall Blackboard course and on the Department of Writing and Rhetoric website at <https://library.cwr.olemiss.edu/guides/cre/>.*

Chapter 1: Using *Just Mercy* in the Classroom

Why does UM have a Common Reading Experience?

The Common Reading Experience provides a shared intellectual experience for new members of the UM community. Through reading and considering a common book, new students engage with each other and with UM faculty in exploring issues relevant to today's global community. The Common Reading Experience helps students understand the expectations of college-level academic work, the nature of scholarly inquiry, and the values of an academic community. The program also enriches new students' campus experiences through co-curricular programs and events related to the book. The Common Reading Text is used in EDHE classes, Writing 100/101 classes, and other classes on campus. For more information about the Common Reading Experience visit <http://umreads.olemiss.edu/>.

Why was *Just Mercy* selected?

The Common Reading Text is chosen by a committee made up of UM faculty, staff, and students. This year's selection was chosen after careful consideration of dozens of potential options. *Just Mercy* tells the true story of a young lawyer who finds his passion defending impoverished people. Through the course of the memoir, readers come to know not only the author but also the clients he defends and the complex intricacies of the U.S. justice system. The book has won numerous awards, including the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and the NAACP Image Award for Non-fiction.

Who is Bryan Stevenson?

Bryan Stevenson is a Harvard-educated lawyer who is the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, and a professor of law at New York University School of Law. Stevenson has won numerous awards including the MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant, the Four Freedoms Award, and the Gruber Prize for Justice.

How do I teach a memoir?

The Common Reading Experience provides students and teachers in all disciplines a chance to interact with a shared text. Critical analysis of texts may feel like foreign territory to some teachers; however, analysis is a skill that is useful in all areas of education and beyond and can be approached in ways with which teachers are comfortable. Writing classes use the common reading text as the basis of a major project, but work with the book in other classes does not need to be so in-depth or take up entire class periods. Try to implement short in-class discussions, homework assignments, response papers, or journal writings using the themes and prompts listed in this guide. An alternative to covering the entire book is to concentrate on a few chapters that relate specifically to the themes of your course. This resource guide should provide starting points for discussions, homework, and/or writing assignments that will challenge students.

How do I encourage students to read?

Before assigning reading:

- Preview *Just Mercy* with students. Introduce the book during class. Explain how the book will be used in the course and how it will help students meet learning outcomes. Share your own excitement about the book, perhaps describing some favorite passages, events, or people.
- Help students understand the depth of reading required. Display a passage, and model critical reading strategies such as text annotation and marginalia.

As students read:

- Provide focused questions for students to consider while they are reading. Ask them to respond to those questions in writing before the next class.
- Have students identify and submit a discussion topic or question via email or Blackboard after they have read an assignment but before the next class meeting. Use their topics and questions as the basis for class activities.
- Require students to keep a reading response journal in which they comment on or question the reading assignment.
- Ask students to underline/highlight several passages from a reading assignment. In class, ask students to discuss one of their underlined/highlighted passages.

After students have read:

- Use class time and activities to build on, rather than summarize, the reading assignment.
- At the start of class, assign a one-minute paper in which students identify both the most crucial part of the reading assignment and an unanswered question they have about the reading assignment.
- During the first few minutes of class, ask students to write about links between the reading assignment and the topic being discussed in class.
- Distribute one or two questions that build on the reading assignment. Use the think-pair-share protocol. Students first consider the question(s) on their own. Then they discuss the question(s) with a partner. Finally, they share their results with the class.

How do I lead a class discussion?

A good class discussion, like any part of teaching, should be structured yet open to improvisation. Following are some pointers for leading a discussion based on what students have read (or even their attendance at an event).

Preparation before the class meeting:

Though you may have already read the book, be sure to review what the students are reading for your class meeting. Make a list of what you would like your students to learn from this exercise in order of importance.

- For instance, you might make priority one that students understand what they read.
- Then you might select a couple of scenes or events in the book that seem important or interesting (or even puzzling – just because you are leading class discussion does not mean you need to have all the possible answers).
- Perhaps you have selected several themes in the book as your focus. You might choose scenes that relate to professional integrity, stereotypes, or the power of community.
- You might also ask students to respond to a specific quote or passage.
- Jot down a few notes so you can access them easily during your class discussion. Annotate your own text.

Class time:

- Establish respect. Class discussion is a time for exploration, and the classroom is a safe environment for students to say what they are thinking. Remind students of the first rule of the University creed: “I believe in respect for the dignity of each person.” Be sure students are listening carefully to each speaker and taking his or her ideas seriously.
- Before discussion, ask students to reflect on a directed, yet open, question in a five- to ten-minute writing. Encourage students to keep writing throughout the allotted time even if they run out of things to say. They will surprise themselves with this unstructured writing. This writing is not a quiz with one correct answer. Ask them questions such as “What do you think is the significance of X?”; “How has X changed over time?”; “Why did X do what he or she did?” You could also ask them to do a close reading of a particular passage, perhaps even comparing it to another passage.
- Avoid general questions such as “What did you think of the reading for today?” or “What did you find interesting?” These are dead-end questions and will lead to short discussions.
- To mix things up, you may also have them work together in small groups to find discussion starters or answers to your questions.

Other ideas and approaches:

- Different classes have different personalities. Just make sure the environment in which students speak is a safe one, and continue to encourage discussion in different ways if something is not working.
- Some students will direct their comments just to you. Encourage them to talk to each other.
- If you had them write a response, invite students to share what they wrote.
- If you had them work in groups, invite representatives from each group to share what they found.
- Encourage students to point to specifics in the text. Ask them where they see what they see.
- Invite students to read sections out loud.
- Be open to where the conversation takes you. Sometimes students will pick up on details that you didn’t see.
- Try not to let the class discussion go over fifteen to twenty minutes. Students are most productive in that time frame.
- At the end of the discussion, recap the major points made or ask students to do so.
- Course-specific discussion prompts are included in the course-specific sections of this guide.

How do I deal with controversial topics?

Some issues in *Just Mercy* may spark controversy in the classroom. Topics that may generate controversy include but are not limited to crime, incarceration, police actions, sexism, and racism. The Yale Center for Teaching and Learning’s [Teaching Controversial Topics](#) can help you consider different approaches to discussing these issues.

Remember that the common read discussion should always serve your course outcomes. If a student raises an issue in which you have no expertise or are uncomfortable tackling, you might respond by explaining the topic is more suited for discussion in a different course (such as criminal justice, sociology, or political science). For example, you might say, “[Controversy X] is an important issue, and it’s one that you can study in depth in [Course Y]. [Course Y] is taught by an expert in that field. For the purposes of this course, let’s keep the focus on [your course outcome Z].” Additional guidelines are below.

If a student raises a controversial issue unexpectedly, you may want to:

1. Acknowledge the student’s remark.
2. Acknowledge that other students may hold different views or positions.
3. Assess your willingness to continue the discussion further.
4. Assess other students’ willingness to continue the discussion further.

The following guidelines may be helpful for facilitating planned discussions of controversial issues:

1. Articulate a clear purpose for the discussion (for example, how the discussion is related to course objectives).
2. Establish ground rules, such as listening without interrupting the speaker, questioning ideas rather than criticizing individuals, offering at least one piece of evidence to support each point made, and/or using “I” statements rather than “you” statements.
3. Be an active facilitator by redirecting students who are off topic or participating too actively, ensuring students are not put on the spot as spokespersons for certain groups, providing opportunities for all students to participate (orally or through writing), and being attuned to students’ emotions.
4. Summarize the discussion at the end of class, and obtain student feedback.

How do I build instruction around the book’s themes?

1. The book weaves many themes, including, but not limited to, justice, mercy, redemption, family ties, stereotypes, humane treatment, poverty, racial inequity, incarceration, punishment, treatment of juveniles, and corruption.
2. A class focusing on the theme of redemption might look like this:
 - Individually, students identify and write about a passage that illustrates the theme of redemption. (five to seven minutes)
 - As a class, students discuss the passages they have chosen. (ten to fifteen minutes)

- With partners, students brainstorm ways in which people are offered redemption outside of the justice system, perhaps using examples from their own experience. (five to ten minutes)
- Student pairs report their findings to the entire class and compose a list of the different types of redemption offered in our society. (ten to fifteen minutes)
- Homework: Students use the Internet or other resources to identify and analyze an article about redemption outside of the justice system. Here are some questions for them to consider: Which (if any) of the types of redemption we discussed in class is exemplified in the article? What was something new about redemption you learned from the article? In what ways is the redemption in the article similar to/different from redemption in the justice system? How does the article resonate with Stevenson’s notion that we all need mitigation and redemption?

What library resources are available?

Visit the [UM Libraries Common Reading Research Guide](#). Explore this website about *Just Mercy* featuring full text articles, videos, suggested readings, upcoming events, and more.

Extra copies of the book

Two paperback copies of the book are on reserve at the J.D. Williams Library at the first-floor West circulation desk for three-day checkout. Two additional copies are located in the main library stacks for regular checkout. You can also access a copy as an [EBook](#)!

What events or speakers are being planned for the fall semester?

Thought-provoking events are an excellent way to get students involved with the book outside of the classroom. Please consider encouraging your students to attend an event and reflect on the overall message being delivered. For the most up-to-date list, visit the [UM Libraries Common Reading Research Guide](#).

What if one of my students has a disability and needs a copy of the book in a different format?

Students with disabilities should visit Student Disability Services in 234 Martindale as soon as possible at the beginning of the semester. SDS provides classroom accommodations to all students on campus who disclose a disability, request accommodations, and meet eligibility requirements. SDS will be able to help your student acquire a copy of the CRE book in an appropriate format. The SDS website, <http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/sds/SDSFaculty.htm>, has some helpful resources for instructors.

Chapter 2: Cases, Concepts, and UM School of Law Initiatives

Prepared by Tucker Carrington
Director of George C. Cochran Innocence Project
University of Mississippi School of Law

This section offers explanations of cases, concepts, and other information referenced in *Just Mercy*, as well as an overview of the work being done by the UM School of Law clinical programs.

Attica Prison Riots: The Attica riot occurred at a prison in Attica, New York, in 1971, when several hundred inmates rose up in protest over their treatment. In the process, they held 42 people hostage. After New York State law enforcement seized back control of the prison, 43 people were killed – ten guards and civilian employees, as well as 33 inmates.

***Batson v. Kentucky* (1986):** When selecting a jury, both the prosecution and the defense – as well as the court—may remove potential jurors for cause because they know someone involved in the case, they are biased for some reason, too ill, prevented by work obligations, etc. Lawyers may also exercise a finite number of peremptory challenges – for which a juror may be struck/removed for no stated reason.

At the Kentucky trial of James Batson for burglary and receipt of stolen goods, the prosecutor used his peremptory challenges to remove all four African Americans from the jury. Batson challenged the removal of these jurors as violating his Sixth Amendment right to an impartial jury and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The U.S. Supreme Court agreed with Batson, ruling that the prosecution is prohibited from using peremptory strikes against a juror because of his or her race: "The harm from discriminatory jury selection extends beyond that inflicted on the defendant and the excluded juror to touch the entire community. Selection procedures that purposefully exclude black persons from juries undermine public confidence in the fairness of our system of justice."

Equal Justice Initiative (EJI): The Equal Justice Initiative is committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, to challenging racial and economic injustice, and to protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable people in American society.

Fourth Amendment—Search and Seizure: "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized."

The Fourth Amendment protects individuals from arbitrary law enforcement/state actor arrests. It also implicates the propriety of search warrants, stop-and-frisk actions, and other right-to-privacy issues.

Legal Clerkship/Internship: Often law students will use the summers between their second and third years in law school (generally a three-year course of study) to work in a law office in their area of interest, like Stevenson’s Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, Alabama.

Loving v. Virginia (1967): The U.S. Supreme Court invalidated (state) laws that prohibited interracial marriages. Mildred (black) and Richard (white) Loving had been sentenced to jail in Virginia as a result of their interracial marriage.

McCleskey v. Kemp (1987): The U.S. Supreme Court held that even though there was substantial data to show the "racially disproportionate impact" in Georgia’s application of the death penalty, the comprehensive scientific study was not enough to overturn the guilty verdict without showing a "racially discriminatory purpose.”

Miller v. Alabama (2012): The U.S. Supreme Court held that mandatory sentences of life without the possibility of parole are unconstitutional for juvenile offenders.

Relevant United States Incarceration Rates:

- From the mid 1970s to 2014, the U.S. prison population increased from 300,000 to 2,300,000.
- One in three black males born in this century is predicted to be incarcerated and/or involved with the criminal justice system (probation or parole) in some regard.
- The U.S. has sent a quarter of a million children to adult prisons and jails.
- The number of women in prison has increased 640 percent in the last 30 years.
- Spending on jails and prisons by state and federal governments has risen from \$6.9 billion in 1980 to nearly \$80 billion in 2014.

Southern Center for Human Rights (formerly Southern Prisoners’ Defense Committee): Stevenson began his legal career at this office in Atlanta. The Center focuses on death penalty defense work in the Deep South, as well as prison condition litigation.

UM School of Law: George C. Cochran Innocence Project and Legal Clinics

The George C. Cochran Innocence Project is committed to providing the highest quality legal representation to its clients: Mississippi state prisoners serving significant periods of incarceration who have cognizable claims of wrongful conviction. In addition, the Project seeks to identify and address systemic problems in the criminal justice system and to develop initiatives designed to raise public and political awareness of the prevalence, causes, and societal costs of wrongful convictions. Alongside its litigation efforts, the Project has continued its Legislative and Public Policy Program, the goal of which is to institute meaningful criminal justice reforms in Mississippi. The Project also offers a clinical opportunity for second- and third-year students at the University of Mississippi School of Law. Participating students routinely cite it as one of, if not the most, meaningful and valuable experiences that they had in law school. Many have gone on to make a difference in the criminal justice system itself – some as defense attorneys and others as prosecutors.

The Cochran Innocence Project and clinic is only one of several clinical programs and offerings at the law school. Generally speaking, legal clinics offer second- and third-year law students the opportunity to represent live clients who could not otherwise afford legal services. Like the Innocence Project Clinic,

several of the clinics engage in representation that affects broader public policy issues in the state. Among them are the Low-Income Housing Clinic and the MacArthur Civil Rights Clinic. Aside from representing individuals in their cases, many of the clinics also work to improve the overall state of the law and community in Mississippi.

To that end, the Cochran Innocence Project, like other innocence projects throughout the country, understands that wrongful convictions occur for a number of reasons – shoddy law enforcement investigation, prosecutorial misconduct, false confessions, faulty eyewitness identification, bogus forensic science, and ineffective assistance of defense counsel. To date, over 350 persons in the United States have been freed through post-conviction DNA testing. Many hundreds more have been proven innocent through other means. In this way, we consider the innocence movement’s nearly singular ability to expose definitively the pervasive systemic injustice that infects the criminal justice system as its most important contribution. Unlike a “not guilty” trial verdict, which allows space for disagreement about the delivery of justice, exonerations, especially those that result from post-conviction DNA testing, provide irrefutable proof of institutionally-condoned injustice. Exonerations, of course, are only the tip of the iceberg. For every mistaken eyewitness identification that can be verified and developed into an innocence case, there are numerous others that suffer from the same faulty evidence but which – because there is no DNA, or it has been lost or degraded, or witnesses have died or gone missing – cannot be similarly developed.¹

Equally compelling is the fact that innocence cases expose appellate courts’ inability – even sometimes seeming unwillingness – to identify colorable [plausible] claims of actual innocence or seriously address their root causes. As early as 1993 in *Herrera v. Collins*² the Supreme Court rejected an opportunity to find unconstitutional the execution of an innocent person who had received a full and fair trial.³ In fact, in her concurrence, Justice O’Connor wrote that “[o]ur society has a high degree of confidence in its criminal trials.”⁴ A substantial amount of time has passed since *Herrera* was decided and Justice O’Connor wrote those words. What seemed then, at any rate, a defensible interpretation of the Constitution paired with an unscientific but nevertheless popular conception of public sentiment, now seems quaint, at best, and if placed against empirical evidence of innocence work, more like a ham-handed effort at creating plausible deniability.

Based on an exhaustive study of the first two hundred reported cases of post-conviction DNA exonerations, University of Virginia Law Professor Brandon Garrett found that although the petitioners were innocent, few actually presented the claim as one of actual innocence because that claim is, according to *Herrera*, not cognizable.⁵ As a result, according to Garrett’s data, appellate claims do not

¹ See Samuel R. Gross & Barbara O'Brien, *Frequency and Predictors of False Conviction: Why We Know So Little, and New Data on Capital Cases*, 5 J. EMP. L. STUDS. 927 (2008); Clarence Page, *The 200th Reason to Test DNA*, CHI. TRIB., Apr. 25, 2007, at C23; D. Michael Risinger, *Convicting the Innocent: An Empirically Justified Wrongful Conviction Rate*, 97 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY (2007), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=931454.

² 506 U.S. 390 (1993).

³ *Id.* (noting, too, that even if such a claim were to exist, the threshold would be “extraordinarily high”).

⁴ *Id.* at 421 (1993) (O’Connor, J., concurring).

⁵ Professor Garrett notes that there are avenues of relief based on “collateral” claims of innocence or on certain states’ constitutional protections. See Brandon L. Garrett, *Judging Innocence*, 108 COLUM. L. REV., 55, 110 n. 200-01 (2008), citing *Kyles v. Whitley*, 514 U.S. 419, 435 (1995), (determining that a *Brady* violation is premised upon a factual proffer showing that the exculpatory evidence “could

privilege factual claims or their development.⁶ Of the two hundred innocence cases examined, not a single case granted relief based on a challenge to eyewitness identification error or a constitutional claim of forensic evidence problems. Of those who falsely confessed, only half raised claims about the issue, and none received relief.⁷

Nevertheless, and in spite of all this, the late Justice Antonin Scalia wrote, “This Court has *never* held that the Constitution forbids the execution of a convicted defendant who has had a full and fair trial but is later able to convince a habeas court that he is ‘actually’ innocent. Quite to the contrary, we have repeatedly left that question unresolved, while expressing considerable doubt that any claim based on alleged ‘actual innocence’ is constitutionally cognizable.”⁸ Were that not enough, he pointed out in a subsequent opinion that “[o]ne cannot have a system of criminal punishment without accepting the possibility that someone will be punished mistakenly. . . . But with regard to the punishment of death in the current American system, that possibility has been reduced to an insignificant minimum.”⁹

As a matter of law Scalia and the Court may be correct, inasmuch as one is attracted to that particular philosophical view of the Constitution and its role in our society. As a matter of objective fact, however, that position flies in the face of what we know about the number of innocence cases, as well as their root causes. Where we as a society ultimately land on these issues – whether, in short, we view the Constitution as a restrictive document or as an aspirational articulation of our better selves – will continue to play out over time. But the work of innocence projects and the powerful narratives they uncover, combined with the broader work of places like Bryan Stevenson’s Equal Justice Initiative and its legal and policy advancements, should add to – maybe even compel – a correct and certain outcome.

reasonably be taken to put the whole case in such a different light as to undermine confidence in the verdict”); *Miller v. Comm’r*, 700 A.2d 1108, 1132 (Conn. 1997) (providing relief in a case where “clear and convincing evidence” of actual innocence is present); *People v. Washington*, 665 N.E.2d 130, 1336-37 (Ill. 1996) (finding that a legitimate claim of innocence raises due process issues under a state’s constitution).

⁶ For a more in-depth discussion of the valuing of procedural claims over factual claims as it applies to innocence cases, see Garrett, *supra* note 66 at 126. For a more general discussion of the trend, see William J. Stuntz, *The Uneasy Relationship Between Criminal Procedure and Criminal Justice*, 107 YALE L.J. 1, 37-45 (1997) (discussing “defense attorneys’ incentive to skew their investment in the direction of more constitutional litigation and less litigation about the facts”).

⁷ Garrett, at 60-61.

⁸ *In re Davis*, 130 S.Ct. 1, 3 (2009) (Scalia, J., dissenting).

⁹ *Kansas v. Marsh*, 548 U.S. 163, 199 (2006) (Scalia, J., concurring).

UM School of Law: Roderick and Solange MacArthur Justice Center

(adapted from the [UM Law MacArthur Justice Center](#) website and used with permission)

The Roderick and Solange MacArthur Justice Center is a public interest law firm advocating for human rights and social justice through litigation. The MacArthur Justice Center focuses on issues such as police misconduct, wrongful search and seizure, conditions of confinement, juvenile justice, inmate access to health care and mental health treatment, access to parole, prosecutorial misconduct, discrimination in the criminal justice system, and indigent rights. The Center's goal is to bring about meaningful and positive change in Mississippi through litigation of cases addressing weaknesses in the State's criminal justice and legal systems. The UM School of Law MacArthur Justice Center works collaboratively with MacArthur Justice Center offices in New Orleans and at the Northwestern University School of Law in Chicago.

MacArthur Justice Clinic

The MacArthur Justice Clinic at the University of Mississippi School of Law provides law students with opportunities to participate in all aspects of the Center's litigation, including case selection, witness interviews, research, discovery, draft pleadings, motions arguments before federal judges, and, when possible, participation at trial. Through this student involvement, the MacArthur Justice Clinic seeks to develop lawyers sensitive to the need for advocacy in the areas of human rights and social justice.

The MacArthur Justice Clinic is the newest of the 11 clinical programs at the University of Mississippi School of Law:

- Child Advocacy
- Conflict Management Practicum I & II
- Criminal Appeals
- Elder Law
- George C. Cochran Innocence Project
- Housing Clinic
- Legislation and Policy
- MacArthur Justice Clinic
- Street Law
- Tax Practicum
- Transactional Law

Chapter 3: Integrating *Just Mercy* into Residential Learning

The Common Reading Experience provides a shared intellectual venture for new members of the UM community. Through reading and considering a common book, new students engage with others in exploring issues relevant to today's global community and their own lives. This section of the guide details the themes that are resonant with living on campus and the beginning of college. Relevant characters and passages from the book as well as sample activities are listed below each theme.

LIVING AND WORKING WITH PEOPLE DIFFERENT FROM YOU

Walter McMillian and Sam Crook, pp. 102-3

Sample activity: After discussing Walter's method of redefining odd people as "interesting," make a list of terms we use to describe people we don't quite get (i.e., kooky, wacky, weird etc.). Then make a list of new words redefining those terms in a positive way (i.e., unique, creative, adventurous, etc.).

HELP ALONG THE WAY

Charlie, pp. 115-126

Marsha Colbey, pp. 227-241

The Stonecatcher, pp. 306-310

Sample activity: After discussing the ways in which these characters seek, find, and offer help, send pairs of residents on a help-finding scavenger hunt. Prepare a list of common problems that first-year students face. Pair residents, and give each pair a different problem. Have the residents do a virtual or real-life search of campus to find people/offices that could help with that problem.

FINDING YOUR PASSION

Bryan Stevenson, pp. 3-14

Sample activity: After reading and discussing how Stevenson struggles to decide if he wants to be a lawyer, ask residents to write down what they think they will be majoring in and why they have made those choices. Then, introduce them to the "Choosing My Major" page of the College of Liberal Arts website at <http://libarts.olemiss.edu/choosing-my-major/>. Ask them to choose one of the majors there they have never heard of or considered and read about the possibilities for jobs listed for that major. Make a list of what the students discover.

LISTENING, LEARNING, AND CHANGING

The correctional officer, pp. 191-202

Sample activity: After reading about how the correctional officer was changed by listening to Stevenson and the expert witness in court, pass out slips of paper and ask residents to write down something they wish they knew more about or understood better. Collect the slips, read each out loud, and discuss courses or activities they could get involved in that would increase their understanding.

MISTAKES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND FORGIVENESS

Ian Manuel and Debbie Baigre, pp. 151-153

Sample activity: This passage illustrates the power of taking responsibility for mistakes and the healing nature of forgiveness. After discussing the relationship that developed between Ian and Debbie after Ian's apology, ask residents to brainstorm "mistakes" that roommates might make as they live together throughout the year. Then role play some scenarios for asking and offering forgiveness for those mistakes.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

The McMillian family and the death row inmates, pp. 225-226

Sample activity: In this scene when Walter is finally released from prison, the family he was born into and the community of death row inmates he was placed into surround him with support and encouragement. The moment is emblematic of the support they have provided throughout Walter's ordeal. Discuss the ways in which community membership (such as living in a residence hall) can provide support and encouragement. Brainstorm ways for residential community members to offer that support.

STEREOTYPES AND IMPLICIT BIAS

Bryan Stevenson, pp. 38-42

Sample activity: In this scene, Stevenson relates an incident in which he was falsely suspected of criminal activity because of his age and race. Unfortunately, college students are often the subjects of unfair stereotypes or implicit biases, too. Ask residents to take the implicit attitude toward age test, "Project Implicit, Age IAT," at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>. Discuss the results. Then list situations in which residents might be judged unfairly based on their age/appearance, and brainstorm effective responses.

FOSTERING PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

Bryan Stevenson and Tom Chapman, pp. 108-113

Sample activity: In this scene, Stevenson recounts a frustrating conversation with a district attorney whom Stevenson characterizes as "dismissive." Learning to listen and respond effectively is a vital skill for college students in their residential and academic lives. After discussing the passage, have residents practice some active listening strategies, such as the following paraphrasing strategy: Tell residents that

the three steps of active listening are 1.) looking at the speaker, 2.) waiting for the speaker to finish, and 3.) responding with words or phrases that paraphrase what the speaker has said. Pair students. Give the first speaker a topic, such as, “A strong emotion I have been experiencing lately is.” Ask the speaker’s partner to practice the steps of active listening. Then switch roles, giving the second speaker a different topic.

MATURATION

Bryan Stevenson, pp. 266-269

Sample activity: Stevenson writes about how many of the juvenile offenders he has worked with “matured into adults who were much more thoughtful and reflective” (266) but made terrible choices when they were younger and less thoughtful. Have students write down and share strategies they have for making mature, responsible decisions now that they are “on their own” and in college yet their brains are still developing.

DISCOMFORT

Darnell Houston, pp. 113-114

Sample activity: After discussing Darnell’s spurious arrest, talk about how systemic racism (as well as other social problems) can perpetuate comfort and discomfort among people and communities. Then have students write down ways they can step out of their own comfort zones and challenge systems that unfairly perpetuate inequalities.

Community assistants may also be interested in forming book discussion groups for their residence halls, using *Just Mercy* as the first book. For help forming a book discussion group, please contact Melissa Dennis, Head of Research & Instruction Services & Associate Professor, at mdennis@olemiss.edu or 662-915-5861.

Chapter 4: Integrating *Just Mercy* into EDHE 105/305

The common reading book selection is used each year in EDHE 105/305 courses primarily as a framework for class discussions, projects, and writing assignments that explore social themes and/or issues from the book. EDHE 105/305 instructors use the text (with a focus on those themes and issues) to teach students how to explore their personal reactions, to understand and appreciate both the things that make them different from their peers and the things that they have in common, and to effectively and respectfully voice their own opinions and viewpoints.

CLASS DISCUSSIONS*

EDHE 105/305 classrooms provide excellent opportunities for students to practice classroom discussion. Instructors are encouraged to read pages 3–6 of this guide to prepare for these opportunities. Here are several suggestions for discussion prompts:

- Early in the book, Stevenson describes an incident when he was racially profiled and police searched his car. He wonders, if there had been drugs in his car and he was arrested, would he have been able to convince his attorney that his car was searched illegally? Stevenson says, “Would a judge believe that I’d done nothing wrong? Would they believe someone who was just like me but happened not to be a lawyer? Someone like me who was unemployed and had a criminal record?” (44). How does Stevenson’s work shape his understanding of the justice system? Do his experiences make him more or less empathetic to those in the justice system? Is it surprising that someone whose 86-year-old grandfather was murdered would work so tirelessly against the death penalty?
- Stevenson was interviewed by Terry Gross on the National Public Radio show *Fresh Air*. When asked about the McMillian case, he says, “...it was challenging because even when we presented all of that evidence – and we presented Mr. McMillian’s strong alibi, the first couple of judges said, ‘No, we’re not going to grant relief.’ It took us six years to get a court to ultimately overturn the conviction. And I think it speaks to this resistance we have in this country to confronting our errors, to confronting our mistakes.” Is there a lack of humility in our justice system? In America? Why does it take so much time, effort, and perseverance to get the legal system to confront its mistakes? Can this be changed?
- Many United States citizens will find this book painful to read, demoralizing, and even shameful. What kind(s) of emotion(s) did the book bring up in you? Is this a book about combating racism? What is this book about?

- The *New York Times* says *Just Mercy* “reads like a call to action.” Stevenson calls for increasing the salaries of teachers, law enforcement, and social workers in an interview with National Public Radio. Are you compelled to take action after reading the book? If so, what would that action look like? Are there local or national groups that you would work with to make your action more powerful?
- One of the most powerful moments in the book is when Stevenson experiences a mental and emotional breakdown. But this breakdown becomes a pivotal moment in his work for he recognizes his and society’s collective brokenness and their response to weakness: “We’ve become so fearful and vengeful that we’ve thrown away children, discarded the disabled, and sanctioned the imprisonment of the sick and the weak—not because they are a threat to public safety or beyond rehabilitation but because we think it makes us seem tough, less broken” (290). How did this realization ultimately aid Stevenson? Do you agree with this realization? Does society need to somehow find its way to that point in order to move forward and heal?
- The purpose of the UM Creed is “to outline certain established values that each member of the University community should strive to possess” (UM Policy 10000781). Discuss how certain characters or events in *Just Mercy* reflect or do not reflect one of the following aspects of the Creed:
 - I believe in respect for the dignity of each person.
 - I believe in fairness and civility.
 - I believe in personal and professional integrity.
 - I believe in good stewardship of our resources.
- In the chapter “Mitigation,” Stevenson describes his interactions with a prison guard who is deeply affected by listening to his arguments in court regarding the background and past experiences of his client. During their conversation at the end of the chapter Stevenson states, “Sometimes I forget how we all need mitigation at some point” (201). Mitigation is defined as “to cause to be less harsh or hostile; to make less severe or painful” (Merriam-Webster). What do you think Stevenson means by this statement?

**Some of these questions are adapted from common reading guides at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Iowa.*

IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES

1. Character Investigation (individual or group activity)

Choose an individual from Walter McMillian’s story in the book. Suggestions:

- Walter McMillian
- Minnie Belle McMillian
- Robert E. Lee King
- Ralph Myers
- Karen Kelly
- Ernest Welch

Investigate this individual using these questions:

- What is this person’s story?
- Describe his or her character traits. Do you admire these traits? Why or why not?
- List a memorable quote from this person. Why did you choose this particular quote?
- How does he/she interact with Stevenson?
- Does this individual evolve and develop throughout the book? If so, how?

2. Interview Analysis

Choose one of the Stevenson interviews listed below:

- Bryan Stevenson—Charlie Rose (<https://charlieroose.com/guests/5864>)
- Bryan Stevenson—The Daily Show with Jon Stewart | Comedy Central (www.cc.com/video-clips/d9wrvk/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-bryan-stevenson)
- Public Interest Lawyer Bryan Stevenson | Interviews | Tavis Smiley | PBS (<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/interviews/public-interest-lawyer-bryan-stevenson/>)

Analyze the interview using these questions:

- Basics: Who interviewed him? Where was the interview? When was the interview?
- How did the interviewer treat Stevenson?
- Discuss Stevenson’s manner, personality, character as exemplified in this interview.
- What was the main point that Stevenson tried to convey in this interview?
- What did you learn from this interview?
- Who might be the intended audience for this interview?
- What additional questions would you ask?

3. Problem-Solving Brainstorming Session

Divide the class into 4–5 groups, providing each group with 5-6 index cards and an envelope.

1. Instruct each group to select a social problem or issue that was brought up in the book and then write this on the envelope. Alternatively, you may start with a brainstorming session, list problems, and have each group select one. Suggestions for issues: racial profiling, abuse of power, legal representation for indigent individuals, mental illness in prison populations, juvenile incarceration, etc.
2. Each group then passes their envelope to the next group.
3. As each group receives an envelope, they have a set amount of time to discuss the problem and possible solutions. They write their best solution on an index card, place it in the envelope, and then pass it to the next group. Groups may not look at other solutions from other groups that are in the envelope!
4. Continue until each group's envelope comes back around to the starting point. Have each group read all of the solution suggestions and decide/explain to the class which one they think is the best and why.

4. In-Class Debate

Choose one of the controversial issues or themes described in this guide and write a proposition statement. For example:

Example #1 – Resolved: The death penalty is an important deterrent to criminal activity.

Example #2 – Resolved: The death penalty should be outlawed in the United States.

Divide the class into two or more groups with one or more sides taking the affirmative position and the other side(s) the negative. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for research and drafting arguments.

Each side then presents its case in the following format:

1. Affirmative constructive speech
2. Negative constructive speech
3. 5-minute work period
4. Negative rebuttal speech
5. Affirmative rebuttal
6. 5-minute work period
7. Negative rebuttal
8. Affirmative rebuttal
9. Decision

Variation: Require research and preparation outside of class. Make teams of two to three and use the debate as the group project assignment.

GROUP/INDIVIDUAL PROJECT ASSIGNMENTS

1. Just the Facts!

Early in the semester, groups can give short presentations on the facts related to various topics in the book.

- The status of the death penalty in the U.S.
- Mandatory drug sentences
- Incarceration in other countries
- Juvenile sentencing in the U.S.
- Prison system in Mississippi

2. Identity Project (*adapted from NC State's "Creative Project"*)

Create two representations of your identities: how you think others view you, and how you view yourself. You can use any medium you want. Some potential options include:

- Video
- Song or other audio art
- Poem or other written art
- Painting, drawing, photography, or other two-dimensional art
- Sculpture, model, diorama, or other three-dimensional art
- Other creative representation of your identities

For your first meeting with your instructor, bring your representations and be prepared to discuss them.

3. Written Identity Reflection (*adapted from NC State's "Creative Project"*)

Please address the following questions. Your response to each question should be thorough but limited to one or two paragraphs per question. Overall your written reflection should be no more than three pages.

1. Define what identity means to you, and describe the identities you feel apply to you as an individual.
2. Select one person from the book whom you found interesting (you may select the author). Briefly describe the person and his/her experience. How are that person's identities different from yours? In what ways are his/her identities similar to yours? How might you and this person experience life differently?

Additional assignment for the end of the semester:

Throughout *Just Mercy*, it was clear to see that Bryan Stevenson had a great impact on the world around him. At New Student Orientation, you were challenged to think about who you will be and how you will exist in this community that is new to you. Now that you have had time to reflect, who will you be? How will you be that person? What specific impact do you intend to make on your community?

4. Research Project/Presentation

Note to instructor: Consider encouraging your students to utilize the library resources found at the [UM Libraries Common Reading Research Guide](#) and other resources listed on pages 7-11 of this guide.

Divide the class into small groups, assigning one of the non-profit organizations listed. Each group member will be assigned a particular role: researcher, illustrator, writer, etc. Have students use the suggested resources plus any others they find in order to prepare a 10- to 15-minute presentation to the class on their project. Instruct students to address the organization's mission, activities, impact, etc.

Organizations seeking justice:

- Equal Justice Initiative
- Mississippi Innocence Project – Innocence Network
- Southern Center for Human Rights (formerly Southern Prisoners Defense Committee)
- Roderick & Solange MacArthur Justice Center

Organizations with a religious emphasis:

- Prison Fellowship
- Kairos Prison Ministry
- Dismas Ministry

Organizations that encourage productive citizens:

- Prison Lives
- P.A.T.H. – Prison Arts Touching Hearts
- Freebird Publishers

5. Teach the Class

Note to instructor: Encourage students to use library resources found at the [UM Libraries Common Reading Research Guide](#).

Your assignment is to teach your classmates about a chapter in the book. Each group will engage the other classmates in discussions or activities built around the themes, characters, and issues presented in your group's assigned chapter.

Each presentation must be 10-15 minutes long. On the day of the presentation, each group must submit a brief outline or study guide which provides the main points of your presentation. The only rule is that you are not allowed to simply recite what you believe to be the main points. Develop a class activity, make a video, use visual aids, etc. Be creative! Using PowerPoint, Prezi, or other presentation software is welcome but will NOT count as a visual aid or activity on its own. Students can reserve [STUDIOone](#) in the library to record and edit videos.

CHAP	CHAPTER TITLE	TOPIC	INDIVIDUALS
4	"The Old Rugged Cross"	Incarceration of veterans	Herbert Richardson
6	"Surely Doomed"	Prosecution of children as adults	Charlie
8	"All God's Children"	Prosecution of children as adults Death in prison for juveniles	Trina Garrett, Ian Manuel, Antonio Nunez
10	"Mitigation"	Incarceration of the mentally ill	Avery Jenkins
12	"Mother, Mother"	Women in prison Murder of child by mother	Marsha Colbey
14	"Cruel and Unusual"	Death penalty Death in prison for juveniles	Joe Sullivan
15	"Broken"	Incarceration of intellectually disabled	Jimmy Dill

Chapter 5: Integrating *Just Mercy* into WRIT 100/101

The first-semester, first-year writing courses—WRIT 100 and WRIT 101—use the Common Reading Text as the basis for the first major writing project. This project emphasizes the critical reading, critical thinking, analysis, research, and synthesis skills that are vital to college writing. In this assignment, students are given a prompt pertaining to the Common Reading Text and asked to compose an essay that integrates the Common Reading Text with outside sources and the student’s own ideas. First-year writing courses use the Common Reading Text as a basis for student reading and writing rather than as a literary study.

Discussion Starters *

1. As you read the book, what were your reactions to descriptions of the criminal justice system? Why does the author compare his own brokenness to the brokenness of the system? Do you believe that broken people can be healed? What does it mean to show mercy within a broken system?
2. Were you surprised by the prevalence of improper legal representation in the cases profiled in *Just Mercy*? What examples of discriminatory jury selection does Stevenson share? What factors do you believe should influence jury selection? Explain your reasoning. Numerous examples of judicial misconduct are also cited in *Just Mercy*, from destruction of evidence to prosecutorial misconduct. Why do you think sheriffs, lawyers, and other government officials proven guilty of misconduct are still on active duty? What reforms, if any, do you believe should be made to the legal system?
3. There are countless examples within the text of courts refusing to review new evidence or grant new trials, stating that it is too late for new information. We also hear about the media experiencing “innocence fatigue.” What do you believe contributes to indifference towards claims of innocence? Should people with claims of innocence have their cases reviewed in a timelier manner? Should victims’ family members be involved in the review of innocence cases? Do you believe our legal system operates under the principle of innocent until proven guilty?
4. Many prisoners who have spent years on death row or in solitary confinement describe their experience as being buried alive. Prisoners are often subjected to rape, assault, and violence and have an increased risk of suicide. What protections should exist for incarcerated people? Do you believe that putting someone in uninterrupted solitary confinement for 18 years, as we read in the case of Ian Manuel, is ever warranted? Do you believe additional protections should exist for juveniles? What kind of punishment, if any, should exist in prisons?
5. Fifty percent of the people in jail and prison today have a diagnosed mental illness, with one in five having a serious mental illness. Why is severe mental illness often ignored at trial? Do you believe mentally ill people convicted of crimes should receive different treatment? In 2002, the Supreme Court ruled in *Atkins v. Virginia* that executing individuals deemed to be “mentally retarded” is cruel and

unusual punishment. What other protections should be considered for prisoners with proven mental illness, including those who have committed violent offenses?

6. Rena Mae Collins' aunt approaches Stevenson after Herbert Richardson's hearing and tells him, "We can't cheer for that man you trying to help but don't want to have to grieve for him, too. There shouldn't be no more killing behind this" (81). How do you believe victims' family members should be involved in legal cases? How do you see the government acting on behalf of victims in the book? McMillian's sister tells Stevenson, "I feel like I've been convicted too" (93). How do you think family members of people convicted of crimes should be treated?
7. What factors prevent mitigating evidence (information about a person's background and upbringing that may reduce punishment for an offense) from being presented at trial? Why would a judge or a jury lack interest in significant, compelling mitigating evidence? Do you believe Herbert Richardson's sentence would have been different if evidence was presented on his history of abuse, mental illness, PTSD, and military service? What does Stevenson mean when he writes, ". . . we all need mitigation at some point" (201)?
8. Before Richardson's execution, correctional officers at Holman Prison were helpful and attentive to his requests. Stevenson asks, "Where were these people when he really needed them?" (89). What support do you believe Richardson should have received while he was struggling with childhood sexual abuse, PTSD, and disability? What does this say about the function of prisons today? What do you think the role of prisons should be?
9. In 1996, people with drug convictions were banned from receiving public benefits including housing, welfare, and student loans. Two-thirds of women in prison are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes, many for writing bad checks or committing minor property crimes. Stevenson charges that these policy changes have "created a new class of 'untouchables'" (237). What are some of the consequences of this class division? What factors lead to an increase in felony charges for nonviolent offenses? Do you think race and class affect sentencing for nonviolent offenses?
10. In the epilogue, Stevenson writes, "The real question of capital punishment in this country is, *Do we deserve to kill?*" (313). What was your opinion about capital punishment prior to reading this book? Did reading *Just Mercy* change your opinion about whether or not the United States has the right to execute its citizens? What other questions did this book raise about capital punishment?
11. Readers from varied backgrounds will approach this book with different knowledge and experiences. Did Stevenson's examples resonate with you, or were you shocked? Is the book an eye-opener for you or validation of what you already knew? Consider how your reaction would differ if you were of a different race or class, were the victim of a serious crime, or had personal experience with the justice system.

**These questions are adapted from common reading guides at The University of Wisconsin-Madison and Washington State University.*

Project Prompts *

1. During Stevenson’s first year in law school he is unsure of his focus and future plans. When he starts working with people on death row he finds his calling. He remembers his grandmother telling him, “You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close” (14). These words of advice help shape Stevenson’s career. Make some notes about how Stevenson’s work is affected by his “getting close” to his subject. How do we see the author “getting close” to issues of punishment and mass incarceration throughout the book? What are some examples of Stevenson “getting close” to the incarcerated people he works with? How does “getting close” to Walter McMillian affect his life? Then, think about your own educational pursuits up to this point. Where have you “gotten close” to your academic work? Why? What does this tell you about who you are as a learner and thinker? What might it mean in the future for you as an academic and beyond? How does your experience compare to Stevenson’s journey? Finally, compose an essay in which you examine a focused area where you have “gotten close” to your studies by getting personally involved and in which you compare and contrast your experiences with Stevenson’s.
1. (NYT) During Stevenson’s first year in law school he is unsure of his focus and future plans. In fact, he notes, “I studied philosophy in college and didn’t realize until my senior year that no one would pay me to philosophize when I graduated” (4). Keeping this in mind, read [“Will you Sprint, Stroll, or Stumble into a Career.”](#) *The New York Times*, April 5, 2016, which characterizes emerging adults as sprinters, wanderers, or stragglers. After reading the article, consider which category Stevenson belongs in. Then think about your own plans for college and beyond, identifying which category best fits you. Finally, compose an essay in which you compare and contrast your own category and experiences with Stevenson’s.
2. Titles can be easily overlooked or forgotten once readers have become immersed in a book. Now that you have finished the book, consider the role that titles play. Start with the book’s title, *Just Mercy*. What are some of the different meanings of the word “just” used throughout the book? Has reading about Stevenson’s experiences influenced your own definition of justice? Then examine the chapter titles. What is their relationship to justice? Do you see patterns or motifs emerging? Are there chapter titles that are particularly significant? Does Stevenson engage in deliberate wordplay in his use of titles? Write a thesis-driven essay examining the ways in which Stevenson’s book and chapter titles affect how we read and think about the book.
2. (NYT) Titles can be easily overlooked or forgotten once readers have become immersed in a book or an article, but titles influence readers in many ways. Read Bryan Stevenson’s October 24, 2014, *New York Times* essay, [“The Man on Death Row Who Changed Me.”](#) which is adapted from the “Higher Ground” introductory chapter of *Just Mercy*. Then reread “Higher Ground.” Write an essay comparing and contrasting the two titles and the ways in which the titles affect both the readers and the selections. Take into consideration the audience, purpose, medium, and exigence for each piece. Consider why each title was chosen and how effective it is.

3. After working with low-income and incarcerated people for many years, Stevenson came to believe that “the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice” (18). How does poverty affect justice in *Just Mercy*? Are there any examples of poverty and justice existing at the same time? Write an essay supporting or opposing Stevenson’s quotation, citing examples from the book as evidence.
3. (NYT) After working with low-income and incarcerated people for many years, Stevenson came to believe that “the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice” (18). Read the October 23, 2015, *New York Times* article, “[Court by Court, Lawyers Fight Policies that Fall Heavily on the Poor.](#),” and watch the embedded video. Then write an essay on how poverty does or does not affect justice, citing examples from the book, the article, and the video. How does poverty affect justice? Are there any examples of poverty and justice existing at the same time?
4. Media outlets play an interesting role in *Just Mercy*. Stevenson is reluctant to bring media attention to some cases, but it is clear that the *60 Minutes* coverage played at least some role in helping to free Walter McMillian. If the justice system in America is based on facts, evidence, and a presumption of innocence until proven guilty, why do media outlets play such a powerful role in our thoughts on crime? Think about your own understanding of justice and crime in America and what role media play in it. Consider another case or two in which you think media attention played a role in public opinion. Ask yourself how confident you are in media portraying you fairly if you were accused of a serious crime. Then compose a thesis-driven argument essay in which you examine the role of media in America’s justice system. Point to examples from *Just Mercy* in your essay.
4. (NYT) Media outlets play an interesting role in *Just Mercy*. Stevenson is reluctant to bring media attention to some cases, but it is clear that the *60 Minutes* coverage played at least some role in helping to free Walter McMillian. If the justice system in America is based on facts, evidence, and a presumption of innocence until proven guilty, why do media outlets play such a powerful role in our thoughts on crime? Read the October 4, 1995, *New York Times* article, “[Not Guilty: The Moment; A Day \(10 Minutes of It\) the Country Stood Still.](#),” about the media coverage of the O.J. Simpson verdict. Think about your own understanding of justice and crime in America and what role media play in it. Ask yourself how confident you are in media portraying you fairly if you were accused of a serious crime. Then compose a thesis-driven argument essay in which you examine the role of media in America’s justice system. Point to examples from *Just Mercy* and the *NYT* article in your essay.
5. Stevenson discusses juveniles in depth in *Just Mercy*, both tacitly and explicitly arguing that a just and merciful country would not sentence children to death or to life in prison. He asserts, “[y]oung teens lack the maturity, independence, and future orientation that adults have acquired” (268) in explaining his argument to the Supreme Court on sentence relief for juveniles. Stevenson further claims that many of the juveniles with life sentences whom he has worked with have become far more reflective and mature adults. Think about your own decisions as you end your teenage years. In what ways have you matured and become more reflective and forward-thinking?

Why? Do your actions as an early teen define you in any ways? How so? Consider how the American justice system handles juvenile crime. Is it appropriate? Why, or why not? Are there certain crimes where defendants should be tried as adults? Is there a particular age when children should be held to different expectations? Is it the same for everybody? How does incarceration affect children differently from adults? Do you agree with Stevenson that punishments for children are often “intense and reactionary” (268)? Compose a thesis-driven essay in which you analyze and make a claim about the juvenile justice system using your own growth and maturation as well as examples from *Just Mercy* to support your points.

5. (*NYT*) Stevenson discusses juveniles in depth in *Just Mercy*, tacitly and explicitly arguing that a just and merciful country would not sentence children to death or to life in prison. He asserts, “[y]oung teens lack the maturity, independence, and future orientation that adults have acquired” (268) in explaining his argument to the Supreme Court on sentence relief for juveniles. Stevenson further claims that many of the juveniles with life sentences whom he has worked with have become far more reflective and mature adults. Read the November 10, 2015, *New York Times* article, “[What Mass Incarceration Looks Like for Juveniles.](#)” Think about your own decisions as you end your teenage years. In what ways have you matured and become more reflective and forward-thinking? Why? Do your actions as an early teen define you in any ways? How so? Consider how the American justice system handles juvenile crime. Is it appropriate? Why, or why not? Are there certain crimes where defendants should be tried as adults? Is there a particular age when children should be held to different expectations? Is it the same for everybody? How does incarceration affect children differently from adults? Do you agree with Stevenson that punishments for children are often “intense and reactionary” (268)? Compose a thesis-driven essay in which you analyze and make a claim about the juvenile justice system using your own growth and maturation as well as examples from *Just Mercy* and the *NYT* article to support your points.
6. Stevenson notes several books that informed his own opinions about justice, including *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois and *Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* by Douglas A. Blackmon. How did these books affect him? What authors or books have informed your own opinions about justice? Compose an essay in which you analyze how books can shape readers’ perceptions of justice using your own experiences and Stevenson’s to support your points.
6. (*NYT*) Stevenson notes several books that informed his own opinions about justice, including *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois and *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* by Douglas A. Blackmon. Read W.E. B. Du Bois’ December 12, 1909, *New York Times* article, “[Fifty Years Among Black Folks: Prof. Dubois Tells of Evolution of Negro.](#)” and Janet Maslin’s April 10, 2008, *New York Times* review, “[What Emancipation Didn’t Stop After All.](#)” of Douglas Blackmon’s volume to get a better understanding of these books. Then consider how and why these books affected Stevenson’s opinions about justice. What authors or books have informed your own opinions about justice? Compose an essay in which you analyze how books can shape readers’ perceptions of justice

using your own experiences and Stevenson’s to support your points. Use the *NYT* articles to inform your discussion of the books that influenced Stevenson.

7. Walter McMillian was the 50th person exonerated from death row in the United States. As of 2015, 156 people have been exonerated, many after serving decades in prison. What challenges do you think formerly incarcerated people, whether deemed innocent or not, face when they re-enter their community? What support, if any, do you believe the government and/or community should grant former prisoners? Once proven innocent, do you believe an exoneree should receive compensation for his or her wrongful incarceration? Craft a thesis-driven argument about how we as a country should address the problems of wrongful convictions and the support that is owed to exonerees.
7. (*NYT*) Walter McMillian was the 50th person exonerated from death row in the United States. As of 2015, 156 people have been exonerated, many after serving decades in prison. Read and listen to several interviews in the November 25, 2007, *New York Times* multimedia presentation, [“Exonerated, Freed, and What Happened Then.”](#) After reviewing Walter McMillian’s story in *Just Mercy* and listening to the *NYT* interviews, what challenges do you think formerly incarcerated people, whether deemed innocent or not, face when they re-enter their community? What support, if any, do you believe the government and/or community should grant former prisoners? Once proven innocent, do you believe an exoneree should receive compensation for his or her wrongful incarceration? Craft a thesis-driven argument about how we as a country should address the problems of wrongful convictions and the support that is owed to exonerees, citing examples from the book and the interviews as evidence.
8. Shame and repentance are recurring themes in *Just Mercy*. In an interview with Ezra Klein, Stevenson remarks,

I think we have to increase our shame — and I don't think shame is a bad thing. I worked with people in jails and prisons, and most parole boards will make my clients say, ‘I am sorry,’ before they can get parole. It's a requirement in many states that you have to show remorse, even if you have a perfect prison record, before they will let you out. We require that because our sense of comfort, our sense of safety, is compromised if we don't think you appreciate the wrongfulness of your criminal act. In faith perspectives, to get to salvation — at least in the Christian tradition — you have to repent. There is no redemption without acknowledgement of sin. It’s not bad to repent. It's cleansing. It's necessary. It's ultimately liberating to acknowledge where we were and where we want to go. We haven't done that collectively.

Do you agree with Stevenson’s remarks? Why, or why not? Craft a thesis-driven argument in which you defend your stance including evidence from the book.

8. (*NYT*) Shame and repentance are recurring themes in *Just Mercy*. In an interview with Ezra Klein, Stevenson remarks,

I think we have to increase our shame — and I don't think shame is a bad thing. I worked with people in jails and prisons, and most parole boards will make my clients say, 'I am sorry,' before they can get parole. It's a requirement in many states that you have to show remorse, even if you have a perfect prison record, before they will let you out. We require that because our sense of comfort, our sense of safety, is compromised if we don't think you appreciate the wrongfulness of your criminal act. In faith perspectives, to get to salvation — at least in the Christian tradition — you have to repent. There is no redemption without acknowledgement of sin. It's not bad to repent. It's cleansing. It's necessary. It's ultimately liberating to acknowledge where we were and where we want to go. We haven't done that collectively.

St. Olaf College Professor of Philosophy Gordon Marino also discusses shame and repentance in his November 12, 2016, *New York Times* column, "[What's the Use of Regret?](#)" After reading Marino's column and reviewing Stevenson's book, consider the following questions. Do you agree with Stevenson's remarks and/or Marino's article? Why, or why not? Craft a thesis-driven argument in which you defend your stance including evidence from the book and the column.

9. Medium—the tool or technology through which information is conveyed—can have a significant impact on audience response. In *Just Mercy*, Walter McMillian's story is conveyed through alphabetic text. The StoryCorps Justice Project relates the stories of individuals affected by mass incarceration through audio. Listen to one or more of the stories on the [StoryCorps Justice Project](#) website. Then compose an essay in which you analyze the effect of medium on audience response. In what ways does the medium have an effect on audience response? In what ways does the medium seem to have no effect? What is the larger significance of your analysis for the rhetorical situation? Craft a thesis-driven argument to defend your analysis.
9. (*NYT*) Medium—the tool or technology through which information is conveyed—can have a significant impact on audience response. The chapters "I'll Fly Away," "Recovery," and "Cruel and Unusual" convey the story of Walter McMillian's prison release and life thereafter through alphabetic text. The [StoryCorps Justice Project](#) relates the story of Jamal Faison's prison release through audio. *The New York Times* Op-Doc, "[A Ride Home from Prison,](#)" relates the story of Stanley Bailey's release through video. Reread, listen to, and watch each of these texts. Then compose an essay in which you analyze the effect of medium on audience response. In what ways does the medium have an effect on audience response? In what ways does the medium seem to have no effect? What is the larger significance of your analysis for the rhetorical situation? Craft a thesis-driven argument to defend your analysis.

**Many of these prompts are adapted from common reading guides at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Washington State University.*

Appendix

Chapter-specific discussion questions*

Chapter 1

1. How did Stevenson’s background prepare him for law school?
2. What famous novel was written in Monroe County, Alabama, and how is it relevant to *Just Mercy*?
3. In what ways did the Alabama government contribute to the economic difficulties of the state’s African American population?
4. Why was Ralph Myers considered to be so trustworthy by the Monroe County police department?

Chapter 2

1. What two cases involving the Gadsden police does Stevenson detail? What do the two cases have in common?
2. Which recent news stories parallel the cases in Gadsden?
3. Describe Stevenson’s own interaction with the police in Atlanta and how that affects him (personally and professionally).
4. What other issues within the law enforcement infrastructure and society in general do the three episodes with the police reveal?
5. How did the senior citizen attending Stevenson’s church lecture earn his “medals of honor”?

Chapter 3

1. What happened to Walter McMillian that landed him on death row *before* his conviction? How and why did this happen?
2. What is the importance of the 1986 Batson v. Kentucky ruling?
3. Why was the trial moved?
4. Who were some of Walter McMillian’s most important allies? What evidence was there in support of McMillian’s innocence?
5. In your opinion, who or what is to blame for Walter’s conviction? (Hint: it may be more than one person/force/reality). Who or what is *most* to blame?
6. Why does Stevenson spend so long telling McMillian’s story? What effect does the story have on Stevenson?

Chapter 4

1. Who was Herbert Duncan, and what did he experience prior to his arrest, trial, and sentencing?
2. What was the 1989 Supreme Court ruling related to death penalty appeals? What impact did that have across the country?
3. When do judge overrides increase and for what reason?
4. What were the details of the 2002 Supreme Court case of Atkins v. Virginia?
5. Alabama’s capital statute requires that murder be intentional in order for a defendant to be eligible for the death penalty. Why is this relevant in Duncan’s case?
6. Duncan was a U.S. war veteran who suffered tremendous mental trauma while serving our nation. How should that be factored into his defense? Why didn’t it factor in at the time?

7. What does Stevenson report and reveal about the lives of the prison staff and how they treated Duncan?
8. How did Duncan's execution affect Stevenson and the others at the clinic?
9. What does Stevenson note about the statistics of veterans in prison?
10. What flaws in both the justice system and the veterans' services system does this chapter highlight? Be able to reference specifics from Duncan's story.

Chapter 5

1. What is the origin of this chapter's name?
2. Why is Walter's family convinced he will be exonerated? How do they treat Stevenson? While Stevenson is meeting Walter's family, is he confident Walter will be exonerated?
3. How is the relationship between Stevenson and Walter changing? What does the author cite as an important activity for lawyers to do when defending death row prisoners? Why?
4. What evidence does Darnell Houston provide, and how does trying to help Walter McMillian put him in a quandary?
5. Even with the new evidence, what happens at the appeal for a new trial? Why does this occur?
6. Why does it annoy Stevenson that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a point of pride in Monroeville?
7. How would you characterize Stevenson's mood at the end of this chapter?

Chapter 6

1. Why is Charlie in jail in the first place?
2. What is happening to Charlie while he is in jail? Why is he not in a juvenile detention center?
3. In what ways has the system failed to protect Charlie, both before and after his incarceration?
4. What special circumstances of the murder victim lead to greater struggles for Charlie? Does this seem fair?
5. How does Stevenson finally convince Charlie to speak with him?
6. Who are Mr. and Mrs. Jennings, and what do they do for Charlie?
7. What are the death penalty laws for juveniles? What does Stevenson think about these laws?

Chapter 7

1. What evidence and arguments does Stevenson present on appeal for Walter McMillian?
2. What evidence do Stevenson and O'Connor discover as they prepare the appeal of the appeal? Be able to list at least five discoveries.
3. Why does Myers have a change of heart? What new information does he want to offer, and why does Stevenson *not* trust him?
4. Why does Stevenson investigate both the Morrison and Pittman murders, and what does he discover? Why do you think the victims' families were treated differently?
5. What does Payne vs. Tennessee allow for?
6. What does McKlesky vs. Kemp reveal? How does the race of the victim come into decisions about sentencing?
7. Why did Stevenson not have access to police files and records in Walter's case? How does he get them (with Rule 32)? How are he and O'Connor treated once they pursue a new case and receive access to the files and official documents?

Chapter 8

1. What are the backgrounds, cases, and sentences for Trina, Ian, and Antonio?
2. Once sentenced to life as minors, how do each of the three endure abuse (or the risk thereof) within the prison system?
3. How is it that Antonio was sentenced to life in prison despite being a minor in California?
4. What correlation does Stevenson reveal between incarcerated youth (or even youth with criminal records) and race?
5. What do you think is the best way to treat minors and youths caught up in the justice system? Should home life be taken into account? Previous abuse? The degree of violence in the crime or if anyone was injured? Is life in prison ever a just punishment for minors?
6. How does poverty reinforce the prejudice built into these systems, according to Stevenson?

Chapter 9

1. What happens in court on the first day of the Rule 32 trial? Does it sound like the jury buys Mr. Myers' new version of events?
2. What happens to the court gallery on the second day?
3. Why does Mrs. Williams not show up on the second day? How is she finally able to support Walter? Why do you think Stevenson includes the story and background of Mrs. Williams?
4. What evidence presented at the trial is most powerful to you?
5. What is the State's response to Stevenson's case, and what effect does that have on everyone present?

Chapter 10

1. What are some of the statistics Stevenson presents about mental illness and incarceration in the United States? Which statistic resonates most with you? Can you think of any ways to address the statistical realities Stevenson highlights?
2. What happened with Avery Jenkins? What evidence did doctors present at his trial, and how was this evidence treated the first time? How did Stevenson help him?
3. What does Stevenson say about the difference between our treatment (both as individuals and as reflected in the legal system) of those suffering from physical versus mental disabilities?
4. Who is Dorothea Dix, and why is she important to this chapter?
5. What does "mitigation" mean in the legal context?

Chapter 11

1. What is the court's ruling in the Rule 32 trial? Why?
2. Even despite the ruling, why was Stevenson hopeful for relief? What does "exculpatory evidence" mean?
3. What role does the *60 Minutes* episode on Walter have on the reinvestigation of the case?
4. Be able to articulate the findings of the ABI in the new investigation. What is the result of these findings?
5. What is the importance of hope, according to Stevenson?
6. What toll does Walter's case take on his family? Despite his release, what effects linger from his interaction with the justice system?
7. Was justice finally served to Walter? Or was his case an example of a miscarriage of justice that was righted only years later? In other words, do you find this case as a whole to represent the best or the worst—or something else—of our justice system?

Chapter 12

1. Describe Marsha and what her life was like before she gave birth to her child. Why was she arrested, and for what?
2. Who is the guiltiest of wrongdoing in Marsha's case?
3. Do you think the verdict would have been different if the accused was the father of the infant? What if Marsha were wealthy?
4. What Alabama law, passed in 2006, put so many poor women at risk of prosecution? What did the Alabama Supreme Court add to the law with respect to the word "environment"? What do you think is the purpose of this law? What is Stevenson's opinion of this law and others like it?
5. In what ways are female inmates more at risk than male inmates?
6. What does Stevenson reveal about the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women? Does Tutwiler seem better or worse than some of the other prisons Stevenson has described?
7. What are some of the secondary (or collateral) consequences of the imprisonment of poor women?
8. How is Stevenson able to help Marsha, and over what time period?
9. How are women like Marsha, even if freed or released from prison after time served, affected by other laws that seem to keep them in cycles of poverty?
10. Based on the way he tells this story, what does Stevenson think about mandatory minimum laws or other laws that seem to criminalize poverty?

Chapter 13

1. Why does Stevenson want to encourage news stories about Walter being released as a free man?
2. Why is Stevenson concerned about Walter returning to his life in his hometown? What obstacles does he face, even though he is freed and exonerated?
3. Should wrongfully imprisoned people receive financial restitution from the state? If so, how should the amount be determined? How would Stevenson answer that question?
4. Why does Stevenson travel to Sweden? What does he witness at the ceremony that disturbs him, and why does he react in this manner?

Chapter 14

1. Who is Joe Sullivan, and what happened to him?
2. What is the "prison industrial complex"?
3. How and why has incarceration been expanded to handle other issues, such as mental illness, addiction, and behavior disorders?
4. What is the eighth amendment to the U.S. Constitution? How does Stevenson plan to use the eighth amendment in defending Joe Sullivan?
5. What decisions did the U.S. Supreme Court make in 2002 with regard to the capital punishment of those with mental disabilities? In 2005 with regard to minors?
6. How many other countries in the world sentence minors to life in prison?
7. In this chapter, Stevenson focuses on two subsets of children serving life sentences—which two, and why do you think he chose them?
8. One prominent person gave Stevenson's U.S. Supreme Court case public support. Who was that, and why is it significant?

Chapter 15 & Epilogue

1. Why is Stevenson starting to feel overwhelmed by 2009?
2. What happens to Walter?
3. What trend is the United States experiencing in the rate of capital punishment sentencings and executions? What does Stevenson give as a reason for this trend in the last decade or so?
4. What does Stevenson argue before the Supreme Court in 2005 with regard to certain methods of execution?
5. What is the irony in states breaking laws to access the drugs used for lethal injection?
6. What is Stevenson's conclusion about justice and mercy and how they must work together?
7. One way of defining justice is that it is punishment for the wrong-doers; what would Stevenson say in response to that kind of definition, particularly in light of this chapter?
8. At Walter's funeral, what does Stevenson say is the real question about capital punishment?
9. What does he say makes mercy just and powerful?

**Adapted from the Gonzaga common read guide and the Random House reading guide.*

Sample Rubrics

Sample Group Presentation Rubric

1. Was the content of the presentation well organized and presented with compelling evidence?

1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

2. Did the visual component enhance the presentation?

1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

3. Was the verbal presentation clear and engaging?

1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

4. Did the group engage the class in a discussion?

1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

5. Did the group follow the time limits?

1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

Sample Group Presentation Peer Evaluation

Your name: _____

1) Team member name: _____

This team member contributed fairly to the creation of the outline. Yes No

If no, please explain:

This team member contributed fairly to the creation of the presentation. Yes No

If no, please explain:

2) Team member name: _____

This team member contributed fairly to the creation of the outline. Yes No

If no, please explain:

This team member contributed fairly to the creation of the presentation. Yes No

If no, please explain:

3) Team member name: _____

This team member contributed fairly to the creation of the outline. Yes No

If no, please explain:

This team member contributed fairly to the creation of the presentation. Yes No

If no, please explain:

4) Team member name: _____

This team member contributed fairly to the creation of the outline. Yes No

If no, please explain:

This team member contributed fairly to the creation of the presentation. Yes No

If no, please explain:

Other comments or concerns about your group and how you worked together? (use back)

ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FOR RESPONSE PAPERS

STUDENT'S NAME: _____

ASSIGNMENT TITLE: _____

SCORE: _____

CONVENTIONS/MECHANICS		
Ineffective	Partially-effective	Effective
Multiple errors in writing hamper communication, and text does not demonstrate standard English grammar, punctuation, and/or usage, and/or does not meet the requirements for length and format.	Minimal errors in standard English, grammar, punctuation, and/or usage are present in some of the writing, and/or the text does not meet requirements for assignment length and/or format.	The writing meets guidelines for standard English grammar, punctuation, and usage, with very few minor errors present. Meets requirements for assignment length and format.
D / F	C	B

INFORMATION PRESENTED			
Ineffective	Partially-effective	Effective	Exceptional
Does not introduce or integrate information relevant to the topic/event, or includes inappropriate use of sources. In the case of an event paper, it is unclear that the event was attended.	Demonstrates only minimal or ineffective use of integrating information relevant to the topic/event. Writing only barely addresses details of event or class materials.	Introduces and integrates information relevant to the topic/event. Writing addresses details of event or class materials and places information within a larger context.	Demonstrates exceptionally strong, integrated information that enhances credibility of writing. Writing includes skillfully represented details about event or class materials.
D / F	C	B	A

REFLECTION/RESPONSE			
Ineffective	Partially-effective	Effective	Exceptional
Fails to explore new ideas and/or works without making any connection between event or class materials and a personal context.	Begins exploration of new ideas but could push further. Experience of event or class materials is put in a personal context but lacks development of ideas.	Explores ideas unfamiliar to the reader, and questions different thinking. Puts experience of event or class materials in a personal context, is well-developed, and includes self-evaluation.	Exhibits a significant investigation of new ideas by way of exploring an event or class materials. Shows signs of personal growth and/or considerable self-evaluation.
D / F	C	B	A

Write additional comments on the back of the rubric.