

Helping students delve deeper into books

By Ellie A. Fogarty and Nelson H. Evans

An elective course that brings librarians and students together

Since 1974 the Trenton State College (TSC) Library has been offering a Library Reading Program (LRP), a two- to three-credit course offering students the opportunity to read in interdisciplinary areas of their interest in consultation with a librarian. The primary purpose of the course is to allow third- or fourth-year students to spend time exploring and discussing a variety of books or articles that they "always wanted to read but never had the time."

A student contacts the LRP coordinator a month before registration with a list of books to read. By reviewing this list, the coordinator matches the student's interests with those of a librarian. The librarian and student go over the list, perhaps adding or deleting a title. Alternative selections are included in case other titles are found to be unsatisfactory once the course begins. Field trips, when appropriate, can also enhance the readings. When the librarian and student feel comfortable with the agreed-upon design, the student is given written permission to register for the course.

In addition to the reading, the student agrees to meet once a week for one or two hours in order to demonstrate, through the discussion, that the week's material has been read and thought about. At the end of the course, the student must write up, in a page or two, the experience in the course and how he or she has benefited from it. The idea is to provide as much time for reading as possible; all other considerations are kept to a minimum.

It is best not to try to imagine the readings in terms of subjects like modern art, child study, or capital punishment. Since each list grows out of the student's interest, it is unique and seldom falls within a single, well-defined subject. Focusing on subject areas tends to produce bibliographies that are better met by departmental courses or a reading list that can be better handled in a department's independent study course.

Selecting students

Quality control is built in since the students who find their way to the course have high motivation. They have demonstrated the level of their interest by the books they have selected to read. Often an academic advisor will encourage a worthy student to contact the LRP coordinator. Among the variants of this has been a department chair sending a student with a prepared bibliography when the department has been too busy to take on another student. This, too, has worked out well. In addition to being selective as to the students, enrollment is limited to the number of available librarians. No librarian is obliged to participate, since schedules and duties vary widely from semester to semester. To date, 95 students have completed this course.

Grading participants

The student receives a grade based on how well he or she can demonstrate that the material has been read and comprehended. This is done through a discussion between the librarian and the student. The librarian's main purpose is not to teach but to verify that the course requirements have been completed. The librar-

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ian is free to discuss and ask specific questions about the reading, but essentially the student should be able to talk about the week's reading without any prompting by the librarian. How well this is done determines the grade. If some of the agreed upon items are not read, it is an automatic failure. This has never happened. If the content is summarized without demonstrating any thought, that would be a C. If the readings are discussed fully, related to other books, and/or to coursework or life experience, that would be a B. "A" students are those who are so enthused that they will read beyond the agreed list, critically analyze the works, or follow up on a newly encountered idea. It should be mentioned that a student does not have to be a fast reader; indeed, the opportunity to read can be more beneficial for a slow reader who finds it difficult having enough time to pursue personal reading interests.

A few examples

The following are a few examples of recent courses:

A senior accounting major who was serving as the accountant for the college theater developed a list of 12 titles including biographies and autobiographies (with two alternative titles) of performers such as Charlie Chaplin, Groucho Marx, Buster Keaton, Lawrence Olivier, and Will Rogers, and was paired with the business/economics librarian. The student carried most of the conversation each week, tracing a sketch of the performers' early lives, struggles, and successes. Many of these entertainers worked together or competed for audiences so there was a sense of continuity throughout the entire course. The student was able to compare and contrast the lives of each performer as the course progressed, and discovered a fascinating history of the early immigrants woven throughout the biographies. He also discussed stage performances and films he had seen and other information he had read regarding the entertainer. Sharing an interest in business allowed the librarian and student to discuss much of the business-related activities of the stage and early film industry.

This course is an opportunity for motivated students looking for a self-designed elective that will be enjoyable and will cultivate their comprehension and communication skills.

One woman read in the area of early American architecture and furniture. In addition to reading books and articles, she went on a field trip to Winterthur Museum, which is about 90 minutes from TSC. Winterthur is a museum started by the Du Ponts composed of rooms taken from buildings and houses to depict various architectural periods and furnishings. She discovered that for a fee, the museum gives guided tours catered to an individual's interests. Being able to see many of the things she had been reading about provided a very enjoyable and educational experience.

Another student read in an area of an Eastern religion. As part of the course she visited one of its centers. She was amazed to find the wide difference between what the members with whom she spoke believed and what scholars she had read reported they believe.

Conclusion

The benefits of this program extend beyond the opportunity to read interesting books. Students can polish their ability to read, understand, synthesize, and orally convey the substance of the readings in a clear and concise manner. Their critical thinking and articulation skills, which so many employers desire and so few courses are able to develop in students, will serve them throughout their professional lives. It is hoped that their enjoyment of read-

ing and appreciation of the book will last a lifetime. This course is an opportunity for motivated students looking for a self-designed elective that will be enjoyable and, even though it is not the primary purpose,

will cultivate their comprehension and communication skills. It provides an occasion to discuss what is learned with a responsive person and the chance to read about interests which may otherwise be frustrated, postponed, forgotten, or never pursued.

As far as we know, there are no other reading programs offered to college students for credit by an academic library. If the reader does know of any, please contact the coordinator, Nelson Evans, at Trenton State College Library, Trenton, NJ 08650-4700; phone (609) 771-2421 or e-mail: EVANS@TSCVM.TRENTON.EDU. ■

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