



Improving student reading skills by developing a **culture of reading.**

QEP Impact Report
Methodist University
Fayetteville, North Carolina

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(From the Quality Enhancement Plan Proposal submitted to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, February 12, 2009)

The selection of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) at Methodist University involved a lengthy, campus-wide dialogue about academic direction and change. It began as a disparate list of desired improvements solicited from and championed by individual faculty, staff, students, and alumni. Although initially an ambitiously inclusive but vague and incompletely articulated proposal, it finally emerged as a focused, widely supported, well researched, well funded, and accessible initiative to improve the reading skills of students by developing a campus-wide culture of reading.

Our plan to create a culture of reading utilizes the existing freshman seminar course, IDS1100: The Methodist University Experience, which has recently been revised to include a common freshman reading assignment. This assignment is a recently published book chosen from popular literature, selected for its thought-provoking potential. Our QEP will build on this course in several ways. Students will be required to enroll in a genre-based Reading Circle (course IDS 2100) in the freshman or sophomore year. The object of these circles is to encourage students to read self-selected material outside of their assigned coursework. To support this goal, the Davis Memorial Library is creating a collection of fiction and other popular works. To support the development of a culture of reading, we will continue to set up “Reading Nooks” around campus to create reading-friendly environments in academic and recreational settings.

The project, which has the slogan “Get Between the Covers!” will be assessed both formally and informally at many levels, including the individual Reading Circles, student reading improvement, and attitudinal changes. Instruments will include NSSE, Nelson-Denny, and the College BASE rubrics for assignments in IDS 1100 and the Reading Circles, as well as internally generated attitudinal questionnaires and surveys developed by our Office of Institutional Research.

**“Get Between the Covers!”
Developing a Culture of Reading at Methodist University**

1.0 Purpose of the QEP

1.1 Goal (as stated in the QEP document): **We want our students to read more** because increased reading will help students become better readers, better students, and better citizens, and we have chosen to increase student reading through creating a culture of reading. Eric J. Paulson, in his article on developing a reading culture, proposed:

that if we identify an important goal of ... reading programs for college readers as providing a foundation of life-long reading, a study-skills approach to college development reading falls short. Instead, we must focus on encouraging and instilling in ... students the belief that reading has intrinsic value. It is through this approach that solid academic progress can be obtained as well. (Paulson, 2006, pp. 51-52)

1.2 Outcomes:

1. Students will engage in more reading-based activities, both recreationally and related to their coursework.
2. Students will show improved reading skills over their course of study at Methodist University.

2.0 Implementation

2.0.1 Changes

The original QEP proposal called for program co-directors, but after some preliminary inquiries University administration determined that having a single director would be both more efficient and more economical.

Soon after the launch of the QEP, the syllabus for FYS 1100 (the freshman seminar) was revised to no longer include a common reading, and thus that element was eliminated as assessment measure.

Effective fall 2012 the number of common readings in IDS 2100 (Reading Circle) was reduced from four to “at least three” since students and instructors reported that they were unable to sufficiently discuss four books and a common reading.

2.1 Outcome 1: Students will engage in more reading-based activities, both recreationally and related to their coursework.

2.1.1 Discussion of implementation

As per our QEP proposal, the process of QEP implementation was assigned to a main QEP committee and five subcommittees (Reading Circles, Culture of Reading, Development, Publicity, and Assessment). At the January 2010 meeting of the QEP Implementation Committee, the members decided to rename the group the QEP Oversight Committee to better reflect the nature of the main committee, acknowledging that much of the “heavy lifting” would be performed by the subcommittees.

The lynchpin for achieving Outcome 1 is the IDS 2100 Reading Circle course. Beginning with the 2009-2010 Academic Catalog, successful completion of at least one Reading Circle became a general education requirement for all undergraduate students not completing at least one Honors program seminar. Students may take up to three different Reading Circles for credit. Approximately 40 sections, both face-to-face and online, are offered each year on a variety of topics. In the fall of each year, potential instructors are invited to submit interest forms. The Reading Circles Subcommittee meets annually to decide on topics and facilitators for the upcoming academic year and throughout the year as needed to support the Reading Circle program. Reading Circle instructors are required to attend training sessions held by members of the Reading Circles Subcommittee and mid-semester group meetings, and to submit assessment data.

This book keeps getting better and better. It's better than watching football.
- Student comment

The Culture of Reading Subcommittee spearheaded efforts to encourage students to read outside of the classroom. The subcommittee set up reading nooks across campus, with most of the indoor locations stocked with free books. Themed “Weekly Special” book giveaways and white board questions (“What literary character are you most like?”) in our busiest classroom building continue to attract student attention and engagement. Contests and panel discussions got faculty, staff, and students talking about reading.

To raise awareness of the QEP theme and to encourage students to increase their reading both in and out of the classroom, the Publicity Subcommittee engaged in a variety of marketing strategies. QEP-branded tee shirts, pens, and bookmarks are common freebies at campus events. The QEP has a prominent presence at the New Student Orientation fair and ads placed in the student newspaper remind students, faculty, and staff about the program. The English department created a series of READ posters featuring faculty and students. Large banners with the QEP theme and logo were displayed at strategic campus locations.

The Development Subcommittee was primarily tasked with administering the mini-grant program, offering up to \$500 for faculty, staff, and student projects which encouraged reading. Among many other endeavors, these funds established a Math Education Literacy Library, supported popular “Monarchs of Poetry” and “Are You Booked for Lunch?” programs, and provided resources for faculty development.

Davis Memorial Library worked closely with the QEP subcommittees to develop resources and programs to support the QEP. The Novel Brew Café in the library was a popular reading spot for several years (until renovations reconfigured the space). The café provided not only comfortable furnishings for reading and studying, but also free coffee and hot chocolate along with space to display new books. Over the course of the first five years of the QEP the library purchased over 1,700 books (both fiction and non-fiction) for recreational reading.

The Assessment Subcommittee met periodically to review the effectiveness of current assessment measures and to evaluate the data collected to that point. At the SACSCOC annual meeting in December 2011, Ms. Arleen Fields (QEP Director), Dr. Don Lassiter, and Dr. Lori Brookman presented a roundtable discussion related to our QEP assessment measures and development of an assessment “dashboard” to organize assessment data. At the SACSCOC annual meeting in December 2012, these same faculty members expanded that discussion into a concurrent session and added content regarding how to keep a QEP on course after the initial enthusiasm wanes.

2.1.2 Impact on student learning (assessment measures)

Our QEP proposal named four measures that would be used to assess the success of achieving Outcome 1 of the “Get Between the Covers! Developing a Culture of Reading” initiative: a) library circulation figures for recreational reading books, b) results of a survey on student attitudes toward reading, c) feedback from students and facilitators involved in Reading Circles, and d) answers to a question on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) regarding recreational reading. Three more assessment measures were added at the launch of the program: e) number of reading nooks, f) number of Reading Circle sections, and g) enrollment in Reading Circle sections.

a. *Davis Memorial Library “popular reading” circulation figures will increase by 5% each year.*

As was mentioned, over 1,700 popular reading books have been purchased for the library since the inception of the QEP. As of the end of last academic year (2013-2014), 62% of those titles have been checked out at least once. From Year 1 to Year 2, the percentage increase in circulation skyrocketed from 42% to 296% owing to the purchase of new books and strong marketing. Year 3 circulation increased an additional 84%, with Year 4 circulation showing a modest 7.1% increase due to library renovations. The library was open during renovations, but materials were hard to access, few new materials were purchased, and the environment was not conducive to casual reading. In Year 5, after completion of the renovations, the rate rebounded to a 19.7% increase in circulation over the previous year. The library plans to continue adding materials to the collection and publicizing them.

b. *In the internally generated survey of student attitudes toward reading, the number of students who report that they like to read for fun will increase.*

The survey included questions about attitudes and habits regarding reading, such as the amount of time spent preparing for class, the importance of being a good reader and writer, and reading comprehension skills. Over five years of QEP programming, the number of students who reported liking to read went from 73% to 81% of respondents; daily reading went from 27% to 43%; always taking notes in class went from 37% to 62%; reading on a college level for most reading went from 26% to 62%. The survey will continue to be administered to all students at the end of each academic year, but with some question revisions. In particular, a question about the number of books students read “for fun” will be added. (See **d. NSSE** data for more information.)

c. *Feedback from students and facilitators involved in Reading Circles.*

Feedback regarding the reading circles was collected informally through solicitation of anecdotes from facilitators and formally through end-of-class student evaluations. Open-ended response sections of student course evaluations are usually completed by students who have strong feelings about a particular class or instructor, and IDS 2100 is no exception. Many students reported that they enjoyed the class discussions and that the course reminded them that they liked to read and could make time to read. The most common complaint was that the required course work was too heavy for a one-credit-hour class. The next-most-common comment reflected resentment that students were “being made to read for fun” and that the class was of no benefit.

I read books that were interesting and I never usually read. It was great!!

There are no plans to cease efforts to create a culture of reading on campus. Student comments demonstrate that the “Try it, you might like it!” approach (making the class a graduation requirement) is having an effect on reluctant readers, regardless of the naysayers. Based on student feedback, the QEP Oversight Committee will continue to examine the course workload in relation to other classes to determine if the class should, in fact, be changed to a two or three credit-hour class. Program coordinators will continue to collect this type of information and utilize it for program evaluation.

d. *NSSE data, specifically, comparison between freshman baseline testing (pre-test) and senior testing (post-test).*

Question 3B on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) asked responders to provide “Number of books read on your own (not assigned) for personal enjoyment or academic enrichment.” Our goal was to have a higher number of “5-10” responses than “1-4” responses, but this was never achieved, and there was no significant increase in recreational reading reported. This question was dropped from the 2013-2014 version of the NSSE and thus will be dropped as an assessment measure. However, this question will be added to the revised version of the internally generated student reading survey, since this attitude shift would be an indication of the positive impact of the QEP (See section b. *Survey of student attitudes towards reading*)

Additional measures from assessment dashboard:

f. *Number of reading nooks*

The QEP document recommended establishment of two reading nooks per year. Comfortable chairs with side or coffee tables have been placed in academic buildings and outdoor gazebos across campus and all have signage identifying them as QEP reading nooks. Most of the indoor nooks have paperback exchange bookshelves. Although some years more nooks were created than others, an average of three nooks were created each year during the five-year program. Casual observation may seem to show that the reading nooks are used more for socializing and school reading than for recreational reading, but they do provide a high level of visibility for the QEP. Based on how frequently the shelves need to be restocked, the students clearly appreciate the free books.

g and h. *Number of IDS 2100 Reading Circle sections and enrollment in reading circles*

The number of reading circle sections offered was increased every year until the first cohort for whom the class was a general education requirement graduated. Supply and demand has reached equilibrium, with between 35 and 40 circles (face-to-face and online) with an average class size of twelve are offered every year. Anecdotal evidence suggests that even though students can take as many as three reading circles for credit, few have taken more than the one required. Sufficient sections to meet demand on a variety of topics will continue to be offered.

2.1.3 Unanticipated outcomes

While not entirely unanticipated, students and faculty report enjoying the Reading Circle classes because they provide an opportunity to interact with people outside their discipline. Out of the 49 Reading Circle facilitators who have taught so far, ten were staff or adjuncts (with appropriate academic credentials to teach at the college level), not full-time teaching faculty. This statistic demonstrates the broad appeal of the course throughout campus.

2.2 Outcome 2: Students will show improved reading skills over their course of study at Methodist University.

2.2.1 Discussion of implementation

Members of the University's Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness worked closely with the developers of the QEP to identify quantitative measures to effectively assess Outcome 2. They chose the a) Nelson-Denny Reading Test, b) the English portion of the College BASE (Basic Academic Subjects Examination), and c) comparisons of individual student performance at the beginning and end of each Reading Circle class.

I'm not a big reader and this class has shaped my habit into wanting to read more. I highly recommend this class.

2.2.2 Impact on student learning (assessment measures)

From the QEP proposal:

a. Nelson-Denny Reading Test – comparison between freshman baseline testing (pre-test) and graduating senior testing (post-test) should show a 5% increase.

The Nelson-Denny Reading Test measures 1) vocabulary, 2) comprehension, and 3) reading proficiency. A fourth score (an overall score) is based on a compilation of the first three. Freshmen who took the test in 2009 and then as seniors showed improvement on all four scores and showed greater than 5% improvement on three of the four scores (vocabulary, reading proficiency, and overall scores). Those freshmen who took the test in 2010 and then as seniors also showed improvement on all four scores and greater than a 5% improvement on two of the four scores (reading proficiency and overall scores). This test will continue to be administered to a majority of students and used as an assessment tool for both QEP and institution-wide goals.

b. College BASE – comparison between freshman baseline testing (pre-test) and graduating senior testing (post-test) should show a 5% increase.

The College BASE is administered to all students as part of the freshman test battery, but not all students take all the sections of the multi-subject test. Approximately 25% of students took the English portion, which was composed of reading critically, reading analytically, understanding literature, and reading literature. (This percentage was used because the College BASE is comprised of four hour-long parts and having 25% of students take each part was a more feasible approach.) While students who took the pretest as freshmen showed small or no improvement in some subsection scores, the improvement in overall reading and literature scores met the criterion of a 5% increase.

The University recently revised the General Education core curriculum and the faculty and administration decided that the College BASE content is not valid for institution-wide assessment purposes. Since only a small percentage of students took the English portion of the test, its usefulness for QEP assessment purposes is also weak. Therefore, this test will be dropped from future QEP assessment measures.

c. At least a 5% increase in graded work and Cloze test scores from the beginning to the end of the semester in IDS 2100 Reading Circles.

Cloze tests are used to measure reading comprehension. On the Cloze test, every n^{th} word (usually somewhere between the 6th and 10th word) of a reading passage is replaced with a blank, and students must use context clues to determine an appropriate word to fill in the blank. All Reading Circle students are required to take a Cloze pre- and post-test. Instructors submit spreadsheets at the end of each semester showing 1) each student's Cloze test score and a comparison of 2) each student's performance in discussion participation, 3) reading notes, and 4) response papers at the beginning and at the end of the semester. This measure was introduced in 2011, and in almost all years students demonstrate at least a 5% improvement in all four areas. Whether this improvement is due to students simply having a better understanding of course requirements or whether it is due to deeper engagement with the reading material is difficult to ascertain. An end-of-class survey asking if students plan to continue reading for fun after the class is over or if their attitudes towards reading have changed may be added. Cloze tests will continue to be used as an assessment measure in the Reading Circles, but more robust course-based measures will be developed to replace the comparisons of the graded work.

2.2.3 Unanticipated outcomes

None.

*An enjoyable distraction from regular homework,
rather than just more homework.*

3.0 Summary of Impact on Student Learning

Changing the entrenched attitudes and habits of adults regarding reading is challenging. The Methodist University QEP developed modest but meaningful initiatives

I have learned that I do have time to read for fun while taking a full class load. I made excuses before.

designed to encourage a campus-wide shift toward a culture of reading, and these efforts are beginning to show positive results. An analysis of standardized testing and similar quantitative assessment data shows, for most measures, at least a 5% increase in student reading skills. The paperback book exchange shelves located around

campus and the recreational reading materials that are prominently displayed in the library have proven popular and provide opportunities for students to encounter recreational reading materials that they might not otherwise seek out. The reading surveys show large increases in the number of students reporting that they like to read and that they are reading more often.

Adding IDS 2100 as a graduation requirement has met some resistance from students, giving weight to the old adage “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink.” Through that class, though, some students have discovered or renewed their thirst for reading. As the “Developing a Culture of Reading” program matures, initiatives which have proved successful will continue to be refined while less effective strategies will be reworked or eliminated.

4.0 Reflection

Challenges for the Future

Reading habits are formed very early in life. Turning college students who are reluctant readers into avid readers is more challenging than the drafters of our QEP proposal may have envisioned. The original plan called for co-directors, but eventually a single director was selected. Going forward with the culture of reading initiative, the University will aim to have two leaders - one to promote the initiative and one to manage it - in an attempt to reap even greater benefits for our University community.

Methodist University offers classes through the MU@Night program where students complete a full semester’s work in half a semester. IDS 2100 Reading Circles are incompatible with this accelerated pace – many MU@Night students work full-time during the day, and expecting them to read, discuss, and enjoy a book “for fun” every two weeks (while also taking other classes) is unrealistic. Currently, the only method these students have to complete this graduation requirement is through enrolling in an online section of the class.

Difficulties with this solution include:

1. Tuition costs for online classes are higher than face-to-face classes.
2. The class runs the whole semester rather than just 8 weeks.

3. Taking the class online entails much more work than taking the class face-to-face. All discussions have to be written out, and weak typing skills can increase the frustration of students already struggling to put their thoughts in writing. Students consistently comment that the class should be worth more than one credit hour.

Summary of plans for the future:

IDS 2100 is the heart of the QEP, and completion of a Reading Circle class will continue to be a graduation requirement for the foreseeable future. Other aspects of the program – reading nooks, recreational reading in the library, book exchange shelves, panel discussions, etc. – will continue to be offered. The QEP proposal contained plans for workshops to encourage faculty members to incorporate recreational reading into curriculum classes but this avenue was never pursued. Exploring this strategy would provide another pathway to encourage students to read for fun.

QEP initiatives inside and outside the classroom created productive discussions regarding the benefits of reading and provided increased opportunities for students to read recreationally. As Methodist University develops a new QEP – and “Get Between the Covers!” is no longer *the* QEP – the institution will continue to support programs that encourage students to engage in recreational reading.

5.0 References

Paulson, E. J. (2006). Self-selected reading for enjoyment as a college developmental reading approach. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 36 (2), 51-58.