

Exploring Sense of Community in a University Common Book Program

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Abstract

Many post-secondary common book programs purport to increase a sense of community on campus. This study explored whether a common book program at a Canadian university was able to create a sense of community among students. Results indicate that in-class discussions about the book, liking the Facebook page, attending the author lecture, and watching the author lecture on YouTube had significant impact on the sense of community among those who read the book. However, the program did not create an overall effect of a sense of community among first-year university students. Implications and recommendations for common book programs are discussed.

Books bring people together: that's the core idea of a common book program. A common book program is also referred to as a common reading program, summer reading program, or a one-book program; the idea is a group of people all reading the same book is hoped to inspire meaningful conversations and create memorable experiences (Dempsey, 2009). In common book programs at the post secondary level, first-year students usually read a common book prior to the start of the academic year, then participate in common book-related events during orientation (Ferguson, 2006; Grenier, 2007). The book may also be integrated by professors into classes, with the capstone event of the program often being a lecture given by the author of the book. Most colleges and universities cite similar goals of their common book programs for freshmen. The common

goals follow:

- A common book promotes a community of students, faculty, and staff by providing a common basis for conversation and by making connections across disciplines (Ferguson, 2006; Fidler, 1997).
- A common book is a means to introduce students to academic skills that they will require in college and university (Ferguson, 2006; Fidler, 1997).
- A common book will enhance the social and academic lives of students, which, in turn, creates a sense of connectedness that positively affects student retention and recruitment (Ferguson, 2006; Fidler, 1997; Straus & Daley, 2002).

Nipissing University in Ontario, Canada, piloted a common book program during the 2010–2011 year. For the pilot project, all first-year students entering the Faculty of Applied and Professional Studies (consisting of Business, Criminal Justice, Nursing, and Social Welfare) were asked to read the award-winning novel *Three Day Road* by Joseph Boyden. There were two main goals of the program: to foster a sense of community and belonging through a common academic experience and to introduce new students to the level of critical thinking, literacy, and analysis necessary in a university environment. The goals changed slightly in 2011 to “introduce students in an academic way to literacy and critical thinking, and to provide students with some common intellectual ground to facilitate discussion and friendship” (Nipissing University, 2012). Since 2012, the program was expanded to include all first-year students in the university in all majors. In 2013, the year of this study, the common book was the young adult science fiction novel *Feed* by M.T. Anderson.

Sense of Community

To ground our understanding, we use the sense of community (referred to hereafter as SoC) theory developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). According to McMillan and Chavis, there are four elements that define a SoC and all are necessary to have a SoC: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Supported by the research indicating that participating in events outside of the classroom can build a SoC on campus (Elkins, Forrester, and Noel-Elkins, 2011; Tinto 1993), we

postulate that reading a common book and participating in common book events can involve all four of the elements of SoC as defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Through a common book program, students all read the same book (membership), could have a voice through participating in discussion and events (influence), could learn and experience personal growth through reading and participating in events (integration and fulfillment of needs), and could have an emotional bond with others through reading and shared events (shared emotional connection).

Colleges and universities have a vested interest in fostering a SoC among students. In their study of 4,000 undergraduates in the U.S., Jacobs and Archie (2008) report that a SoC positively impacts students' intention to stay at an institution. Jacobs & Archie (2008) also find that membership in fraternities and sororities, residence, and ethnicity influenced SoC among students and their intent to return to university. Tinto's work also demonstrates that SoC can influence first-year student completion (Tinto, 2012) and a sense of commitment to the university (Tinto, 1993, 2012).

Creating a SoC is the goal of many common book programs, and there is an assumption that reading of a common text can produce the effect of a SoC. For instance, Ferguson (2006) states, "Reading the same book brings people together as a community by creating common ground for discussion" (p. 8). However, there are few refereed studies that explore whether common book programs actually achieve this goal. Nichols (2012) found that honors students in South Dakota reported that a common book program enhanced their engagement with students in the campus community. Daugherty and Hayes (2012) report that engaged readers (students who read the common book) had higher perceptions of community connection than non-engaged readers (students who did not finish or read the book). Benz et al. (2013) report that at Fort Louis College, 82% of approximately 300 students surveyed felt that reading the common book made them feel like a "part of a larger community of readers, writers, and thinkers" (p. 27). However, not all common book programs are successful in achieving the goal of the creation of a SoC. In our previous research at our Canadian university, we found that the common book program did not create a SoC in its pilot year with

only 22% of all students and 31% of students who read the book feeling that reading the book and participating in the program made them feel like a part of the school community (Ferguson, Brown, & Piper, 2014). However, we did find that faculty members felt the program had the potential to create a SoC on campus in future years (Ferguson, Brown, & Piper, 2014).

In anecdotal reports, Cheston (2013) states that four post-secondary institutions in North Carolina have cancelled their common reading programs because the programs were not meeting their goals, including the creation of a SoC. Cheston (2013) spoke to the assistant vice president for academic affairs at Mars Hill, Jason Pierce, who stated that the program did not create a SoC: “‘We found that [the summer reading program] didn’t help to bridge any of those gaps,’ Pierce said. ‘They weren’t having those conversations outside of class.’ Many of the students—especially those who might have most benefited from it, Pierce said—didn’t even read the book.” (n.p.).

Based on the extant literature and our previous research, we were curious about the potential that exists in creating a SoC through common reading. The question guiding our research was: does reading a common book and participating in events related to the book contribute to a SoC among students?

Methodology

Because first-year students at Nipissing University are a large population for a study, we decided a questionnaire would be the most practical and appropriate method of data collection. Survey research allows us to collect data about the feeling and attitudes of the population as well as explore the relationships among the survey questions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Based on our literature review and previous research, we developed two basic hypotheses:

H1: The common book program created a sense of community among students

H2: Participation in in-class and out-of-class activities influenced students’ perceptions of a sense of community created by the common book program

Instrument

As SoC is a multidimensional construct, we developed a 30-

item inventory for SoC in the context of a common book program. Each potential respondent rated the degree to which they agreed with each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”). The items covered the four factors for creating a SoC identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986)—membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. For example, “The common book program made me feel connected to my department” was a statement used to assess membership; “The common book program allowed me to contribute to my own learning,” was used as a statement to gauge influence; “The common book program made me feel connected to other students in class,” was a statement used to assess shared emotional connection; and “I learned more than I would have just reading textbooks,” was a statement used to assess integration and fulfillment of needs. Items measuring demographic factors (age, gender, program of study, year in program) and participation in in-class and out-of-class common book related activities were also included in the questionnaire.

Data Collection

Our target population were the approximately 700 students taking first-year courses between March and April of 2013. We felt that an anonymous online survey would be the best method to maximize participation because university students are known Internet users. Potential participants were recruited through flyers, posters, Facebook and Twitter. Given that our target population consisted of students, we were not concerned about the threat of limited access to the survey affecting its external validity (Handwerk, Carson, & Blackwell, 2000). Of the approximately 700 potential participants, 159 (22.7%) questionnaires were collected, of which 112 (16%) questionnaires were useable for testing. While the response rate may appear low in comparison to paper-and-pencil or phone surveys, some studies have reported receiving higher quality data from online surveys due to lower item non-response and longer answers (Evans & Mathur, 2005). In addition, the demographic profile of the sample was comparable to the target population.

Data Analysis

New measurement scores for each dimension of SoC were

derived by calculating the arithmetic mean of the scores over the relevant items for the given dimension for each observation. Using the dimensional measurement scores, a composite SoC score was derived by calculating the arithmetic mean of the dimensional measurement scores for each observation. Therefore, in the construction of this SoC composite score, each dimension—membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection—was given equal weight. The measurement scores for each dimension were derived in order to assess the degree to which the participants felt the common book program had achieved that important element to creating a SoC. For example, a membership score of “5” would indicate that participants felt that the program created a strong feeling of belonging to the university, faculty or department and “1” would indicate that the participants felt that the program did not create a strong feeling of belonging to the university. Meanwhile, the composite score was derived to assess the degree to which participants felt that the common book program created or contributed to a SoC. Therefore, a composite score of “5” would indicate that participants felt that the program created a strong SoC and a composite score of “1” would indicate that the participants felt that the program did not create a SoC. The model showed high internal consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.974, well above the suggested cut-off of 0.70 (Lance, Butts, & Michels, 2006).

Results

Participants

The data from the 112 useable questionnaires indicated that our sample was decidedly female (74.5%), young (57.9% were between 17 and 20 years of age), and at the early stages of their academic career (70.1% were in their first or second year of their program of study). The student population at the university is predominately female, with 72% of the student body identifying as female. The majority of participants were from Business (35%), English Studies (10%), History (9%), and Psychology (9%), which was consistent with the breakdown in the target population. Seventy-one respondents (63%) indicated that they read the common book.

Creating a Sense of Community (H1)

The measurement scores derived for the dimensions of SoC

had means below 3, except for integration and fulfillment of needs. The membership and shared emotional connection scores were the lowest, while the integration and fulfillment of needs score was the highest (see Table 1).

Table 1
Sense of Community

Dimension	All Participants (n=112)		Participants who read the Common Book (n=71)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Membership	2.4866	1.07061	2.4383	1.04995
Influence	2.7639	1.03619	2.7832	0.99351
Integration and Fulfillment of Needs	3.0547	0.89834	3.0812	0.86656
Shared Emotional Connection	2.6851	1.04044	2.6786	0.97067
SoC	2.7210	0.94359	2.7175	0.88596

The membership score suggests that participants felt that participating in the common book program did not increase their feelings of belonging to the university, their faculty, or their department. The integration and fulfillment of needs mean score suggests that participants were neutral on whether their participation in the common book program benefitted them individually in terms of their learning and personal growth. With a mean of 2.721 and a standard deviation of 0.9439, the SoC composite score suggested that the common book program did not create a SoC among participants. Note that the SoC composite score was slightly lower for the subsample of participants who had read the common book. The scores for membership

and shared emotional connection were also lower for the subsample of participants who had read the common book.

In-Class and Out-of-Class Activities (H2)

The common book was integrated into courses through class and group discussions, written assignments, student presentations, and exam questions. Out-of-class activities or events included viewings of films related to the themes found in the common book, attending the author's Skype lecture, visiting the common book program website, donating food, and following the common book program on Facebook. To test our second hypothesis, t-tests to compare means and regression were used to determine the relationship, if any, between participation in in-class and out-of-class activities and the SoC composite score. Difference of means t-tests were conducted for each in-class activity and out-of-class activity to determine if there were any significant differences in the mean SoC composite scores for respondents who participated or did not participate in these activities. Only those in-class or out-of-class activities for which there was sufficient participation were included in the t-tests and the regression model. The t-tests revealed statistically significant differences in the mean SoC scores for certain groups of participants. Specifically, the mean SoC composite scores were higher for respondents who had written assignments, participated in class discussions, attended the author's Skype lecture, or watched the lecture on YouTube. However, the regression model was a poor fit, suggesting that participation in class and out-of-class activities are poor predictors of SoC. The only significant predictor of SoC was whether or not the participant had read the common book. Table 2 shows the regression results.

There was an improvement in the model's fit when we examined the subsample of student respondents who read the common book. Participation in class activities and out-of-class activities were still not good predictors of SoC. Five of the ten participation variables were significant—using the common book in class discussions, liking the Facebook page, donating food at a common book event, attending the Skype lecture with the common book author, and watching the author's Skype lecture on YouTube. Table 3 shows the results of this regression.

Table 2
Sense of Community, In-Class and Out-of-Class Activities
 (n = 97, F = 1.787, R² = 0.201)

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-statistic	p-value
Constants	2.502***	0.205	12.197	0.000
Read the Common Book	-0.561**	0.276	-2.033	0.045
Number of courses in which common book was used	-0.004	0.093	-0.041	0.967
Used in class discussion	0.308	0.254	1.212	0.229
Used in group discussion	0.148	0.248	0.599	0.551
Used in written assignments	0.243	0.307	0.792	0.430
Used in tests or exams	-0.129	0.248	0.519	0.605
Attended film viewings	0.366	0.303	1.208	0.230
Visited website	0.216	0.225	0.958	0.341
Liked Facebook page	0.126	0.198	0.634	0.523
Donated food	-0.314	0.241	-1.303	0.196
Attended Skype lecture	0.314	0.235	1.331	0.187
Watched Skype lecture on Youtube	0.48*	0.257	1.903	0.060

* - significant at the 10% level

** - significant at the 5% level

*** - significant at the 1% level

Table 3
Sense of Community, In-Class and Out-of-Class
Activities for Readers of the Book
 (n = 71, F = 3.058, R² = 0.359)

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-statistic	p-value
Constants	1.876***	0.286	7.011	0.000
Number of courses in which common book was used	0.029	0.088	0.325	0.746
Used in class discussion	0.533**	0.260	2.049	0.045
Used in group discussion	0.039	0.221	0.177	0.860
Used in written assignments	0.061	0.287	0.212	0.833
Used in tests or exams	-0.194	0.230	-0.845	0.402
Attended film viewings	0.254	0.291	0.873	0.386
Visited website	-0.010	0.231	-0.042	0.967
Liked Facebook page	0.325*	0.193	1.686	0.097
Donated food	-0.504**	0.231	-2.182	0.033
Attended Skype lecture	0.518**	0.212	2.441	0.018
Watched Skype lecture on Youtube	0.542**	0.235	2.304	0.025

* - significant at the 10% level

** - significant at the 5% level

*** - significant at the 1% level

Using the common book in class discussions, following the common book program on Facebook, and attending or watching the author's Skype lecture had positive effects on the participants' perceptions of SoC. This was confirmed by t-tests, as survey respondents who participated in these activities had significantly higher mean SoC composite and dimensional scores. Those who donated food to the food bank had lower SoC scores. The number of courses in which the common book was used appeared to have no effect on the participants' perception of SoC. The difference between male and female SoC scores was not statistically significant. However, male students had higher shared emotional connection scores, and this difference was statistically significant at the 10% level. Neither the SoC composite score nor its dimensions varied significantly by age, year of program, or program of study.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our results indicate that the common book program at Nipissing University did not significantly contribute to an overall SoC among students taking first-year courses. Each dimension of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory (except for integration and fulfillment of needs) had a mean below 3, which would indicate that the students felt neutral on the impact of the common book program on SoC on campus. Moreover, the SoC composite score was 2.721 and shows the common book did not have an overall impact on SoC among the participants in our study. Our study adds to the already mixed results presented in the literature about whether common book programs promote a SoC on campus. The present study, our previous study with a different cohort of students (Ferguson, Brown, & Piper, 2014), and the anecdotal account of Cheston (2013) find that common book programs have no impact on SoC while the research of Nichols (2012), Daughterty and Hayes (2012), and Benz et al. (2013) found positive impacts from the common book programs on SoC. Since we found little impact of the common book program on SoC, it is unlikely that the common book program had an impact on first-year students' completion, their sense of commitment to the institution, or their intent to stay at the institution (Jacobs & Archie, 2008; Tinto, 1993; 2012).

As we found in our previous study (Ferguson, Brown, & Piper,

2014) and is reported in the literature (Daugherty & Hayes, 2012; Cheston 2013), students actually need to read the common book for it to make an impact. While 63% of students in our study read the common book, based on previous research (e.g. Daugherty and Hayes, 2012; Benz et. al, 2013) one would expect that if more students read the book, SoC scores might be higher. Paradoxically, we found lower SoC scores among those who had read the common book. We found that reading the common book, participating in class discussion, liking the Facebook page, attending the Skype lecture or watching this lecture on YouTube were significant predictors of SoC. The relationship between out of class activities and creating a SoC is supported in the research of SoC in higher education contexts (Elkins, Forrester, and Noel-Elikins, 2011; Tinto 1993). We found that whole class discussion was a significant and positive predictor of SoC while small group discussion was not. Perhaps a faculty member is needed to guide and facilitate small group student discussion. The film viewings were not well attended and did not impact SoC. Our results also indicate that technology and social media can have positive impacts on SoC and this is supported by an emerging body of literature on SoC, technology, and higher education (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). However, visiting the webpage had no impact on students' perceptions of SoC. While the effect was not statistically significant, using the common book for tests and exams had a negative relationship on students' SoC. Testing students on the book is a method to get students to read the common book; however, perhaps it takes away from an intrinsic sense of enjoyment of reading a book. Written assignments also had no impact on SoC perhaps for the same reason. While at first glance, the negative effect of donating food as a part of the common book program on the SoC score might seem counterintuitive, it is likely that those students who donated food to the local food banks as part of the program already possess a strong SoC or civic duty so that the common book program would be less likely to enhance a SoC among this group.

Since reading the book makes a significant impact on students and their perceptions of SoC, we feel that institutions implementing the common book programs make reading the book a priority. Perhaps reading the book could be mandatory in a required course or

time during orientation week could be devoted to providing students with time to read. Our results also show that the number of courses in which the students used the common book had no impact on SoC. Perhaps instead of a widespread initiative across all first-year courses, a common book program that is focused and used in particular classes could still meet its program objectives. It would also be worthwhile for future researchers and for schools to compare their common book programs and activities to other institutions where SoC created by the common book is high, such as at Fort Louis College. The manner in which common book programs are implemented vary widely from institution to institution. Some schools use the common book as an orientation activity driven by the student affairs department, while other institutions, such as Nipissing University, make the program academic by integrating the common book into courses (Ferguson, 2006; Grenier, 2007). Future researchers and schools implementing common book programs need to look at which model (if any model) is the most effective in achieving program goals such as SoC.

Cheston (2013) notes that common book programs could be a passing fad. Common book programs can be costly in terms of money and personnel hours, and if programs are not meeting goals such as creating a SoC, then perhaps common book programs should be discontinued. Proponents of common book programs claim that common books create a SoC and connectedness on campus (Ferguson, 2006; Fidler, 1997, Straus & Daley, 2002); however, there is simply not enough consistent evidence at the present to support this claim. While our study is limited by its small size, somewhat low return rate, and focuses on one post-secondary institution, we feel that schools implementing a common book program should evaluate common book programs beyond anecdotal evidence to see if the programs are meeting their program goals. We love the idea of books and reading bringing people together. However, if common book programs are not meeting their goals, schools need to make tough decisions about common book programs or realign program goals and assess the objectives of the program with measurable outcomes.

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