

PREFACE

The National Association of Scholars (NAS) has analyzed college common readings since 2010. Different college readings have risen and fallen in popularity—Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* one year, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* another—but our overall critique has remained fairly constant. College common reading committees overwhelmingly prefer to select their readings from a narrow subsection of books: politically progressive, designed to promote activism, confined to American authors, literarily mediocre, juvenile, recently published, and mostly nonfiction.

The limitations of college common reading selections derive from their institutional frameworks. Non-academic mission statements steer selection committees away from intellectually challenging books toward books that promote progressive belief and/or activism; the selection committees are usually run or dominated by activist “co-curricular” administrators rather than professors; and common reading programs are frequently integrated with programs of service-learning and civic engagement, which are designed to promote student activism rather than to educate students to think.

This year we are adding chronological depth to our analysis and critique. *Beach Books 2017-2018* collects intensive data on 498 college common reading selections in 2017-2018 at 481 institutions, but it also surveys eleven years of college common reading programs, between 2007-2008 and 2017-2018. We have searched college websites, made strategic use of the Wayback Machine (<http://archive.org/web/>), and directly contacted common reading program administrators throughout the nation. Our data is not absolutely comprehensive, and we welcome information to supplement our lacunae and correct our errors. But we are now able to present and analyze information on 4,754 assignments over the last eleven years at 732 separate institutions, including 1,664 individual texts.

We have collated this information with multiple audiences and purposes in mind. We present this data in part to the American public as a whole, to support its efforts to reform college common reading programs. We also present our data to an audience of common reading professionals, to whom we are indebted for numerous professional courtesies, for them to use regardless of whether they take on board our critique of their practices. We advocate systematic reform of college common reading programs, but in a friendly spirit. We provide this data as an instance of our friendliness.

The NAS has only begun to analyze this larger corpus of data. Our initial inquiry, however, has led us to modify our existing critique of the general absence of classic texts from college common readings. Previously, we had taken that absence to be almost absolute, and thus phrased our critique of college common reading programs as *Do differently!* With eleven years of data, we can now see that about 6% of assignments date to before 1989. This allows us to modify our recommendations.

We now say *Follow best practices!* We have added a series of additional recommendations, designed to put this modified exhortation into practice. We expect to continue to update our analyses and recommendations in years to come, as we engage in further analysis of this body of data.

We have organized *Beach Books 2017-2018* in the following sections:

1. our introductory essay summarizing the report's conclusions;
2. our analysis of the 2017-2018 selections, including explorations of the implications of the #MeToo movement for common reading selections;
3. our analysis of the eleven years of selections between 2007/2008 and 2017/2018;
4. our recommendations for how to reform college common reading programs; and
5. our Appendices with our full data, including an expanded list of 140 books the NAS recommends for colleges and universities with common reading programs.

The printed version of *Beach Books 2017-2018* does not include Appendices VI, VII, and VIII, which provide the data on the entire eleven years of college common reading assignments. The cost to print several hundred pages of data was prohibitive. These appendices appear in the PDF version of *Beach Books 2017-2018* on our website—<https://www.nas.org/projects/beachbooks>.