

## Practice and Implications of Common Reading Programs in North American Higher Education Institutions (Postprint)

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study aims to investigate the implementation, typology, and characteristics of common reading programs in North American higher education institutions, thereby providing references and insights for reading promotion initiatives in Chinese university libraries. [Method/Process] Through systematic investigation of official websites of North American universities and colleges, information related to common reading programs was collected, organized, and analyzed, yielding five salient features: alignment with parent institutional strategies with dedicated administrative structures; facilitation of faculty-student shared reading through discussion components; transcendence of mere reading activities to pursue multidirectional integration; expansion of students' foundational multi-literacies through shared reading; and optimization of shared reading through multidimensional evaluation. [Results/Conclusion] Reading promotion efforts in Chinese university libraries should endeavor to: root themselves in the objectives and positioning of the parent institution; prioritize faculty participation with necessary support structures; achieve convergence and cross-pollination of multiple practices through reading; broaden university students' multi-literacies via reading; and enrich evaluation dimensions while demonstrating institutional value and contribution.

### Full Text

## The Practice and Enlightenment of “Common Reading Programs” in North American Universities

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**Abstract:** *[Purpose/Significance]* This study examines the implementation, types, and characteristics of “common reading programs” in North American universities to provide reference for reading promotion initiatives in Chinese university libraries. *[Method/Process]* Through investigation of official university websites in North America, we collected, organized, and analyzed information related to “common reading programs,” identifying five distinctive features: alignment with institutional strategy with dedicated oversight; realization of “teacher-student shared reading” through discussion sessions; pursuit of multi-directional integration beyond mere reading activities; broadening the foundation of students’ multiple literacies through shared reading; and optimization of shared reading through multi-dimensional assessment. *[Result/Conclusion]* Chinese university library reading promotion should: be rooted in the goals and positioning of the parent institution; emphasize teacher participation with necessary support; achieve integration and crossover of multiple practices through reading; expand students’ multiple literacies through reading; and enrich assessment dimensions to demonstrate value and contribution to the university.

**Keywords:** North American universities; common reading program; college student reading; reading promotion **Classification Number:** G251 **DOI:** 10.13266/j.issn.0252-3116.2021.20.014

Reading plays a vital role in the comprehensive development and innovation capacity of university students. Higher education communities worldwide attach great importance to cultivating and enhancing students’ reading literacy. In North America, university “common reading programs” have been implemented for decades, achieving broad coverage and developing effective concepts and practices. Chinese universities have also conducted similar shared reading initiatives: in 2009, Minzu University of China held a “Reading the Same Book” activity for freshmen; in 2010, Beijing Normal University launched a “Teachers and Students Reading Together” program with sharing platforms; in 2014, Shaanxi University of Science and Technology organized small-scale “Reading the Same Book” activities fully planned by the library; Southwest Jiaotong University has published 96 classic titles annually since 2014, advocating campus-wide shared reading; in 2015, Nanjing University launched a “Classic Reading Program” for freshmen; in 2016, University of Electronic Science and Technology promoted reading “60 Classics” among undergraduates. Additionally, provincial higher education library committees have organized multi-institution reading activities, such as Hunan’s “One University, One Book—Classics, Intensive Reading, and Application” since 2013, and Sichuan’s “Reading the ‘Epidemic’—Exploring Technology and the Meaning of Life.”

As a form of reading promotion, these shared reading practices in Chinese universities have positively advocated reading culture, enhanced students’ reading literacy, and implemented moral education. However, current library-led shared reading practices and reading promotion in general still face problems requiring solutions through 借鉴 international best practices. North American universities’ “common reading programs” have effectively promoted student reading and

learning while advancing institutional teaching and educational development, making their examination valuable for improving Chinese university practices.

## 1. Domestic Research Status and Survey Sample Sources

North American “common reading programs” have attracted Chinese scholars’ attention. For instance, E Junli [1] examined partner institutions and book acquisition methods; Lai Xiaojing [2] analyzed book selection mechanisms, processes, and characteristics of selected texts; Lü Xuemei [3], Feng Zhanjun [4], and Kou Shuang [5] focused on American university “freshman common reading programs,” noting features such as author-student interaction and interdisciplinary integration, implementation processes, and objectives. Overall, current domestic research remains nascent with limitations: first, lacking diachronic analysis of development and focusing only on the U.S. while ignoring Canadian practices; second, incomplete classification of program types and insufficiently deep exploration of characteristics.

Therefore, this study investigated North American university websites using Microsoft Bing, selecting 30 institutions that have implemented or are implementing “common reading programs” as survey samples (see Table 1 ), based on content availability and referencing U.S. News & World Report and QS World University Rankings. These 30 institutions include public, private, and community colleges for comprehensive understanding.

## 2. Overview of Common Reading Programs in North American Universities

North American “common reading programs” are collective terms for similar reading initiatives designed to engage specific student groups, entire campuses, or neighboring communities in reading and discussing selected texts [6]. Programs carry various brand names, such as Collin College’s and Bellarmine University’s “One Book,” Chaffey College’s and Moraine Valley Community College’s “One Book, One College,” Pittsburg State University’s “Readings for Empowerment and Diversity (READ),” Texas A&M International University’s “Reading the Globe,” and Queen’s University’s “Queen’s Read.” These represent localized versions of the common reading model.

Historical records indicate these programs span decades. As early as 1965, Lass and Wilson mentioned the concept in *The College Student’s Handbook* [7]. Miami University launched one of the earliest programs in 1982. Participation grew during the 1990s and early 2000s: Elon University (1992), University of Southern California (1994), Temple University (1995), Appalachian State University (1997), and others including SUNY Buffalo, Eastern Illinois University, Duke University, and CUNY Brooklyn College. By 2006, the movement peaked, with over 130 U.S. institutions participating [8]. The National Association of Scholars reported at least 475 universities conducted programs in 2019 alone, covering 47 states and Washington D.C. [9].

Canadian universities have also adopted these programs. McMaster University launched its first common reading in June 2005. Nipissing University began in 2010 within its Faculty of Applied and Professional Studies before expanding campus-wide. Queen's University started "Queen's Read" in 2012, connecting students through online forums and peer-led discussion groups during orientation. The University of Calgary also implements a common reading program.

### 3. Types of Common Reading Programs

By cycle, programs fall into three categories: orientation, semester, and academic year. Orientation programs require pre-arrival reading with activities during new student orientation, typically concluding when orientation ends (though Ball State University uses online forums for pre-arrival discussions). Semester programs target freshmen or other students during the first semester, either as curricular or extracurricular activities (e.g., California State University, Bakersfield's "Runner Reader"). Academic year programs extend throughout the year, often featuring author visits through lecture series.

By support structure, programs are either course-based or community-based. Course-based programs integrate into specific courses or student development initiatives, such as first-year seminars where selected texts serve as course materials. Community-based programs connect university participants with local community or public library "One Book, One Community" activities, broadening student perspectives while benefiting communities.

### 4. Characteristics of Common Reading Programs

Four key characteristics emerge from our investigation:

#### 4.1 Alignment with Institutional Strategy and Dedicated Oversight

Program objectives align with institutional development goals and strategic plans. North American universities integrate these programs with other student success initiatives like first-year seminars and learning communities. Temple University launched its program in 1995 to enhance learning community engagement, promoting interdisciplinary dialogue. Appalachian State University's program originated from a 1996 strategic retreat addressing campus academic climate improvement.

Most institutions establish dedicated committees for book selection, discussion organization, and program implementation. Queen's University's advisory group includes representatives from the Alma Mater Society, Student Affairs, Residence Life, First-Year Experience Office, Student Academic Success Services, Learning Commons, and Writers Festival. North Carolina State University's committee comprises representatives from the Vice Provost's office, International Programs, Institutional Equity and Diversity, University Development, first-year students, graduate students, immigrant students, and parent services.

#### 4.2 Teacher-Student Shared Reading Through Discussion Sessions

Many programs feature discussion sessions enabling peer and faculty interaction around texts. These flexible sessions are typically small-group based, led by trained faculty, upperclassmen, or community members. Gallaudet University organized various discussion activities around Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*, including film-based discussions, multicultural student program luncheons, and community-open library panels. Appalachian State University requires freshmen to attend faculty-volunteer-led discussions. At the University of South Carolina, students attend faculty-moderated discussion groups after author lectures and visit library exhibitions. Temple University's "Reading at the Table" discussions occur during meals at campus dining halls.

**4.3 Multi-Directional Integration Beyond Reading** Programs transcend simple reading by integrating with diverse courses and embedding writing and information literacy education. Some combine with general education writing courses (e.g., University of Texas at Arlington, Louisburg College) or professional courses (e.g., University of Virginia's engineering program with STS 1500, University of Kentucky's pharmacy program). Libraries actively participate: York University's library representative serves on the selection committee, promotes resources, and plans extracurricular activities. California State University, Bakersfield's program incorporates nine information literacy modules into required composition courses.

**4.4 Broadening Multiple Literacies Through Shared Reading** Programs cultivate competencies beyond professional skills, including critical thinking, ethical awareness, collaboration, and lifelong learning. The University of Michigan's College of Engineering used William Kamkwamba's *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* to discuss engineers' societal roles and responsibilities. Stockton University's Health Sciences College used Jill Bolte Taylor's *My Stroke of Insight* to develop professional literacy, empathy, ethical behavior, and interprofessional collaboration awareness among health profession students.

**4.5 Multi-Dimensional Assessment for Program Optimization** North American universities emphasize assessment using quantitative (surveys, data analysis) and qualitative (interviews, writing prompts, focus groups) methods. Assessment focuses on improvable factors and informs institutional decision-making. The University of South Carolina evaluates book selection, materials, timeliness, keynote speakers, and discussion experiences from participants and non-participants, with feedback compiled in October for improvement decisions. Nipissing University surveys first-year students and discussion leaders to inform future planning, examining selection criteria, book length, and author appeal across disciplines.

## 5. Implications for Chinese University Libraries

Chinese university library reading promotion faces challenges: loose connection to institutional strategy, insufficient teacher involvement, limited integration with educational practices, narrow cultivation of non-professional literacies, and

narrow assessment focused on practice rather than contribution to institutional goals. North American practices offer valuable insights:

**5.1 Root in Institutional Goals and Positioning** Reading promotion has become routine in Chinese university libraries, improving reading volume and campus culture [12]. However, many initiatives lack institutional distinctiveness and strategic alignment, appearing as superficial activities without demonstrating core library value in teaching and research support. North American programs align with institutional missions and combine with student development initiatives. Chinese libraries should ground reading promotion in institutional educational goals and support disciplinary characteristics.

**5.2 Value Teacher Participation with Necessary Support** While teachers naturally influence student reading [16], Chinese library-led reading promotion underutilizes faculty. North American programs engage teachers in selection committees and discussion moderation, providing training in facilitation and instructional strategies, plus rich curricular resources. Chinese libraries should create supportive “scaffolding” for faculty across all stages to enhance participation quality and effectiveness.

**5.3 Achieve Multi-Practice Integration Through Reading** Critical thinking—a core 21st-century competency—develops recursively with reading, writing, and information retrieval abilities [17-18]. North American programs integrate reading texts into writing courses and embed information literacy modules to comprehensively develop these interconnected skills. Chinese libraries should strengthen integration of reading, writing, and information literacies, transforming simple reading activities into diverse intellectual and academic experiences that innovate critical thinking cultivation.

**5.4 Cultivate Multiple Literacies Through Reading** University education extends beyond knowledge transmission to holistic cultural shaping [14-15]. Reading literacy cultivation realizes this core mission. As Chinese universities focus on moral education, libraries should use reading promotion to foster multiple literacies, adapting to new era educational requirements.

**5.5 Enrich Assessment Dimensions to Demonstrate Institutional Value** Facing technological challenges, university libraries must demonstrate broader effectiveness [19]. North American programs incorporate comprehensive assessment involving all stakeholders to inform institutional decisions. Chinese library assessment should adopt a macro perspective, demonstrating how reading promotion contributes to teaching, talent development, and long-term institutional goals.

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**Keywords:** North American colleges and universities; common reading program; college students’ reading; reading promotion

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

*Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.*