

Research on the Guidance of College Student Reading Behavior in American Universities: Postprint

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Date: 2023-08-26T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] To systematically review the relevant measures taken by American universities to promote undergraduate reading and explore new models suitable for Chinese universities to carry out reading promotion and guidance for college students. [Method/Process] Based on field visits and data compilation, this study analyzes the curriculum design of reading courses in American universities, the role of faculty in guiding reading, and various reading activities, examines the operation and effectiveness of the comprehensive reading promotion and guidance system in American universities, and subsequently proposes three insights. [Results/Conclusions] Reading promotion in Chinese universities should further emphasize the power of faculty, moving from activity-based promotion to in-depth guidance throughout the reading process; attach importance to cultivating reading habits among first-year university students; and provide multiple platforms for reading sharing and exchange.

Full Text

Guidance Research on College Students' Reading Behavior in American Universities

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This paper analyzes the measures taken by American colleges and universities to promote student reading, exploring new models for reading promotion and guidance among Chinese university students.

[Method/Process] Based on field visits and collation of materials, the study examines the design of reading curricula, the guiding role of faculty, and various reading activities in American universities. It investigates the operation and effectiveness of comprehensive reading promotion and guidance systems in U.S. higher education, and subsequently proposes three key insights. **[Result/Conclusion]** China's university reading promotion should further emphasize the power of teachers, moving from activity-based promotion to process-oriented guidance; prioritize the cultivation of reading habits among first-year students; and provide multiple platforms for reading sharing and exchange.

Keywords: college students; reading; teachers; guidance

Classification Number: G252

DOI: 10.13266/j.issn.0252-3116.2018.08.005

College student reading constitutes an important component of national reading. Against the backdrop of sustained national advocacy for universal reading, various reading promotion activities have flourished in Chinese universities in recent years. However, as an adult population, college students already possess relatively mature reading perspectives, motivations, and interests. The actual effectiveness of library-centered reading promotion activities remains questionable. Following World Book Day in 2017, the School of Journalism and Communication at Wuhan University's newspaper *New Viewpoint* published commentary noting that "on soil lacking reading consciousness and plagued by restlessness, those diverse reading activities are fostering the growth of a distorted reading psychology—what is being called for is not reading itself, but the feeling of having read" [1]. According to data from the China Press and Publication Research Institute's national reading survey, in 2016 Chinese adults read an average of only 7.86 books, with merely 4.65 being print books—just 0.07 more than in 2015 and 0.09 more than in 2014 [2]. Consequently, commentators have observed that the national enthusiasm for reading has not shown significant growth. Beyond "activity-based" promotion, how can we fundamentally stimulate national reading passion? This paper systematically examines the measures American universities employ to advance college student reading, arguing that U.S. higher education reading practices center tightly on a "curriculum—teacher—activities" framework. Reading itself forms part of curricular education, teachers play a core role in spiritual guidance and methodological instruction, and libraries supplement these efforts through various reading activities. This model offers valuable reference points.

1. Research Status on College Student Reading Behavior in the United States

The United States' emphasis on national reading is well-established, consistently treating it as a national strategy. The *No Child Left Behind Act* even incorporated reading legislation directly into basic education law, elevating it to the

level of fundamental statute. Consequently, substantial reading research concentrates on K-12 education, with comparatively few studies addressing college-level reading. This paper draws on relevant assessment reports and research papers on U.S. college student reading collected via EBSCOhost, combined with the authors' field observations in the United States and reference to related works.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) published two national reports in 2004 and 2007, *Reading at Risk* and *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, specifically noting that reading proficiency among college graduates had declined by 20-23% [3]. Since 2011, the National Association of Scholars has released biennial assessment reports on summer reading for U.S. college students, *Beach Books: What Do Colleges Want Students to Read?* The latest report (2014-2016) explicitly states that books recommended to students are becoming increasingly simplistic and less challenging [4].

Declining reading ability, reduced reading willingness, and the digitization of reading behavior—these trends in American college student reading mirror those observed among Chinese students. However, U.S. research on causes and countermeasures differs significantly from domestic approaches. Chinese research primarily focuses on technological environments, arguing that ubiquitous new media affects deep reading and leads to fragmented, utilitarian reading patterns. Corresponding solutions mainly advocate comprehensive promotion through multimedia terminals. American library and education sectors, conversely, emphasize understanding college students' reading interests and analyzing influencing factors, giving greater consideration to students' developmental educational environments and mainstream social value systems. Therefore, U.S. reading guidance for college students aims to cultivate “reading interest” from the source, promote “reading processes” methodologically, and encourage “reading sharing” emotionally. In her work *The Slow Book Revolution: Creating a New Culture of Reading on College Campuses and Beyond*, M. Lacy, a librarian at the City University of New York, advocates using slow reading to combat fast-paced living. She suggests librarians encourage students to read and learn joyfully outside class, sharing experiences from university library book clubs and recommending students read at least 30 minutes daily [5].

Research on American college student reading behavior demonstrates that analysis requires historical and comprehensive perspectives rather than limiting examination to the college stage, library viewpoints, or technological factors alone—precisely what domestic reading behavior research lacks.

2. Reading Guidance for College Students in American Universities

2.1 Curriculum-Based Reading Education as Foundation

Many American universities offer two-year reading courses as required general education. These curricula are not isolated but built upon the K-12 national reading education sequence. As a “new civil right,” reading education holds paramount importance in American basic education. Each state establishes its own K-12 reading education system goals, implementation methods, and assessment standards. The 2010 *Common Core State Standards* (CCSS) systematically describes “reading standards,” outlining reading literacy development goals through “K-12 grade-level reading standards, college and career readiness anchor standards, and exemplar texts and reading tasks” [6]. Under rigorous K-12 implementation, American college students enter higher education with substantial reading knowledge and skills, enabling universities to offer demanding classics in philosophy, sociology, and related fields.

American universities widely require two-year humanities education courses comprising classic reading and writing. Humanities reading classroom objectives are defined as: (1) enhancing close textual reading and thoughtful discussion; (2) fostering intellectual curiosity, healthy skepticism, and open-mindedness; (3) understanding the diversity and different applications of human knowledge and its integrity; (4) valuing the process of exploration and discovery of meaning; and (5) attending to one’s own humanity and the differences and unity of the human condition [7]. These goals are achieved through two forms of “dialogue”: between reader and classic text author—“liberal education is carefully reading great works left by great minds” [8]—and among classmates through classroom discussion, enabling reflection and exchange.

Beyond dedicated reading courses, many universities encourage faculty to integrate common reading books into curricula. The University of South Florida, University of North Carolina, and University of Wilmington, for example, require first-year instructors to incorporate common reading books into foundational academic courses, while other faculty integrate them into undergraduate and graduate courses [9].

2.2 Faculty Reading Guidance as Core

While libraries’ influence on college student reading remains relatively weak, teachers possess natural influence over students—not only in guiding reading methods and techniques but, more importantly, in sharing and conveying reading experiences. Teachers’ passion or aversion for reading subtly transmits to students. American educators pose the question: “How can teachers without reading passion cultivate students with reading passion?”

2.2.1 Addressing the “Peter Effect” The “Peter Effect” was first proposed by J. Applegate and M. Applegate in *The Peter Effect: Reading Habits and*

Attitudes of Preservice Teachers [10]. Their findings support the view that most preservice teachers themselves do not love reading, and this lack of passion directly affects their future students—a phenomenon termed the “Peter Effect.” Derived from the New Testament, where a beggar asks Saint Peter for alms and receives the reply “I have none, therefore I cannot give,” the “Peter Effect” illustrates that teachers without reading passion cannot cultivate reading-loving students.

Ten years later, Applegate et al. revisited this in *The Peter Effect Revisited: Reading Habits and Attitudes of College Students*, again confirming the correlation between teachers’ and students’ reading attitudes [11]. Among 1,024 surveyed first- and second-year students, those who recalled encountering teachers who “recommended favorite books,” “encouraged book discussions,” and “inspired love for reading” in elementary and secondary education comprised a higher proportion of avid readers. Conversely, students identified as non-readers or reading-averse generally had not encountered reading-passionate teachers; instead, they remembered teachers as merely “assigning tedious reading tasks,” “providing impoverished instruction,” or “not loving reading themselves.” Researchers concluded that only highly skilled actors can convey reading passion they do not possess, and experienced teachers know students can detect inauthenticity.

Similar conclusions appear in studies by C. Hulleman, O. Godes, and G. Hendricks [12]; E. Patall and H. Cooper [13]; and T. Urdan [14]. Thus, cultivating college students’ reading habits and interests becomes a question of how to develop influential teachers and seek more positive reading education methods. American scholars offer several thought-provoking perspectives: J. Turner argues teachers at all levels must identify and reverse negative reading motivation using assessment tools [15]. R. Allington earlier proposed that teachers should promote educational curiosity, abandoning tasks that encourage “copying, memorizing, and reciting” in favor of having students “think about what they read,” thereby transforming future reading attitudes [16]. J. Applegate et al. suggest addressing teacher cultivation, selection, and training to develop reading-loving teachers and maximize their influence, while noting that although CCSS emphasizes significant ideological and cultural dimensions, it lacks concepts of reading motivation and passion [11].

To become influential reading teachers requires not only personal reading passion but also creative methods: respecting students’ autonomy in material selection, providing opportunities to share reading insights, and taking time to recommend personally cherished books. In fact, American universities have implemented these practices over the past decade through reading circles, book discussions, and campus-wide common reading, all centered on “transmitting reading passion and sharing reading insights,” with teachers as essential components.

2.2.2 Identification and Support for “Reading Disability” Groups

Reading courses permeate the American K-12 education system. Corresponding to state K-12 goals and CCSS reading standards are reading proficiency assessments. Students failing to meet standardized testing requirements are identified as having “reading disabilities.” Under Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act*, these students can request schools provide additional support to ensure educational completion, such as reduced course difficulty, extended testing time, and audio versions of texts. Identification and support for reading disabilities continue through college, with research suggesting universities harbor even larger populations of reading-disabled students because most neglect academic reading volume [17].

Teachers play a central role in identifying and supporting reading-disabled students through timely recognition, developing multiple teaching methods, providing reading strategy assistance, and helping students overcome reading anxiety. P. Alex’s survey of 302 first-year students found successful readers more effectively employ reading strategies than struggling readers, such as note-taking, underlining key points, and periodically reflecting on content during reading [18]. Teachers can strengthen reading motivation and clarify goals by appropriately setting questions and arranging discussion topics when assigning reading tasks. Introducing background information about texts before students read enhances focus and comprehension.

I. Mary’s research suggests teachers assisting college students with reading disabilities should attend to differences in reading history, culture, ethnicity, and experience, avoiding the marginalization that occurs when reading disability becomes an identity label. Better support should help these students develop positive self-identities [17].

In summary, American college reading education builds upon K-12 reading education, with teachers consistently playing a core role in providing spiritual leadership, technical guidance, and emotional support throughout the entire educational process—a dimension largely absent in China.

2.3 Supplementary Reading Activities

Beyond curriculum-based education and faculty guidance, American universities arrange rich reading activities to cultivate student interest.

2.3.1 Common Reading Common reading is a widely implemented activity where universities designate a book for students to read during summer, followed by various fall semester activities such as author lectures, discussions, writing assignments, and course integration. According to National Association of Scholars (NAS) surveys of 2014-2016, common reading is trending upward, with over 350 colleges and universities conducting such programs across two academic years [9]. These activities feature complete organizational mechanisms including institutional structures, goal setting, book selection, target popula-

tions, curricular integration, book discussions, author talks, essay writing, and effectiveness evaluation.

What expectations do universities hold for such widespread common reading? NAS reports identify two primary goals: (1) building campus community by encouraging student exchange and dialogue, with common books providing shared topics for discussion, and (2) setting academic expectations to inspire thinking and critical analysis. Some universities integrate common reading books into courses to achieve these academic expectations.

Although common reading has become prevalent, it remains a relatively new phenomenon emerging after 2000 and continues evolving. NAS biennial reports since 2011 have tracked its development, identifying persistent issues such as overly simplistic book selections, lack of classics, preference for living authors, and unwieldy selection committees that often choose unpopular books—issues warranting consideration and improvement.

2.3.2 The Big Read The Big Read, launched by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2006, is a reading grant program aiming to help participants better understand the world and themselves through shared reading [19]. NEA provides a curated list of 47 books encompassing novels, short stories, memoirs, and poetry. Nonprofit organizations including arts centers, colleges, community service agencies, libraries, museums, and faith-based organizations can select books, develop reading plans, and apply for NEA support. Approximately 75 programs annually receive \$5,000 to \$20,000 in funding. Beyond financial support, NEA provides comprehensive guidance including promotional materials, staff training, program revision, and implementation strategies.

Over its decade-long history, the Big Read has funded more than 1,300 programs, with higher education institutions as key participants. American universities have selected 22 books for Big Read activities across 158 institutions [20]. During program periods, universities conduct diverse activities beyond traditional lectures and exhibitions, utilizing media and online platforms to initiate virtual discussions and extended reading.

2.3.3 Literature Circles Literature circles and reading groups have become popular reading promotion strategies in the United States, welcomed by teachers and librarians for motivating students and enhancing reading engagement.

First proposed by D. Harvey, literature circles are defined as “small, peer-led book discussion groups whose members can choose to read the same story, poem, article, or book” [21]. Group discussions stimulate students to expand their textual understanding, develop higher-level critical thinking, gradually cultivate reflective reading habits, and learn multiple ways to respond to literature.

Literature circles motivate students to overcome reading difficulties through three key elements: (1) a cooperative learning environment where members collaborate to complete assigned reading, making active participation unavoidable;

(2) promotion of independent reading by allowing students to read self-selected materials at their own pace, increasing completion likelihood and shared learning responsibility; and (3) opportunities for group discussion, providing a social and academic environment where students actively construct knowledge through oral discourse, learning through observation and interaction with peers. This comfortable group interaction allows cognitive and emotional responses to literature, ultimately promoting lifelong learning.

While formal literature circles are established in classrooms, their powerful effects have led to widespread diffusion in various forms—reading circles, book discussion groups, book clubs, and online reading guides—initiated by university libraries, public libraries, communities, and social service organizations, all aimed at sharing, discussing, and guiding reading.

3. Implications for College Reading Promotion in China

Compared with American universities' comprehensive reading guidance, Chinese universities show clear gaps in their emphasis and promotion of student reading. These gaps manifest not only in the absence of systematic reading education in the national curriculum but also in the lack of coordinated, long-term mechanisms for comprehensive reading promotion and guidance within institutions. This paper offers three recommendations for current Chinese university reading promotion and guidance.

3.1 Moving from Activity-Based Promotion to Process-Oriented Guidance

Activity-based reading promotion can create reading atmospheres and lead campus reading trends, but it has limitations: limited audience reach, dependence on student initiative, and difficulty overcoming participation constraints despite extensive promotion. College students' reading abilities vary, encountering different difficulties in recommended texts—some methodological, some related to comprehension. Activity-based promotion struggles to track and guide students' reading processes and lacks systematic coherence between activities, making it difficult to achieve progressive reading ability enhancement.

To address these shortcomings requires curriculum and teacher involvement. Since 2015, Nanjing University has pioneered a "Classic Reading Program" for incoming students, creating a required classic reading course—the first of its kind to award academic credits. Through collaboration among top disciplinary experts, frontline teachers, and undergraduates, the program has developed a teaching model featuring "60 classics, 2 readers, 3 modules, 6 unit teams, 60 virtual classrooms, 60 guiding teachers, and 2 reading credits," receiving widespread social attention and recognition [22].

Given that China cannot yet universally implement reading education courses, we recommend assigning reading mentors selected from professional faculty, librarians, student counselors, psychological consultants, and educational admin-

istrators to provide targeted guidance to colleges and grades. These mentors would establish communication channels to monitor students' reading progress and answer questions. The authors piloted this approach with first-year students in one college, using a grade-wide QQ group as a platform to regularly post borrowing statistics, exemplary reading lists from high-achieving upperclassmen, personal book recommendations, short reviews, library activity announcements, and conduct random interviews. Practice demonstrated that shared professional backgrounds and mutual familiarity among group members facilitated discussion initiation, online community formation, and effective reading guidance. Interaction topics ranged widely from initial library usage questions to reading exchanges and mutual book recommendations, with some students submitting personal book reviews for teacher feedback—demonstrating that reading mentorship meets college students' reading needs.

3.2 Emphasizing Reading Habit Cultivation Among First-Year Students

The college years constitute a crucial period when students' worldviews and values mature and stabilize. The first year determines whether students can successfully transition from high school to college, adapt to new environments, and engage in new learning states. Reading habit cultivation should align with first-year characteristics.

Many American universities implement “first-year programs” including first-year experience projects and education to help students transition successfully, incorporating first-year reading experiences and training. Ohio State University offers a “First-Year Summer Book Community” in its summer orientation program, while Stanford University's “Summer Reading Program” annually selects three books for incoming students to read before enrollment. These programs' significance “lies not only in students completing guided reading tasks and reading a book together, but in connecting all freshmen to the first-year experience, as shared reading content creates dialogue opportunities and reading experiences across seminars, dormitories, and various academic and extracurricular activities” [23].

Cultivating reading habits among first-year students and transmitting reading concepts can begin by mailing selected common reading books with admission letters. Common reading book selection and recommendation simultaneously convey institutional philosophy, values, and cultural heritage.

3.3 Providing Multiple Platforms for Reading Sharing and Exchange

A common feature across American college reading courses, guidance, interventions, and promotion activities is providing platforms for students to share reading insights and engage in exchanges. These platforms may be classroom-based, community-based, or organized by specific reading groups. All reading promotion initiatives necessarily include such sustainable components.

Chinese university reading promotion activities generally lack this element. While continuously producing expert-level “recommended reading lists,” there are no appropriate platforms for students to express or exchange whether they are actually reading, what difficulties they encounter, what thoughts or insights they generate, or what confusions they face. Against the backdrop of vigorously advancing universal reading, establishing college student reading exchange platforms is indispensable.

The authors’ university library has recently established a normalized reading promotion model using its periodical *Shulin Yi* as an exchange platform, publishing various guided book reviews in print and synchronizing updates via WeChat public accounts where readers can comment, initially creating online communication channels between library and readers. However, such exchanges are limited to account followers, who are typically already motivated readers. More students lack reading initiative or face reading difficulties and likewise need multi-channel communication and exchange.

Therefore, we recommend establishing diverse reading exchange platforms within universities. Beyond libraries, course instructors, counselors, psychological consultants, youth league committees, and club advisors can all create reading exchange circles at different scopes and levels to comprehensively disseminate and share reading enjoyment.

In conclusion, cultivating college students’ reading habits requires constructing an integrated university-wide reading promotion and guidance mechanism in which teachers play an especially important role—“Without teachers who love reading, how can we cultivate students who love reading?” Librarians should leverage professional resource advantages to participate extensively and permeate various reading promotion, exchange, and sharing activities.

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Author Contributions:

Yuan Shifen: Research material compilation, paper writing and revision.

Qian Jun: Foreign literature provision, guidance and approval of paper writing process.

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

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.