

Signature Experiences

Through conversations and some web-surfing, I have developed two possible definitions of “signature experience.” One definition is a defining or culminating experience that a student might describe as the highlight of their academic career. This signature experience could potentially take many forms: study abroad, research, internships, etc., most of which are being examined by others on the subcommittee. The other definition is that of a common experience for all students that helps to define or distinguish their university. The closest thing I have found to a common experience for all students at UF is the relatively new Common Reading Program, so I will describe that more fully below.

Coordinated through New Student Programs in the Dean of Students Office, the Common Reading Program “...is designed to provide all 6600 new first-year students with a common intellectual experience to stimulate discussion, critical thinking, and encourage a sense of community among students, faculty and staff.” (Source: <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/nsp/firstyearexperience/commonread>). Common readers are becoming a popular element of first year experience programs across the country.

Begun in 2007, the UF Common Reading Program selects a book and distributes that book to all new freshmen during their Preview (orientation) session with the expectation that students read the book prior to their arrival on campus. Resource materials allow faculty to integrate topics and themes from the book into freshmen courses such as First-Year-Florida, Composition, and others. Additional events (including a visit by the author) are scheduled throughout fall semester.

Book selection is done by a committee of faculty, staff and students with the goal of selecting a book that is “...interdisciplinary, global, recently published, and relatable to both first-year students and the campus community.” In 2007, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder was the selected book. This year, *When the Rivers Run Dry: Water – the Defining Crisis of the Twenty-First Century* by Fred Pearce was the selected text. This year, each college had planned an event to welcome its incoming freshmen and host break-out book discussion sessions, but this was rained out by Hurricane Fay. The general consensus among colleges was to try to organize this type of “convocation” next fall.

It’s probably a bit premature to call this a “signature experience” for UF, but could be built into something more substantial. However, as currently structured, the Common Reading Program doesn’t reach incoming transfer students and therefore, doesn’t touch every UF student.

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