

# Rescuing Reading and Literature at the Community College

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How would you respond to this social critic,  
Hugo Münsterberg, a psychologist?

- School-time was to be made a period of happiness, the child was to learn only what he liked, the college . . . [student] was to study only what seemed interesting. . . It was a period in which the . . . [students] were no longer ordered, but begged and persuaded, . . . and in the school all, with the exception of the teachers, had a good time. But now in the zigzag movement of educational progress, a new countermovement seems imminent. . . . The youth left the school with a hundred things in their minds, but without any power of intellectual self-discipline. . . . Our public life reflects this lack everywhere. The newspapers and magazines, the theatres and the social-reform movements, are more and more made for a public which looks only to be entertained, and which has lost the power of sustained attention to that which is not attractive in itself . . . (*The Atlantic Monthly*, November 2006, 47-9)

# All scholarly research . . .

- Begins with a question, or
- Begins with a cascading series of isolated observations that suddenly seem to connect, or
- Begins with an accumulation of anecdotes.

# Then the scholar . . .

- Frames a question, and
- Forms a hypothesis, and
- Forms a method for answering the question or proving the hypothesis.

# An ideal research method would . . .

- Document the problem/deficiency in **qualitative** and **quantitative** terms.
- Isolate and reduce the number of variables.
- Create an **intervention** (solution/remedy).
- Conduct an **assessment** *before* the intervention and conduct a comparable assessment *after* the intervention.
- The assessment would be **randomized**, **representative**, and sufficiently **large**.

# My Question/Hypothesis

- Is reading, particularly literary reading, at risk among our students?
- A variety of factors contribute to declining reading skills and declining literary reading practices among our students, which might be remedied by interventions with students, faculty and administrators to foster or strengthen a reading culture on campus.

# Is reading at risk?

- According to the **National Endowment for the Arts** (NEA), *Reading at Risk* (2004):
  1. The percentage of adult Americans reading literature has dropped dramatically over the past 20 years.
  2. The decline in literary reading parallels a decline in total book reading.
  3. The rate of decline in literary reading is accelerating.
  4. Women read more literature than men do, but literary reading by both groups is declining at significant rates.
  5. Literary reading is declining among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics.
  6. Literary reading is declining among all education levels.
  7. Literary reading is declining among all age groups.
  8. The steepest decline in literary reading is in the youngest age groups.
  9. The decline in literary reading foreshadows an erosion in cultural and civic participation.
  10. The decline in reading correlates with increased participation in a variety of electronic media, including the Internet, video games, and portable digital devices.

# NEA, *Reading at Risk* methodology

- Results from the literature segment of the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, conducted by the Census Bureau in 2002 at the request of the National Endowment for the Arts.
- Survey investigated the percentage and number of adults, age 18 and over, who attended artistic performances, visited museums, watched broadcasts of arts programs, or read literature.
- Sample numbered more than 17,000 individuals.
- Extrapolates and interprets data on literary reading and compares them with results from similar surveys carried out in 1982 and 1992.
- “The survey asked respondents if, during the previous twelve months, they had read any novels, short stories, plays, or poetry in their leisure time (not for work or school). The report establishes trends in the number of adults reading, listening to, and writing literature by demographic categories of age, race, region, income, and education. This report also compares participation in literary activities with other leisure activities, such as watching movies and exercising.” (*Reading at Risk*, “Executive Summary” ix)

# **1. The percentage of adult Americans reading literature has dropped dramatically over the past 20 years.**

- Less than half of the adult American population now reads literature. ■ The 10 percentage point decline in literary reading represents a loss of 20 million potential readers. ■ Only the strong growth in overall U.S. population of nearly 40 million adults from 1982 to 2002 allowed the actual number of readers to remain flat at 96 million.

## **2. The decline in literary reading parallels a decline in total book reading.**

- Total book reading is declining significantly, although not at the rate of literary reading. The percentage of the U.S. adult population reading any books (56.6%) has declined by -7 percent over the past decade.

### **3. The rate of decline in literary reading is accelerating.**

- The ten-year rate of decline has accelerated from -5 percent to -14 percent since 1992.

**4. Women read more literature than men do, but literary reading by both groups is declining at significant rates.**

- Only slightly more than one-third of adult American males now reads literature. ■ Reading among women is also declining significantly, but at a slower rate.

## **5. Literary reading is declining among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics.**

- Hispanic 26.5%
- White 51.4%
- African American 37.1%
- All Other 43.7%

## **6. Literary reading is declining among all education levels.**

- The higher the education level, the higher the reading rate, but reading among every group has declined over the past 20 years.

**7. Literary reading is declining among all age groups.**

## 8. The steepest decline in literary reading is in the youngest age groups.

- Over the past 20 years, young adults (18-34) have declined from being those most likely to read literature to those least likely (with the exception of those age 65 and above). ■ The rate of decline for the youngest adults (18-24) is 55 percent greater than that of the total adult population (-28 percent vs. -18 percent).

## **9. The decline in literary reading foreshadows an erosion in cultural and civic participation.**

- Literary reading strongly correlates to other forms of active civic participation. ■ Literary readers are more likely than non-literary readers to perform volunteer and charity work, visit art museums, attend performing arts events, and attend sporting events. ■ Literary reading strongly correlates to other forms of active civic participation. ■ Literary readers are more likely than non-literary readers to perform volunteer and charity work, visit art museums, attend performing arts events, and attend sporting events.

10. The decline in reading **correlates** with increased participation in a variety of electronic media, including the Internet, video games, and portable digital devices.

- Literature now competes with an enormous array of electronic media. While no single activity is responsible for the decline of reading, the cumulative presence and availability of these alternatives have increasingly drawn Americans away from reading. ■ Non-readers watch more television than do readers. ■ In 1990, book buying constituted 5.7 percent of total recreation spending, while spending on audio, video, computers, and software was 6 percent. By 2002, electronic spending had soared to 24 percent, while spending on books declined slightly to 5.6 percent. ■ A 1999 study showed that the average American child lives in a household with 2.9 televisions, 1.8 VCRs, 3.1 radios, 2.1 CD players, 1.4 video game players, and 1 computer. (*Reading at Risk*, “Executive Summary” ix-xii)

# Causes for Decline?

- Socio-economic decline? (As income rises, so do leisure and reading. As incomes decline, so do leisure and reading.)
- Declining higher-education rates among young adults? (For the first time in our history, young adults are less well educated than older adults.)
- Public education fails to instill reading skills beyond decoding reader (rarely fluent-comprehending or expert readers)?
- A culture of distraction unable to focus or pay attention? (Why do we multitask? Because we can.)
- A culture of stupidity, sensation? (The Springerization of America)

# Pop Quiz

- What is the name of the pop singer who recently lost custody of her two children to her ex-husband?
- What is the name of your state senator and your state delegate recently elected to the Virginia General Assembly?

# A Culture of Stupidity

- In the 1950s and 60s, this man was a frequent guest on TV talk shows and late night shows and was a regular game-show panelist known for his witty repartee.
- This man co-founded Random House Books, fought government censorship, published some of the most important writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- When was the last time you saw an editor on a game show or talk show?



# Rescuing Reading: A Community College Response to *Reading at Risk*

(Two-year VCCS Chancellor's Commonwealth Professorship)

- Biannual Book Circles (Fall and Spring terms)
- Subscribers Database
- Web Site
- *Your Weekly Reader* (email newsletter)
  - “What They’re Reading”
  - “Web Watch”
  - News to Use
  - Book Circles Promo
- Strategic Partnerships (Internal and external stakeholders)
  - President’s Cultural Scholarships, SDV 100, English faculty (books they are assigning), foreign language faculty (Spring Book Circles Spanish selection), faculty across the college (extra credit suggestions)
  - Libraries and book stores
  - Newport News Libraries: The Big Read
  - Virginia Peninsula Literary Consortium
- Faculty survey at the end of two years

# Faculty Survey Method

- Although the original proposal planned both pre- and post-surveys, institutional difficulties only permitted a post-survey.
- However, two questions regarding literature in the curriculum were asked in a similar faculty survey two years earlier (and two student surveys provide 2004 and 2007 data).
- On-line, Web-based survey of faculty (self-selected, voluntary participation), May 2007, N=89 (TNCC Institutional Research, Dr. John Davis, Ms. Terry Allen)

**Table 1**  
**Thomas Nelson Community College**  
**Rescuing Reading Assessment**  
**Survey Results -- May 2007**  
**Total Survey Respondents = 89**

Category		Survey Respondents (N=89)	
		N	%
<b>1.</b>	<b>Employment Status:</b>	89	100.0
	Full-Time	56	62.9
	Part-Time	33	37.1
	Unknown	0	0.0
<b>2.</b>	<b>Age:</b>	89	100.0
	18 to 21	0	0.0
	22 to 24	0	0.0
	25 to 34	8	9.0
	35 to 44	13	14.6
	45 to 59	44	49.4
	60 and over	23	25.8
	Unknown	1	1.1
<b>3.</b>	<b>Gender:</b>	89	100.0
	Male	25	28.1
	Female	50	56.2
	Unknown	14	15.7

# Survey says . . .

- Responses of faculty who are not teaching English
  - N=70

# Non-ENG departments (2 or more respondents)

Category	Survey Respondents (N=70)	
	N	%
<b>Primary teaching department by prefix</b>	70	100.0
AUT	7	10.0
CHD	3	4.3
CHM	3	4.3
HIS	4	5.7
HUM	2	2.9
ITP	2	2.9
MTH	12	17.1
PSY	5	7.1
SDV	5	7.1
SPA	2	2.9
SPD	3	4.3

Occupational/Technical      N=24 (34%)

Gen Ed/College Transfer      N=46 (66%)

# What they thought about Rescuing Reading

	Ratings													
	Total	Strongly Agree			Agree		Strongly Agree and Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Disagree and Strongly Disagree	
		N	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
5. I am familiar with the Rescuing Reading Project.	69	34	49.3	25	36.2	59	85.5	7	10.1	3	4.3	10	14.5	
10. The book selections for the Book Circles were of suitable variety to interest different kinds of readers.	62	26	41.9	30	48.4	56	90.3	6	9.7	0	0.0	6	9.7	
11. Book Circles were held at a convenient day / time.	60	16	26.7	31	51.7	47	78.3	12	20.0	1	1.7	13	21.7	
12. There was sufficient publicity for Book Circles events.	67	40	59.7	23	34.3	63	94.0	4	6.0	0	0.0	4	6.0	
13. The weekly email bulletin, <i>Your Weekly Reader</i> , had interesting or useful information.	62	26	41.9	26	41.9	52	83.9	10	16.1	0	0.0	10	16.1	
16. I attended at least one of the Peninsula community events for The Big Read (Zora Neale Hurston's novel, <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> ), including TNCC's Spring 2007 Book Circles.	67	6	9.0	3	4.5	9	13.4	34	50.7	24	35.8	58	86.6	

# What they also thought about Rescuing Reading

	Ratings													
	Total	Always		Sometimes		Always and Sometimes		Rarely		Never		Rarely and Never		
		N	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
18. I read the weekly email bulletin, <i>Your Weekly Reader</i> .	70	23	32.9	30	42.9	53	75.7	9	12.9	8	11.4	17	24.3	
19. I encouraged my students to participate in the Book Circles.	68	16	23.5	18	26.5	34	50.0	21	30.9	13	19.1	34	50.0	
20. I gave my students extra credit for participating in the Book Circles.	68	11	16.2	4	5.9	15	22.1	11	16.2	42	61.8	53	77.9	
21. I read the Book Circles selections myself.	70	8	11.4	21	30.0	29	41.4	17	24.3	24	34.3	41	58.6	
22. I attended the Book Circles events.	70	5	7.1	8	11.4	13	18.6	14	20.0	43	61.4	57	81.4	
23. I visited the Rescuing Reading Web site.	69	5	7.2	21	30.4	26	37.7	22	31.9	21	30.4	43	62.3	
24. I assigned a Book Circles book selection in one or more of my classes.	68	2	2.9	5	7.4	7	10.3	8	11.8	53	77.9	61	89.7	
27. I assign readings from non-fiction or literature outside of the course's textbook readings.	67	15	22.4	12	17.9	27	40.3	16	23.9	24	35.8	40	59.7	
29. I passed to my students information about the Book Circles.	67	15	22.4	21	31.3	36	53.7	12	17.9	19	28.4	31	46.3	

# What they say about students' reading skills

## Non-ENG Faculty

	Total	Ratings												
		Strongly Agree			Agree		Strongly Agree and Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Disagree and Strongly Disagree	
		N	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
8. My students are able to read and comprehend the texts that I assign them for my courses.	65	9	13.8	38	58.5	47	72.3	14	21.5	4	6.2	18	27.7	

## ENG Faculty

	Total	Ratings												
		Strongly Agree			Agree		Strongly Agree and Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Disagree and Strongly Disagree	
		N	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
8. My students are able to read and comprehend the texts that I assign them for my courses.	19	0	0.0	10	52.6	10	52.6	9	47.4	0	0.0	9	47.4	

# What they say about students' attitudes toward books

## Non-ENG Faculty

	Total	Ratings													
		Strongly Agree			Agree			Strongly Agree and Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Disagree and Strongly Disagree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
14 Books seem to be important to my students.	64	1	1.6	19	29.7	20	31.3	38	59.4	6	9.4	44	68.8		

## ENG Faculty

	Total	Ratings													
		Strongly Agree			Agree			Strongly Agree and Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Disagree and Strongly Disagree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
14 Books seem to be important to my students.	19	0	0.0	4	21.1	4	21.1	12	63.2	3	15.8	15	78.9		

# Literature in the Curricula

## Non-English Faculty Respondents

	December 2004		May 2007	
	Very/Somewhat Important	Unimportant	Very/Somewhat Important	Unimportant
<b>1. College-Educated Person</b>	<b>88.3</b>	<b>11.7</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>0%</b>
2. In Your Program/Dept.	47.4%	52.6%	69.2%	30.8%

1. How important in the **general education** of a **college student** is a student's exploration of literature (poetry, fiction, and drama)?
2. How important for the goals of **your program** is a student's exploration of literature (poetry, fiction, and drama)?

# Student Survey

- Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)
  - Randomized, representative, and sufficiently large
  - 2005 and 2007
- “Number of books read on your own (not assigned) for personal enjoyment or academic enrichment during the current school year.”

“Number of books read on your own (not assigned) for personal enjoyment or academic enrichment during the current school year.”

<b>TNCC</b>	<b>2005</b>		<b>2007</b>	
<b>CCSSE</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>%</b>
<b><i>None</i></b>	<b><i>NA</i></b>	<b><i>23.5</i></b>	<b><i>27</i></b>	<b><i>3.5</i></b>
<b><i>1-4</i></b>	<b><i>NA</i></b>	<b><i>52.1</i></b>	<b><i>389</i></b>	<b><i>51.1</i></b>
<b><i>5-10</i></b>	<b><i>NA</i></b>	<b><i>12.9</i></b>	<b><i>200</i></b>	<b><i>26.2</i></b>
<b><i>11-20</i></b>	<b><i>NA</i></b>	<b><i>5.4</i></b>	<b><i>93</i></b>	<b><i>12.3</i></b>
<b><i>+20</i></b>	<b><i>NA</i></b>	<b><i>6.2</i></b>	<b><i>53</i></b>	<b><i>6.9</i></b>

# Conclusions

- The percentage of non-English faculty responding that students' experience of literature was somewhat important or very important to the goals of the faculty members' degree programs increased from 47% to 69%.
- The percentage of students reporting that they had read no books in the current year declined from 24% to 4%.
- The percentage of students reporting that they had read one or more books in the current year grew from 77% to 97%.

# Why is literature important?

- A cultural tradition, a patrimony, a legacy.
- College is an academy for leaders, and knowledge from literature is one kind of knowledge that leaders possess.
- One of the distinguishing marks of a first-class education.
- Reading literature trains the mind in nuance, irony, inference, figurative language, subtlety.
- “In order to be a great writer a person must have a built-in shockproof crap detector” --Hemingway

# Family Remedies

- Read, read, read to your children.
- Create a reliable, regular reading hour.
- Have books in the home.
- Take children to the library.
- Give books as gifts.
- Talk to, don't yell at, pre-kindergarten children.

# College Remedies?

- English faculty must engage all internal and external stakeholders in continuous, robust advocacy on behalf of the infusion of literature across curricula.
- Colleges must decide if they are merely trade schools or if they want to be academies for leaders.
- General education across curricula has to be every departments' business but not compartmentalized by department.

Thank you.

Questions?