

Common Reading Experience: Assessing a Growing High-Impact Practice

Kelly Smith and Denise Rode

High-Impact Practices (HIPs), like the Common Reading Experience (CRE), are increasingly prevalent on college campuses. Despite the development and growth of CRE programs, assessment procedures struggle to keep pace. This article provides some innovative guidelines on how to effectively assess a high-impact and far-reaching program like the Common Reading Experience.

Common Reading Experience (CRE) programs are a recognized and valued component in many first-year experience programs. This is due, in part, to their connection with Kuh's High-Impact Practices (HIPs), namely creating the opportunity for a common intellectual experience by exposing all incoming first-year students to a common book (Kuh, 2008; Soria, 2015). Involvement in HIPs increases student likelihood to stay motivated and engaged in their educational experience by developing opportunities for them to connect to faculty, staff, and their peers through meaningful interactions (Kuh, 2008).

Northern Illinois University (NIU) first implemented a CRE in 2008, basing many of the program goals and student learning outcomes on anecdotal evidence provided by Laufgraben (2006), who described benefits of the CRE as including setting academic expectations, connecting students to their faculty and peers, and encouraging intellectual conversations outside the classroom. However, in the infancy of the NIU CRE program, assessment focused mainly on logistical and practical items, such as creating opportunities to expose the book to first-year students, incorporating the book into academic course sections across the university, increasing student participation in CRE-related events, and partnering with a wide variety of university and community partners. At the time, these items were typically reviewed when considering the "success" of a CRE program.

Although assessment has always been a part of NIU's CRE program, the process has evolved as the program has grown and as departments are being held accountable for the attainment of university goals and learning outcomes. Soria's (2015) study is one of the first attempts to empirically confirm some of the earlier research claiming additional benefits of student participation in a CRE. It unveiled connections between first-year student participation in the CRE and student

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“development in academic skills—critical thinking; understanding of a field of study; and reading, writing, and speaking skills—and multicultural appreciation and competence—appreciating cultural, racial, global, and ethnic diversity and feeling comfortable interacting with those from others cultures” (Soria, 2015, p. 42).

More recently, in addition to the logistical considerations, the NIU CRE committee, which includes key partners from both the campus (Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, faculty, staff, and students) and the community (e.g., local community colleges and public library staff), intentionally considers the ways the CRE incorporates the university’s eight student learning outcomes (SLO):

1. Integrate knowledge of global interconnections and interdependencies
2. Exhibit intercultural competencies with people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives
3. Analyze issues that interconnect human life and the natural world
4. Demonstrate critical, creative, and independent thought
5. Communicate clearly and effectively
6. Collaborate with others to achieve specific goals
7. Use and combine appropriate quantitative and qualitative reasoning skills to address questions and solve problems
8. Synthesize knowledge and skills relevant to one’s major or particular fields of study and apply them creatively to develop innovative outcomes.

NIU administrators want to know how all programs achieve learning above and beyond simply supporting the university’s mission. In particular, they want to know how the NIU CRE program incorporates university SLOs. Soria’s research directly links CRE program outcomes to six of NIU’s SLOs (1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8). The question becomes, how is assessment implemented to demonstrate that the CRE influences NIU SLOs?

At NIU, we’ve found that we cannot do this alone. Collaboration with university professionals in the area of assessment is key to enhancing assessment efforts. While we continue to implement basic assessments described earlier in this article (e.g., reviewing the number of students involved, exposure of the book, and partnerships), we recognized that information doesn’t provide a full picture of the influence of each CRE event. The following list describes ways that assessment of the CRE has evolved to provide richer data used to connect CRE outcomes to university SLOs:

1. **Partnering with early alert survey administrators.** In order to more efficiently survey students, we partner with the office that distributes the early alert survey at NIU. We add questions to the online survey, which is promoted and distributed to all first-year students in the third week of the fall semester by that office. We receive access to the results, which have already been organized by the early alert system, making it easy for us to break down, interpret, and report the results in an effective manner (Table 1).
2. **Attendance.** We still take attendance at all events. If the event is large scale,

we borrow ID card readers from another office on campus to make this possible (Figure 1).

3. **Sentence stems and sticky notes.** Some of our programs (the author's speaking engagement, for example) are too large to survey, and taking attendance when it is required doesn't reveal much about the influence of the experience on student learning. In order to elicit student reactions, we place banners with a sentence stem at the top of large bulletin boards located outside the auditorium used for large events. We then ask students to pick one or more of these sentences to complete in their own words using a large sticky note and marker (Figure 2).
4. **Qualitative observers.** Another way to gather information from events that aren't ideal for surveys is to use qualitative observers to record the happenings at an event. During authors' speaking engagements, we partner with NIU's Division of Outreach, Engagement, and Regional Development. This unit provides a skilled qualitative observer who is able to write a thorough report of the content of the speech, student's reactions, and the open discussion that followed. The report reveals that students share thoughtful stories and ask intriguing questions, revealing a deeper level of thinking occurring at each session.
5. **Service event surveys.** Each service event occurring in conjunction with the CRE includes a brief overview from the director of the agency or community program that students are serving. Directly after the event, students are asked to reflect on their experience on a two-sided, hand-written survey. These reflections provide valuable insight into self-reported gains toward NIU's learning outcomes.
6. **UNIV 101/201 (first-year seminars) reflections and course evaluations.** All UNIV 101/201 sections are required to use the common reader. The reflections students produce in class provide additional qualitative support for the influence of the CRE on SLOs. Students also provide quantitative and qualitative feedback on the course evaluations distributed in hard-copy form at the end of each semester.
7. **Annual report.** In an effort to bring these assessment pieces together, First- and Second-Year Experience produces and distributes an annual report to campus partners and stakeholders. This report helps FSYE recognize current and identify new partners, while further promoting the support of the CRE (Figure 3).
8. **Additional outcomes.** Despite the fact that the common book changes every two years at NIU, CRE program administrators look for additional ways to incorporate the book into the fabric of the university and ensure longer-term effects of the initiatives developed during each book's tenure. The 2013-2015 CRE selection was *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*. The CRE resulted in additional outcomes, such as the formation of a new student interfaith organization (BetterTogether@NIU), movement toward a Presidential Commission on Interfaith Initiatives, a 6-week, non-credit Interfaith

Conversation Series, all-campus surveys, and a residential interfaith floor. The NIU CRE also spilled out into the community, with civic and faith leaders meeting twice during author visits to discuss how participants could bring interfaith efforts together to address problems in the greater community beyond the campus. NIU interfaith leaders participated in the Vanguard Conference of the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) in Washington, D.C. (September, 2014), and an NIU CRE coordinator also partnered with an IFYC staff member to present a session at a national conference on collaboration efforts; another presentation was given at a campus workshop on interfaith initiatives. Additionally, the local community college and the public library hosted interfaith activities at their sites.

Although CREs have proliferated across the country, with ancillary events such as author visits, service opportunities, and curricular strategies, assessment of these initiatives has lagged. The basic qualitative and quantitative methods described in this article provide several low-cost, practical means for determining the impact of a Common Reading Experience. At NIU, we intend to build on this foundation to develop and embed meaningful assessment processes into the CRE program.

TABLE 1

Survey Respondents: On campus UNIV students who completed the MAP-Works® Fall Transition Survey

	2014	2013
Have you heard of the Common Reading Experience (CRE)?	81 percent (n=1,214) of 1,502 respondents answered "yes."	56 percent (n=626) of 1,116 respondents answered "yes."
With regard to the First Year CRE, have you or do you plan to attend an event?	36 percent (n=541) of 1,502 respondents answered "yes."	41 percent (n=458) of 1,110 respondents answered "yes."

FIGURE 1



Student workers check students in for an author visit through ID matching.

FIGURE 2



Students affix their responses to an author's presentation using large sticky notes, which later were categorized into major themes by program administrators.

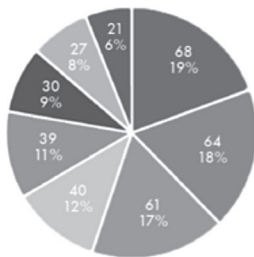
FIGURE 3

The CRE Learning Objectives align directly with the University's Student Learning Objectives. At the completion of the presentations, feedback was collected from attendees regarding their views on community involvement, collaboration, beliefs, social justice, and service. A sample of participant comments follows:

- "I feel inspired to take full advantage of my time here at NIU. Although four years may seem like a long time now, it's actually really short when you think of your life. College is a unique chance to focus on yourself and developing who you want to become years down the road and what legacy you want to leave."
- "I want to know what people can do within the community or university to engage in diverse situations with people of different backgrounds."
- "I feel inspired to teach tolerance and show that everyone has a right to their opinion and way of believing."
- "I recognize that being aware of working together with others from different backgrounds helps me fully understand the basis of other people's beliefs, using this knowledge to supplement and strength my own faith as well as my understanding of religious plurality."
- "I feel inspired to explore different religious beliefs and culture, to educate myself in order to reduce stigma and misunderstanding."
- "I learned that religion plays an important role in not only our daily lives, but also in the workplace and society. It is good to have an understanding of different religions in order to be an educated American."

An analysis of attendees' comments revealed the following themes:

Resulting Themes



- Encouraged to be more open-minded
- Motivated to develop relationships with others
- Inspired to learn about other cultures and beliefs
- Inspired to be a leader
- Motivated to explore self-identity
- General positive feedback
- Inspired to take action
- Random comments

Following the evening public presentation by Eboo Patel, several students expressed interest in further engaging in interfaith work and service opportunities with the NIU campus and community:

- Twenty-nine students expressed interest and provided contact information for the BetterTogether@NIU organization;
- Seventeen students expressed interest and provided contact information for the Spring Interfaith Dialogue series;
- Six students expressed interest and provided contact information for involvement in future service projects; and
- Twenty students signed up to volunteer or receive information from multiple organizations at the Mini-Volunteer Fair.

A series of volunteer events were offered in conjunction with the 2014 CRE as well, students reported:

- After working with others from different backgrounds and beliefs than my own, "I learned that if we set aside our differences we can be a more cohesive unit and work more efficiently."
- As a result of this service participation, "I was able to see how active this community is with NIU and [I appreciate] the value of education from a young age."
- After this volunteer experience, "I feel that it was an honor to be able to work with other people from different backgrounds, and it has changed my view of my peers."
- After this volunteer experience, "I feel like NIU students greatly contribute to DeKalb's community through service."

An excerpt from NIU's 2014 Annual Report, showcasing assessment of CRE-related programming and events.