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COMMON READING PROGRAM

THE COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING COMMON READING EXPERIENCE



Through a Transforming Learning for a Third Century Quick Wins grant, the University of Michigan College of Engineering (CoE) was able to start a Common Reading Experience for all incoming first-year engineering students during the 2013-14 academic year. This initiative is contributing to the integration of the Michigan Engineering Plus philosophy at the college by emphasizing engaged learning experiences for students. It is also providing an important opportunity to facilitate meaningful discussions about the role of engineers in the 21st Century.

Background

While the implementation of first year reading programs is often practiced among liberal arts institutions, the development of a program specifically for engineering students is extremely rare and has the potential to be transformational for the U-M engineering experience. CoE leveraged the Common Reading Experience to emphasize the importance of intellectual engagement and to encourage a broad educational experience for engineering students.

Project Description

A committee of CoE Faculty and staff selected “The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy” by Pietra Rivoli as the book for the inaugural Michigan Engineering Common Reading Experience. In this book, the author traces the origins of an ordinary T-shirt around the world on a journey that takes her from the



cotton fields of Texas to the textile manufacturing operations throughout China. She subsequently discovers the fate of a donated T-shirt, ending her adventure in an open-air market in Tanzania. This story brings to life the social and environmental aspects of globalization, providing an opportunity to



consider how engineering work is connected to other fields. This book provided opportunities for CoE to raise questions with students in a number of important topics, including human labor conditions, environmental regulation, the importance of student activism, gender perceptions, intercultural intelligence and the ethical implications of the competitive the “race to the bottom” that occurs in many industries.

In July 2013, more than 1,200 first year engineering students received a copy of the book and were asked to read it by September 2013.

Communication and Social Media

In order to generate enthusiasm about the program and encourage students to interact during the summer months, CoE established several means of communication with students. In addition to email correspondence, they created a website with information about the program. In partnership with CoE’s Office of Communications and Marketing, a video was produced to encourage first-year students to participate in the program. They also created a Facebook page and a Twitter hashtag to encourage conversation among students while reading. Students posted to twitter when they received their books and the Twitter feed was filled with a lot of positive comments about the program from the incoming class.

- [Website](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter Hashtag \(#UMenginread\)](#)
- [Video](#)

Book Discussions

Approximately 1,200 students attended a small group discussion session during fall term 2013. Fifty CoE juniors and seniors were trained to act as discussion leaders

and to provide advice to students about broadening their engineering perspective. Students were also asked to consider what qualities are important for an engineer to develop and encouraged to think beyond the technical. Overall, there were many positive comments and students indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to connect with each other and upper-class students around a common experience.

“The [Common Reading Experience] provides the opportunity for students to come in and start their engineering experience with a broader, more comprehensive perspective. This, in effect, encourages better engineering all around.”

– Discussion Group Facilitator



“I think they understood that a Michigan Engineer is not just a regular engineer. We are world citizens who understand problems other than engineering/technical problems and who can look at the situations from a broader point of view.” – Discussion Group Facilitator

Integration of the Book into the First Year

Several special events were held in partnership with other offices to integrate concepts from the book into the first year experience. In addition, faculty teaching in the first year program were encouraged to incorporate the book into their 100-level engineering classes. For example, in one section of Engineering 100, students completed a water footprint of the t-shirt highlighted in the book, as one of their homework assignments.

Additionally, the Common Reading Experience partnered with several offices on-campus including International Programs in Engineering, Center for Educational



Diversity and Outreach (CEDO), Center for Entrepreneurship, Engineering Career Resource Center, and the Cooley Writing Center to put on related events for students. Some of the featured events included the Engineering Study Abroad Fair, CEDO Cupcake Day, Entrepreneurship Hour lecture series, a career planning workshop, and the Cooley Writing Center contest. In Winter of 2013, the Common Reading Experience, in collaboration with the Center for Entrepreneurship, brought former Michigan Basketball captain and local entrepreneur, David Merritt, to campus as the Keynote Speaker. David

spoke on the topic “Doing Well and Doing Good” and discussed the establishment of his clothing store in Ann Arbor. Twenty percent of proceeds from merchandise at his new social change clothing store in Ann Arbor support scholarships for youth from Detroit.

David Merritt’s Keynote speech

A Model Opportunity

The CoE model for a Common Reading Experience has the potential to be implemented in other areas across the U-M campus. The developed model could be used with a variation on the selection of the book and the themes for small

group discussions, based on the specific educational outcomes of another department, school or college. In addition to the potential for replication, this program also offers the opportunity for collaboration among groups across campus.



For example, schools or colleges serving students in STEM fields could consider engaging their students in the Michigan Engineering Common Reading Experience, with field specific discussion groups. Likewise, in the future, the Common Reading Experience could be integrated into larger campus initiatives, such as the LSA theme semester.

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