

Results Outreach Committee

ROC Final Report

ROC Project Title

MCC Book Club

Name(s) and Department

Kate Mohler (English Faculty), Nora Reyes (Education Studies Department Chair & Multicultural Education Residential Faculty), Brian Dille (Political Science Faculty)

Abstract

The goals of the ROC grant were to:

Book Club supports the college-wide outcomes assessment endeavor in that it bolsters critical thinking skills and encourages participants to learn about (and appreciate) other cultures, world views, and opposing viewpoints. This project brings together a diverse group of people from the campus community, including students, faculty, and staff members.

Book Club is based on reading popular, informative, thought-provoking texts, and then discussing those texts in an informal yet structured environment. Critical thinking is emphasized as we read, form text-based opinions, share those opinions, then analyze and learn from other people's opinions. By promoting reading, analysis, and the value of spirited, fair-minded debate, Book Club provides long-term benefits to participants through an academic yet social atmosphere that appeals to all.

Outcomes

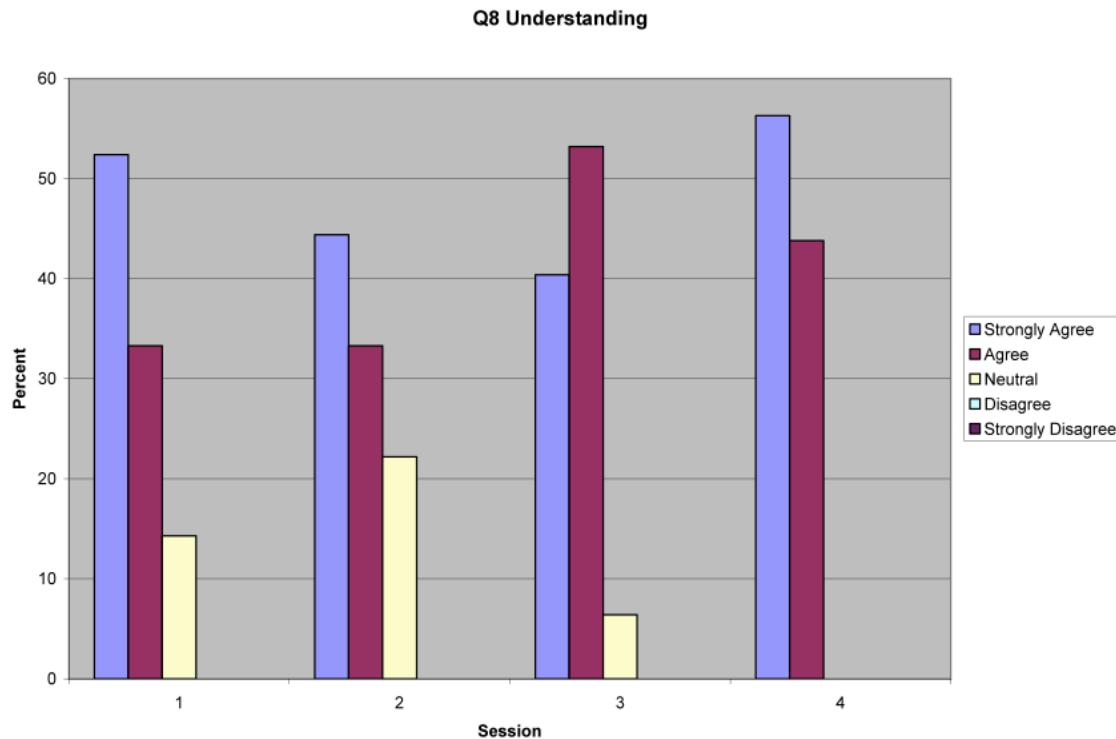
The intended outcomes of this project were:

1. To promote literacy
2. To promote social awareness
3. To recognize and appreciate opposing viewpoints
4. To bolster critical thinking skills
5. To create a feeling of connectedness within our on-campus community
6. To help participants become better at challenging ideas in the media
7. To help participants confidently assert their own informed opinions

These outcomes were met in several ways:

1. Book Club participants are encouraged to attend the first introductory meeting (during which we raffle off books), and then—after reading each half of the book selection—to attend both ninety-minute discussion sessions. During book discussions, lists of thought-provoking prompts and questions are analyzed and debated in small groups, and then further explored in a large group setting. Some instructors offer extra credit for student participation or include Book Club participation as an option for a class project requirement. Students who can't attend the on-campus meetings (such as online students) are sometimes given the option by their instructors to read the book and write answers to the discussion questions. In addition, some instructors

incorporate the book selection into their curriculum, encouraging classroom discussion and/or oral presentation. Book Club is an opportunity that is well-publicized and then utilized by many instructors campus-wide, in various ways. All of these activities **promote literacy, critical thinking skills, and the appreciation of opposing viewpoints**. Pre/post surveys conducted in Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 semesters provided interesting insights. The Fall 2010 surveys showed little change in participants' perception that books help them understand new viewpoints. The Spring 2011 surveys, however, indicated that 90-100% of participants agreed that books help them understand new viewpoints. Furthermore, while the changes in perception were subtle for Fall 2010, the changes for Spring 2011 showed a shift in participants' level of agreement, with more participants indicating "strongly agree" rather than simply "agree" in the post-survey. The nature of the books selected is most likely the explanation for this discrepancy from one semester to the next. The fall selection *Aspire* is a book on inspiring others, and while discussions surfaced some differences of opinion regarding the author's style, the content was not controversial nor did it promote the discussion of the variety of experiences and viewpoints provoked by the spring selection *Methland*. By challenging participants to listen to the varied experiences and viewpoints shared on a topic that some had intimate experience with and others little or not at all, the stage was set for deeper reflection, highlighting the impact books can have on our understanding of and appreciation for various viewpoints. This insight will help to guide future book selections.



- Everyone who attends the on-campus sessions introduces themselves, wears nametags, and explains why they have joined Book Club. As the semester progresses, participants end up working closely together to analyze the discussion questions and to share each others' experiences. An e-mail distribution list is always created to reinforce attendance and participation. Attendance at Book Club meetings averages between twenty and thirty people including students, faculty members and staff members, and sometimes members of the general

community as well. Refreshments are always served and well-received. The atmosphere at meetings is always positive and energetic; Book Club members often end up attending semester after semester. All of this **builds social connections within our campus community**.

Anecdotal evidence supports the fact that students enjoy having a specific place to gather and exchange ideas with other students and faculty members in a more casual, inclusive atmosphere--and they still reap the benefits of participating in a scholarly, academic event. MCC's Book Club came about after Naomi Story sent around an article written by Laurie Snyder titled, "Retention First Aid Delivers Student Success", published on the League For Innovation's website in July of 2008. The following excerpt regards student involvement in on-campus activities and how that fosters retention:

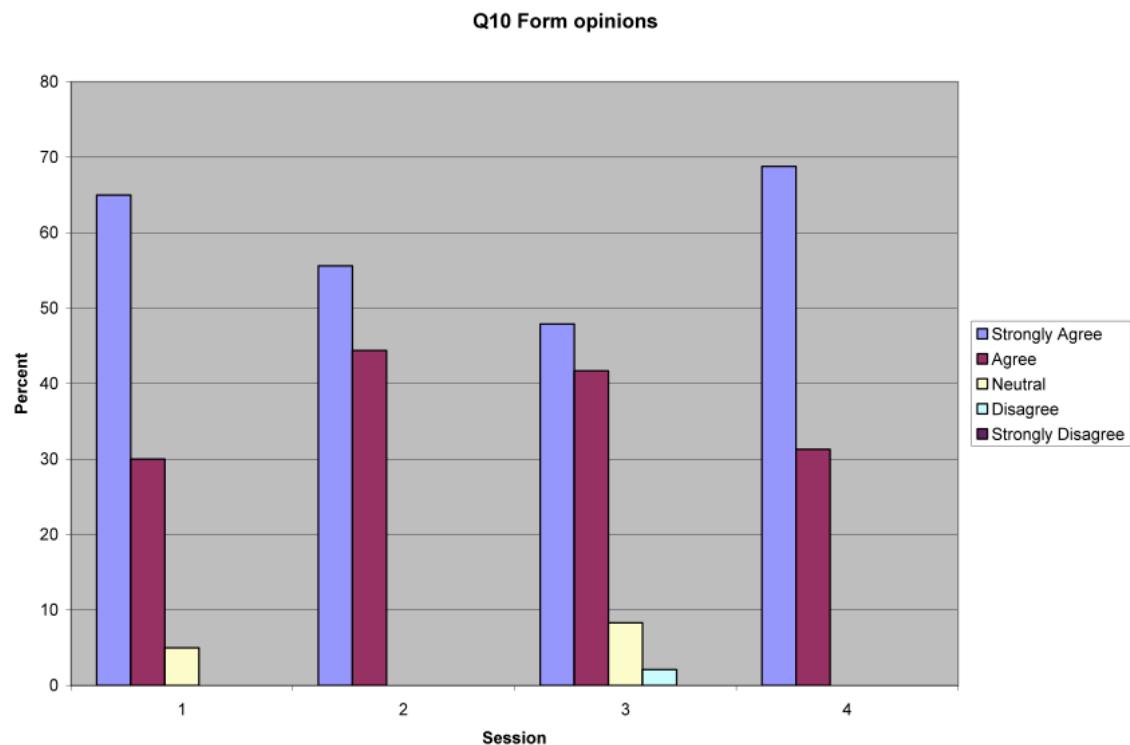
"How better to engage students in a campus-wide learning community and deepen the connection between student and coursework than a book club. The Justus Girls Literary Society at Monroe Community College's urban campus is not just any kind of book club, but a literacy society for female students who read contemporary female authors. The book club helps students build close connections with faculty and enhance their education. Members also increase their reading outside of the classroom and participate in discussions with experienced readers trained in critical analysis.

It is these types of endeavors, initiated by faculty and staff, which help students stay committed to their education and enrolled in college through graduation. [...] Monroe Community College (MCC) in Rochester, New York [...] understands the importance that our students' success has on our community at large. And that success depends on retention; students need to stay in college in order to receive their certificate or degree, attain their job of choice, and achieve their dreams. Research indicates the importance of social integration in retaining students. For many community college students, the classroom may be the only place where involvement occurs. As Vincent Tinto reports, students who interact with their teachers develop a support network and are more likely to persist."

3. During the 2010-2011 academic year, Book Club members read two books: *Aspire*, by Kevin Hall; and *Methland*, by Nick Reding. Hall showed us how words can help transform thoughts and beliefs into social action, ultimately improving ourselves, our experience on this planet, and other people's lives. Reding—through close examination and research into how meth can bring down the individual, the family, an entire region and perhaps even entire industries—brought the meth epidemic into full light for us. Most Book Club members were unaware of the horrible and far-reaching consequences of meth use in this country and Mexico.

Some Book Club members were actually recovering meth addicts; their contributions to our discussions were invaluable, **bolstering our social awareness**. *Methland* especially educated us on specific social and political issues—such as how the manufacture, distribution and use of meth connects the agricultural and pharmaceutical industries to small town life--which in turn helped us to **confidently assert our own opinions** regarding those issues.

Pre/post surveys conducted in both Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 semesters showed a slight increase in the view that reading and studying help form sound opinions. While more than 90% agreed with this view in both pre-surveys, both post-surveys increased to 100% agreement. Though the Fall post-survey showed a slight drop in the strength of this view, the Spring post-survey showed a more than 20% increase in participants responding “strongly agree” rather than simply “agree.” Again, this discrepancy between semesters is most likely due to the nature of the books selected.



Impact and Applicability

This ROC project begins to affect student learning from the very moment students walk into a Book Club gathering. They are asked to participate in a survey that tracks and associates assessment data and student knowledge. Student learning continues as they begin to read the book selection. They learn about current events, social trends, and different cultures. When they engage in discussion and analysis of these issues, their knowledge base and level of insight increase. In addition, faculty members from various departments and programs (like Honors) across campus incorporate the book selection into their curricula either as an extra credit opportunity or part of their course of study. Therefore, Book Club impacts programs and departments campus-wise, more and more every semester as news of this opportunity spreads.

Dissemination

This report will appear on the ROC website and will be available to the public.