Rescuing Reading at the Community College

By Thomas Lawrence Long

Two national studies of Americans' changing reading habits, published by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), quantified the grounds for concerns that college and university educators have expressed in recent years based on their own anecdotal evidence from observing students. *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (2004) documented a decline in literary reading among adults in over two decades of longitudinal studies conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. More recently, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (2007), a collective analysis of previously published peer-reviewed research, sounded an alarm that not only were Americans less likely to read, but also they were less able to read skillfully and effectively.

These data are not surprising to community-college faculty who frequently lament that their students have weak reading skills and that even assigned reading, not to mention reading for pleasure, is rarely accomplished. Based on these observations and on *Reading at Risk* (2004), the two-year Rescuing Reading project was begun in 2005 at Thomas Nelson Community College (TNCC) in Hampton, Virginia, as a college-wide response to the NEA report. Funded by a two-year Virginia Community College System (VCCS) Chancellor's Commonwealth Professorship, Rescuing Reading collected pre-intervention and post-intervention data, developed a variety of activities in order to engage all stakeholders in paying attention to reading, and used the project as a sounding board to highlight the importance and the pleasure of reading. After two years, data indicated increases in the amount of students' reading

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and the degree of importance that non-English faculty (both college transfer and occupational/technical) attributed to literary reading. In addition, the project was perceived by faculty as positive and effective with significant percentages of faculty surveyed registering engagement with or participation in some aspect of the project.

Basis of Concern

Both national data and TNCC institutional research provide substantial grounds for concern. The National Endowment for the Arts report *Reading at Risk* (2004) compared Census Bureau data from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts in 1982, 1992, and 2002. While the report was not without its critics, many of whom lamented its narrow definition of literary reading (poetry, fiction, and drama), the survey method seems otherwise sound. Because the survey is longitudinal (every ten years for the past twenty years), researchers could not validly change the wording of the survey to reflect more recent aesthetic sensibilities and reading tastes (which today would likely be more inclusive of non-fiction in the definition of "literary" than 20 years ago).

Several findings are of particular concern for community-college faculty. First, whereas 20 years ago nearly 60 percent of adult Americans reported literary reading, in 2002 that percentage had dropped to below 50 percent. In the same period, there were declines in reported reading of any book (2004, ix). Literary reading declined across genders, but in 2002 more than half of women surveyed still reported literary reading while only slightly more than one-third of men did (2004, x). Literary reading declined across all education levels, but the largest decline (by 20 percentage points) was among adults who had some college (but not a college degree), of whom nearly three quarters had reported literary reading in 1982 but of whom only slightly more than half did so in 2002 (2004, xi). Similarly alarming, although declines in literary reading occurred across all age groups, two cohorts that had previously registered the highest rates of literary reading (18 to 24 year olds, 25 to 34 year olds) registered the highest declines over a twenty-year period, and in the case of the younger cohort, they now represent the lowest rate of literary reading (about 43 percent) (2004, xi). The more recent NEA follow-up report, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (2007), explored three themes: Americans are reading less and spending less time reading; reading comprehension skills are declining; and these declining skills have civic, social, cultural, and economic implications.

VCCS institutional data confirm that many of our entering students

perform so poorly on placement tests that developmental courses are indicated. However, as faculty can attest, more students who place into college-level courses are similarly unprepared. While recommendation of a reading placement is the least frequent developmental requirement (constituting about one-third of students) compared to math (the highest category) (Jovanovich, 2007), math weaknesses may in many instances point to difficulties with reading. In a 2007 TNCC Faculty Senate resolution endorsing the coherence of the college's developmental course prerequisite system, math faculty were among the staunchest defenders of reading prerequisites. Socioeconomic status is much more likely to affect developmental reading placement than it is to affect writing or math placement. VCCS students who qualify for Pell Grants are almost twice as likely to require developmental reading courses as students who do not qualify for the need-based grants. Perhaps related to this status, part-time students are slightly more likely to receive a developmental reading recommendation (Jovanovich, 2007).

TNCC institutional data collected prior to the beginning of the Rescuing Reading project also indicated cause for concern. In the college's first participation in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) during the spring 2005 term, 23.5 percent of student respondents at the college indicated that they had not read for enjoyment or enrichment on their own (i.e. not assigned for a course) any book in the current academic year. Equally troubling were faculty responses to a college-wide survey of instructors conducted in December 2004 by the English department in preparation for the revision of ENG 111-112. Among non-English faculty who were asked "How important in the general education of a college student is a student's exploration of literature (poetry, fiction, and drama)?" only 88.3 percent reported that it was important or very important. When asked "How important for the goals of your program is a student's exploration of literature (poetry, fiction, and drama)?" the results were even less enthusiastic, with only 47.4 percent of non-English faculty reporting that it was important or very important.

Project Description

From 2005 to 2007, the Rescuing Reading project attempted to advocate for reading across curricula at TNCC, which serves six municipalities with two campuses offering both college-transfer and occupational/technical degrees. Founded in 1967, at the time of the creation of the VCCS, TNCC now serves over 12,000 students. A Chancellor's Commonwealth Professorship allowed course reassigned time each semester, a summer stipend, and a small budget

for two years.

The Rescuing Reading project employed a variety of interventions. The publication of a weekly email newsletter (called *Your Weekly Reader*) conveyed pertinent information about current reading research (largely gleaned from general-audience publications like *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *New York Times*), news about upcoming campus reading events, and information about human-interest features. Subscribers included both internal stakeholders (the college's full-time and adjunct faculty and administrators) and external stakeholders (including public-school faculty and public librarians). News about current reading research was presented as being of interest to faculty across curricula (not just to English faculty), upcoming book events were similarly marketed, and the human-interest stories included a regular "What They're Reading" feature in which faculty reported on what was currently their bedside book, some of the more interesting of which were the current reading selections including non-fiction books of faculty outside the English department. The project also created and maintained a website available at http://www.tncc.edu/rescuingreading/ that provides links to the project's original proposal, to the 2004 NEA report, to a portal for weblinks on reading, and to archives of *Your Weekly Reader* and of workshop presentations of Rescuing Reading (with links to audio podcasts of some of those presentations).

Two interventions deserve special notice. First, beginning several years prior to the Rescuing Reading project, TNCC has sustained a student book club called the Book Circles, an activity that was subsumed under the Rescuing Reading project. With two or three book selections, the Book Circles meet once each semester (in early November and early April) for informal conversations about the books, are facilitated by faculty and staff, and include refreshments provided by the Student Activities Office. In the spring term, the college's foreign language department selects one book in Spanish, which becomes the subject of one of the Book Circles' discussions. The Book Circles coordinator solicited recommendations from other faculty across the curricula, including an English professor who teaches a film and literature course that enabled the Book Circles to select some books for which there was a companion film, and the college's Student Activities Office arranged for film showings as part of its schedule throughout the semester. The Rescuing Reading project created a "Faculty Prospectus" brochure for the Book Circles, which was distributed to all faculty prior to the beginning of the semester. This brochure briefly described the books, indicated how the books might serve as supplements in courses in a variety of disciplines (for example, in social sciences, natural sciences,

business, humanities, and technologies), and suggested ways that faculty might encourage students to participate. Funds from the Chancellor's Commonwealth Professorship enabled authors to be brought to campus.

The second intervention of note was related to the Book Circles. In 2006, the Rescuing Reading project joined with the City of Newport News Public Libraries in their application for a National Endowment for the Arts grant to participate in the NEA's community reading project, called The Big Read. This grant application resulted in two accomplishments: first, the City of Newport News Public Libraries was awarded the grant and Thomas Nelson Community College's spring 2007 Book Circles included The Big Read selection, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and second, the partners created a not-for-profit regional organization, the Virginia Peninsula Literary Consortium, as a permanent collaboration among public and higher-education libraries that has subsequently brought Amy Tan to the Virginia Peninsula in fall 2007 and Walter Mosley to the area in the fall of 2008. TNCC English faculty were recruited as content experts to speak about Hurston to local book groups at public libraries, and a Blackboard organization was created for those faculty as an online seminar to prepare them. Through The Big Read grants, the NEA provides not only funding for special programming (paying guest speakers and performers or content experts to lead local book discussions) but also provides a rich variety of print and digital media, including sound recordings, copies of the selected book, reader's guides, facilitator's guides, bookmarks, posters, and banners. Taken together, these created "buzz" about reading as an engaging and entertaining leisure activity.

The Rescuing Reading project provided a bully pulpit that was used in a variety of formal and informal ways to try to create a book buzz on campus. In the second year of the project, the project coordinator's position as president of the college's Faculty Senate provided entrée to a variety of forums, including the College Support Staff Association, the President's Expanded Staff meetings, an advisory body to the president called the College Council, and the Senate itself, as well as regular appearances on the agendas of the monthly meetings of the college's academic divisions in order to pitch the Book Circles or other Rescuing Reading activities. Despite the acknowledged efficacy of face-to-face communication, the convenient but largely useless medium of email as the primary (or even sole) contact with other colleagues and administrators is frequently the default means. It is unfortunately easier to delete an unread email than to tune out a guest in a division meeting.

By offering valuable suggestions and contributing new connections

to the Rescuing Reading project, faculty contributed to its success. For example, Susan Pongratz, an instructor in TNCC's developmental reading program, provided the introduction to the staff at the City of Newport News Public Libraries that enabled the college's participation in The Big Read and in the subsequent creation of the Virginia Peninsula Literary Consortium. In addition, Pongratz suggested a photography competition called Catch Someone Reading in which students were invited to submit photographs of people reading and faculty in the college's computer arts and photography degree programs served as judges, giving cash awards to the winners. The photographs were prominently featured in a public display, and the awards were announced at the spring Book Circles event. Thus, collaboration among different disciplines demonstrated the value and pleasure of reading.

Data and Analysis

A pre-test and post-test method seemed desirable in determining if student behaviors and faculty attitudes about reading had changed during the Rescuing Reading project. In addition, an assessment of Rescuing Reading's value to faculty and their awareness of its activities was also conducted toward the end of the project.

To assess students' reading behavior, data from the college's 2005 CCSSE participation (prior to Rescuing Reading) and its 2007 participation (toward the end of Rescuing Reading) were used. CCSSE has the advantage of capturing a sufficiently large, randomized, and representative pool of respondents, as well as providing national and peer benchmarks. In CCSSE, students are invited to report on the number of books that they have read for pleasure or enrichment outside of assigned course reading during the current academic year. Before Rescuing Reading, nearly a quarter (23.5 percent) of all students surveyed reported that they had not read any books in the current academic year; however, after Rescuing Reading only 3.5 percent reported not having read any books in the current academic year. The percentage of students reporting in 2007 that they had read five to ten books that year doubled over the previous administration of the survey in 2005, and the percentage of students reporting that they had read eleven to twenty books more than doubled between the 2005 and 2007 administration of the survey.

Assessing faculty attitudes toward reading and reading behaviors and their reactions to Rescuing Reading was accomplished through a voluntary, anonymous online survey prepared in collaboration with the college's Office of Institutional Research and administered in April 2007. Out of the college's 109 full-time faculty, 56 full-time faculty responded to

the survey; in addition, 33 adjunct faculty responded.

Faculty respondents indicated that reading was important to them and that the Rescuing Reading project had captured their interest. Responding to the statement "Reading non-fiction (for example, about history, science, technology, or world events), fiction (short stories, novels), poetry, or drama is important to me," 98 percent of respondents agreed, while 93 percent agreed to the statement "I have at least one book that I am currently reading." Nearly 88 percent of respondents said that they were familiar with Rescuing Reading, with about 81 percent responding that they read the e-newsletter *Your Weekly Reader* (while inexplicably slightly more [86 percent] responded that it had interesting or useful information). However, there was a falling-off in their actual engagement with other components of Rescuing Reading, such as encouraging students to participate in the Book Circles (59 percent), reading the Book Circles selections themselves (49 percent), giving their students extra credit for participation in the Book Circles (32 percent), attending the Book Circles events themselves (26 percent), or visiting the Rescuing Reading website (45 percent).

One of the concerns about reading in America is that it has become a gendered activity, with women far outnumbering men in reading skill and reading practice. This gender imbalance was also reflected in the faculty respondents to the survey, 56 percent of whom identified themselves as women, while only 28 percent as men (with nearly 16 percent abstaining from identifying their gender). This ratio roughly parallels the findings of the NEA report (2004) in which slightly more than half of women and about one-third of men now report regular reading.

There were intriguing disparities between English faculty and non-English faculty in their perceptions of students as readers. Responding to the statement "My students are able to read and comprehend the texts that I assign them for my courses," 72 percent of non-English faculty agreed, but only 53 percent of English faculty agreed. Responding to the statement "Books seem to be important to my students," 31 percent of non-English faculty agreed, while only 21 percent of English faculty agreed. These disparities deserve closer research attention, as they may derive in part from the different kinds of texts that non-English and English faculty assign, but also from the fact that English instructors might be more alert than other instructors to literacy deficiencies in students (in the same way that a mathematics instructor is likely to be more aware of students' numeracy problems than an English instructor).

While most of the faculty survey items were related specifically to

Rescuing Reading, the survey did repeat two items from the 2004 college-wide faculty writing survey, the statements concerning the importance of literature in a college education and in the faculty respondents' transfer or technical degree programs. Before Rescuing Reading, about 88 percent of non-English faculty respondents said that a college student's exploration of literature was a somewhat or very important college general-education goal; after Rescuing Reading, 100 percent of respondents said so, an increase of 12 percentage points. Before Rescuing Reading, only about 47 percent of non-English faculty said that a college student's exploration of literature was somewhat or very important in those faculty member's specific degree program goals; but after Rescuing Reading nearly 70 percent said so, an increase of over 20 percentage points.

In Reflection

Correlation or association is not causality, of course, and survey methods and statistical anomalies can account for some data variations. Nonetheless, Rescuing Reading appears to have produced a predictable result: an environment in which faculty, staff, and students frequently hear or see messages celebrating the utility and pleasure of reading produces a concomitant change in behavior and attitude.

The causes of the decline in reading are many, and they work in a complex cultural and cognitive ecosystem. The NEA reports *Reading at Risk* (2004) and *To Read or Not to Read* (2007) suggest that the declines in reading practice and reading skills might be related to the increases in the numbers of media forms and media devices and the amount of leisure time reported spent with those media (at the expense of reading). Over the past two or three decades, a much more complicated relationship of conditions, including premature termination of reading instruction (usually at the end of elementary school or middle school), declining economic power, declining completion rates of higher education, and the increase in single-parent households and dual-career couple households may be more proximate causes. Reading instruction in public schools typically does not continue after elementary education, with the result that some adult readers never advance far beyond the level of "decoder literacy" into becoming fluent or expert readers (Wolf, 2007). Anyone who has used reading aloud in a college classroom as a learning tool can attest to the fact that many students struggle painfully with reading, stumbling over words. Such readers cannot enjoy reading, not to mention make effective use of the skill. In addition, over the past 30 years, working-class citizens' real wages have failed to grow, with 80 percent of gains in net income going to the top 1

percent of income groups (Bartels, 2008, p. 22). Among TNCC students a growing number anecdotally report that they carry a full-time course load while working full time, which leaves little time for leisure reading and less mental attention for slow, deep reading (and often not much time or energy for assigned academic reading) for an increasing number of them.

As noted above, lower socioeconomic status is more likely to be associated with lower reading skill than it is with lower math or writing skill (at least as determined by the current VCCS placement testing practices). Economic distress does not simply leave a college student with less time and energy to read; college students raised in inherited poverty (in welfare-supported or near-poverty working-class homes) come to college with what Louisa Cook Moats calls "word poverty" (2001). Research by Hart and Risley (2003) discovered in one community that, by age five, some children from impoverished homes and language environments had heard 32 million fewer words spoken to them than typical middle-class children. This early impediment creates obstacles from which it is difficult for a child to regain lost ground, not to mention the cascading deficits into adolescence and adulthood.

There are three conclusions that might be reached from the Rescuing Reading project. First, reading skill is a precondition of all the things that are central to a community college's mission, including college transfer preparation and occupational/technical education. Second, general education across curricula has to be every department's business not compartmentalized by discipline, meaning that all disciplines need to be alert to students' reading deficiencies and to seek ways of enhancing reading across curricula. Finally, English faculty, who are primarily entrusted with the mission to advance reading and writing, must engage all stakeholders by continuous, robust advocacy on behalf of the infusion of reading across curricula. In doing so, they have to behave more like politicians and marketing experts than like professors when it comes to rescuing reading.

Note

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