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Walter H. Johnson

One Book, One College: Cumberland County College's Approach

Nine years ago, the concept of One Book, One College was introduced to Cumberland County College, and it has caught on with great success. In simple terms, this means that a college committee chooses a book for the entire college community to read, discuss, and benefit in various ways. This program was the brainchild of an English professor from New Jersey's Sussex County Community College, Dr. Eleanor Carducci, who started it there in 1993. Cumberland's current president, Dr. Thomas Isekenegbe, learned of the program while he was working there and later invited Dr. Carducci to give a workshop to interested members of faculty, administration, and staff at Cumberland. Since 2004, with the selection of James McBride's *The Color of Water*, this annual activity has become a campus favorite.

A few months prior to the end of the school year, the One Book, One College committee agrees upon a book (with an alternative or two on hand) that has been written by a currently living author and sends the titles to the College's Director of the Fine Arts Center. This person's duty is then to find out if the author of the top selection is both affordable and able to come to the College to address an audience, hopefully in early November, though a spring-semester appearance could also work. By the end of the school year, the announcement of the school's choice is made, and the entire College family is invited and encouraged to read the book during the summer.

The program aims to encourage reading for pleasure, critical thinking, global awareness, and multicultural understanding. Our selections are made with the College's students in mind, particularly those in the remedial English and Reading classes. The instructors of these courses, as well as instructors of the forty-some sections of the Freshman Seminar classes each fall semester, include the selected book as required reading, with follow-up discussions and assignments. Remarkably, these students come to enjoy the book and look forward to the appearance on campus of the author and the various activities set

up that connect to the theme and subject of the selected book.

The decision for the 2009-10 school year was Amy Hill Hearth's *Strong Medicine Speaks: A Native American Elder Has Her Say*. This is the "oral history" of the matriarch, Marion Gould, of the Lenni-Lenape tribe, whose community is in the College's county and whose current chief was once a student at the College. Many questioned the choice of a relatively unknown book, but the College's treatment given to this book, its author, and its subject made it as successful as any of the previous selections. Students by the hundreds came to appreciate it because of the classroom discussions and the various activities set up during the course of the entire school year, which included in the fall the appearance on campus of the author and an afternoon panel discussion featuring Chief Quiet Hawk, the son of Strong Medicine herself, and a mini-Powwow in the campus's Conference Center in the spring. The long line of people seeking Ms. Hill Hearth's autograph on the night she spoke was a testimony to the reading enjoyment her book provided.

Without setting out to do so, the One Book, One College committee has favored non-fiction in the nine years' worth of selections. *Strong Medicine Speaks* was preceded by Jeannette Walls's popular story of her dysfunctional family, *The Glass Castle*, and the year before that the committee chose Erin Gruwell's *Freedom Writers Diary*, the story of the author's success with reluctant students in a California school, documented in a popular Hollywood movie. The very first book chosen was the story of author James McBride's mother, *The Color of Water*. But in between these choices came the fictional pieces *My Sister's Keeper*, by the prolific writer Jodi Picoult, and *Snow Falling on Cedars*, by David Guterson. The selection for school year 2010-11 was Steve Lopez's *The Solist*, yet another non-fiction book. Like the previous selections, this proved to be very popular, especially because of the recent movie that starred Jamie Foxx. Copies of this book were stocked in the College's bookstore, and announcements were made to the

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College's family and community urging the reading of the book during the summer so that interest could be created for the annual fall panel discussion, which, because of this book's subject, focused on homelessness. Then, in early November, author Steve Lopez was present on campus to meet with a group of selected students prior to, and during, a dinner honoring him and then talked to a full-house, gathering in the College's Fine Arts Center.

Sonia Nazario, author of the non-fictional *Enrique's Journey*, visited Cumberland County College in November of 2011. Her book, based on the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper series that earned Ms. Nazario a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, recounts the unforgettable odyssey of a Honduran boy who braves unimaginable hardship and peril to reach his mother in the United States after their being eleven years apart. (It was strictly coincidence that both Nazario and Lopez, back-to-back authors, write for the same newspaper.)

For the 2012-13 school year, the College's committee chose a volume of short stories by the highly acclaimed and prolific author, Joyce Carol Oates, whose scheduled appearance on campus needed to be shifted from late October to early December because of the mega-storm Sandy. Her book, *Faithless: Tales of Transgression*, added an element of controversy within the College community because of the dark, even sometimes "nasty," nature of the collection of the twenty-one selections in this volume. But this author's status in modern American literature won out over the controversy, and the benefits of dealing with short stories, especially in remedial classes and the percentage of reluctant readers therein, could add further relevance to this current year's choice. (The committee conducts a follow-up discussion of the pros and cons of the outcomes of each year's program.)

Besides the effect of getting students to discover the many benefits associated with reading, the College encourages the entire community to share in this program. Book clubs in the area are invited to incorporate the annual selections into their own agendas and then attend the events that focus on the books and the topics within them. The panel discussions include students, faculty, and staff, as well as interested community members. In addition, workshops and lectures are scheduled whenever they can meet the needs and the interests of those affected by the book and its subject matter. There is never a charge for attendance at the events surrounding the book, for the College sets aside an amount in each year's budget to provide these events, and the President has been known to add some money from his own budget if the author in question demands a particularly large amount.

The One Book, One College committee includes a dozen members, about half of whom are faculty (adjunct, as well as full time); the others are staff and administrators. There is a chairperson and a secretary, and there is a website maintained to provide background and rationale for those who want such information. The committee meets once in the summer and periodically throughout the school year. All members are encouraged not only to discover potential books but to provide titles and even copies for the other members so that a final selection can be made by the entire committee, not just the ones who have the time and desire to read profusely. The concept invented by Dr. Eleanor Carducci twenty years ago has developed into a program at Cumberland County College that encourages reading as a life-long learning and pleasurable experience, and its future looks as promising as the hopes of those on campus involved in promoting it.

Walter H. Johnson retired after fifty-one years of teaching in New Jersey (eight in high schools and forty-three at this county college). He taught included English Composition, Effective Speech, Modern American Literature, and Children's Literature. He has had articles published in most of the issues of the *New Jersey English Journal*.