Meeting First-Year Students Through Their Work
A Presentation to the 26th Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience
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Narrative

Like many schools, Denison found some success with the use of common readings assigned to first-year students during the summer before their arrival. But there had been significant limitations: our FY seminar program employs topical courses which couldn’t easily share a text, so “de-briefing” the book had to be done during our fall orientation. When we discovered that many students weren’t reading the book, we felt that the program was not only failing to serve its purposes, but also sending the signal to students that they didn’t really have to do assigned work. Or, we could punish them for failing to do the work, which was another wrong signal.

In the summer of 2003, we asked students to produce their own creative works rather than reading the work of others. The prompt we provided was inspired by the work of our opening convocation speaker, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Entering students were asked to use their imaginations and were given the freedom to employ any medium as well as any disciplinary perspective in telling us about the significance of rivers in their lives. Faculty and staff were also invited to contribute, so that we might all “think together” about the same topic. As incentive, contributors were promised an invitation to a VIP reception with the speaker, to be held in a gallery displaying their work. We also compiled a printed anthology that presented the work of over half of the contributors, which we gave to all students upon their arrival on move-in day.

Program Goals

Like common reading programs, this initiative was intended to give students a common experience and a subject about which they could talk with one another. We also hoped to convey the love of learning and intellectual engagement that academic communities share. And we hoped that, by asking students to produce their own work, we might convey the value liberal arts institutions place on diversity of experience and perspective, on individual interpretation and on the exchange of ideas. Finally, we hoped that by making the program optional, students might find participation more appealing, and might join in because they wanted to, rather than because they were required to—another value we hoped to communicate as they entered college.

Outcomes, including the Unexpected

The program now enters its fifth year, each year drawing on the work of our opening speakers. We have had approximately 150 contributions per year (110-125 from students and the balance from faculty and staff). Contributions have included every art form, science experiments, prose and poetry, and even some baked goods. Student response is described on the reverse side, and confirms that the projects do engage students in a common experience. The project has been more successful than we expected, by giving us the chance to know students on their own terms and through their own work, even before they arrive. When a student’s orientation leader, instructor, or advisor welcomes her by saying “I loved your poem!,” it’s an obvious thrill. Comments from students also reveal that those who do not contribute often feel that they have missed out on a set of experiences (from the conversations among students about their contributions to the reception with the speaker) that others get to enjoy. And these are the exact feelings that we want students to have regarding
intellectual investment: that there are rewards and recognition for participating, and a sense of personal regret and foregone opportunity when one does not. In institutional terms, the program has become a “signature” experience used in Admissions recruiting and advancement efforts. In the program’s second year, Denison received a $250,000 McGregor Fund grant to imbue the full college curriculum with events and activities related to each year’s theme.

Program Costs

The greatest costs of this program are in the printed anthology. We hire students to do the editorial lay-out and, because they have just two weeks to complete the design, their hours are long and include overtime pay. The publishing cost for anthologies is about $3.00 per book. Exhibition costs were high in the first year, but many of the materials (frames and mats, e.g.) can be re-used from year to year. Our mailing budget has been stressed by requests from families for copies of the anthology.

What Students Say*

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<tr>
<th>Reasons for Contributing:</th>
<th>How Participation Changed Arrival:</th>
<th>How The Project Compared to a Book Assignment:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt that if I didn’t contribute, I would regret missing out on such a unique collective work composed by the people who would soon become by closest friends.</td>
<td>Several professors had seen my work and I felt that erased the nervousness of going into a classroom where I was an unknown.</td>
<td>It put the learning into our own hands and showed us how hands-on Denison is, and how experiences don’t just come from renowned authors and scholars, but also from within ourselves.</td>
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<td>I contributed because I didn’t have to do it. Because I was given freedom &amp; treated as an adult, I contributed.</td>
<td>The people who did not contribute regretted it after because it was cool to see one’s work hung up.</td>
<td>Being optional made the &quot;assignment&quot; much less &quot;high school&quot; than reading.</td>
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<td>I was excited about becoming a member of Denison’s community and wanted to jump right in.</td>
<td>It gave a formal and serious while enjoyable air to our entrance to school while setting a role model of rewarding involvement.</td>
<td>Other comments:</td>
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<td>I loved the thought of already becoming part of something even though I wasn’t on campus yet!</td>
<td>Being a contributor made me feel as though I was already becoming an active student. I also felt like I had taken the first step toward leaving my mark on Denison of my own accord, and it is often said that the first step is the hardest.</td>
<td>This method of contribution clearly illustrates the learning opportunities at Denison: you will get exactly as much out of your work as much as the effort and passion you put into it.</td>
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<td>I wanted to contribute to my class’s anthology. In some ways, it felt like a chance to connect with my new classmates.</td>
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* A survey comprised of these four questions was sent to 475 students who had participated in the project over the last four years. A total of 74 surveys were returned (16%), from which these remarks are excerpted.