

Rescuing Reading:

A Community-College Response

To the National Endowment for the Arts Report, *Reading at Risk*

A Proposal

For the

Chancellor's Commonwealth Professorship

Virginia Community College System

Professional Development Initiative

Prepared by

Dr. Thomas L. Long, Ph.D.

Professor and Department Chairperson of English

Thomas Nelson Community College

Hampton, VA

## Contents

Nomination Letter

Executive Summary

Proposal

Benefits to Faculty

Budget

Appendices

    Endorsement Letters

    Supporting Articles

## Executive Summary

A nationwide study conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, recently reported in *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (Research Division Report #46, June 2004), indicates disturbing trends in the erosion of literary reading among adult Americans. Although the NEA study has not met with universal endorsement, it does raise issues that community college faculty have long observed anecdotally. Between 1982 and 2002, the percentage of the U.S. adult population who read literature (defined in the survey as poetry, fiction, and drama) declined from 56.9% to 46.7%; this paralleled declines between 1992 and 2002 in book reading (-7%) and in literary reading (-14%). Sadly, although reading rates are directly proportional to educational attainment, adults with some college education comprised the largest decline (-20%) between 1982 and 2002, and the age group with the largest decline for the same period were young adults, aged 18-24 (-17%).

While these statistics do not bode well for English faculty or for the language-arts general-education goals of high schools and colleges, the NEA study also indicates larger social and economic effects. Literary readers were more likely than non-literary readers to do volunteer or charity work (43%/17%), to attend performing arts events (49%/17%), and even to attend sporting events (45%/27%). Although such correlation is not necessarily causality (and in this case might have more to do with economic class than educational attainment), these data should concern all educators.

This Chancellor's Commonwealth Professor project proposes four goals: 1) to engage faculty at Thomas Nelson Community College in a campus-wide conversation about literary reading as a component of the college's general-education goals; 2) to initiate dialogue with English and reading faculty from public high schools in the college's service region about adolescent literary reading; 3) to provide supplementary resources to the college's existing literary reading initiatives; 4) and to replicate on campus the NEA study in order to determine its suitability as an assessment tool of the college's language-arts general-education goals.

## Applicant's Vita

Dr. Thomas L. Long is professor and department chairperson of English at Thomas Nelson Community College, Hampton, VA. He has earned master's degrees in English (University of Illinois, 1977) and theology (The Catholic University of America, 1981), as well as a PhD in Literature and Criticism from Indiana University of Pennsylvania (1997). He is the author of numerous conference papers and published articles on literature, on education, and on instructional innovation. His forthcoming book, *AIDS and American Apocalypticism: The Cultural Semiotics of an Epidemic*, will be published in 2005 by State University of New York Press. Dr. Long has taught in a visiting capacity at the College of William and Mary and Old Dominion University. He is the recipient of the Virginia Community College Association Faculty Showcase Award (2002), the Innovative Excellence in Teaching, Learning and Technology Award from the International Conference on College Teaching and Learning (2000), and was twice included in *Who's Who Among American Teachers*. He was the founding chairperson of the Regional Center for Teaching Excellence/Tidewater and is past-president of the Literature and Religion Division of the Modern Language Association.

## Proposal Goals and Objectives

**Goal One:** To engage faculty at Thomas Nelson Community College in a campus-wide conversation about literary reading as a component of the college's general-education goals.

*Background:* According to the college's statement of general education goals, students completing a degree at Thomas Nelson Community College will have developed the "knowledge, skills, competencies, attitudes, and values characteristic of an educated and well-informed citizen capable of functioning effectively in a complex and rapidly changing world." These attributes are defined as "holistic development of the person" rather than "specific occupational and/or program skills." Among these general-education goals are several that encompass literary reading: communication skills ("The skills to read, write, listen, and speak effectively so as to communicate clearly on a personal, occupational, or professional level"), critical thinking skills ("The development of a reflective and analytic disposition well-suited to recognize and evaluate arguments of one's own and others as to their relative strength or weakness, thus creating the foundation for effective decision making and problem solving"), interpersonal and human relations skills ("The ability to know and understand one's self and others—especially those of other gender, race, and background—so as not only to live but also to develop a personal set of values, ethics, and responsibilities"), global, historical and cultural traditions ("The awareness of not only the Western world's history and culture but also that of the East and Africa"), and appreciation of fine arts and music ("The development of a basic understanding of artistic principles, genres, periods, and artists to enable the individual to appreciate and enjoy art in its varied forms as a source of public and private enjoyment"). The curricular assumption is that these goals will be met by prescribed courses or by general-education distributional requirements that students take while matriculating toward a degree. However, the faculty of the college have not recently engaged in a serious, formal or systematic discussion either of these general education goals or of the assumptions about how they are best achieved. In addition, general-education components of the curricula have not been examined or revised for many years. To that end and in preparation for SACS reaffirmation, the college has initiated a Quality Enhancement Plan whose committee is focusing on holistic learning, including reading and writing across the curriculum.

Objective 1. Create and conduct a "Rescuing Reading" cross-curricular faculty study group for the purpose of reading and discussing the NEA report, *Reading at Risk*, its implications for general education, and strategies for increasing literary reading; provide stipend for 15 participants. (Fall 2005)

Objective 2. Create and conduct a "Rescuing Reading" cross-curricular student and faculty instructional-development group for the purpose of developing strategies to infuse literary reading across the curricula; provide stipend for 15 participants. (Spring 2006)

Objective 3. Research and compose "Rescuing Reading" learning guides for faculty across curricula to promote infusion of literary reading. (Summer 2006)

Objective 4. Publish and promote “Rescuing Reading” learning guides for faculty across curricula to promote infusion of literary reading. (Fall 2006)

Objective 5. Disseminate results in conference presentations (such as New Horizons and English Peer Group Meeting) and articles (such as in *Inquiry*). (Spring 2006-Spring 2007)

Objective 6. Conduct two workshops to introduce faculty members to a variety of multimedia materials (for example, film, video, radio, internet resources, hypertext literature, online discussions with authors) that can be used to enhance current teaching and learning reading strategies and to create interactive reading opportunities; provide stipend for presenter. (Fall 2005, 2006)

**Goal Two:** To initiate dialogue with English and reading faculty from public high schools in the college’s service region about adolescent literary reading.

*Background:* The college serves a diverse region, including urban, suburban and rural populations, in the cities of Hampton, Newport News, Poquoson, Williamsburg, as well as James City County and York County, each with its own public school system. The Alliance for Excellent Education in its 2003 report *Adolescents and Literacy: Reading for the 21st Century* suggests that teachers’ professional development is essential in ensuring improvements in adolescent reading, a desperately important goal when 25% of secondary students read at “below basic” levels. Unfortunately, TNCC’s English department does not currently have in place formal relationships with language-arts teachers in these systems, a lack that this proposal will begin to remedy.

Objective 1. Create and maintain a “Rescuing Reading” Web site. (Fall 2005)

Objective 2. Create and moderate a “Rescuing Reading” listserv for local public high school and college undergraduate faculty. (Spring 2006)

Objective 3. Organize and market a “Rescuing Reading” symposium for language arts department heads from all local public high schools in the college’s service region. (Spring, Summer 2006)

Objective 4. Secure private-sector and public-sector partnerships in support of “Rescuing Reading” symposium. (Spring, Summer 2006)

Objective 5. Host “Rescuing Reading” symposium. (Fall 2006)

Objective 6. Disseminate results of “Rescuing Reading” symposium via Web site, conference presentations, and articles. (Spring 2007)

**Goal Three:** To provide supplementary resources to the college's existing literary reading initiatives.

*Background:* Through the initiative of faculty and administrators, the college offers a variety of supplementary activities that promote literary reading, including biannual book circles, an annual literary contest and literary magazine, a monthly faculty/staff book group, in addition to regular courses in literary reading (including two-semester survey sequences in American literature, African-American literature, English literature, and world literature, creative writing, and a film and literature course). The book circles select four books each semester (fall and spring), meeting after the midterm to discuss the four books. Students, faculty, and staff read one of the four books and participate in a small group discussion for the book they've read, followed by a reception with refreshments.

Objective 1. Review and select one non-fiction book thematically related to the Jamestown quadricentennial for Book Circles in fall and spring. (Fall, Spring, 2005-2007)

Objective 2. Provide stipend for one non-fiction author whose book has been selected for Book Circles to visit the campus after either the fall or spring book circles have met. (Fall, Spring, 2005-2007)

Objective 3. Provide stipend for one fiction author whose book has been selected for Book Circles to visit the campus after either the fall and spring book circles have met. (Fall, Spring, 2005-2007)

Objective 4. For biannual Book Circles, purchase five copies of each book selected to be placed on reserve in the college library. (Fall, Spring, 2005-2007)

Objective 5. For annual Women's History Month Tea and Crumpets Book Circle, purchase ten copies of the selected book for library reserve. (March 2006, 2007)

Objective 6. Select one book adapted to film for each Book Circles event; organize later event for viewing and discussion of film. (Fall, Spring 2005-2007)

**Goal Four:** To replicate on campus the NEA study in order to determine its suitability as an assessment tool of the college's language-arts general-education goals.

*Background:* The prevailing assumption of the college's curricular goals is that by accumulating broad distributional electives students will accrue the set of skills and attitudes that constitute a generally educated person. However, we do not have in place an established assessment of these goals with either national or regional benchmarks.

Objective 1. Consult with the college's Office of Institutional Advancement to adapt the NEA survey for use among students entering and graduating from degree programs and among alumni-graduates of degree programs. (Summer 2005)

Objective 2. Administer NEA survey to entering students. (Summer, Fall 2005)

Objective 3. Administer NEA survey to graduating students. (Spring 2007)

Objective 4. Collect, analyze and disseminate results in conference presentations and articles. (Summer 2007)

## Benefits to VCCS Faculty

Engage faculty across curricula in a formal conversation about language-arts general-education goals.

Engage faculty across curricula in a formal conversation about instructional innovations regarding literary reading.

Provide faculty across the curricula with guidance to infuse literary reading in courses outside the English program.

Engage community college and local public high school language-arts faculty in a conversation about the articulation of reading and writing skills.

Increase the capacity of the college's existing literary reading activities in order to enhance student involvement.

Disseminate instructional innovations through Web site, listserv, other publications, articles (such as in *Inquiry*), and conference presentations (such as New Horizons and the English Peer Group Meeting).

Provide a pilot assessment tool for determining the effectiveness of general-education language-arts goals.

Create a replicable model for regional and college-wide collaboration in general-education development.

## Proposal Budget

### Goal One

Faculty Stipends	2500.00
Printing	200.00

### Goal Two

Web Site Registration	70.00
Symposium Printing	300.00
Symposium Refreshments	350.00
Symposium Supplies	100.00

### Goal Three

Author Stipends	2000.00
Book Purchases	1080.00

### Goal Four

Printing	400.00
Administration	500.00

<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$7500.00</b>
--------------	------------------

## College's In-kind Contributions

Web Server  
 Web-site Design  
 Survey Administration  
 Facilities Use  
 Reassigned Time

## Appendices

### Endorsement Letters

Prof. Mitchell Smith, Dean of Communications and Humanities  
 Prof. Lisa Ray, Assistant Dean of Communications and Humanities  
 Prof. Mary Dubbé, Reading Program Head and Quality Enhancement Program  
 Chairperson  
 Dr. Michael Quanty, President, Faculty Senate

### Supporting Articles

National Endowment for the Arts, “Executive Summary,” *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (July 2004).

Scott McLemee, “Americans Found to Read Less Literature Than Ever,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (16 July 2004), <<http://chronicle.com>>.

Jabari Asim, “Is Reading at Risk?” *Washington Post* (19 July 2004), <<http://www.washingtonpost.com>>.

Carlin Romano, “Who Killed Literary Reading?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (23 July 2004), <<http://chronicle.com>>.

Edwin Clay III, “Is Virginia for Book Lovers? Or: When the NEA Is the NEAin’t,” *Bacon’s Rebellion: The Op/Ed Page for Virginia’s New Economy* (4 October 2004), <<http://www.baconsrebellion.com>>.

Alliance for Excellent Education, “Executive Summary,” *Adolescents and Literacy: Reading for the Twenty-first Century* (November 2003).