Final Report on the WSU 2009-2010 Common Reading:
Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*
Compiled by Karen Weathermon with assistance from Leslie Jo Sena and Meg Autrey

**Summary**
The 2009-2010 Common Reading Program, the third year of the program at Washington State University, was a year of tremendous growth in several areas. The book, Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, was used by four times as many sections of courses (102 sections in all) and by a much greater diversity of courses across the university than had been the case in the previous two years.

The author lecture in January also drew in a significantly larger audience; while previous lectures had been almost exclusively attended by freshmen students and their instructors and residence life staffs with total attendance of approximately 2500, Pollan’s lecture was attended by approximately 3500 people, about half of whom were faculty, staff, and community members. The faculty lecture series, which highlighted related WSU research across a wide array of disciplines and colleges, also grew to a full academic year program with thirteen lectures; this series was attended by over a thousand people, mainly students attending for course requirements or for extra credit. The year also saw the development of an extensive and effective partnership with the College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences, whose work within their College fit particularly well with the issues of the book.

Finally, our assessments of freshmen at the end of their first year indicate that the Common Reading Program continues to add to students’ achievement of the first-year goals articulated at the program’s inception; these assessments are particularly pronounced for students who encounter the book in courses and who attend Common Reading events such as the author and faculty lectures. The area of greatest improvement with regard to program goals in the past three years has been in students’ understanding of the research that occurs at a university, with overall positive responses in this area rising from 51 percent in 2007-2008 to 63 percent in 2009-2010; those who attended three or more Common Reading events in 2009-2010 had positive responses of 68 percent in this area. This assessment focus is especially significant since WSU’s Common Reading Program has developed over the past three years as a means to highlight the research mission of our institution—a feature of the WSU program that is fairly unique in the national landscape of freshman reading programs.

**Selection Process**
The WSU Pullman Common Reading book was selected by a group of faculty from across the university, with an emphasis on those who would be most likely to use the book in classroom and other first-year settings. The selection committee was comprised of:

- Susan Poch (Common Reading Co-Chair, OUE, Educational Development)
- Karen Weathermon (Common Reading Co-Chair, OUE, Freshman Focus)
- Dave Bahr (Engineering, Undergraduate Research)
- Beth Buyserie (English 101, Assistant Director of Composition)
- Lisa Carloye (Science 101, Freshman Focus)
- Selena Castro (PASS: Pathways to Academic Success Seminar—GenEd 104)
- Coree Newman Coronado (Residence Life)
The committee began with nominations, pursued approximately 12-14 books in depth, and chose the final selection from a final grouping of Greg Mortenson’s *Three Cups of Tea*, Gordy Slack’s *The Battle Over the Meaning of Everything: Evolution, Intelligent Design, and a School Board in Dover, PA*, Bjorn Lomborg’s *Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist’s Guide to Global Warming*, and Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: The Natural History of Four Meals*. For several of the finalists, common reading directors at universities that had used one of the books were contacted to inquire about student reception to the text as well as the kinds of programming employed. Ultimately Pollan’s book was chosen as being the one that best highlighted WSU’s research and provided opportunities for use in a variety of classroom and extracurricular venues.

**Classroom Use**

One of the most significant areas of growth during the 2009-2010 year was the increase in classroom use of the common reading. This growth was the result of several factors. Going into the third year of the Common Reading Program, more faculty were aware of the program and the kinds of complementary events that would accompany it; the perceived controversy and resulting media attention that attended the months immediately following the book’s selection increased faculty awareness of the book; Pollan’s work is considerably better known than that of our previous two authors; and the book was a particularly good fit for WSU’s research interests, particularly in the field of agriculture, but also in a wide array of other disciplines. In addition, for this academic year, faculty with students who were not freshmen were also offered copies of the book for these students, making it a more attractive addition for courses that generally enroll mixed freshmen/nonfreshmen or only upper division students.

As a result of these factors, classroom use leapt from approximately 25 sections of classes (mainly those in Freshman Focus and/or World Civilizations) in the previous two years, to 102 sections in AY 2009-2010. These courses represented six WSU Colleges and student enrollments of over 6000 students.

By college, the courses using the book (and the number of sections of each) were:

**College of Agriculture, Human, Natural, and Resource Science**
- AFS 101 (1 section)
- AFS 201 (1)
- AS 101 (1)
- EconS 451 (1)
- HD 205 (4)
- ID 101 (1)

**College of Business**
- MgtOp 452 (1)
Engineering and Architecture
MSE 110 (1)
BE 205 (1)

Honors College
English 298 (2)
UH 390 (1)

College of Liberal Arts
Anth 309 (1)
Engl 101 (30)
Engl 105 (3)
Engl 201 (1)
Gen Ed 104 (20)
Gen Ed 110 (14)
Gen Ed 111 (10)
Soc 102 (1)
WS 200 (1)

College of Science
ES/RP 101 (1)
Sci 101 (1)
Sci 102 (1)
MBioS 130 (2)
Neuro 138 (1)

The book was incorporated into the above classes in a variety of different ways, particularly as the basis for discussion of book topics relevant to course materials (for example, the development of agriculture in Gen Ed 110, opinion and research writing in English 101, agricultural work as gendered labor in WSt 200, and closed system operations in MgtOp 452). Many courses also used the book and the accompanying university wide programming as the basis for written assignments and/or extra credit.

Residence Hall Programming:
The food aspect of Pollan’s book was most often utilized by Residence Hall programming, usually in conjunction with Freshman Focus activities. For example, freshmen residents in Streit-Perham participated in an Iron Chef competition using foods discussed in the book that was judged by Freshman Focus learning community faculty associated with that hall. Other halls conducted “taste test” programs between organic and conventional foods, or visited the local farmers’ market. In the Hill Halls of Community, Waller, and Wilmer Davis, all 150 residents who were enrolled in Theresa Jordan’s Gen Ed 110 course participated in preparing meals representative of the foods and average caloric intake of people in various countries.

Multiple halls showed the movies Super-Size Me and King Corn, and hall staff as well as Freshmen Focus faculty used questions created by the implementation committee to facilitate discussion surrounding consumption and nutrition in American culture. Many of these conversations allowed for students to analyze their own eating choices and incorporate concepts addressed in Michael Pollan’s book.
Residence Hall Governments supported students attending the YMCA Hunger Banquets by purchasing tickets for their residents. In all, 41 programs focused on the Common Reading were held in the residence halls, some of them in collaboration with Dining Services and Health and Wellness. Additionally, 24 groups of students attended campus-wide Common Reading programs as a hall activity.

**University-wide Programming**

The largest university wide event was, of course, Michael Pollan’s campus visit on January 13, 2010. The public lecture, “The Food Sun Agenda,” was attended by approximately 3500 people, about half of the audience being students and the other half community members. The large turnout of community members was another area of growth for the program this year and again reflects the larger presence of Pollan’s work in the general public. In the afternoon Pollan answered student questions in a session in the CUB that was not as well attended as anticipated with only 75 students attending, but the questions asked reflected thoughtful consideration of the book’s topics.

In addition to the Pollan lecture, the major university-wide programming was the faculty lecture series, which was expanded to the run throughout the academic year rather than just in the fall. Thirteen faculty lectures were presented, occurring roughly every two weeks throughout the year, with faculty presenters from MBioS, Health and Wellness, Anthropology, International Programs, Veterinary Science, Creative Writing, Philosophy, Economics, Engineering, and Women’s Studies. Five of the WSU colleges were represented in the series. Three non-faculty speakers were also part of the series: Josiah Pinkham (Nez Perce tribal ethnologist) on Nez Perce food traditions, William D. Marler (WSU alumnus and food safety attorney) on food safety policy and litigation, and Rosalinda Guillen (former VP of United Farm Workers) on agricultural labor issues. These lectures were attended by 1,125 people, mainly WSU undergraduates, with 81 percent indicating they did so because of a course requirement or for extra credit. The average attendance for the year was 86 attendees per lecture, but the attendance was larger during fall semester when the greatest number of courses were using the book. In addition to the lecture series, the documentary *King Corn* was shown during Week of Welcome; this event, which was followed by a presentation on undergraduate research opportunities by Dave Bahr and two students, was attended by approximately 400 students.

Another area of growth this year was the extensive collaboration with colleges, in this case particularly the College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences, in providing programming. Kim Kidwell’s AFS 101 course hosted weekly lectures by faculty, farmers, and industry professionals who presented on a variety of agricultural issues and perspectives. These noon presentations were advertised and open to the general university community. CAHNRS also hosted a light dinner and panel on agricultural perspectives on January 13 before the Pollan lecture; this event was attended by approximately 400 people. CAHNRS also maintained an extensive website with information and various resources related to the book, and their graphic designers designed and printed the Common Reading posters for the year—both of which garnered several design awards. CAHNRS also coordinated having “Food for Thought” table tents in the WSU dining centers that featured information and questions about food on a regular basis throughout fall semester. The College of Liberal Arts also collaborated by proposing a month’s focus on The Human Land and organizing the two faculty lectures for that theme in February.

HD 205 sections that were part of Freshman Focus in the fall also added tremendously to the year’s events by hosting as their class project five Hunger Banquets during the week before Thanksgiving break. These banquets, modeled on the materials of Oxfam International to physically illustrate the
inquities of global food distribution, were attended by approximately 1000 students and community members.

Finally, as in past years, the WSU libraries created research guides and exhibits to complement the book and help guide students doing related research. The year began with a library exhibit on William Jasper Spillman, a WSU faculty member from the early 20th century who was a major figure in the development of modern agricultural practices; this exhibit focused on research not only by highlighting Spillman’s own contributions but also on the kinds of sources available about Spillman.

A full list of university wide programming can be found attached to this report as Appendix A.

**Promotion of Events**
Promotion of Common Reading events was accomplished through a variety of low-cost means: weekly emails of upcoming Common Reading events to all faculty using the book as well as all Residence Hall Directors; articles and announcements in WSU Today and WSU Announcements; the Common Reading and CAHNRS Common Reading websites; the Common Reading posters designed by the CAHNRS graphic designers and funded by that college; targeted email invitations to the Pollan events sent to all students enrolled in courses that had or were using the Common Reading in fall or spring semester; limited advertisements in The Daily Evergreen (for the Pollan events), and strategic placement of related articles in The Daily Evergreen and Washington State Magazine. Communication Directors Bev Makhani (University College) and Kathy Barnard (CAHNRS) and their staffs were instrumental in these efforts.

**Contribution to First-Year Goals**
When the Common Reading Program was initiated in 2006, the inaugural committee developed the following goals:

1. Create opportunities for entering students and faculty to engage in discussion in informal small groups.
2. Communicate academic expectations (before students arrive on campus)
3. Introduce entering freshmen to the intellectual life of WSU Pullman
4. Enable departments and faculty to connect with pre-majors informally
5. Expose students to the rich diversity of ideas at a research university
6. Create additional common ground and common experience in the freshman year

The evaluation of the effectiveness of the Common Reading program in helping students achieve the goals for the program is accomplished through two main assessment strategies: an ongoing short evaluation form used at every lecture in the faculty lecture series and an online evaluation survey sent out to all WSU Pullman freshmen in May via an announcement on each student’s MyWSU account.

**Evaluations of Lectures:**
In addition to asking for demographic and motivational information (class standing, reason for attending the lecture), the lecture evaluation form asks respondents for their level of interest in the lecture, the degree to which the lecture inspired them to want to learn more about the lecture’s topic, and the degree to which the lecture added to their understanding of some aspect of the book.

*Basic Demographics:*
Head count of total lecture series 1125
Number of attendees who completed evaluations 744 66%
Number attending because of a class 599 80.5%
Number attending who were freshmen 407 55%

The cumulative average positive responses (“agree” or “strongly agree”) to the three evaluation statements for the 2009-2010 lecture series were:

- I found this event interesting 566 76%
- I’m inspired to learn more about this topic 400 54%
- This event furthered my understanding of an issue in the book 381 51%

*Note: For this final statement several respondents didn’t rate this statement, noting that they had not read the book. This was especially true for community members and upper-division students.

For the goals of the WSU Common Reading, the second question, about students’ level of inspiration to learn more about the lecture topic, is particularly salient. Unlike many universities, we use the book each year not only to illuminate an issue but to expose students to the research possibilities of the university. Although the majority of students attended the lectures due to a class requirement or for extra credit, slightly more than half of the respondents indicated an interest in researching the topic further.

Another aspect of interest to note is that, of those who filled out the evaluation, a large percentage (45 percent) were not freshmen even though the majority attended because of a course. Some of these respondents were students enrolled in 100-level courses using the book; some were enrolled in upper-division courses that were using the book or that awarded extra credit opportunities for attending selected lectures; and some attended out of personal interest in the topic. Some were also not students at all but were faculty, staff, and community members. Thus, while the Common Reading lecture series is targeted toward first-year students, it is also utilized by a significant number of courses and students beyond their first year as well as by other members of the university and local community.

**Online Survey of Common Reading Participation and First-Year Goals:**
For each of the program’s three years of implementation, Leslie Jo Sena (Freshman Focus faculty member in English and Common Reading committee member), has conducted an online survey that asks students both about their self-ranking with regard to a number of program goals and about their level of participation in Common Reading activities: how much of the book they read, how many classes they had that used the book, and the number of Common Reading events they attended. (The full survey instrument is included as Appendix B.) This year the survey was completed by 340 freshmen, which represents about 10% of our entering 2009 class.

This survey indicates that the Common Reading program, specifically the use of the Common Reading in classes and the faculty lecture series, shows measurable benefit to student engagement and first-year experience. In spring of 2007, at the conclusion of the first year of the program, students who reported having two or more classes that used the Common Reading in any capacity rated their experiences significantly more positively (p = 0.031) than students who reported having only one or no classes that used the Common Reading. While individual questions did not show difference of statistical significance, it is important to note that each measure of engagement with the Common Reading
The online evaluation asks students to rate their first year experience at WSU by agreeing or disagreeing with five key statements:

- My first semester, I felt like part of the academic community at WSU
- I had the opportunity to engage with informal discussions with faculty
- I was introduced to a rich diversity of ideas
- I felt a sense of community and common ground with other students
- I understand the types of research that go on at a university

The lowest scoring statement in 2007 was on understanding “the types of research that go on at a university” (overall positive response rate of 51 percent). However with the addition of a faculty lecture series to the program in 2008, that statement was the one to show the most improvement in student responses (overall positive response rate of 61 percent). Students who encounter the Common Reading in their classes and report attending one or two Common Reading events score their first year experience higher, specific to the program goals, when compared to students who have less contact with the program.

The 2009-2010 program findings show that students who reported attending three or more Common Reading events scored 68% positive responses to the understanding of research statement, the highest rating group for this question. The overall response rate for this question was 63% positive.

A summary of the responses, sorted by participation, is in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2009-2010 Responses First Year Statements:</th>
<th>Academic Community</th>
<th>Informal Discussions</th>
<th>Diversity of Ideas</th>
<th>Common Ground</th>
<th>Understand Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent Groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one or no classes</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>79% 12%</td>
<td>56% 28%</td>
<td>70% 15%</td>
<td>74% 17% 62% 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two or more classes</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>82% 7%</td>
<td>63% 18%</td>
<td>80% 9%</td>
<td>84% 8% 66% 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no CR events</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>76% 12%</td>
<td>53% 30%</td>
<td>72% 14%</td>
<td>80% 13% 61% 24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one or two CR events</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>84% 9%</td>
<td>68% 19%</td>
<td>76% 10%</td>
<td>74% 15% 64% 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three or more CR events</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>91% 0%</td>
<td>61% 17%</td>
<td>83% 8%</td>
<td>74% 8% 68% 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total responses</td>
<td>~340</td>
<td>80% 10%</td>
<td>59% 24%</td>
<td>74% 12%</td>
<td>76% 14% 63% 23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dissemination of Findings**

During spring 2010, Karen Weathermon, Leslie Jo Sena (English Dept Instructor within Freshman Focus and lead person on the online evaluation survey), and Meg Autrey (Residential Education Director and intern on the Common Reading project) presented a poster on the research findings from the first two
years of the WSU Common Reading program, “Assessed Benefits of a Common Reading: Growing a Comprehensive Program at WSU,” at the Annual Meeting of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition” in Denver, Colorado. The same poster was accepted for the WSU Showcase event on excellence in research in March.

Points of Further Growth and Development
The Common Reading Program at WSU-Pullman has grown exponentially in its first three years—from two general lectures in the fall and use in approximately 25 sections of Freshman Focus classes to a full year of extensive programming and use in 100 sections of courses across the university. There remain areas of potential future growth and development. One certainly is to continue to develop collaborative relationships with a variety of colleges so that classroom use and lecture programming is strong across the disciplines. Faculty-led study abroad programs and more intentional opportunities for relevant service learning and undergraduate research could also be developed. Taken as whole, the program also offers potential for the kind of integrative learning that bodies such as the AACU advocate but are difficult to implement in universities of our size; we could do more to capitalize on these opportunities by offering credit or other incentives for students to participate in a wide range of Common Reading opportunities rather than only attending one or two.

Another point of potential growth is to use the Common Reading as a means of connecting with alumni and other potential donors because it so powerfully and tangibly exemplifies the university’s goals for providing a transformative undergraduate education, especially in the first year. We could, for example, engage alumni whose work is relevant to the year’s selection to add to the lecture series or other mentoring experiences. On-line or face-to-face book discussion opportunities for alumni and/or parents of freshmen students are another possible venue of interaction that could be explored in conjunction with Alumni Relations and the Parents Program.

A change that would aid us tremendously in being able to further develop the program would be to make the book selection earlier, ideally a year ahead of implementation but at least by January of the preceding year. Without an early selection, the implementation group has to scramble to assemble the programming and faculty who may wish to adopt the book for classroom use may not have adequate lead time to do so. The benefit of more time, however, is secondary to an even more pressing need: that of a dependable source of funding. In the 2009/10 year we were the beneficiaries of a $50,000 donation from an alumnus that allowed us to bring Michael Pollan to campus. Whether through fundraising or through other means of support, advance planning will require the assurance that we have the funds—or can generate the funds--to bring in the author and, potentially, other high level speakers.

Leslie Jo Sena is furthering her research on Common Reading programs by applying similar assessment of students at other colleges and universities with Common Reading programs. Participating institutions include Amarillo College, Bellevue College, Montana State University – Billings, Virginia Commonwealth University, Western Washington University, and others. Since little to no research has been done outside of WSU on how Common Reading programs affect student engagement and first-year experience, this project should yield important information about how Common Reading programs can best serve student engagement and institutional programmatic goals.