

Campus and Community Connections: The Evolving IUPUI Common Theme Project

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Abstract

In 2009, IUPUI launched the Common Theme Project, designed to “promote campus unity, conversation, and collaboration on timely issues that connect IUPUI to central Indiana and the world.” This paper briefly discusses the evolution of the Common Theme Project, from its roots as a freshman common reader to the current campus focus on social entrepreneurship, strategies that increased campus and community interest, and the goal to move from a “project” status to a campus initiative that will enhance IUPUI’s commitment to outreach and engagement.

Background

The Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Common Theme Project originated as a “one book, one campus” initiative in the University College of Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) in 2008–2009, due to the efforts of Associate Dean Gayle Williams and Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Life and Learning Frank Ross. University College has been the home for “undecided” freshmen, the first-year experience course, and academic advising. Incoming freshmen received free copies of the book *Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, by Ishmael Beah, and first-year experience instructors found ways to integrate the book and its themes into course assignments and projects. There were a few supporting campus events, including an author visit, a lecture open to the public, and an essay contest, but the focus at this time was to encourage students to read and offer them a common book that would facilitate discussion.

The effort was successful, but Williams and Ross wanted to extend the common reader beyond the freshman student body to the entire campus and to build upon IUPUI’s commitment to student engagement and community outreach. To do so, they launched the Common Theme Project. It incorporated a single book, but it also sought to increase participation by promoting inquiry into a universal question, issue, or problem that could be adopted and adapted across disciplines and units at IUPUI. They issued a request for proposals from tenured faculty, which they felt would encourage faculty acceptance of the Common Theme Project and ensure student participation.

The successful Common Theme proposal was expected to support key campus initiatives, such as the Principles of Undergraduate Learning (<http://iport.iupui.edu/selfstudy/tl/puls/>) and RISE to the IUPUI Challenge (<http://academicaffairs.iupui.edu/plans/rise.cfm>), and its focus on research,

international study abroad, service, and experiential learning. The common reader needed to be less than 300 pages and written by a living author who was willing to visit campus. The Common Theme Project would last two academic years, with a different book introduced each fall. Williams and Ross were able to obtain modest budgetary support from University College and Dean of Faculties and Executive Vice Chancellor Uday Sukatme. They then established a steering committee that was representative of the campus, including faculty, staff, and students.

Consuming Well for the Wealth of Communities: From IUPUI to the World

The steering committee selected a proposal by David Craig, associate professor in religious studies and adjunct to philanthropic studies, for the inaugural 2009–2011 Common Theme Project. His proposal, “Consuming Well for the Wealth of Communities: From IUPUI to the World,” inspired by his Ethics of Consumption course, focused on the green economy, healthy communities, and just sustainability. The common reader for the first year of his Theme was Bill McKibben’s *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*. Beginning in 2008 and in the months leading up to the fall 2009 semester, Craig worked tirelessly to personally make campus and community connections; he organized and promoted the Theme’s three foci, held workshops, established a website (<http://www.iupui.edu>

[/common_theme/2009/](http://www.iupui.edu/common_theme/2009/)), provided teaching resources and event information to faculty, and developed sub-committees to handle event planning and relieve some of his workload in his engagement with the campus and community.

The book and Common Theme were promoted to students during freshman orientation events, and faculty began incorporating the Theme into their course work. The highlight of the first semester was the author visit in early November of 2009; McKibben gave an on-campus lecture, followed by an appearance with a panel of central Indiana experts to discuss the topic “Can Local Food Feed Indiana and the World?” The panel discussion event was held at the Indiana State Museum and was open to the campus and community free of charge. This event was leveraged by Craig’s personal connection to Indianapolis’s Annual Spirit and Place Festival (<http://www.spiritandplace.org>), which promotes cross-community collaboration and civic engagement. Additional community partners throughout the 2009–2011 also included the Christian Theological Seminary (<http://www.cts.edu>), the Hoosier Environmental Council (<http://www.hecweb.org/>), the Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center (<http://www.inrc.org>), and Slow Food Indy (<http://www.slowfoodindy.com>).

By the summer 2010, the steering committee turned its attention to choosing the campus reader for the following fall. Because students had responded most favorably to the Common Theme topic of sustainability (and particularly to McKibben’s chapter on food in *Deep Economy*), the steering committee selected Colin Beavan’s

No Impact Man: The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet, and the Discoveries He Makes about Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process as the next book. The book’s more conversational style proved more accessible to undergraduate reading levels than the previous book. Beavan also had an established website, non-profit organization, and documentary film that could be utilized as additional teaching tools.

Gayle Williams and Jane Luzar, dean of the Honors College (who replaced Frank Ross as co-director) determined that the steering committee should bear the workload for supporting Craig’s Theme for its second year and that the next Theme would be in planning for a full year prior to its launch.

In fall 2010, IUPUI University Library hosted multiple screenings of Colin Beavan’s documentary and his visit to campus was extremely well attended by the community as well as by students, faculty, and staff. Under the auspices of the Common Theme, several students attended a national environmental conference and returned fired up to tackle campus initiatives, including petitioning for an optional student “green fee” to help fund campus projects and to lobby for an Office of Sustainability. A “freecycle” event (where people simply gave away goods and services across the campus community) and Earth Day activities wrapped up the inaugural Common Theme Project. Its legacy is the numerous “green teams” across campus units striving to increase sustainability in individual offices and buildings, and the creation of the IUPUI Office of Sustainability (<http://sustainability.iupui.edu>).

Figure 1. Timeline

Fall 2008	Spring 2009	Summer 2009	Fall 2009	Spring 2010	Summer 2010	Fall 2010	Spring 2011
Ishamel Beah’s <i>Long Way Gone</i>							
	Selection of Craig proposal; planning stage for fall 2010 launch		“Consuming Well for the Wealth of Communities” <i>Deep Economy No Impact Man</i>				
Fall 2010	Spring 2011	Summer 2011	Fall 2011	Spring 2012	Summer 2012	Fall 2012	Spring 2013
Selection of Hanna proposal; planning stage for fall 2011 Common Theme launch			“Change Your World: The Power of New Ideas” <i>Change the World Half the Sky</i>				
					Selection of Khaja proposal; planning stage for fall 2013 Common Theme launch		

Changes to the Common Theme Project

Prior to its call for proposals for the 2011–2013 Common Theme Project, co-directors Williams and Luzar sought and received permission to offer the winning proposal a position as a faculty fellow under a program created by Dean of Faculties and Executive Vice Chancellor Uday Sukatme through the Office of Academic Affairs. The program was a part-time appointment (with course load release and professional development monies), stressed a broad perspective of the university, and was designed as a leadership development opportunity. It was hoped that this would alleviate budgetary and time stressors David Craig had faced during the first Common Theme.

The Common Theme steering committee accepted my proposal in summer 2010 and I became the first Common Theme Faculty Fellow and the first faculty librarian to receive a Faculty Fellow appointment under Sukatme’s program. As tenured librarians do not normally carry teaching loads, I was able to use a portion of my fellowship to hire a part-time graduate assistant during the 2010–2011 planning year.

Before the 2011–2013 Common Theme launched, Gayle Williams took advantage of an early retirement opportunity, leaving Jane Luzar as sole director of the Common Theme Project. This prompted Luzar to offer steering committee appointments to those with an explicit interest in the new Theme. There also was to be less emphasis on a common reader—although this was still an important aspect—and greater emphasis on the actual Theme; the book would simply be one more tool to engage the campus and community and the author would still visit campus. The goal was to move beyond “project” status in hopes of ensuring the profile and continuity of the Common Theme. In addition, the committee decided to create two main events—the author visit in the fall and another large event in spring—and encourage other campus units and the community to develop supporting events that the Common Theme steering committee and faculty fellow would promote.

Change Your World: The Power of New Ideas

The 2011–2013 Common Theme, “Change Your World: The Power of New Ideas,” (http://www.iupui.edu/common_theme) focuses on social entrepreneurship: the development of creative and innovative solutions to social problems. The book for 2011–2012 was David Bornstein’s *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*. I selected this book as it was the first to bring widespread attention to social entrepreneurship and the chapters provided human-interest stories across a variety of subject areas as well as practical information on social entrepreneurship. I felt the Theme was particularly suited to IUPUI’s missions of community engagement, service, and international outreach.

I sought to build on David Craig’s efforts and not only work closely with the undergraduate side of campus, but also expand more fully into the professional schools. My graduate assistant, Elijah Howe, a master’s student in philanthropic studies, and I created Common Theme information packets for each unit we visited

and sent packets to those we were unable to meet with face to face. Our research indicated that *every* school, if not every discipline, at IUPUI was actively involved in some aspect of social entrepreneurship through service learning, study abroad, research centers, or student organizations. The new Theme seemed to strike a chord on campus and the Common Theme was even adopted by the IUPUI Office of Alumni Relations' Weekend U—an annual symposium which attracts alumni and community members. We also held workshops with the IUPUI Center for Teaching and Learning and University College.

Making new community connections was challenging at first, but key people on campus came forward, including Associate Professor in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs John Clark who teaches graduate level courses in social engagement and globalization and has created an ongoing community project called Provocate (<http://www.provocate.org>), which his students build upon every semester with extensive public discussions. Clark also is also very active in IndyTalks (<http://www.indytalks.info>), a collaboration of thirty local arts, cultural, educational, and humanitarian organizations who have become very supportive of the Common Theme. In addition, Director Teresa Bennett and Associate Director Christine Fitzpatrick of the IUPUI Solution Center, the community “front door” to the campus (<http://www.iupui.edu/~solctr/>), also have been extremely supportive. The Solution Center makes connections between community members or organizations and faculty to pursue service learning often in conjunction with the IUPUI Center for Service and Learning (<http://www.csl.iupui.edu>), develops internships, and provides resources. Following up on these connections brought a wealth of information, ideas, and introductions to the vast number of social entrepreneurs in central Indiana.

Author David Bornstein's campus visit in early November 2011 was our best-attended event to date, once again attracting numerous community members and organizations as well as local high school students. His visit influenced the creation of a new student organization founded by graduate student Aryn Schounce, called The Social Trep Club, which engages “in the process of socially impactful entrepreneurial activity including identifying resources for their own ventures, networking with the Indianapolis social entrepreneurship community, and receiving valuable training and leadership opportunities.”

Bornstein's visit was the catalyst for another graduate student, Juanita Galvis. After Bornstein's visit, she attended Harvard Social Enterprise Conference to learn more about creating a social entrepreneurial organization. Juanita now volunteers with March of Dimes in Indianapolis as she completes a degree in philanthropic studies. Her goal is to help March of Dimes expand its international program into her native Columbia in order to improve the health of premature infants. Galvis's mother, a professor of social work at Universidad de La Salle in Bogota, has incorporated *How to Change the World* in her classroom; Bornstein provided the needed Spanish language copies of the book for her students.

In April 2012, we partnered with IndyTalks to host an event, “Creativity, Collaboration and Compassion at the Crossroads,” in which John Clark’s students led small-group discussion groups on a wide range of topics surrounding the premise of Indianapolis as a humanitarian “hub” to foster social entrepreneurship on a large scale. Many students connected with some of the city’s youngest and most energetic social entrepreneurs, including Amy King of Provocate Haiti (<http://haiti.provocate.org>) who has garnered national attention for her humanitarian efforts in Haiti.

The 2012–2013 Common Theme reader is *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, who are Pulitzer Prize recipients for their work. PBS broadcast the documentary based upon the book during the first week of October 2012 and our local PBS affiliate (and IndyTalks partner), WFYI, provided on-campus screenings to coincide with Sheryl WuDunn’s visit to IUPUI on November 14, 2012.

We have adopted a different approach to the common reader in response to anecdotal feedback. We still have one “official” Theme book and visiting author, but also offer a list of optional titles for faculty to more easily incorporate the Theme, including two titles by local authors in order to attract the community:

- *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War* by Leymah Gbowee (who visited IUPUI in February 2012)
- *For the Love of Cities: The Love Affair Between People and Their Places* by Peter Kageyama
- *Unnoticed Neighbors: A Pilgrimage into the Social Justice Story* by Erina Ludwig (an Indianapolis author)
- *Start Something That Matters* by Blake Mycoskie (who visited IUPUI in April 2012)
- *Where Am I Wearing? A Global Tour to the Countries, Factories, and People That Make Our Clothes* by Kelsey Timmerman (a Muncie, Indiana author)
- *Citizen You: Doing Your Part to Change the World* by Jonathan Tisch

The current Common Theme has sought to leverage its resources by increased emphasis on social media through Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/commontheme>), LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com/groups?&gid=3908151>), and Twitter (<http://twitter.com/IUPUICommTheme>) in addition to the campus website. We are presently trying to attract 1,000 “likes” to our Facebook page prior to author Sheryl WuDunn’s visit.

A few examples of courses using the social entrepreneurship Common Theme illustrate the breadth and depth of the appeal of this Common Theme and how it has built on the previous Theme's extensive reach into first year seminar and gateway courses:

- Freshman students in the school of engineering and technology read a section of David Bornstein's book and performed library research on social entrepreneurship and how it may relate to their future professions. Working in small groups, students developed ideas for technology-related social enterprises (for example, roof top gardens for low-income housing), wrote papers, and gave presentations.
- Business marketing (400-level course) students created a marketing plan and materials for the 2011 Homeward Bound walk for the homeless, which boosted donations and attendance at the event. A group of these students also were winners of the Common Theme photo contest that coincided with David Bornstein's campus visit.
- Tourism management (400-level course) students researched ways that tourism can combat human trafficking in the industry and gave public poster presentations at the semester's end.
- Graduate nursing students partnered with Red Oak Industries, a local commercial janitorial company that pairs each of its mentally/psychiatrically disabled employees with a nondisabled employee. Students developed a training program for the nondisabled employees to improve interactions with and understanding of their disabled partners. Another student in this course created a program for pre- and post-partum depression screening in the hospital where she was employed.
- During fall 2012, sport management (400-level course) students partnered with Back on My Feet (<http://indianapolis.backonmyfeet.org/>), a running program for the homeless, to develop marketing materials and provide volunteers for fundraising events. According to the instructor, "Most of the students were sport management majors and it seemed they had never thought of sport organizations as anything other than professional/collegiate money-making enterprises. Based on their feedback, this project really helped open their eyes to a different avenue they could pursue in the sport industry."
- A consumer health class (300-level course), funded by a RISE grant, is currently piloting a project to investigate food waste and food rescue on campus and in the community in partnership with Second Helpings (<http://www.secondhelpings.org>).

As the 2011–2013 Common Theme winds down, we hope there will be a legacy, similar to the Office of Sustainability and other initiatives that resulted from the first Theme. We had planned to create a campus/community social entrepreneurship center or incubator, but have not yet identified funding sources or space to accomplish this. The IUPUI Center for Research and Learning (<http://www.crl.iupui.edu>) has attempted to launch such efforts through a student competition and undergraduate research grant program, and has discovered there is certainly a need and desire for these types of programs and

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facilities. We also hope to eventually develop an open access journal for scholarly research in social entrepreneurship across the disciplines. The IUPUI University Library possesses the infrastructure and initial support for such an undertaking.

Continuing Challenges

Author visits are the single largest expense of the Common Theme—speaker fees range in the tens of thousands of dollars and it is highly unlikely we will be able to sustain that in the long term, even with generous contributions from various schools on campus. It is possible we could restrict the common reader to books written by local (rather than national) authors and host smaller events, but we also recognize a need for our students to be exposed to national and international figures. It has been suggested we find support in the private sector or grant funding. Such resources would no doubt change with the focus of each Theme, and grant writing or fundraising chores would certainly increase the workload of the faculty fellow.

Our intention for the steering committee to support the majority of the workload for the Theme's second year has met with mixed results. The steering committee is composed of faculty, staff, and students who have many other responsibilities, and for tenure-track faculty, this service does not carry much weight in their dossiers. Attendance at meetings is sporadic and generally dwindles to a handful of dedicated committee members by the end of the first year. Therefore, the second year of the Theme, which should be heavily managed by the committee rather than the now-exhausted faculty fellow, tends to be less robust than the first.

Faculty awareness and adaptation of the Common Theme is a continuous process. Often, fixed curricula and a tendency to focus on one's own discipline produce a reaction of "one more thing" to add to the teaching workload. We have tried to combat this by providing resources across disciplines that faculty can integrate into current teaching, and it seems to be working well. It also has been equally challenging to induce faculty into sharing what they have used in the classroom with the wider campus community. Through informal conversations and encounters, we've learned that the social entrepreneurship theme has been widely incorporated in many courses, but when asked for sample assignments or a paragraph describing student projects, there has been little or no response. It was suggested through the campus administration that a faculty contest for the most creative Common Theme course integration with a monetary prize in the form of professional development or travel might encourage faculty to share their classroom experiences.

Although we have many ways to communicate at IUPUI (e-mail, websites, the Oncourse course management system, campus news listserv, posters, flyers, plasma TVs, and even chalked messages on sidewalks), it is still challenging to gain the attention of students and faculty amidst the "noise" of countless campus and community events, initiatives, and obligations. Common Theme website updates and press releases are in the hands of campus communications and marketing office and same-day website changes or quick-turnaround announcements are not possible. So far,

social media and word of mouth are proving to be most effective. We may request permission to move the Common Theme website to IUPUI University Library servers (Luzar's Honors College resides in the library), which would enable greater control and flexibility, but this could prove a delicate negotiation. As there is no dedicated office staff for event planning, marketing, and clerical support, this is done on the fly through the Honors College staff, a few steering committee members, and the faculty fellow. Ideally we would have better-coordinated marketing and communications support and work with Tourism, Conventions, and Event Management, and/or Journalism faculty to create course-related projects or internships to assist with this issue.

Although we have attempted to track the impact of the Common Theme, mostly through post-event surveys, we have yet to establish a reliable and rigorous assessment program for campus or community. A 2010 campus survey indicated that most students (other than freshmen) were unfamiliar with the Common Theme, and suggested communicating through means we already employed. They also indicated that we should host events and that evening and weekend events were desirable, although we had done this as well. It's clear we need to improve in this area.

The Common Theme requires a considerable investment in time and physical and mental energies. The planning year involves a good deal of commitment and mine certainly took me outside my comfort zone. The first year of the public launch also is intensive with multiple meetings held on a daily and weekly basis as the norm. The second year of the Theme should be less arduous, but as noted previously, the steering committee has yet to fill the gap in shepherding the Theme to its successful conclusion.

Find Your Voice: Hear My Voice

Khadija Khaja, associate professor in the school of social work, proposed the 2013–2015 Common Theme, “Find Your Voice: Hear My Voice,” which centers on civility and civil discourse. Her planning year coincides with her sabbatical, and as civil discourse is her area of research, this may help alleviate faculty fellow burnout, improve community connections (Khaja plans to hold focus groups and interviews on campus and in the community), and introduce a more rigorous assessment of the impact of the Common Theme.

Conclusion

Although Executive Vice Chancellor Sukatme bestowed a faculty fellowship upon the Common Theme, his successor has discontinued the program. There is no guarantee of campus support for the Common Theme past 2015. It will take time, energy, and perhaps a campus leader to champion the Common Theme if it is to survive *and* thrive. Having a central theme and common reader does seem to resonate with the campus, particularly for faculty and students searching for more authentic learning experiences in and out of the classroom and ones that support existing initiatives, such as RISE to the IUPUI Challenge and the Principles of Undergraduate Learning.

It would be to IUPUI's benefit to continue the Common Theme in some capacity now that it has been more fully embraced by the entire campus and local community.

Author Information

Kathleen A. Hanna is an associate librarian at IUPUI University Library and liaison to the School of Physical Education and Tourism Management since 2001. She serves as the 2011–2013 Common Theme faculty fellow for “Change Your World: The Power of New Ideas.”

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