10 Tips to Promote a Successful Summer Reading Program Discussion

The Summer Reading Program is an opportunity for incoming students to participate in a shared intellectual conversation with the IWU community; to express ideas about a common text that many IWU students, faculty, staff, and alumni are reading; and to respond respectfully to ideas others bring to the discussion. Further, this program provides students the chance to observe classroom behaviors and to see models of classroom engagement, and to reduce anxiety associated with waiting almost a week from arrival on campus to a first academic contact.

As a reminder, 35 of the 37 Summer Reading Discussion Groups comprise a Gateway Colloquium class. *This is not just a one-time event for the students; they will be in class together in either the Fall or the Spring.*

1. **Select a leader among your co-facilitators.** This individual should be willing to start off the discussion, interject if the discussion strays too far off-topic or slows down, and bring quiet students into the discussion.

2. **Based on your comfort level with the topics,** choose five to six questions from the list provided (in addition to the four the students received over the summer). You may also develop questions with your fellow co-facilitators:
   a. Avoid questions that are too general, like “what did you think of the book?”
   b. Limit questions that have yes or no answers.
   c. Ask open ended questions and help students to talk about themes and how the book relates to deeper issues.

3. **Consider having an introduction activity/ice breaker.** The students in the room will have already met each other, but they may just now be meeting you.

4. **Establish ground rules.** Provide a safe environment by communicating that participants are expected to listen respectfully without interrupting, respect one another’s views, and avoid debate, blame, speculation, and inflammatory language. Foster civility by protecting students from feeling personally attacked. Students may disagree, but comments need to be focused on ideas, not those who espouse them. Model respect for cultural differences by acknowledging the value of differing perspectives.

5. **Promote discussion.** You want to facilitate discussion, not come off as the expert. By encouraging students to answer first, you will promote conversation and help everyone feel like their opinions matter. Sometimes people may need to think before they answer. Part of being a good leader is being comfortable with silence. Don't feel like you have to jump in if no one answers immediately. If needed, clarify, expand, or rephrase the question. If tension escalates, stay calm and try to turn the conflict into a learning experience. Do not avoid the issue, but remind participants to be civil and respectful.

6. **Make connections between comments.** If someone gives an answer to question 2 that connects well with question 5, don't feel obligated to ask questions 3 and 4 before moving to 5. As facilitators, you can go in whatever order you want. Even if you go in order, try to find a link between an answer and the next question. By connecting people’s comments to the questions, you’ll help build momentum in the conversation.

7. **Occasionally direct questions toward quiet people.** You don’t want to put anyone on the spot, but you want everyone to know their opinions are valued. If you have a few talkative people who always jump right in, directing a question to a specific person may help draw out the quieter people (and let the loud people know it is time to give someone else a turn).

8. **Set limits.** Book discussions are popular not only because people like to read, but because they are great social outlets. A little off topic conversation is fine, but you also want to respect the fact that people have read the book and expect to talk about it. As the facilitator, it is your job to recognize tangents and bring the discussion back to the book.

9. **Don’t feel obligated to get through all the questions you chose to discuss.** The questions are there as a guide. You may only get through three or four questions, and that is fine! Respect people’s time by wrapping up the discussion when the meeting time is over rather than pushing on until you finish everything you planned.

10. **Wrap up the discussion.** One good way to wrap up the conversation is to have people summarize how the book has affected them and how they are going to use this reading experience to help them make a difference on campus and in the community.