First Year Common Reading

About The Spirit Level
It is a well-established fact that in rich societies the poor have shorter lives and suffer more from almost every social problem. The Spirit Level, based on thirty years of research, takes this truth a step further. One common factor links the healthiest and happiest societies: the degree of equality among their members. Further, more unequal societies are bad for everyone within them—the rich and middle class as well as the poor.

The remarkable data assembled in The Spirit Level exposes stark differences, not only among the nations of the first world but even within America's fifty states. Almost every modern social problem—poor health, violence, lack of community life, teen pregnancy, mental illness—is more likely to occur in a less-equal society.

Renowned researchers Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett lay bare the contradictions between material success and social failure in the developed world. But they do not merely tell us what's wrong. They offer a way toward a new political outlook, shifting from self-interested consumerism to a friendlier, more sustainable society.

Greetings Moravian Community:

We are sending this document to tell you a little bit about the common book that the incoming freshmen read this summer in preparation for their academic life at Moravian College. Since most of us will be interacting with at least some freshmen during this coming academic year, we thought all community members, not just faculty members teaching first year seminars, might enjoy hearing a bit about the book.

Before we talk about the book, however, we want to say a bit about the process of choosing the common reading. Having been involved in this process for a few years now, we believe no committee will be able to choose a book that will be able to fully satisfy the multiple goals of the summer reading. Given that we do not have the opportunity to guide incoming students in detail (beyond the summer assignments) in either the ways of reading the selected book or in the ways of responding to it, the summer reading is basically an invitation to students to the type of reading/thinking that will be expected of them at Moravian (a notice to them that 'things will be different in college') and less as a 'class textbook' (for which we would all apply very different expectations). A central goal of the first-year reading is that it will provoke students to ask questions about some of what they read/understand; we do not anticipate that they'll 'get' all of the content.

It is very challenging to find a summer reading that can bear everything that is loaded upon it at Moravian College (e.g., is timely and thought-provoking, challenges students with the complexities of
college-level thinking, can potentially engage 360+ 18 year-olds who have varying degrees of preparation/interest, fits well with IN FOCUS programming (2013-2014 Healthcare), is written by an author who can meet our expectations about visit/presentation, satisfies 20+ instructors with varying degrees of expertise in the field, etc.).

But here are some of the reasons why *The Spirit Level*:

- *The Spirit Level* was recommended by a considerable number of public health professionals who have used the book very successfully in their classes.

- Kerry Cheever and Ginny Adams O’Connell, this year’s faculty directors for the IN FOCUS Centers for Investigation, read the book along with a first-year reading committee headed by Jim Skalnik and thought that the book would serve us well for the following reasons (the list below is not exhaustive):
  - Kerry and Ginny are interested in underscoring and promoting a comprehensive concept of health and wellness during the IN FOCUS year. We thought that the book does have a broad concept of health and wellness with health tied to our interconnectedness with our fellow residents in a human population. We think the topics covered in the book tie together the four themes of IN FOCUS—Poverty and Inequality, Sustainability, Healthcare, and War and Peace.
  - We like that Wilkinson and Pickett reviewed hundreds of articles from peer-reviewed journals. We want the students to see and appreciate the depth and breadth of their research and to start to appreciate that scholarship is a communal effort—that insight comes from the replication and testing of ideas/theories. Many of us have experienced students complaining if we require that they have at least 10 references for a paper—Wilkinson and Pickett cite 456. We hope that the book can be an example of what we mean by scholarship or provide some talking points as we introduce them to college-level research and writing.
  - We appreciate the global perspective of the book and feel that the students will benefit from reading about not only the greater 50 states, but also about countries whose names they might not even recognize.
  - We feel that the book could be approached and analyzed from a variety of disciplines (and therefore is a “liberal arts” text) and therefore well-suited for our FYS program.

For anyone who has followed this book at all since 2010, you know that Wilkinson and Pickett have been criticized for some of their statistical analyses and broad conclusions. The most well-known challenges have come from Snowden’s book, *The Spirit Level Delusion* and Sauner’s extensive paper, “Beware False Prophets”. Even in light of the critiques, we think it is important to recognize that this work has launched a series of debates and analyses that continue to push the analysis forward—a provocative piece of scholarship. The debates about the book revolve around debates about politically motivated research, the centrality of the peer-review process, and the clear definition of analytical frameworks.
If you are interested in learning more about The Spirit Level, a web search will provide you with a lot of fodder, but we provide a few links for your convenience:

Snowden’s book:  
http://spiritleveldelusion.blogspot.com/

Saunders’s Beware False Prophets:  

Review from The Guardian:  
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/aug/14/the-spirit-level-equality-thinktanks

The Equality Trust, The authors respond to questions about The Spirit Level’s analysis:  
http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/authors-respond-questions-about-spirit-levels-analysis

THE SPIRIT LEVEL REVISITED: REGRESSION LINES, CORRELATION, OUTLIERS and MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS, A plain man’s guide to statistical inference in THE SPIRIT LEVEL and in the critique offered by Peter Saunders, by Hugh Noble  

Does income inequality cause health and social problems? Karen Rowlingson  

The Price of Inequality: How Today’s Divided Society Endangers Our Future by Joseph E. Stiglitz  
http://books.wwnorton.com/books/The-Price-of-Inequality/

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Ginny Adams O’Connell, Co-Chair FYS Steering Committee and 2013-2014 Co-Director, IN FOCUS Center for Investigation  
John Black, Co-Chair FYS Steering Committee  
Kerry Cheever, 2013-2014 Co-Director, IN FOCUS Center for Investigation