

Executive Summary

The 2013 University of Canberra Book Project is a common reading program that is unique among Australian universities, although such programs are common overseas. In 2013, its first year of operation, the project offered a free copy of the novel *Jasper Jones* (Craig Silvey) to all commencing students and all staff at the University of Canberra. In total, 6074 offers were made to prospective students (those who had accepted an offer), resulting in 2030 responses where commencing students collected a hardcopy (n = 1593) or an electronic copy (n = 437) of the book. Of the 1888 book offers to staff, 940 accepted with the majority (n = 763) choosing a hardcopy over an eBook (n = 177).

Student surveys and independent measurements indicate that the first year of the UC Book Project was a success, making a positive contribution to University life for students and staff and adding to the University's profile in the wider community. A survey of students, plus anecdotal evidence, indicate the project was seen as a worthwhile and positive initiative. Media coverage of the project and related events was strong, and there was a surprisingly high level of staff involvement despite the late launch of the project.

Despite the difficulties in evaluating the direct effect of the UC Book Project on student engagement and retention, given other potentially confounding variables, statistically significant results were revealed in the evaluation of the project. The proportion of prospective students that responded to a UC Book offer and enrolled in units (and were still enrolled at census date) was greater than those who did not respond to their book offer, attributing up to 3% increase in retention rates of commencing students to the UC Book Project. This alone has a potential economic value to the University of more than \$700,000, which dwarfs the cost of the first year of the Project (\$54,029).

Future iterations of the project should include a more comprehensive evaluation process. Overall response rates to the project by both students and staff could be improved with better marketing of the project and by the heightened awareness of the project. Having data from the first iteration of the project for comparison will also aid in future evaluation of the project's success against specific aims and objectives.