

Colleagues,

For more than a decade SLU's first-year experience has featured a [First Year Common Reading Program](#), showcasing texts that speak to SLU's Jesuit, liberal arts educational heritage. Faculty- and staff-led reading groups help new students discuss the chosen book early in the fall term, followed by a presentation by each book's author later in the term. The program has become a significant tradition at SLU, and deservedly so. This kind of shared intellectual endeavor is often cited as a "high impact educational practice" in the scholarly literature on student success.

Another significant SLU tradition is the conferral of the [St. Louis Literary Award](#) by the [SLU Library Associates](#). Since 1967, this award has been given to some of the world's most highly-respected authors, including Margaret Atwood (2017), Salmon Rushdie (2009), Seamus Heaney (1998), Arthur Miller (1980), and Tennessee Williams (1974). Each awardee has come to SLU for a presentation to the University community and the St. Louis community at-large.

I write today to announce a pilot project bridging both of these traditions. For Fall 2018, the First Year Common Reading Program will focus not on a book but on a selection of the most heralded works of lyricist and composer Stephen Sondheim – [recipient of the 2018 St. Louis Literary Award](#) who has also won Grammy Awards, Tony Awards, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

This effort, proposed by members of the First Year Common Reading committee and the SLU Library Associates, appropriately embraces a broader concept of "text," and illuminates the roles of music and theatre in our shared quest to understand and interpret ourselves. Each of the three Sondheim works of focus – *Into the Woods*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *West Side Story* – takes a different path to addressing issues of identity, self-authorship, morality, tribalism, and other defining facets of the human experience.

A few of the related events/activities already planned include the following:

- Fall 2018 New Student Orientation: On-campus screenings of film adaptations of *Into the Woods*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *West Side Story*; themes on identity from those works will also be incorporated into U101 course activities and learning communities
- October 4th: The St. Louis Literary Award is presented to Mr. Sondheim at the Sheldon Auditorium
- October 5th: Mr. Sondheim offers a presentation on craft in the SLU Xavier Theatre
- Faculty Awards for innovative approaches to incorporating Sondheim's works into their courses or other departmental/college/University events
- A contest for students to submit works of music, poetry, film, art, photography, writing, etc. centered on a theme(s) from one or more of the three Sondheim works of focus

The First Year Common Reading Committee also seeks to support faculty efforts to weave the themes of any or all of the three Sondheim works into as many components of their first-year undergraduate courses as possible. To that end, I have dedicated funding in the form of \$500

mini-grants to faculty willing to develop or revise their Fall 2018 courses accordingly; as always, our colleagues in the Reinert Center are available to assist faculty in such efforts.

We might choose to continue to coordinate the First Year Common Reading Program with our St. Louis Literary Award in future years. I will ask the University Undergraduate Core Committee to consider this effort as part of their curriculum planning going forward. In the meantime, I have the First Year Common Reading Committee and the SLU Library Associates to thank for an excellent proposal. I hope you'll consider how you can take part in the program as well. For more information, including details on applying for the faculty mini-grants, please contact Associate Provost Dr. Rob Wood at x3718 or robert.wood@slu.edu.

Respectfully,

Nancy Brickhouse, Ph.D.
Provost