

To: Frank Weislo, Dean of the Ingram Commons
Faculty Heads of Houses

From: Erin Clancy, Kaila Millis, Rebecca Nichols Erica Robertson Grant Wenzlau,
American Studies Seniors, Class of 2012

RE: Commons Reading for the Class of 2017

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Water is the oil of the 21st Century. It is a resource that has been taken for granted and is currently being depleted at a rate faster than it can be replenished. We are living in an age of “peak water.” In the coming decades, water scarcity will become a pressing global, national, and local issue. Globally, one out of eight people lacks access to clean water. Nationally, the EPA projects that thirty-six states will experience water shortages by 2013. Locally, Tennessee is in a water war with Georgia over who owns the Tennessee River. Water affects everyone everywhere and will soon become an issue that cannot be ignored.

Bottlemania, by Elizabeth Royte, addresses many of these broader issues through a familiar and ubiquitous object—the plastic water bottle. Through an investigation of the rise of bottled water in the U.S. and worldwide, she explores a wide range of issues including human rights, environmental degradation, economics, advertising, corporate versus community politics, the psychology of consumerism, and health concerns. Royte’s first-hand investigation of bottling and tap water treatment plants gives readers a taste of where their water comes from and how a tiny gesture like purchasing a bottle of water or turning on the faucet is connected to these larger issues. *Bottlemania* is an exploration of how the billion-dollar water industry came to be, its on-going effects, and why we as consumers choose to sustain it. It also speaks to the ethical issues and real-world ramifications of privatizing one of our most important common resources.

Royte’s goal is to educate, not to push a specific agenda. *Bottlemania* provides both sides of the story; it presents the problems surrounding tap as well as bottled water. The book is both intellectually challenging and engaging. Royte’s first-person narrative and unbiased tone are inviting and conversational, making the book readable and easily excerptable. Royte herself is an engaging speaker. She writes for audiences as varied as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *National Geographic*. She is relatable and could speak well to Vanderbilt’s diverse student body.

Bottlemania lends itself to an interdisciplinary style of learning. It will appeal to students from all schools and disciplines. Engineering and science students will benefit from its focus on groundwater and the intricacies of water purification. Peabody students will be interested in the community aspects of municipal water supplies. Arts and Science students will be engaged in the philosophical and economic discussions of the privatization of a public good, the history and politics of the bottling of water, as well as the many cultural meanings of this vital resource.

Through the study of *Bottlemania* specifically and the global issue of water more generally, students will connect to Vanderbilt's intellectual mission: the values of scholarship and discovery as well as those of accountability, caring, and civility. The book challenges students' assumptions about water and asks them to re-evaluate their personal choices in relation to their impact on the world. Through living in the Commons together, students will have the opportunity to translate their learning into living by becoming more water conscious and more responsible global citizens. The book, then, channels knowledge toward the betterment of "the commons."

Water is the issue of the future and, as a premiere educational institution, it is Vanderbilt's duty to educate students on this matter. The Class of 2017 will be the generation that comes of age and holds positions of power when water scarcity will be unavoidable. A year on the theme of water, with *Bottlemania* as its key text, would help prepare students for their future responsibilities. If this book is chosen, the American Studies Seniors (Class of 2013), under the direction of Professor Teresa Goddu and in coordination with the Dean of the Commons and the Heads of Houses, will create a curriculum for the book and a companion website for a year of water. The choice of *Bottlemania* as the Commons Reading for the Class of 2017 will serve as an initial step towards a curriculum designed for students by students.