Film Synopsis

“The Color Purple follows the life of Celie Johnson as she struggles through life in the early 1900s. The film begins with Celie about 17 years old, giving birth to her second child, sired by her father. Her father takes the second child away from her and tells her never to tell anyone about it. Time passes and a local farmer, "Mister", comes by to marry Celie's younger, prettier sister, Nettie. Her father refuses to let Nettie marry and gives the man Celie instead. Mister neglects and abuses Celie until Nettie comes by asking to stay with them, because the father can't keep his hands off her. When Mister is unable to lure Nettie, he sends her away, leaving Celie more distraught than ever. Nettie promises to write unless death keeps her from it, but Celie never receives a letter. Meanwhile, Mister's lover, Shug Avery, comes to visit and befriends Celie, helping her to understand that she is more than Mister's servant. The movie culminates in Celie leaving Mister with the threat that everything he touches will fall apart until he does right by her. Mister finds compassion and goes to the INS to help Celie's sister Nettie prove that she is a US citizen and return from Africa where she has been living with Celie's two children who had been given to a missionary and his wife. Celie is reunited with Nettie and her two children in a heartfelt ending to an extraordinary film.”

(Retrieved from imdb.com 7/30/09)

Discussion Guide

This discussion guide is designed to be used in conjunction with the 2009/2010 Common Book “Growing Up” and Residence Life Cinema showing of THE COLOR PURPLE. It is intended to help college students look at issues addressed in the book and in the movie and at the ways those issues affect their lives. This guide can help you facilitate the discussion of these issues. It is not necessary to use all of the discussion questions. Instead, take a minute to look over the suggestions listed below and choose the ones that meet the needs and personality of your audience. These suggestions are intended to assist you, not to limit you. Feel free to modify or elaborate them to suit your needs. Most important, make an effort to see the movie and consider the questions in advance so that you do not approach the program “cold”. The movies are available for rent through Netflix.com, or Blockbuster.com.

* This guide is adapted from the discussion guide provided by Swank Motion Pictures Inc. for Residence Life Cinema.
Programming Suggestions

1. THE COLOR PURPLE documents an era in which women and children were viewed as the property of men and domestic violence was considered “between a man and his wife” rather than an offense that merited criminal punishment. Invite a psychologist or a representative from Safe Passage to discuss the abuse and its affect on the development of self image.

2. Both the movie and the book focus on a particularly special bond between two characters. Before the movie is shown, ask the students to think of a special relationship which has helped them through difficulty. After the movie is shown, ask them to share any similarities between their relationships and the relationships portrayed.

3. Use the discussion questions below as a springboard for open interaction.

An important element in any discussion is that all students present should have the opportunity to ask questions and voice opinions. A statement should be made at the beginning of the program concerning all participants’ freedom to voice opinions without fear of personal ridicule. This will provide an environment that is more open to discussing the issues at hand. It is the facilitator’s responsibility to protect the individual’s rights as well as the integrity of the program.

Facilitating the Program

The facilitator should always remain somewhat neutral in the discussion. This does not mean that the role of “devil’s advocate” should not be utilized. It may be necessary for the facilitator to voice opposite opinions to continue the discussion and insure different viewpoints are examined. Hopefully, this will enable student to participate by examining opinions and learning to defend and question all viewpoints equally.

Movie Discussion Questions

1. What abuse did Celie suffer from her father? What was the affect of the abuse? How did the abuse affect her image of marriage?

2. Discuss Nettie and Celie’s relationship. What did each one give to the relationship? What did each one draw from the relationship? What things make a relationship really special? What can an individual do to cultivate a relationship like theirs?

3. Celie said she didn’t know how to fight, only how to stay alive. What are the advantages of both methods of coping? Who taught her to fight? What events were most significant?

4. Why did Celie tell Harpo to beat Sophie?

5. Why was the mailbox so important to Celie? to Mr.?
6. Why was Celie so curious about Shug when she first arrived? Why was it so important to please her? How does pleasing someone else affect your own self image? What did Shug see in Celie that no one else saw? How did Shug’s image of Celie change Celie’s image of herself?

7. Celie’s first attempt to leave Mr. was unsuccessful. What was different about her second attempt?

8. List the tragic situations in Sophie’s life. Which were the worst? Why? Who was the most abusive to her?

9. What was the turning point for Celie from survivor to fighter? Would Celie have slit Mr.’s throat if Shug hadn’t stopped her?

10. Which characters overcame their abuse or negative parts? How?

Common Book Connections

1. The relationship between a child and his or her caregiver is important to the child’s development. Contrast Celie’s relationship with her father to Russell’s relationship with his mother and to discuss how this influenced the person each grew up to be.

2. Both Russell and Celie were separated from family members. How did this affect their “growing up” experiences?

3. The characters in both the movie and the book grew up in similar time periods during difficult economic circumstances, yet the women in The Color Purple faced additional challenges. What obstacles made it more difficult for Celie and Sophie to “make something of themselves” than it was for Russell? Do you see any comparisons between the life of Russell’s mother and the women in the film or were their situations different? What did the women do to try to overcome adversity?

4. What is the significance of having “a home of one’s own” in both the movie and the book? Why do you think this is so important to the characters? Consider this in the context of the recent collapse of the housing market and reflect on the implications of foreclosure for families.

5. Think about how the wealth or lack thereof of past generations influences the circumstances of later generations. What did Celie inherit and how did it improve her life? What if she had not received this inheritance? In what ways did Russell’s mother’s privileged upbringing help her and her children? Does the wealth of past generations give some in the current generation a head start in the quest for a good life?
Connection to the Core Commitments

These films were chosen because they all examine the dual themes of growing up and striving for excellence from a different perspective. *Cinderella Man* compares directly with the book in showing the experiences of a white family struggling to make it during the Great Depression. In contrast, *The Color Purple* shows us how life was different during that same time period for women and African Americans. *Of Mice and Men* tells the story of two men, one with a disability, in the Deep South during the Great Depression, and *Avalon* tells the story of a family of Jewish immigrants in Baltimore during the same time period. Lastly, *Into the Wild*, is set in the present day, but shows a very different perspective on growing up in which a teenager from a relatively privileged background relinquishes all material possessions and tries to reconnect with nature in order to “make something of himself”.

Taking Seriously the Perspective of Others

These films encourage students to contrast the varied perspectives of males and females, members of racial minorities and dominant groups, able-bodied persons and persons with disabilities, along with the poor and the privileged. Discussing themes of disability, class privilege, racial and ethnic relations, poverty and oppression encourages students to consider how one’s position in the social hierarchy might influence the lives of individuals.

Striving for Excellence

Russel Baker’s mother was always pushing him to “make something of himself”. What does it mean to make something of oneself? Though the characters in the book and films might answer that question differently, each is striving for a better, more fulfilling life. Each of these films depicts a struggle in which characters face various obstacles and emerge as stronger, more determined individuals. While their goals are different, each takes the high road and makes the most out of his or her circumstances. These five films encourage students to strive for excellence despite tough economic times, racism, sexism, or physical barriers they may encounter along the way.

Refining Ethical and Moral Reasoning

This program invites students to compare the ideas institutions, philosophies, moral codes, and ethical principles of the past to those they have experienced in the present day. This program creates an atmosphere in which students can reflect on their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and habits while comparing them to the characters in the book and films.