

First-Year Seminar Proposal

MOTION

The Committee on Educational Policies and Planning moves that the faculty adopt this first-year curriculum consisting of first-year seminars, in place of the current LS1 and LS2.

RATIONALE

Our students' first year at the College serves as their formative Skidmore experience, for it is the time when they begin to build communities, identify intellectual interests and passions, explore ideas, challenge assumptions, and first encounter faculty expectations of academic rigor and excellence. The First-Year Seminar (FYS) is a central component of a proposed First-Year Experience (FYE). The FYE addresses curricular, co-curricular and residential aspects of a student's first semester at Skidmore. The faculty play a central role in the FYS, serving as instructors and mentors to groups of first-year students. The fall semester Seminars are not isolated educational opportunities but are part of the larger continuum of FYE curricular, mentoring, co-curricular, and residential experiences that will help shape our students' four years at Skidmore. These initial courses will introduce students to ways of thinking and knowing, to working independently and collaboratively, to crafting arguments and articulating positions, and to living within an intellectual community committed to the life of the mind. The FYS will thus guide new Skidmore students as they bring into focus their academic aspirations and goals and strive for academic distinction.

The Seminars are defined by the passion for learning that the faculty and students bring to the enterprise, by the nature of the mentoring relationships that faculty establish with the students, and by the connections faculty and students make between and across disciplines. The seminars present opportunities for risk-taking both for the faculty and students, moving students beyond the narrow confines of a high school education and offering faculty the chance to explore new areas of intellectual interest. The seminars invite students to think about the liberal arts as a whole, to challenge their preconceived notions about inquiry and knowledge, to examine issues from multiple perspectives, and to make connections across disciplines. Some seminars have a disciplinary focus, but they also link to other avenues of inquiry. The FYSs, then, introduce students to a liberal arts education and the life of the mind, and the seminars serve as the first step in the students' transformation as engaged interdisciplinary thinkers.

THE SEMINARS: GOALS

The unifying component of the first-year seminars is a set of goals featured within each course. These goals seek to elucidate the types of questions and levels of investigation students will embark upon in the seminars. Each FYS will include the following goals in the course syllabus:

This course will introduce students to disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives on [the course topic]. Besides being a course about [the course topic], this is a course about knowing, particularly about ways to identify problems, formulate productive questions, and go about answering those questions. Students in this course will demonstrate the ability to

1. distinguish among, and formulate, the types of questions asked by different disciplines
2. read critically, and gather and interpret evidence
3. distinguish among the evidence and methodologies appropriate to different disciplines
4. consider and address complexities and ambiguities
5. develop the habit of mind of making connections among ideas
6. recognize choices, examine assumptions and take a skeptical stance
7. formulate conclusions based upon evidence
8. communicate those ideas to others both orally and in writing
9. relate the results to each student's educational goals

Faculty may offer courses currently listed in the Liberal Studies program as first-year seminars provided that they meet the goals of the FYS curriculum.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The seminars will help students understand the conventions of academic writing and oral presentations. Students will respond to assignments that generate discovery through writing, reading critically and analytically, and communicating orally. Drafting and revising will help students strengthen their writing skills. During the FYS, students will demonstrate the ability to

- analyze ideas and formulate questions
- focus an essay or presentation with a thesis or main idea
- organize ideas logically and with appropriate transitions
- support assertions with evidence
- revise their own work with attention to clarity and correctness.

Students will be introduced to conventions of documentation and understand the purposes of using sources and the need to uphold standards of academic integrity. Scribner Library will be an important partner in this endeavor, providing resources and education on information literacy and research skills.

The FYS begins to establish an atmosphere of intellectual engagement that will continue beyond the first year and throughout the student's career at Skidmore. CEPP envisions a curriculum where students across the disciplines will have opportunities to hone their oral and written communication skills. CEPP plans to work with departments and programs, in conjunction with the Expository Writing Committee, to integrate written and oral communication into the student's academic work throughout his or her Skidmore career.

STUDENT AND FACULTY CHOICE

One of the advantages to the First-Year Seminar is the placement of incoming first-semester students in seminars that hold particular appeal for them. The Registrar's Office will work with new students to assist them with registration for the seminar. The FYS also will accommodate faculty desires to share their particular intellectual interests with first-year students; faculty will teach subjects about which they are particularly passionate, in the knowledge that the passion they exhibit for learning will serve as a strong incentive for students to cultivate the life of the mind.

FACULTY MENTORS AND ADVISORS

CEPP envisions that students will develop relationships with several faculty advisors/mentors during their Skidmore careers, as early as the first year (e.g., students enrolled in the Higher Education Opportunity Program; Filene and Porter Scholars; students with an interest in pre-med, pre-law and other pre-professional programs, etc.). The FYS begins that process. The instructors of the FYS will serve as the students' advisors and mentors, a powerful mechanism for strengthening first-year students' connections to the intellectual life of the College. Advisors will continue to focus their efforts on helping the students make informed choices about their curricular plans. Mentors will help the students reflect upon the trajectory of their educational career: conversations between mentors and students may focus on how the courses and the programs they choose relate to their larger academic goals and personal visions, or how co-curricular activities help inform students' lives in their classroom and residential lives, etc. One mechanism for framing the students' intellectual growth is the Reflection and Projection plan (RAP, see below) that students will construct before they enter the College and routinely revise until they graduate. Mentors will also direct students to other faculty for advice and guidance about the students' academic aspirations and plans. In addition, faculty and the peer student mentors have available a variety of college resources, including librarians, educational technologists, and other campus professionals who can provide additional mentoring and support for the students in the FYS.

During the spring semester, FYS mentors will advise students about the opportunity for establishing a relationship with a new mentor in the second year. Although the student may continue with the FYS advisor, by choosing a new mentor students will establish another close relationship with a faculty member.

Most likely the student and new mentor will share interests that may enrich the mentoring relationship. Faculty who have taught in the FYS in one year thus will be able, if they so choose, to participate in the program in consecutive years. Staff from the office of the Dean of Student Affairs will also support the students in their academic lives and co-curricular interests.

THE REFLECTION AND PROJECTION PLAN (RAP), PORTFOLIOS AND ASSESSMENT

Over the course of four years, each student will develop an academic plan articulating intellectual aspirations and achievements, and demonstrating the student's engagement in and ownership of a personal educational vision. The students will refine the Reflection and Projection Plan (RAP), which will

- help the student identify key questions and interests to be explored and revised throughout the four years of college
- introduce the student to the various academic disciplines as different ways of formulating questions and pursuing interests
- provide practice in the productive use of resources for educational support such as the Library, the Writing Center, the Internet, etc.
- explore the interaction of coursework and co-curricular events as mutually reinforcing an educational experience
- foster an understanding of liberal education as a whole that will encourage the student to seek out and recognize interactions among courses selected in future semesters.

The RAP will also serve as a key instrument for the Dean of Student Affairs staff and faculty mentors as they develop a relationship with a student, and it will have a central place in the student's academic portfolio, which CEPP recommends all students and academic programs adopt. The RAP and the portfolio will serve as resources for mentoring and for assessment, capturing the student's academic accomplishments not only in the FYS but through the all-College curriculum and the major(s). The faculty mentors and the student will revisit the RAP in succeeding semesters as a student's college career takes shape, and it, together with the rest of the portfolio, will enable the student to reflect upon his or her educational and academic goals, and may support such future purposes as applications to graduate schools and employers.

LIVING-LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND CO-CURRICULAR LIFE

Residence halls will house students in an individual FYS in proximity to one another, integrated with students from a variety of other FYSs, and the co-curricular activities will extend into the students' residential lives. Upper-level students will serve as student mentors in the first-year seminars and will reside in singles with the students within those courses; they will, together with the faculty, facilitate classroom discussion and the close linkage between the curricular and co-curricular experience. Such "living-learning communities" will facilitate first-year students developing a close working relationship not only with their faculty and student mentors, but also with each other.

The seminars will integrate already scheduled co-curricular events when possible, drawing upon scheduled lectures, performances, Tang exhibits and other appropriate opportunities. The faculty will work with each other, with Student Affairs staff and with student leaders of clubs and organizations to identify already scheduled events, or plan additional ones, that highlight aspects of the course clusters. Special campus-wide events – such as fall and spring convocations – could serve as common experiences for students in the seminars.

THE SEMINARS: STRUCTURE

The Seminars will meet three hours per week in a traditional classroom format, and use the fourth hour for mentoring and co-curricular activities. The courses will be capped at 15 students, providing a small seminar

environment equivalent to the cap on Expository Writing classes and lower than the current caps for LS1 (18) and LS2 (17-25). College classroom and staffing resources preclude the option of seminars with enrollments lower than 15. The limit of 15 students per course will enable students and faculty to work within a seminar format – one of the hallmarks of the Liberal Studies program. The courses will share a specific set of goals, thus retaining LS’ commitment to a common experience.

THE SEMINARS: IMPLEMENTATION

Faculty may offer courses currently listed in the Liberal Studies program as FYSs provided that they meet the goals of the Seminars. As with the Liberal Studies program, the interdisciplinary nature of the FYS welcomes and encourages collaboration, where appropriate, among faculty in the delivery of the curriculum. For example,

- Two faculty could choose to teach 30 students in a combined seminar that draws even more extensively on inter- and cross-disciplinary perspectives.
- A group of faculty might offer sections of the current LS1 curriculum, and employ the same methodologies and pedagogies from LS1 while meeting the goals of the FYS.
- Clusters are likely to emerge naturally as the faculty meet regularly to develop and implement the FYS, inviting students and faculty to collaborate across the seminars. Novel approaches to interdisciplinary teaching may emerge from these collaborations.

THE SEMINARS AND THE LIBERAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

Some of the finest features of the current Liberal Studies curriculum are retained in the FYS, including the centrality of interdisciplinary thinking and teaching; small seminars; close collaboration among students and between students and faculty; and the participation in the seminar of a more advanced student who will serve as a mentor for the first-year students. One of the most significant impacts of the Liberal Studies program on the faculty and the College has been the foregrounding of interdisciplinarity within the scholarly and pedagogical work of many Skidmore faculty members. Interdisciplinary and disciplinary approaches to thinking and teaching, and knowledge and learning, will remain the central, core tenet of the First-Year Seminar.

STAFFING AND FUNDING

Participation by the tenure-line faculty in the FYS is an essential aspect of the first-year experience. CEPP recognizes the delicate balance departments and programs face in offering a full spectrum of courses, and the need to provide up to 600 additional enrollments with the elimination of the LS2 requirement. Departments and programs will need to address this issue by offering more courses at the 100- and 200-levels, and such participation in the FYS will put an additional strain on existing resources. Faculty might elect to teach versions of the same course in two successive semesters – in the fall as a FYS, but also as a separate course in the spring to students who are not first-year advisees.

Therefore, CEPP sees the creation of new tenure-track lines, distributed according to need, as a critical step to provide sufficient support for faculty to participate in the FYS, to address the redistribution of seats among lower-level courses, and to staff current departments and programs adequately. The faculty in these new lines will contribute to the FYS and will also provide coverage of departmental and program courses to enable more senior colleagues to participate in the FYS as well. The upcoming “Campaign for Skidmore” creates the opportunity for the College to seek the funding for these lines.

CEPP also hopes that the faculty, and the departments and programs in which they teach, will see the FYS as an exciting opportunity to teach topics at the core of their professional lives and to engage new Skidmore students with faculty’s intellectual passions. The faculty will design and offer first-year seminars that draw upon faculty members’ expertise and curiosity, a powerful incentive for participation. Still, CEPP recognizes that the demands upon, and desires of, faculty to participate in a variety of departmental and

program curricula will present challenges to staffing the FYS sufficiently. Therefore, CEPP recommends that each department, in consultation with the Dean of the Faculty, will contribute to the FYE according to an agreed-upon formula that can maintain tenure-line faculty participation in the FYS and rotate among the faculty the opportunity and responsibility for teaching first-year seminars and serving as first-year advisors. For example, each department might contribute 6% of its full-time equivalents' (FTEs') teaching obligations to the FYS, so that a department would offer one FYS for approximately every three full-time faculty.

Financial support for the first-year seminars will provide opportunities for faculty and students to enhance classroom learning with films, recordings, speakers, performances and other on-campus experiences, and off-campus visits to museums, performances, etc. Each seminar will receive a \$1000 budget for the seminar: \$750 for co-curricular events, and \$250 for faculty development (books and other pedagogical materials). CEPP encourages collaboration among the faculty in the planning of co-curricular events, so several faculty might pool their budgets to subsidize outside speakers or performance groups, or to arrange an off-campus site visit. The total budget for development funds, to be administered by the director of the FYS program, amounts to approximately \$50,000.

PLANNING WORKSHOPS, REGULAR MEETINGS AND COLLABORATION

Each summer, beginning in 2005, faculty who intend to teach in the FYS will meet in a workshop to design seminars and begin the planning for co-curricular activities. These workshops will serve as the locus for exploring collaborative approaches to teaching and mentoring in the FYS, and will build annually a community of faculty committed to participation in the FYE. The faculty will continue to meet during the fall and spring semesters, to discuss pedagogical approaches to seminars and to coordinate co-curricular opportunities. The faculty who participate in the full workshop will receive stipends, half of which will be distributed during the summer workshop, the other half during the academic year, after successful course development.

CEPP acknowledges the considerable efforts that many faculty have expended in the service of the Liberal Studies program and seeks to streamline the conversion of existing LS courses into first-year seminars. LS1 sections and LS2 courses that already meet the goals of the FYSs should receive approval from the Curriculum Committee expeditiously. New seminars that do not draw upon existing LS courses will need to follow the traditional process for approval.

CEPP also recognizes that the faculty teaching some LS2 courses, particularly those currently housed in departments and programs, will wish to continue to offer them as part of the College's curriculum. Some courses might become part of departmental or program curricula; others would be retained under the rubric of "Liberal Studies," an interdisciplinary program.

ADMINISTRATION

CEPP recommends that the Dean of the Faculty and the Dean of Student Affairs determine the administrative structure of the FYE in consultation with the committee. The administration of the program will encompass the curriculum, the residential experience, oversight of the student mentors, the co-curricular program, orientation and advising.