

## **First-Year Experience: A Proposal**

### **MOTION**

The Committee on Educational Policy and Planning moves that the faculty endorse this revised Liberal Studies curriculum, consisting of first-year seminars and colloquia, in place of the current LS1 and LS2.

### **RATIONALE**

#### **Goals of the First-Year Experience (FYE)**

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 proposed First-Year Experience (FYE) program addresses all aspects of a student's first year at Skidmore, with curricular, co-curricular and residential components. The faculty play a central role in the FYE, serving as instructors and advisor-mentors to groups of first-year students. The courses that the faculty will deliver in the FYE – First-Year Seminars (FYS) in the fall and First-Year Colloquia (FYC) in the spring – are not isolated educational opportunities but are part of the larger continuum of curricular, mentoring, co-curricular, and residential experiences that will help shape our students' four years at Skidmore. These 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 FYE will thus guide new Skidmore students as they bring into focus their academic aspirations and goals and strive for academic distinction.

#### **The First-Year Seminar (FYS)**

The First-Year Seminar (FYS) will consist of approximately 43-44 3-credit courses of 15 students each offered during the fall semester and taught by the students' advisor-mentor. Students in the London program will enroll in one of two 3-credit FYS in the fall, and spring transfer students will enroll in a 3-credit FYS during their first semester at the College. 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 First-Year Seminars will be grouped into three clusters: investigating historical and social change, investigating creativity, and investigating the natural world, thus preserving the types of inquiry embedded in the original Liberal Studies curriculum. The courses will share a specific set of goals (see below), thus retaining in the Liberal Studies program a common experience. Faculty may offer courses currently listed in the LS2 program as first-year seminars provided that they meet the goals of the new Liberal Studies curriculum. The interdisciplinary nature of the LS program welcomes and encourages collaboration, where appropriate, among faculty in the delivery of the curriculum.

#### **Goals of the First-Year Seminar**

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 the types of questions asked by different disciplines*
- 2. gather and interpret evidence*
- 3. distinguish among the evidence and methodologies appropriate to different disciplines*
- 4. consider and address complexities and ambiguities*
- 5. formulate conclusions based upon evidence*
- 6. communicate those ideas to others both orally and in writing*
- 7. relate the results to each student's educational goals.*

## **Mentoring**

The instructors of the FYS will serve as the students' advisor-mentors, a powerful mechanism for strengthening first-year students' connections to the intellectual life of the College. Faculty not only will work closely with these advisees on the practical aspects of registration for the next semester's classes, but also will serve as interrogators of and resources for students as they fashion their academic lives – articulated in the evolving Reflection and Projection plan (RAP, see below) that students will construct before they enter the College and routinely revise until they graduate. Faculty will also integrate, when relevant, the rich array of co-curricular events into their courses and their advising of the students. During the spring semester, FYE mentors will advise students about the possibility of choosing a new mentor for the second year. Although the student may continue with the FYE advisor, by choosing a new mentor students will establish another close relationship with a faculty member. This new mentor need not be a student's advisor for the major, but most likely the student and mentor will share interests that may enrich the mentoring relationship. Faculty who have taught in the FYE 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.

## **Reflection and Projection (RAP), Portfolios and Assessment**

Over the course of four years, each student will develop over his or her Skidmore career 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 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 FYE 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.

### **Spring colloquia**

The spring courses – First-Year Colloquia (FYC) – taught by the FYS instructor to the same 15 students will draw upon and continue consideration of the content of the fall courses, will incorporate co-curricular activities and highlight the development of students' academic interests (the RAP). These 1-credit courses offer students and faculty considerable flexibility in their learning and teaching: class meetings may focus on materials related to the fall FYS; on current topics examined from disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives; on lectures, performances and other events that comprise the College's co-curricular life; on the diverse intellectual pursuits of the students that they have developed during and since the FYS. Central to the FYC is the students' RAP, which continues to provide a framework for the articulation of students' educational experiences and aspirations. The goals of the FYC seek to enhance and enrich students' reflections on their learning, to strengthen the connections between curricular and co-curricular experiences and to encourage a continuing dialogue from the fall semester among the students and the faculty-mentor.

Because each FYC meets once per week, three colloquia can share a weekly course time slot: e.g., three colloquia can meet separately on Monday, Wednesday or Friday from 9.05-10.10, or 10.10-11.05, etc., thus alleviating some of the pressure on classroom availability.

### **Residential Life**

Residence halls will house students within the FYS-FYC in proximity to one another, 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 colloquia 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.

### **Co-Curricular Life**

The seminars and colloquia in the FYE 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 and/or colloquia.

## **Oral and Written Communication**

The FYS and FYC 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 FYE, 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.

## **Liberal Studies**

Some of the finest features of the current Liberal Studies curriculum are retained in this revision of LS, 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. CEPP proposes that “Liberal Studies” remain as the overarching theme for the First-Year Experience, and that the first-year seminars, first-year colloquia and other Liberal Studies interdisciplinary courses will reside under this rubric. Interdisciplinary approaches to thinking will remain as the central, core feature of the Liberal Studies program and its host of courses, and that all seminars and colloquia offered as part of the First-Year Experience will take interdisciplinary and disciplinary approaches to knowledge and learning.

## **Enrollment Caps**

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 lower than 15.

## **Student and Faculty Choice**

One of the advantages to this revision of Liberal Studies is the placement of incoming first-semester students in seminars that hold particular appeal for them. Newly matriculated Skidmore students will select three or four choices from among the rich array of first-year seminars and will be placed in one of the seminars they selected. The revised LS program 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.

## Staffing

Participation by the tenure-line faculty in the FYE 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 FYE 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 with its attendant FYC in the spring, but also as a separate course in the spring to students who are not first-year advisees. This course could fulfill all-College or major requirements.

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 FYE, 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 FYE and will also provide coverage of departmental and program courses to enable more senior colleagues to participate in the FYE 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 FYE as an exciting opportunity to teach topics at the core of their professional lives and to expose new Skidmore students to faculty's intellectual passions. The faculty will design and offer first-year seminars and colloquia 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 FYE sufficiently. Therefore, CEPP recommends that each department, in consultation with the Dean of the Faculty, should contribute to the FYE according to an agreed-upon formula that can maintain tenure-line faculty participation in the FYE and rotate among the faculty the opportunity and responsibility for teaching first-year seminars and colloquia and serving as first-year advisors. For example, each department might contribute 6% of its full-time equivalents' (FTEs') teaching obligations to the FYE, so that a department would offer one FYS-FYC for approximately every three full-time faculty.

## Planning: Workshops and Faculty Collaboration

Each summer, beginning in 2004, faculty who intend to teach in the FYE will meet in a workshop to design seminars and colloquia and/or begin the planning for co-curricular activities. These workshops will serve as the locus for exploring collaborative approaches to teaching and mentoring in the FYE, 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 colloquia 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 converted to first-year seminars will need to incorporate the goals stated for

the FYE but will not require additional approval from the Curriculum Committee. 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. As noted above under **Staffing**, faculty may choose to propose such courses to fulfill all-College or major requirements.

### **Student and Faculty Development Funds**

Financial support for the first-year seminars and colloquia 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 instructor will receive a \$1000 budget for the seminar and colloquium: \$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 amounts to approximately \$50,000.

### **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.

### **Timetable**

Spring 2004	Approval of the LS revision; appointment of FYE administrator(s)
Summer 2004	Summer workshop on curricular and co-curricular planning for F'05; development of electronic and print promotional materials
Fall 2004	Deadline for new FYS course proposals for F'05; development of co-curricular events
Spring 2005	Finalizing of curriculum and co-curriculum for F'05
Summer 2005	Summer workshop on curricular and co-curricular planning for F'06
2005-2006	First year of implementation of the FYE