

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.

CEPP offers the following amendment: change “endorse this revised Liberal Studies curriculum” to “adopt this new first-year curriculum” in the Motion. The amended Motion would read

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

The Committee has also made a number of changes to the Rationale which it asks you to consider. They include:

- **stronger linkage between the First-Year Experience and the remainder of our students’ college career**
- **a heightened emphasis on oral and written communication skills not only in the First-Year Seminars but as well in the disciplines**
- **an increase in the number of teaching credits for the FYS from three to four; the seminars will meet three hours per week, and the fourth hour will focus on mentoring and co-curricular events**
- **an explicit statement about team-teaching and collaboration in the FYS, including opportunities to offer sections of LS1 within the context of the FYS goals**
- **a grandparenting of current LS2 courses into FYSs, provided they continue to meet the goals of LS2 (which are virtually synonymous with those of the FYS)**
- **elimination of the clusters of FYSs, anticipating that faculty will elect during the planning and implementation processes to organize the seminars into various clusters for team-teaching and co-curricular opportunities**
- **the spring semester First-Year Colloquium will be available to faculty as an option; although CEPP continues to see this opportunity as valuable and distinctive, it recognizes that the resource constraints programs and departments face might preclude participation in the FYC. Therefore, CEPP and the administrators of the FYE will ask faculty to participate in a pilot program to offer, and assess the effectiveness of, First-Year Colloquia in the spring.**

RATIONALE

Goals of the First-Year Experience (FYE) and Beyond

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 mentors to groups of first-year students. The fall semester First-Year Seminars (FYS) 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 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 plans to make recommendations for fostering this engagement in several areas:

1. integrating written and oral communication into the student's academic work throughout his or her Skidmore career. 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 develop such opportunities.
2. integrating co-curricular activities such as seminars, colloquia, Tang exhibitions and discussions, residence hall reading groups, etc., into the students' academic work.

The First-Year Seminar (FYS)

The First-Year Seminar (FYS) will consist of approximately 43-44 4-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 4-credit FYS in the fall, and spring transfer students will enroll in a 4-credit FYS during their first semester at the College. The faculty and students will meet three hours per week in a traditional classroom format, and use the fourth hour for mentoring and co-curricular activities.

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 (see below), thus retaining LS' commitment to a common experience. Faculty may offer courses currently listed in the LS2 program as first-year seminars provided that they continue to meet the goals of the LS2 curriculum. The three central goals of LS2 pertain as well to the FYS:

1. Each course must be interdisciplinary, not simply multidisciplinary. Courses should not only pursue their topics or themes from at least two separate disciplinary perspectives but also should examine those disciplines in relation to one another. Students completing an LS 2 course should gain some understanding of each constituent discipline, as well as the ways in which the disciplines are integrated in the study of the defining themes of the course.
2. The question of what constitutes a discipline is complex, and the boundaries between disciplines are often subtle. This can make it difficult to determine whether a course involves more than one discipline. For purposes of these guidelines, the constituent disciplines must clearly differ in methodologies, defining questions, course materials, or goals.
3. Liberal Studies 2 courses should emphasize the continued development of cognitive skills. These skills include the ability to analyze and solve problems, to consider problems from multiple perspectives, to understand the strengths and limitations of various methodologies, to read critically, and to express ideas clearly. In designing courses, instructors should pay particular attention to the College's emphasis on effective writing.

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 and 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.

CEPP recommends that the FYS administrators work with the Registrar, departments and programs to establish a limited number of times in the schedule for First-Year Seminars to avoid conflict with 100- and 200-level courses.

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

CEPP envisions that students will develop relationships with several faculty advisors/mentors during their Skidmore careers. 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 intellectual life: 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, FYE 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 FYE 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 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 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: Pilot Program

CEPP recommends the creation of a pilot program that will feature First-Year Colloquia in the spring semester. Faculty may choose to offer a 1-credit course in the spring semester to the same 15 students; the colloquia will draw upon the FYSs, 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 for all students in the first year and beyond. 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. CEPP recommends that an assessment plan be implemented from the inception of the pilot program to gauge the effectiveness of First-Year Colloquia, and anticipates that FYCs may become a regular feature of the FYE.

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 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 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 the FYE, 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 approaches to thinking and teaching will remain the central, core tenet of the First-Year Experience, and 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 new First-Year Experience 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 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.

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, 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 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 not need to undergo additional approval provided they continue to meet the goals of LS1 and LS2 (see above). 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