

16 October 2009

Dear Colleague:

I'm writing to ask you to think about *next* fall – specifically, about whether you would like to offer a First-Year Seminar next year. First-Year Seminars are some of the most rewarding courses to teach because they offer an opportunity to explore a topic in depth, a topic about which you are passionate. They also provide a chance for you to interact regularly and meaningfully with students as they begin their college experience; indeed, some of the students will be your first-year advisees. A few weeks ago, I participated in a First-Year Experience discussion about student academic life with a group of about twenty first-year students from Stine Hall. I asked them to name a course that they saw as typifying the liberal arts experience, and almost every student in the room named his or her First-Year Seminar. Many students regard their First-Year Seminars as formative, even pivotal, in their education. They appreciate reading unique texts that force them to think, discussing complex issues with their peers, and being challenged by their instructors.

**First-Year Seminar Proposals for Fall 2010** are due in the Provost's Office no later than Tuesday, **November 24**. I especially encourage full-time members of the faculty to consider how they might fashion a seminar experience. Recent topics have been diverse and interesting. Consider, as examples, current or recent seminars that investigate the influence of Darwinian evolution across the liberal arts, discuss transformative travel experiences in Latin America, evaluate the legacy of the Eisenhower presidency, explore the ethics of concealment, challenge assumptions about homelessness, and examine life by examining death. Often, when I show a colleague the brochure describing our First-Year Seminars, he or she will scan the offerings and point to one or two, saying, "I wish I could take that course!" The best way for a faculty member to "take" the course is to teach it—so please start dreaming and planning about how you might organize exactly the kind of course in which you would be excited to enroll.

This year, I would like to encourage you to consider two suggestions. First, I often notice that several seminars have related themes. Please consider talking with colleagues who are also interested in teaching a First-Year Seminar, and consider developing a proposal together for courses that are formally paired or grouped. You may want to establish a few common readings, or have students participate in activities or field trips together. If you are interested, we can arrange for your courses to be taught in the same building at the same time in order to permit joint class sessions from time to time. If you have offered a "solo" seminar in the past, or if you have an idea for one now, of course you are welcome to offer it as a standalone course, just as you have in the past. And if you are thinking about doing something new, or if you have always been interested in learning more about how a colleague with related interests might approach a topic, this is a chance for you to try a slightly different way of organizing your seminar.

My second suggestion is that you consider offering a seminar that would count as Effective Communication in the first-year. Faculty in all disciplines can offer these courses; you do not need to be a member of the English Department to offer a writing-intensive course. I know that many of you have substantial writing assignments in your courses, assignments that involve writing in stages and revising existing work. These courses are probably already eligible to satisfy the first-year Effective Communication requirement, and it would be helpful to our colleagues in English, and to the students, if they were recognized as such. If you are considering offering a writing-intensive First-Year Seminar, please contact Will Lane or me.

Here is some information and direction for your thoughts and your proposal:

- We would like our entering students to have the Seminar experience available to them as soon as they arrive, and any proposal for a First-Year Seminar must be for a Seminar conducted entirely in the Fall semester of 2010;
- As we continue to grow and nurture our curriculum, we look for continued support from and participation by full-time members of our faculty in the First-Year Seminar program, and proposals from them will have priority over those from part-time faculty;
- Seminar instructors will have access to funds specially designated for, among other things, meals with seminar students, field trips, extracurricular activities, and visits by off-campus guests;
- Seminar instructors may elect to hold class meetings in regular academic spaces (e.g., a classroom) or in a residence hall on campus; and
- Great efforts will be made to house students in a given Seminar in the same dormitory so that they have a greater sense of community and easier access to their classmates for discussion of ideas introduced in class.

The mechanism for submitting a proposal for a First-Year Seminar depends upon whether or not you have taught the proposed Seminar in the past. There are two possibilities.

***You have taught the Seminar in the past.***

If you wish to teach a Seminar that has been reviewed and approved by the APPC, then you need only discuss this with your department chair or program coordinator and let me know that you would like to teach the Seminar again in the Fall 2010 semester.

***You want to teach a new Seminar.***

If you wish to propose a new course as a First-Year Seminar, or transform an old course into a First-Year Seminar, send me a proposal (following the format outlined in the attached description and guidelines). Should you desire your proposed Seminar to help students achieve any of the College's curricular goals, you and I should discuss it and bring your proposal to the APPC for approval. Seminars that are not designed to satisfy directly any of the formal curricular objectives will simply be acknowledged by the APPC. (Refer to the College Catalogue or the Provost's Office web pages, "Support for Teaching," for information on curricular goals.)

In addition, if you are interested in offering a writing-intensive seminar, please let me know.

Participation in the First-Year Seminar program is something that can provide you and your students with great pleasure. I hope you will consider proposing a seminar or offering an existing seminar again. If you have any questions, please contact me at telephone extension 6822 or via email to [jryan@gettysburg.edu](mailto:jryan@gettysburg.edu).

Sincerely,

Jack Ryan  
Acting Vice Provost

*JER/pmc*

## **First-Year Seminars: Their Nature, Construction, and Implementation**

### *What are First-Year Seminars?*

The First-Year Seminar (FYS) is a hallmark of the curriculum at Gettysburg College and is intended to defeat one's notion of a typical college learning experience—a large lecture-based survey course for first-year students and intimate seminars with senior faculty reserved only for advanced students committed to a major. The FYS brings the benefits of a seminar to students *beginning* their college career.

Participation by first-year students in the Seminars is not required, but the students are offered a large array of Seminars of broad scope so that nearly all students who request a Seminar are able to enroll. These distinct and numbered courses are seminars in that they have small enrollments, focus on special or rather narrow topics, and emphasize active and collaborative learning. They are designed to help entering students make the transition to college-level learning by stressing fundamental learning skills—in particular, writing, discussion, quantitative reasoning, and basic research methodology. The environment for learning is complemented by out-of-classroom experiences. The Seminars may permit students to satisfy a curricular objective, they may serve as an alternative introduction to the methods and problems of a discipline and count toward a major, or they may be interdisciplinary in scope.

### *The Opportunity for Students*

Entering students will be invited to choose from a collection of First-Year Seminars described in a FYS brochure. (Presidential Scholars are given first choice of Seminars; other students are enrolled on a first-come, first-served basis.) While a particular Seminar will have specific, desired outcomes, FYSs generally demonstrate the value of the liberal arts by demonstrating how the liberated mind focuses on an area of intellectual interest. And because the participants in each Seminar are likely to be housed together, first-year students will naturally find a means of blending their academic and social realms.

### *The Opportunity for Faculty*

Individual faculty and whole departments or programs find certain advantages in offering First-Year Seminars. For a faculty member, her or his teaching situation should be nearly optimal: the professor designs a course that focuses on a special topic of deep intellectual interest; the course's enrollment will be small enough (a maximum of sixteen students) to permit the professor to offer individualized attention to students and to introduce active-learning, collaborative learning, and special group projects; and, as the students who enroll are self-selected by their interest in the topic, the professor can assume her or his students have a curiosity about the topic. In addition, the professor will have the benefit of special funding for meals, speakers, and field trips (each instructor of a Seminar in Fall 2010 will be eligible for **\$500** to support social and academic activities). Further, the professor may request a Student Associate for the Seminar if the Associate's assignments meet established guidelines. Finally, the Seminars allow for creative cross-course linkages, such as joint meetings and events, the "cluster" concept, and links between First-Year Seminars and service-learning experiences or other courses.

Those faculty members who teach a Seminar will have specialized services available to them in the planning and execution of their courses. Those Seminars where writing is emphasized will have special support from the Writing Center, including the opportunity for workshop training and assistance. Some Seminars may allow a student to fulfill the first-year writing requirement (contact the Vice Provost to discuss this possibility). Instructional Technology will provide assistance to those professors who have ideas about special uses of technology—such as web projects or bibliographic-search education. Professors may also work with reference librarians to design assignments that introduce students to library resources in ways that are directly linked to the course content and assignments.

Departments and programs may find the FYSs useful as alternatives to existing courses that meet the curricular multiple-inquiries goal. Or FYSs may provide an alternative course toward the major or even an innovative introduction to the major. Indeed, in the long run, it is likely that the successful FYS will recruit majors by confirming or converting students.

The Office of the Provost is committed to providing staffing assistance for these courses. This means that a priority will be given in the assignment of adjunct sections to departments that need replacements for full-time faculty teaching an FYS.

#### *How to Propose a First-Year Seminar*

Draft your FYS proposal in accordance with the Guidelines and Format instructions below. Once you have gained the endorsement of your department chair or program coordinator, send the proposal to the Vice Provost. He will work with you from that point to design a Seminar that meets programmatic guidelines and to secure the necessary APPC approval(s).

#### **Guidelines for a First-Year Seminar**

The proposed Seminar must:

- serve the needs of first-year students by exercising teaching skills—particularly writing, quantitative reasoning, speech, research methods, etc.—and by serving as a gateway to college-level academic work;
- be designed for a seminar format with twelve to sixteen students;
- be focused on a relatively narrow topic—First-Year Seminars are not designed to replace traditional survey courses;
- have an appealing title and a provocative description; and
- actively involve students in the learning process.

In addition, the proposed Seminar may:

- be multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or provide an introduction to disciplinary study;
- enable students to achieve a curricular goal—that is,
  - the *multiple inquiry goal* (arts, humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences)
  - first-year writing requirement for the *effective communication goal*
  - the *local and global citizenship goal* as a course addressing cultural

- diversity, or science, technology, and society
  - the *integrative thinking goal*, as a quantitative, inductive, or deductive reasoning course, half of a cluster, or as an interdisciplinary course
- count toward a major or minor course of study; and
- be connected to other courses with related subject matter, sharing guest speakers, field trips, and other activities.

### **Format for First-Year Seminar Proposals**

Your proposal must contain:

- the Seminar title and a zesty, one-paragraph description of the proposed Seminar's content (for the FYS brochure and College Catalogue listing);
- a brief explanation of how the Seminar fits the above guidelines, focusing on how the Seminar will serve the needs of first-year students;
- an indication of which, if any, curricular goals the proposed Seminar will achieve and/or a statement describing how the Seminar will fit into a major and/or be connected to other courses (proposed Seminars put forth to reach any of the College's fundamental curricular goals will require approval by the APPC);
- a tentative reading list (including, where appropriate, films or videos);
- a preliminary account of Seminar requirements for academic credit;
- an explanation of the role and functions to be assigned to a Student Associate if one is requested; and
- the signature endorsement of the department chair or program coordinator.

*JER/pmc*  
10/16/09