

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

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 to

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

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

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

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