

Millersville University
Proposal for First Year Inquiry Seminars
(12/18/07)

UNIV 103: 3 credits
First Year Inquiry Seminar

Catalog Description:

Each First Year Inquiry (FYI) Seminar section focuses on a different topic of strong interest to faculty and students. Seminars jump start the process of intellectual inquiry through a free exchange of ideas during and outside of class. FYI instructors mentor and assist students in developing a meaningful and purposeful approach to their college experiences. The FYI Seminar counts in the Connections and Exploration area of the new General Education curriculum (for students entering fall 2008).

Course Summary:

The First Year Inquiry (FYI) Seminar is a component of General Education specifically designed for first semester freshmen and offered in a seminar format, typically linked to a foundations course (either ENGL 110 or COMM 100) as part of a living/learning community. Students will choose from several varieties of FYI courses offered each semester. A major function of these courses is to introduce a process of critical inquiry applied to important social, cultural, scientific, technological, and environmental issues.

The first need relates to the goal of developing a more purposeful general education program. The Gen Ed Task Force conducted focus groups and surveys about the quality of general education in the fall of 2003. Faculty and students clearly expressed the view that our current Gen Ed program was more like a menu of courses than a purposeful program. On a 5-point scale, with 1 being low, 26 out of 41 faculty and 11 out of 27 students rated general education coherence as either a 1 or a 2. Institutional structures and curriculum can support a purposeful general education program. Yet true reform requires a shift of culture and understanding that can only occur through sustained dialogue. Each seminar will include readings and discussion designed to raise dialogue about and appreciation for critical thought as it is developed in disciplines related to the seminar.

A second need indicated by the Gen Ed Task Force was for improved intellectual richness and challenge. A common theme of focus groups was that currently there is a perception that Gen Ed courses are “supposed to be easy.” Seminars are designed to challenge this assumption in the first semester. Each seminar should reflect the goal of an intellectually rich course, both in terms of expectations for active critical thinking and in terms of appropriate yet challenging expectations for reading, writing, student research, and student led discussion. Seminars are designed to challenge through piquing curiosity, sustained inquiry, and dialogue, rather than through the memorization of a large body of knowledge. Faculty will develop Seminars around issues, topics (often current), and questions that they are passionate about, yet that may not fit within the established curriculum. Students will be able to select seminars of interest to them.

Third, Seminars are designed to improve student-faculty interactions during the student’s first year. Millersville ranks in the 30th percentile of Masters I and II institutions in terms of student-faculty interactions in the freshman year (according to the National Survey of Student Engagement). Typically, freshmen are placed in large lecture classes with little chance to interact with faculty. Each section will be limited to 20-25 students and will promote a seminar approach to learning as one way to create opportunities for rich interactions. Integrating the First Seminars with learning communities and including a service learning requirement are additional ways to extend the bonds of friendship and interest beyond the classroom.

Finally, it is essential to address all of these needs early in the general education program. The original freshman seminar model (UNIV 101 – begun in fall 2001) at Millersville has been highly successful in helping new freshman transition to college. Students in the program have had higher retention rates into the second and third college years than students who were not enrolled in the program. Follow-up of students in UNIV 179 (begun in fall 2005) has only just begun, but informal feedback from current instructors and students has been very positive. Faculty and students both seemed highly engaged and excited about the topics and the process of exploring them in the context of a seminar and learning community. Assessment data from the UNIV 179 pilot-test are summarized in a separate section below.

It is important to clarify the evolution of first-year programming at Millersville. The concept of UNIV 101 grew out of the recommendations of the MU Alcohol Task Force in the late 1990s. Historically, University 101 has been a 1-credit course offered only to students who have not declared a major. (Occasionally, the course has served as a majors-based seminar for Departments that do not have their own course label.) However, University 101 was not designed to address the need for intellectual richness. In addition, instructors often felt that one hour per week of class limited the opportunity for interaction and the depth to which instructors could get to know and assist their students. From the student side, a one-credit seminar did not fulfill a curricular need and, as a result,

Course Objectives:

By completion of this course, the students will

- a) Investigate a specific topic or question in-depth.
- b) Consider the connections within and between various fields of study
- c) Discuss and explore how diverse viewpoints can aid and enhance research and understanding
- d) Recognize the need to explore underlying assumptions in both people and text
- e) Demonstrate strengthened inquiry, research and information literacy skills
- f) Reflect upon the importance of civic responsibility
- g) Discuss and practice integrity within personal and educational contexts
- h) Develop skills in oral discussion and written communication
- i) Learn to utilize University resources including registration and other academic services

Comprehensive Outline of Course Content:

The very nature of First-Year Inquiry courses is that the content will differ for each seminar, prohibiting a full course outline here. However, each seminar will celebrate inquiry and diversity within the context of the course material. All seminars will be constructed around the following foundational questions.

- 1) The Knowledgeable Mind (aka General Education)
 - a) How does a broad background encourage different points of view?
 - b) How have various disciplines provided insights into the topic of the course?
 - c) In today's society where information is easily accessible, what is the value of a liberal arts education?
- 2) The Critical Mind (aka Critical Thinking)
 - a) What does it mean to think critically?
 - b) How do underlying assumptions bias information?
 - c) How does one evaluate information available in journals and on-line?
 - d) How is critical thinking practiced in the context of the course?
 - e) How is critical thinking practiced in the context of life?
- 3) The Investigative Mind (aka Research and Information Literacy)
 - a) Where can one find reliable information?
 - b) How does one access reliable information?
 - c) How does one evaluate information?
- 4) The Communicative Mind (aka Oral and Written Communication)
 - a) What makes an effective oral presentation?
 - b) What makes an effective written presentation?
- 5) The Civic Mind (aka Service Learning and Civic Responsibility)
 - a) What is individual responsibility?
 - b) What is an individual's responsibility to the social and civic network?
 - c) How can one person impact society?

Criteria for Evaluating Student Performance:

Each instructor will define their specific evaluation procedures following assessment guidelines appropriate for classes offered in a seminar format. Students should be expected to participate in challenging discussions on various topics related to their individual seminar content. Writing and student research are also seminar components that need to be assessed in each respective class. FYI assessment instruments will also be a regular part of evaluation data that will be collected each semester the course is offered.

Course evaluations may include but are not limited to individual or group research projects, intellectual portfolios, journals, class discussion, oral presentations, and individual or group service learning participation.

Grading:

The FYI Seminar will be offered on a traditional A-F grade.

Bibliography:

Each seminar will have an individual bibliography appropriate to the content of the course being offered.