

Millersville University
General Education Task Force
Draft Proposal for First-Year Seminars
(DRAFT – 12/3/04)

UNIV 179: 3 credits
First Seminar

Catalog Description:

Each Seminar section focuses on a different topic of strong interest to faculty and students. Seminars are designed to jump start the process of intellectual inquiry; students participate in a free exchange of ideas through discussion and oral presentations. 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. Professors teaching First Seminars have a strong mentoring role as they assist students in developing a meaningful and purposeful approach to General Education that will prepare them for life.

An important part of the First Seminar is that most sections will be part of a learning community. Learning communities may be arranged as living-learning communities and Seminar sections may team with either the freshman writing or speech course. Whatever the design of the learning community, the goal is always to promote a richer experience that extends learning and relationship beyond the classroom. Seminars are limited to 20 students.

Course Rationale:

The First Seminar is designed to meet three critical needs: 1) to imbue an appreciation in students of critical thought as it is developed in a variety of disciplines, 2) to create a culture of intellectual richness at the beginning of a student's experience with Millersville general education, and 3) to improve student faculty interactions in the freshman or transfer year. Identification of each of these needs arose from an analysis of multiple sources of data including GENED Task force focus groups and surveys, the National Survey of Student Engagement, and data collected on the current 1-credit Freshman Year Seminar (UNIV 101).

The first need relates to the goal of developing a more purposeful general education program. The GENED 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 GENED 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. Moreover, each seminar will include investigation of the relation between seminar questions and broader cross-disciplinary questions.

A second need indicated by the GENED Task force was for improved intellectual richness and challenge. A common theme of focus groups was that currently there is a perception that GENED 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 freshman 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 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 where possible, 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 current freshman seminar has been highly successful in helping new freshman transition to college. Students in University 101 have a 17% higher retention rate than students who are not enrolled in the program. Currently, University 101 is a 1-credit course offered only to students who have not declared a major. Also, University 101 is not designed to address the need for intellectual richness. The First Seminar (University 179) will be a 3-credit course with a substantial academic focus offered to all students.

Course Objectives:

By completion of this course, the students will

- Investigate a specific topic or question in-depth.
- Understand comparisons and connections within and between various fields of study and the role of critical thinking in a liberal arts education.
- Recognize the need to explore assumptions, including assumptions from readings, peers, and faculty.
- Demonstrate strengthened inquiry, research and information literacy skills.
- Understand and demonstrate tolerance for the relativity and plurality of human values and beliefs, especially the multicultural values represented in society.
- Reflect upon the importance of civic responsibility and academic integrity.
- Develop skills in oral discussion and written communication

Comprehensive Outline of Course Content:

The very nature of First Seminar courses is that the content will be different for each section, prohibiting a full course outline here. However, each section will have several topics/issues in common.

- **Critical Thinking and General Education:** Is there value in seeking a well-rounded education? How is critical thinking a vital part of being a well-educated person? What does critical thinking look like in the disciplines related to the seminar topic?
- **Service Learning:** seminars will include a 5-hour service learning experience. The service learning experience will not be part of class time, but essays/discussions related to service learning will be part of the seminar. Organizing and implementing the service learning experience is not part of the faculty responsibilities for the course; this work will be done by the office of Community and Academic Partnerships
- **Information Literacy:** in the context of student research for the seminar, library faculty will deliver instruction to strengthen inquiry, research, and information literacy skills.
- **Examples:** the concept of the First Seminar was proposed to Millersville by a Stephen Briggs, Provost at The College of New Jersey. Although this proposal differs in many respects from TCNJ's version of the course, examples of potential seminar topics can be seen on TCNJ's website: <http://www.tcnj.edu/%7Eliberal/firstselection.html>

Criteria for Evaluating Student Performance:

Each instructor will define specific evaluation procedures, but assessment should be consistent with a seminar format and the rationale for the course. Students should be expected to engage in challenging discussions, writing, and research; assessments should reflect this. It is likely that assessments will involve some of the following: research projects, intellectual portfolios, journals, class discussion, and oral presentations.

Bibliography:

Each Seminar section will have its own bibliography.

General Education Credit:

Each Seminar section will be designated as a G1, G2, or G3 course. Sections must be approved by the General Education Review Committee. Like topics courses, individual seminar sections do not need to be approved through the normal governance process. Individual sections will be approved for 3 years; after 3 years seminar sections must be submitted for reapproval.

Collecting Data on Seminar Format Implementation:

This course is intended to be delivered in a true seminar format with extensive student-led discussion. In order to evaluate the degree of success in implementing this format, each seminar faculty member would agree to collect data using questions designed by the GERC. Data would be connected to a specific seminar section, but not to individual faculty members. Examples of the types of prompts that might be used for this purpose are listed below.

Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions

Made a class presentation

Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in

Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources

Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments

Come to class without completing readings or assignments

Worked with other students on projects during class

Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments

Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class

Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations

Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, coworkers, etc.)

Resources:

- Staff: given the format of the seminars and the limit of 20 students per section, this proposal does have resource implications. Discussions are ongoing to resolve these resource issues.
- Library resources: the library faculty will provide the necessary instructional support for seminars. The current library facilities and resources provide a strong foundation for student research.
- Service Learning: the office of Community and Academic Partnerships will organize and implement service learning experiences.

- No special equipment is needed for this course.

This course adheres strictly to the University Academic Honesty Policy.