

**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/or aesthetic problems. Each seminar will introduce multiple perspectives related to the understanding and resolution of these problems. A second function of these courses is to support students' transition into the college experience academically, socially, and personally.

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.

An important part of the FYI 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 first-year writing (ENGL 110) or fundamentals of speech (COMM 100) 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 20-25 students.

**Course Rationale:**

The First Year Inquiry Seminar is designed to meet four 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 socialize students to that culture, 3) to improve student-faculty interactions in the first college year, and 4) to assist entering students in their transition to college, academically, socially and personally. Identification of each of the above needs arose from an analysis of multiple sources of data including Gen Ed Task Force (GETF) focus groups and surveys, the National Survey of Student Engagement, and data collected on existing 1-credit (UNIV 101) and 3-credit (UNIV 179) Freshman Year Seminars.

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 30<sup>th</sup> 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,

was sometimes taken less seriously than other coursework. Expanding upon the potential of this early model and fueled by the ongoing work of the Gen Ed Task Force, the First Seminar model (UNIV 179) was created and pilot-tested in 2005 as a 3-credit course with a substantial academic focus. By fall 2006 it was being offered to all incoming Exploratory students. The proposed First Year Inquiry Seminar (University 103) grew out of the UNIV 179 pilot-test.

While discussing first-year programming, it is important to point out other models of freshman seminars – those offered by majors or programs (such as Ethnic Studies). These typically one-credit seminars have a history of serving the need of socializing majors to the intellectual life of their particular disciplines. Most, either explicitly or implicitly and to varying degrees, have also served to support the transition to college life in a more general sense. It is both hoped and expected that some of the major-based seminars will convert to First Year Inquiry Seminars by merging their disciplinary objectives with the objectives laid out below for an FYI Seminar.

The FYI Seminar has been proposed as one of the cornerstones of the new General Education curriculum and its renewed commitment to a purposeful liberal education. As an innovation designed “to initiate students into the college experience and to stimulate their passion for learning through intense engagement with faculty and fellow students” (MU’s Strategic Directions), the FYI Seminar serves to further the vision of Millersville University as a center for learning and free inquiry in the liberal arts tradition.

### **Assessment Results:**

Results from the 2005 FYE Survey and end-of-semester focus groups both suggested that seminar/learning community participation had desirable impacts. Overall, students were very satisfied with the three-credit UNIV 179 seminar (96% indicated good, very good, or excellent). In comparing those having seminars with those who didn’t, students in UNIV 179 had more serious conversations with different students, worked more with classmates outside of class, performed more library research, contributed more to class, and came to class more prepared than students who were not in a freshman seminar. The 2006 FYE assessment focused on a series of quantitative and qualitative pretest and posttest measures to examine change over the course of the semester. Significant growth was shown for students’ openness to diversity and challenge and in their understanding of the liberal arts and their ability to articulate that understanding. Analysis of NSSE data for this cohort is still being conducted. In summary, both impressionistic and data-based assessments have yielded a favorable picture of the first-year seminar initiatives including the extension to the three-credit “passion course” model.

## **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.