FYS GUIDELINES

The overall aim of the First-Year Seminar (FYS) program is to provide new college students with motivational examples of the benefits of intellectual curiosity and life-long learning. First-Year Seminars introduce students to college-level inquiry and facilitate their academic and personal transitions from high school learners to university scholars. All FYS reflect the faculty members’ research and creative interests, and, where possible, engage students in the close analysis of primary texts and sources. The courses also emphasize experiential learning and effective academic habits. The most successful courses display these characteristics:

A compelling, challenging “Big Question”: FYS should present students with issues and topics for which there are no easy or pre-determined answers. In so doing, the courses encourage students to think creatively and to work with multiple sources of information. Big questions help students connect their coursework to the challenges and opportunities that face our professional and personal communities. All FYS courses are to include this learning outcome:

• Students will engage a question of enduring and/or contemporary importance and be able to define and discuss the complexities and implications of the question.

This objective is to be assessed through a written essay assigned at an appropriate time during the course.

For information on big questions and FYS, click here.

An emphasis on depth, not breadth: FYS should take students on intellectual journeys into particular issues, conditions, or intellectual puzzles. Their purpose is to demonstrate how academics go about defining, framing, and exploring specific research questions. To that end, FYS should not stipulate a body of knowledge or skill set as a prerequisite, nor should it act as an introduction to a particular major or field of study.

An awareness of methodology: FYS should make a point of helping students understand how scholars pose questions, read and analyze primary sources, evaluate data and evidence, and formulate substantive and supportable conclusions. Whenever possible, students should reflect on their course work to gain a deeper understanding of how knowledge is created, consumed, and mediated.

A focus on active learning: Students in FYS should engage in activities, both inside and outside the classroom, that guide them toward increasingly independent investigations of questions and issues. Instruction should be geared toward activities that encourage students to talk and listen to one another, write in response to new ideas, reflect on their learning, and engage in problem-solving exercises. Active course might include substantial time given to small group discussions, case studies, simulations, and role-playing activities.

An emphasis on communication: FYS students should engage in regular exercises that involve writing, speaking, and presenting.

A commitment to critical thinking: FYS should provide students with guided practice in developing and refining their critical thinking skills. Students should have frequent opportunities to analyze issues, questions, and problems; synthesize data from multiple sources; and evaluate findings, opinions, and experimental results — both their own and those of others.