What is the purpose of the First Year Seminar?

The purpose of the First Year Seminar program is to provide an effective introduction for first year students to the intellectual life of college. This is done in the context of a small discussion-oriented seminar designed around a specific theme or topic approached from the perspective of one or more of the traditional academic disciplines. In this context, students work toward enhancing their ability in the basic intellectual skills: how to read critically, think logically, and communicate effectively. In addition, students are encouraged to begin thinking about how the Christian faith can and should be related to the intellectual life. In short, First Year Seminars are designed to encourage positive attitudes toward academic work and stimulate appropriate mental habits.

What specific objectives are assigned to First Year Seminars?

The objectives for First Year Seminars, as delineated in the Messiah College General Education Curriculum, are the following. By the completion of the course the students will demonstrate the ability to

a. apply skills of critical thinking to reading, writing, and discussion,
b. read analytically and critically,
c. write essays using effective prose,
d. apply basic methods and skills of information literacy: accessing, evaluating, and using information effectively and ethically,
e. relate aspects of Christian faith to intellectual life, and
f. participate in conversations with students and faculty about significant ideas related to the identity of the College, thus enhancing an intellectual campus climate.

Are there other outcomes which might be expected from First Year Seminars?

The seminar program provides an opportunity for first year students to work closely with a faculty member, helping to foster enhanced student-faculty relationships and ease the feeling of intimidation that many students experience early in their time at college. In addition, given the small group context of the First Year Seminars, this program serves to promote a community of inquiry in which students are encouraged, early in their college studies, to exchange ideas with one another and thus collaborate in the learning process.

How do First Year Seminars compare with other courses?

First Year Seminars are academic experiences with the same standards and expectations as other courses offered by the College. Each seminar counts as three credit hours and is taught by a member of the College faculty.

What distinguishes First Year Seminars from other courses?

The emphasis in First Year Seminars is on the process of intellectual discovery rather than on the acquisition of facts or content related to a specified academic discipline. By emphasizing logical analysis and creative synthesis of ideas, First Year Seminars help first year students achieve critical thinking and communication skills essential to success in the world of academic scholarship.

The seminars have no prerequisites and are not intended to provide preparation needed for advanced work in specific departmental programs. The topical or thematic content of each seminar is determined by the individual faculty member. Each seminar adheres to stipulated requirements for the writing component common to all seminars. Since reading and interpreting texts is an important component of the delineated objectives, seminars also include a substantial amount of required reading.
What types of writing activities are required?

Two principles inform the writing-learning context of the First Year Seminar: engagement and helpful intervention. Engagement is important because students tend to write better about subjects that interest them. Since the seminar topics are chosen to stimulate student interest, it is not too difficult to adhere to this principle. But equally important is the principle of helpful intervention; students need to receive, during the writing process, input that aids them in focusing and refining their final products. This intervention may take various forms such as the professor looking at rough drafts, peer editing, and help from Writing Workshop tutors.

Many types of activities can work within this context, because the principles do not dictate the kind of writing activities to be assigned--they only guide the ways these activities are carried out. A rough description of the writing element of the seminars, however, might read like this: "Students write frequent, relatively brief essays that are useful to them in the learning process. They are guided through prewriting, writing, and editing. Most work to be graded as a product will have been seen and commented upon while in draft form by people other than the author. While some of the writing will be reflexive, or personal, most will be in the modes that scholars use: description, exposition, argumentation."

Writing assignments of individual seminars may include analytical reactions to daily readings and discussions, summaries of articles, position papers, very brief research reports, etc. Some professors have students keep journals of the readings and discussions as well. But these activities are only examples. Specific writing assignments vary from one seminar to the next.

Who are the Seminar faculty?

Faculty members from each academic department of the College teach in the First Year Seminar program. This helps to assure that a breadth of topics are available in the Seminar program -- faculty members frequently propose seminar topics based on their areas of disciplinary expertise, or sometimes they draw on areas of personal interest which are not associated with their academic specialty.

How do I select a Seminar?

Several issues will influence your choice. Primary among these will be your own interest in the topics covered in the seminars. Descriptions of each seminar are provided in the following documents; you are encouraged to find several among these which represent interests you have or ideas you would like to study. In addition, your selection of a seminar will be guided by the schedule of other courses you need to take. While seminars are open to all first year students, enrollment in each is limited. Once a seminar reaches this enrollment, it is closed to all other students.

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