

**PERSUASION THROUGH *LOGIC & REASON*:
THE CONCEPTUAL CASE FOR THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR**

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Anticipate and Counter Common Objections to the Course

When arguing for the academic credibility and creditability of the first-year seminar, it is important to anticipate common objections and be ready to debunk them in a rational, authoritative (and socially sensitive) manner. In the following sections of this manuscript, two of the most common arguments against the first-year seminar are cited and suggested counter-arguments are provided.

◆ **Common Objection #1. The first-year seminar is a “*remedial*” or “*developmental*” course, therefore it should not carry college credit.**

For critics who employ this argument, let them be reminded that research on the first-year seminar indicates that it *benefits students of all levels of academic ability* (Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Fidler, 1990). In fact, one institutional research study revealed that participation in the first-year seminar had more positive impact on the retention of students with higher SAT scores than course participants with lower SAT scores (Davis, 1992).

Students at all levels of academic preparedness benefit from grappling with such first-year seminar topics as, “the meaning and value of liberal education” because such information is neither covered in high school, nor is it explicitly covered anywhere in the undergraduate curriculum. (Or in the graduate curriculum, for that matter, resulting in the cruel irony that most college faculty are not conversant with this central goal of the undergraduate experience—including the present author—until he began teaching the topic in the first-year seminar!).

Also, academically well-prepared freshmen profit from exposure to strategies for coping with college-related social and emotional adjustments that may otherwise interfere with their academic performance. It is interesting to note that three major topics covered in the first-year seminar, self-awareness, social and emotional adjustment are often perceived as affective or non-intellectual (“touchy-feely”) subjects; yet, recent research and theory on human cognition refers to these very same concepts as forms of human intelligence: “intrapersonal intelligence”, “interpersonal intelligence” (Gardner, 1983, 1993), and “emotional intelligence” (Goleman., 1995). There are also “undecided” students among the academically well-prepared who still need to sort out the complex relationships among college majors, future careers, and personal interests, aptitudes, and values. Even honors students report significant stress related to time-management adjustments during their first year of college (Stephens & Eison, 1986-1987)

John Gardner (1989) eloquently sums up the major counter-arguments to the charge that the first-year seminar is a remedial or developmental course:

The argument that freshman seminars are developmental or remedial is easily refuted. They are offered at many institutions so select in their admission practices that teaching such courses could not possibly be considered developmental or remedial. Even more important, it must be argued that the purpose and content of freshman seminars focus on the nature of the college experience, most of which cannot be taught before students reach college. Freshmen cannot learn to cope with college professors before they get there. High school teachers are

different from college teachers, and freshmen cannot possibly become oriented to an institution before they arrive. They cannot learn how to take college lecture notes if they have not been lectured to in high school. Finally it should be noted that *all* education and course work are developmental in the sense that they develop the student's intellectual and personal capacities. All college work should be regarded as remedial, for it is remedying existing levels of ignorance and lack of knowledge (p. 245).

◆ **Common Objection #2. The first-year seminar is an “*applied*,” not an “*academic*” course.**

For critics who argue that college credit should not be awarded for the first-year seminar because its course content is too “applied or “non-academic” in nature, let them be reminded that such criticism was once directed against science labs and modern languages when these courses were first introduced to the college curriculum (Rudolph, 1977), while at other major universities, similar charges were leveled against history, political science, sociology (Thelin, 1992), and American literature (Franklin, Huber, & Laurence, 1992). This suggests that higher education’s definition of “academic” is neither immutable nor indisputable; rather, it may often reflect the somewhat arbitrary norms of already-established departments or the narrowly-focused professional perspectives of academic specialists. (For an astute examination of the issue of what is academic or intellectual, see McGrath and Spear’s [1991] critique of “disciplinary savants.”)

Critics should also be reminded of the fact that academic credit is now offered for other college courses that are patently “applied” in nature (e.g., computer programming, physical education, and cardiopulmonary resuscitation). Academic purists are sometimes inclined to assume that an *educational* experience is synonymous with an *academic* experience, but the former is a much more inclusive concept that embraces learning experiences beyond those that equate to traditional content-centered, “chalk-and-talk” lectures.

Furthermore, a substantive educational experience depends as much, or more, on *how* the learner works on or engages with the subject matter than it does on *what* the subject matter happens to be. For example, a first-year seminar which encourages a small class of students to actively reflect on, and think deeply about its subject through focused discussions and writing assignments may constitute a more rigorous educational experience than a required introductory course that is taught exclusively via lectures delivered to large groups of students—who “learn” by listening passively in class—and demonstrate their learning on multiple-choice exams requiring nothing more than rote recall of factual information. The latter type of learning experience is not untypical of many introductory, general education courses experienced during the first year which are commonly designed to provide cursory coverage of multiple topics (Spear, 1984), and which are delivered in impersonal large-class settings with little opportunity for active student involvement, writing, and personalized feedback. Moreover, there is extensive research indicating that even when factual information is “learned” by college students in this fashion, it is forgotten soon after course completion (Blunt & Blizard, 1975; Brethower, 1977; Gustav, 1969; McLeish, 1968). Commenting on these findings in their comprehensive 20-year review of more than 2500 studies on how college affects students, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) reached the following conclusion:

Abundant evidence suggests that much factual material is forgotten rather soon after it is presented in educational settings. Thus, . . . beyond imparting specific subject matter knowledge, claims for the enduring influence of postsecondary education on learning must be

based . . . on cognitive competencies and skills (p. 114).

It is these timeless, cross-situational lifelong learning skills (rather than time-bound college survival skills) that should be emphasized when rebutting the charge that the first-year seminar is “too applied.” Furthermore, these highly transferable “life skills” should be showcased as course objectives in the first-year seminar syllabus. Such evidence underscores the need for the college curriculum to counterbalance its heavy dose of “information-loaded” courses with courses designed to develop students' lifelong-learning *skills* (Cross, 1993). The first-year seminar represents such a course—one which focuses on the development of student competencies and skills that are likely to withstand the “test of time”—an oft-cited criterion used to assess the ultimate value of an educational experience (Cross, 1982). Applying this test-of-time criterion to the first-year seminar, Gordon and Grites (1984) argue eloquently for the course’s credit-bearing value,

To determine the credit value of a freshman seminar course, ask yourself to identify an undergraduate course you had that you are not using in your work today. If you can identify only one, you are very fortunate. The skills, attitudes, and knowledge learned in a freshman seminar usually outlive those learned in many other courses because they are used daily (p. 317).

Understand Common *Criteria* Used by Faculty to *Evaluate* College Courses

In addition to anticipating common course objections, it is important to understand the implicit criteria that are commonly used by faculty to judge the credit-worthiness of college-level courses. Three criteria seem to be employed commonly (and often tacitly) by faculty in reaching decisions about approving courses for college credit: (1) Does the course involve coverage of *theoretical* concepts or *abstract* principles? (2) Does the course have a *broad* focus with respect to person, time and place that moves beyond the self to include *historical, intercultural, or global* perspectives? (3) Does the course foster *critical thinking*? (4) Is the course *comparable* to anything already offered for academic credit in higher education?

Strategies for meeting each of these three course-evaluation standards or criteria will be discussed in turn.

◆ Course-evaluation standard #1. Coverage of *theoretical* concepts or *abstract* principles.

A major criterion commonly employed by faculty when judging the credit-worthiness of a college course is its *theoretical* emphasis. As Harrison (1983-84) notes, “People who teach skills and provide services are traditionally less respected and rewarded than those who teach theory” (p. 5). Furthermore, Shaw (1980) points out that,

The main criterion that governs faculty thinking in making distinctions between the creditable and the noncreditable is often hidden—not intentionally but because faculty by nature or conditioning have come to assume it. The criterion is *abstraction*. Virtually any course that yields or at least manipulates abstract concepts is virtually assured of accreditation (pp. 33-34, italics added).

Thus, proponents of the seminar should emphasize during course negotiations that the content of

the course is well-grounded in scholarly research and theory on personal adjustment (e.g., mental health and social psychology), human development (e.g., adolescent and adult development), and human learning (e.g., information-processing and cognition). The seminar's content is also well grounded in higher education research and theory on student adjustment, student development, and collegiate success. These theoretical and research underpinnings of the seminar should be showcased in course proposals and highlighted in the course syllabus (e.g., in course objectives, topic descriptions, and bibliographical references) so as to raise their level of consciousness in the minds of those who are offering judgments and rendering decisions about the seminar's credit-bearing status.

This does not mean that the course has to forfeit its applied, learner-centered, student development focus—which remains the primary focus on what is done with students inside the classroom (the “internal audience”)—while theory is introduced secondarily. However, for the “external audience” (faculty), theoretical aspects of the course are highlighted. This is not to suggest that deception or duplicity be used in course negotiations; what is being suggested is that different aspects of the course should be showcased or marketed when selling it to different audiences—faculty or students. This strategy is no different than one commonly recommended by assessment scholars for reporting data on educational programs: Tailor the content and tone of the assessment report to the specific needs and interests of the audience (Hanson, 1982).

The present recommendation for emphasizing theory or practice to different audiences at different times is well illustrated in the first-year seminar offered at Empire State College (NY). This course includes readings on the ways that humans develop over the life span that have a theoretical focus; however, classroom activities and course assignments have a practical emphasis, such as constructing personal life-planning maps and interviewing people with extensive life and work experience (Steltenpohl, Shipton, & Villines, 1996).

◆ **Course-evaluation standard #2. *Broad focus with respect to person, time and place that moves beyond the self to include historical, intercultural, or global perspectives.***

That the college curriculum should broaden students' perspectives beyond the self to include other times, places, and people is a long-held ideal of liberal education (Boyer & Kaplan, 1977) that is shared by faculty in many academic disciplines (Civian, et al. 1997). The criterion of broad focus can be addressed through course content (topics and subtopics), but also through course *goals and objectives*.

With respect to course content, there are several major topics or instructional units typically included in first-year seminars that can accommodate this judgment criterion. A common goal of many first-year seminars is to introduce new college students to the “culture” of higher education (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996), including such topics as the key differences between high school and higher education, the meaning and value of a college education, and the academic expectations of college students. A historical perspective can be woven meaningfully into this unit by infusing it with discussion of (a) a brief review of the historical development of higher education in America, and (b) historical differences in the attitudes, values, aspirations, and experiences of college students (e.g., pre-1960s, vs. the '60s, vs. today).

Also, broader intercultural elements may be incorporated under the rubric of introducing students to higher education, such as: (a) diversity of higher education in America (e.g., community colleges, liberal arts colleges, comprehensive universities, research universities); (b) differences between American higher education and postsecondary education in other countries

(e.g., student access, diversity of postsecondary institutions); and (c) higher education demographics (e.g., changes in numbers of females, re-entry adults, racial and ethnic minorities).

Diversity is another staple topic in many first-year seminars (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996) that is typically covered under the rubric of social development (interpersonal relations) or as a stand-alone unit. Diversity lends itself to a wealth of subtopics that meet the course-evaluation criterion of a broad focus that moves students beyond themselves. For instance, any or all of the following issues may be relevant for discussion in the first-year seminar: (a) multicultural (domestic) diversity—differences among racial, ethnic, and cultural groups within America; (b) cross-cultural (international) diversity—differences between American culture and the culture of other nations; (c) intercultural communication skills; (d) diversity in learning styles; (e) diversity in lifestyle (e.g., relating to socioeconomic differences, or to different campus subcultures—scholars, party animals, jocks, hippies), (f) diversity in sexual orientation, and (g) achieving unity and community amidst diversity (e.g., discussion of universal human characteristics, needs, and concerns).

Furthermore, many of these same diversity issues may be discussed within the context of another common topic in the first-year seminar: Self-awareness and self-understanding (e.g., self-assessment and self-monitoring; self-concept and personal identity; self-esteem and self-efficacy; values awareness and clarification). Moving beyond the self to understand the perspectives of others who are different (diversity appreciation) provides individual students with multiple comparative perspectives or reference points for more accurately assessing and understanding who they are. (It should also be noted here that including the topic of self-awareness or self-understanding in the first-year seminar is a good course-approval strategy in its own right because it addresses one of the most frequently-cited goals in the history of liberal education: “Know thyself” [Cross, 1982]).

Since faculty tend to be content-focused and content-driven (Erickson & Strommer, 1991), it is recommended that the title and description of course topics listed in the syllabus should be phrased in a way that highlights their academic (i.e., abstract, theoretical, historical, global) aspects or implications. Listed below is a sample of topic titles typically covered in first-year seminar textbooks followed by a rephrasing of each title to connote a more academic focus. Note the use of the grammatical colon, which allows more opportunity to describe the topic and delineate its specific components.

- (1) Introduction to College → Understanding Higher Education: Its Purpose, Value, & Expectations
- (2) Learning Strategies/Study Skills → Meta-Learning & Meta-Cognition: Learning about Learning and Thinking
- (3) Time Management → Personal Responsibility: Self-Motivation, Self-Management, and Self-Discipline
- (4) Majors & Careers → Life Planning: Connecting the Present Academic Experience to Future Personal & Professional Goals
- (5) Wellness → Holistic Development: Social, Emotional, Physical, & Spiritual Elements of Personal Development.

◆ Course evaluation standard #3. **A focus on critical thinking.**

In a national survey conducted by the American Council on Education, 97% of the 40,000 faculty respondents indicated that promoting critical thinking was the most important goal of undergraduate education (cited in Milton, 1982). This suggests that including attention to critical thinking in the first-year seminar may serve to enhance its perceived academic credibility.

Fortunately, critical thinking is a skill-focused educational objective which can be applied to a wide variety of content areas, including those that comprise the first-year seminar.

Unfortunately, however, even though many faculty are staunch advocates for critical thinking, there has been little consensus among them on how they define it (McMillan, 1987).

Nonetheless, it has been the author's experience that almost all faculty will firmly assert that they "know it when they see it" (i.e., they can identify or recognize instances of it).

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Another strategy is to breakout or isolate "critical thinking" as a separate *unit of instruction* and list it in the syllabus as one of the major topics to be covered in the course. Many first-year seminar/student success textbooks include critical thinking as a stand-alone course topic, so they may be consulted to identify components of this topic. It is also recommended that an instructional unit on critical thinking in the first-year seminar should include some or all of the following subtopics: (a) becoming an intelligent "consumer" of college courses, programs and activities, (b) critical thinking with respect to choice of major and career; (c) critically evaluating information retrieved in print and through the Internet; (d) understanding epistemological and methodological differences across different academic disciplines (e.g., disciplinary differences in types of intellectual questions asked, approaches to answering these questions, ways of learning and knowing, standards or criteria for judging truth or beauty, and for demonstrating critical and creative thinking); (e) applying critical thinking to interpersonal relationships; and (f) applying critical thinking to money management and intelligent consumerism.

One final recommendation for addressing the critical-thinking criterion often used in judging first-year seminars is to include an emphasis on student *writing* in the course proposal and course syllabus. Writing and thinking have long been viewed as strongly interrelated activities, both in the scholarly literature on writing (Connolly, 1989) and in the minds of many faculty (Smit, 1991). Thus, requiring student writing in the first-year seminar (e.g., out-of-class writing assignments and in-class writing activities) is strongly recommended for gaining and securing course acceptance. However, it should be noted that requiring student writing is not synonymous with requiring the traditional term paper. Required writing can take the form of essays exams (in-class or take-home), as well as a host of short, focused "writing-to-learn" assignments.

◆ Course evaluation standard #4. **Comparability with already-accredited college courses.**

With respect to understanding and coping with this common criterion for judging the credit-worthiness of college courses, it should be kept in mind that psychological research indicates that *familiarity* has a powerful effect on human judgment and decision-making. Generally speaking, the more exposure humans have to something, the more familiar it becomes, and the more likely it is to be perceived *positively* and judged *favorably*. So powerful is the effect of familiarity, it has gained the status of an established principle of human behavior, referred to by

social psychologists as the “familiarity principle,” i.e., what is familiar (and has not harmed us) is good (Zajonc, 1968, 1970). This strong influence of familiarity on human judgment may explain why innovators in any organization or culture often must overcome rigid adherence to tradition and intense resistance to change.

For course proponents trying to gain acceptance of the first-year seminar, one strategy that may reduce this source of resistance and re-direct it in a way that it may work *for* (rather than against) course approval is to look for familiar, already-credited courses which cover topics that are similar to those discussed in the first-year seminar. For instance, it could be pointed out during negotiations that a course commonly offered by colleges and universities, “Psychology of Adjustment,” contains content that is quite comparable to topics covered in the first-year seminar (e.g., self-concept and self-esteem, motivation and goal setting, self-management, memory-improvement, and interpersonal relations). The only major difference is that students in the first-year seminar apply these topics and concepts to the college adjustment experience in particular, rather than to personal adjustment in general. Undoubtedly, there are courses in the college curriculum that cover content similar to that which is discussed in the first-year seminar, particularly those offered by the behavioral or social sciences, and the departments of education and human development.

Comparability with other college courses may also be addressed by ensuring that the nature of *student work* in the first-year seminar is comparable to that required of students in other academic credit-bearing courses. As Gardner notes with respect to first-year seminars,

These courses can be made as “academic” as the designers choose. There are all sorts of opportunities for freshman seminars to provide instruction and learning opportunities by such traditional means as required readings, required writing, testing, book reviews, oral reports, written reports, keeping journals [and] writing term papers (1989, p. 247).

One way to make these “academic” elements of the course very visible to those who are judging its credibility is to showcase them in the course syllabus. Indeed, the design and presentation of a comprehensive, well-constructed course syllabus may in itself promote positive perceptions of the course and enhance its endorsement.

A final strategy for capitalizing on the familiarity principle to gain course acceptance is to simply point out that first-year seminars are rapidly becoming familiar additions to the college curriculum in higher education, as evidenced by the following findings: (a) Almost 70% of American colleges and universities surveyed have implemented a “student success” type of first-year seminar (National Resource Center, 1998); (b) approximately 80% of first-year seminars were initiated during the 1980s and nearly 25% during the 1990s (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996); and (c) approximately 47% of first-year seminars are *required* for *all* first-year students, and 88% of these seminars carry academic credit toward graduation (National Resource Center, 1998). Although the first-year seminar may still be perceived as unorthodox when viewed in relation to other courses comprising the home institution’s curriculum, if it is viewed from a less parochial and more national perspective, a strong case can be made that the course has become an established component of college curricula across the country.

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