

FIRST YEAR SEMINAR: ENDURING QUESTIONS

July 1, 2016

I. Short Description

This seminar introduces students to the Christian liberal arts by engaging enduring questions in a theologically informed way. Common material will include essential biblical and theological content that grounds investigation of enduring questions, the liberal arts, vocation, and character formation. Students will apply their learning to a specific theme or question related to the faculty member's discipline.

II. First Year Seminar Learning Outcomes and Interpretation

A. Students will be able to....

1. articulate how life in Christ shapes the way one addresses enduring questions (including "What is the good life?") in conversation with alternative approaches
2. analyze significant factors that influence the development of character
3. articulate the value of Christian liberal arts education
4. explain the Gospel in light of the biblical narrative using basic theological vocabulary
5. critically engage the ideas of vocation as they concern God's general calling on all Christians, their calling as students, and the distinctive vocations each of them pursues

B. Expansion and interpretation of the outcome statements

1. Outcome #1: Students will be able to articulate how life in Christ shapes the way one addresses enduring questions (including "What is the good life?") in conversation with alternative approaches

The Christian tradition offers a distinctive perspective from which to address enduring questions that touch on issues such as the good life, justice, truth, beauty, and goodness. Christians anchor their reflections on these matters in the biblical narrative and the church's theological reflections on it, in various times and places. The Christian tradition's answers to these enduring questions form us for life in this world and the next. Students will compare and contrast various Christian answers to these enduring questions with alternative perspectives.

2. Outcome #2: Students will be able to analyze significant factors that influence the development of character

Students will explore how factors such as one's community, family, Christian disciplines and their strategies of self-examination help us to analyze and foster virtues and avoid or conquer vices. Students will consider what constitutes Christian character and promotes the formation of virtuous habits and practices. Character formation in a Christian context requires us to avail ourselves of the Church's long-standing practices of spiritual disciplines, such as scripture study, worship, prayer, fasting, and solitude. These disciplines open us to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and aid the task of self-examination. They reveal areas where we must grow in intellectual, moral, spiritual, and civic virtues and where we must be vigilant against habits that impede their formation.

3. Outcome #3: Students will be able to articulate the value of Christian liberal arts education

A liberal arts curriculum aims to educate students holistically by conveying academic content and shaping character. Through broad exposure to the arts and sciences as well as their accompanying competencies – and alongside Christian professors and peers –students grow not only in knowledge and understanding, but also in a range of qualities that go beyond the sheer endurance needed to complete a degree. They learn to articulate and defend the value of the liberal arts; to delight and take joy in discovery; to deepen humility before God's immense creation; to work cooperatively with their peers; and to receive correction from the same. They also gain insights into how they might apply their learning to serve Christ, the church, and the world. The goal is to develop and display qualities that will make them effective and fruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:8).

To help prepare students to fully engage with their liberal arts experience, the First-Year Seminar includes an introduction to information literacy. The instruction focuses on key introductory skills of navigating Wheaton's information resources, evaluating sources, and avoiding plagiarism. This instruction is foundational to further information literacy material that is delivered later in the curriculum (advanced seminar, etc.), and is essential for preparing students for their college work. The instructor will assign online tutorial content, prepared by the library, to be completed outside of class time. Library faculty members are available to support instructors as needed or desired.

4. Outcome #4: Students will be able to explain the Gospel in light of the biblical narrative using basic theological vocabulary

The gospel is the good news about the identity and action of Jesus Christ. Paul describes it as the "gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 1:3-4) The *news* is that God's Son has come in the flesh as the true heir of David, the long awaited Messiah of Israel. This news is *good* because of God's Old Testament promises that he would use Israel's Messiah to bring salvation to all peoples by atoning for their sin and giving them new hearts capable of obeying him. This is precisely what Jesus accomplishes in his role as "the Christ" ("the Messiah"). In order to understand this gospel, integrate their faith with their academic learning, and think in Christian ways about enduring questions, students must have a strong understanding of the entire biblical narrative and be able to situate their thinking within it.

This is the climax of a story that students will understand only if they know its beginning, middle and end. God created the world and relates to it while remaining utterly distinct from it. Human sin marred creation and alienated us from God. Despite sin, God called his people Israel, and through his prophets spoke to them of the salvation from sin that would be won by the Messiah. Christ's saving work is received through faith by the Holy Spirit who empowers us to live a life worthy of our calling. This sanctifying work will culminate at the general resurrection of the dead, as we inhabit the new heavens and the new earth with Christ and all the saints.

5. Outcome #5: Students will be able to critically engage the ideas of vocation as they concern God's general calling on all Christians, their calling as students, and the distinctive vocations each of them pursues

God calls all persons to reflect his image and likeness by living in right relation to God, neighbor, our true self, and creation. Christians also are called to live holy lives that bear witness to Jesus Christ through the imitation of him (Ephesians 5:1-2). As Scripture depicts, this call extends to the believer's life in community with family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and fellow believers. God's call takes concrete form as the Holy Spirit gives us various and distinct gifts. We faithfully respond to God's call by devoting our individual talents, training, and giftedness to serve Christ, the church, and the world. Students completing the FYS will be able to engage various understandings of vocation critically and theologically including God's general calling on all Christians, the calling of the student, and the distinctive vocations each student will pursue in light of their talents, training, and giftedness. Use of the plural term "vocations" is encouraged throughout the course.

III. Guidelines

A. Expanded course description

The First Year Seminar: Enduring Questions introduces students to the practice of integrating faith and learning by engaging challenging, theologically significant enduring questions organized around the question "What is the good life?" and a theme tied to the faculty member's specialty. All First Year Seminars have common readings and assignments in addition to readings and class sessions faculty members can tailor to their semester-long theme. The shared content of the first eleven weeks of the semester includes multidisciplinary perspectives on a series of enduring questions that relate foundational theological content, the liberal arts tradition, vocation, and Christian character formation. The remaining four weeks focus on readings, assignments, and class discussions that explore an enduring question related to the seminar instructor's discipline.

B. Connection between area outcomes (Part I above) and the 12 overall program goals of Christ at the Core (see p. 8-9 of the Proposal).

1. Learning Outcome #1 connects with Christ at the Core, Wisdom Learning Goal 3.
2. Learning Outcome #2 connects with Christ at the Core, Wisdom Learning Goals 2.
3. Learning Outcome #3 connects with Christ at the Core, Holistic Learning Goals 2, 3.
4. Learning Outcome #4 connects with Christ at the Core, Wisdom Learning Goals 1.

5. Learning Outcome #5 connects with Christ at the Core, Character Learning Goals 1, 2 and Christian Character 4.

C. Explanation, with examples, of what types of data will count as evidence for achievement of the stated outcomes

1. Shared Assignments

FYS Workload Policy:

The total number pages for writing assignments for the FYS should fall within the range of 15-25 pages (or 3,750-6,250 words) for the entire semester. The intention of this policy is to identify the parameters of acceptable work load in order to keep FYS sections from diverging too widely in required work.

FYS Shared Assignments:

The goal of the common readings and common material for the FYS is to encourage a unifying conversation for freshmen, no matter their FYS section. Our goal is to identify shared assignments that are open and flexible enough to work across the FYS sections and the various disciplines/FYS topics that the faculty represent while also offering enough clarity and direction so that there is consistency in shared assignments where needed. Because the FYS is the first of three sequential and developmental courses, there is need for a single student assignment that each freshman produces to return to for the Capstone Experience in order to demonstrate achievement of Capstone outcomes #2 and #3.

In the table below, “Shared Assignment” refers to assignment prompts with some parameters for FYS faculty to follow as they design their assignments. “Open Assignment” refers to assignments that do not have shared parameters. Some possible options are listed to serve as suggestions for possible assignments but they are not required.

First Year Seminar Outcomes Students will be able to . . .	Measurement As evidenced by ...
1. articulate how their life in Christ shapes the way they address enduring questions (including “What is the good life?”) in conversation with alternative approaches	Shared Assignment: A 4-6 page (1,000-1,500 word) essay that responds to the prompt, “How does a life in Christ shape the way I answer an enduring question?” [It is up to the instructor if the prompt will identify the enduring question under consideration to be WITGL or the instructor’s choice question or an enduring question selected by the student.]

<p>2. analyze significant factors that influence the development of character</p>	<p>Open Assignment: Options might include, but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literary analysis of character in selected reading. • Interaction with a reading about Christian spiritual practices and discipleship. • Personal reflection through self-assessment of character. development. Possible prompts include: “How would you describe your own character and the ways in which it was shaped?” or “What are your top three personal values, and how did these develop? To what extent does your life reflect or not reflect these values?” or “What are your daily habits and regular practices that shape who you are as a person?” “What are the character traits you admire in other people, and why? Are these character traits something you see present or lacking in your character?” (Length determined by instructor.)
<p>3. articulate the value of “liberal arts education” in order to explain how this approach to learning coheres with Christian perspectives</p>	<p>Open Assignment: Options might include, but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An essay on the value of a Christian liberal arts education. • A series of reflection papers. • An expansion of the vocation assignment for outcome #5 to include this liberal arts component as well. <p>Shared Assignment: Students must successfully complete (before or by the end of A quad) the First Year Seminar information literacy tutorial as a requirement of this course. Understanding will be assessed within the modules on a pass/fail basis. All freshmen will be introduced to the basics of information literacy to prepare them for liberal arts study.</p>

<p>4. describe the Gospel in light of the biblical narrative using basic theological vocabulary</p>	<p>Open Assignment: Options might include, but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating an outline that includes 7 passages from John that explain the gospel. • A reflection paper with a brief description of the gospel that uses theological language and follows the biblical narrative.
<p>5. explain the idea of Christian vocation as it concerns God’s general calling on all Christians, their calling as students, and the distinctive vocations each of them pursues</p>	<p>Shared Assignment: After reading C.S. Lewis’ “Learning in Wartime,” write an essay of at least 2 pages (500 words) that focuses on your development as a Christian liberal arts student.</p> <p>Students will revisit this essay on vocation and the liberal arts in their Capstone Experience and complete an assignment that includes reflection on their current understanding of vocation. This may be accomplished through their Capstone significant project or by writing another essay on the subject. (Note: This assignment could also be designed to measure outcome #3 as well with a prompt that includes articulation of the value of studying the Christian liberal arts.)</p>

D. General Advice

1. Guidelines for Selecting an Enduring Question(s) for Weeks 12-15

Each First Year Seminar instructor will devote one-third of the course’s content to an enduring question and theme organized around his or her specialty. This portion of the course will be unique to the individual seminar instructor and will involve a close examination of a significant and culturally pertinent question of the faculty member’s own choosing. After having explored for the first two-thirds of the seminar the question of “What is the Good Life?,” the remainder of the seminar will focus upon a perennial question that has grown out of the complex and diverse history of human experience. To explore its specific question fully, each seminar will read key texts from multiple disciplines (the arts, humanities, natural science, and social science) and, at the faculty member's discretion, experience and study important works of art, music, and drama. This “instructor’s choice” component of the seminar will continue to emphasize the integration of faith and learning in a liberal arts context. Faculty members should demonstrate the theological significance of their course questions as well as the ways in which the church across the centuries has brought theological resources to bear upon answering the perennial question(s) under consideration.

Questions may be general ones asked from the heart of the human experience across the ages: “What is justice?” “What is worth dying for?” “By what authority do we govern others and ourselves?” “What is evil and why do we do evil things?” “Do humans have meaningful freedom?” “Does God exist?” “Can war be just?” Or the questions may represent a perennial human concern framed in contemporary language: “Human character: is it nature or nurture?” The instructor’s enduring question may be a scriptural question with such as “What is truth?” These are examples and not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive.

2. Selecting Readings for the First Year Seminar

Each First Year Seminar (FYS) will be organized around two-thirds shared readings and topics. The instructor will design one-third of the course to include readings and content related to a perennial question that complements their disciplinary expertise. The focus of each course will gradually move from shared materials and consideration of the enduring question, “What is the Good Life?” to a more intensive focus on the instructor’s perennial question. The overall goal will be to provide cohesive and shared experience for the freshmen across the FYS sections while also allowing for instructors’ creativity and flexibility in customizing their course. While designing a FYS course, please keep the following organizing principles in mind:

- Assigned readings should range from 75-125 pages a week, understanding that some genres and texts should be read at a slower pace depending upon the level of technical content. These roughly 100 pages of weekly readings include: required Core Readings, some Suggested Readings chosen by the instructor, and the disciplinary specific readings for the instructor’s choice portion of the course.
- The selections of Suggested Readings from the First Year Seminar Course Outline should not be confined to one discipline, but expose students to a variety of disciplines and perspectives in keeping with the course’s focus on introducing students to the liberal arts and multidisciplinary perspectives. A strong course will include readings or other appropriate content from the arts, humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences.
- Each FYS course will include shared assignments (see above) but the instructor may assign additional assignments such as a book review or short essay if appropriate.

3. Pedagogy for the First Year Seminar

The intended purpose of the First Year Seminar is to provide incoming college students with a positive initial learning experience, characterized by small classes, engaging discussions, and meaningful relationships. The seminar format, by definition, places students at the center of the daily regimen of active learning, through intentional practices of reading analysis, in-class writing, focused conversation, critical thinking, and charitable disagreement. The primary role of the instructor is to facilitate purposeful student engagement through the regular promotion of *shared inquiry*. The pedagogy of shared inquiry is commonly used at colleges and universities that have thriving first-year seminars. According to Donald Whitfield, shared inquiry can be understood as follows:

In shared inquiry, students collaborate with their classmates to seek a deep understanding of the text they are examining in order to judge its merits and significance, prompted by skilled questions from the discussion leader. Learning to read a challenging text closely and to think well about its ideas cannot be a passive process. The shared inquiry discussion method involves each participant in an active search for meaning in a text. With the energy and encouragement of a group, participants articulate ideas, support assertions with evidence and reasoned judgments, and grapple with the depths of meaning contained in works of outstanding intellectual or artistic achievement. By learning to build upon each others' insights and perspectives, students in shared inquiry discussions make openness to the ideas of others a part of their own creative thinking.¹

According to this instructional model, then, the seminar should not overtly put the instructor at the center of the classroom activities but instead the students' active and direct participation in discussion. Therefore, the typical lecture approach to instruction should be avoided, except in moments of direction, clarification or facilitation. Similarly, the teacher should resist the temptation to assume the persona of 'the sage on stage.'²

The role of the instructor in a shared inquiry seminar involves fostering the following kinds of deliberate learning goals and procedures in relation to assigned readings and discussion:

- Building a class community by learning students' names quickly and using them daily.
- Establishing clear learning guidelines for students in the seminar to grasp and follow.
- Beginning class discussion with a central question that addresses a main theme in a text.
- Encouraging all class members to participate by questioning, commenting or interpreting.
- Requesting that students support their ideas by making clear references to the given text.
- Demonstrating careful critical listening by restating and recasting what others have said.
- Reinforcing the habit of making connections to what others have said in dialog before.
- Challenging factual inaccurate, confusing or contradictory comments with gentle inquiry.
- Supporting the momentum of the ongoing dialog by asking relevant follow-up questions.
- Allowing students to labor as they find words to express themselves, modeling patience.

The constant concern for the seminar leader will always be to advance the aims of liberal arts, allowing students to practice the academic literacy skills of careful reading, effective writing, purposeful speaking, and critical listening. Students must *practice* these habits to truly learn them.³

¹ Donald Whitfield, "Teaching Through Shared Inquiry,"
<http://www.nationalgreatbooks.com/cirriculum/teachingshared.asp>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.