

For: the General Education Task Force  
Revised Ideas for a Common Freshman Year GE Experience  
(Sept. 20 & Oct 18, 2006)

Lisa Burger, Pat O'Neill, Donna Brown, & Tom Steen (Art Jones could not attend the meeting where we developed this proposal)

*Issues and Concerns that You (GETF) raised about our initial proposal:*

- *The experience should be for all freshman—our proposal reached most, but not all frosh*
- *A required experience would give academic credit, and therefore more "value"—our proposal was built into certain courses, on a voluntary basis, which was viewed as "extra," or an "add on."*
- *The experience should address at least some GE goals—ours did not*
- *Student learning should be assessable with results fitting into the overall GE assessment plan—so we can find out if the experience is doing what we want it to do.*
- *Some part of the experience should truly be in common for all the frosh who experience it—we had suggested an annual theme, but some of you seemed to be asking for more commonality.*

*Issues, ideas, and concerns that you raised in response to our revised proposal (GETF meeting, Oct. 6, 2006):*

- *As a whole, you all seemed to favor the general shape of the proposal: a required seminar for all freshman focusing on intellectual discussion of "big ideas or questions" and targeted toward the GE goals of communication and critical thinking*
- *You asked to tighten up the requirement so it addresses what happens if a student fails the seminar.*
- *Some of you were concerned that our class size limit—which you thought was a good idea—was still too large for good discussion by students and good assessment by the instructor*
- *We had the impression that you favored the all-program theme option (option A) over the instructor-selected theme. Some of you proposed sharing the theme with a GE Senior course (another proposal), adding a campus colloquium with guest experts/speakers, and generally trying to adopt a "vertical curriculum" approach with the theme driving campus discussion and study, from freshmen to seniors to graduate students, during the year.*
- *You advised us to ensure that the student assessment focus in the seminar be on genuine participation—demonstrated effort in thinking critically speaking thoughtfully, and writing clearly and intelligently about the theme (as we had proposed)*
- *You also advised us to consider increasing the credit value from one to two or three credits, to increase the seminar's perceived value on the part of students (and faculty).*

[Proposal here is unchanged from the one discussed at the Oct. 6 meeting)

Proposal & GE Goals: Using the responses you gave to our original proposal, we've revised our proposal and now recommend a new course for our General Education program: **UND Freshman Seminar**. The seminar is a required course to be taken by all frosh in one of their first two semesters. To be focused on reading, discussing, and debating a "big idea" theme, each seminar would be aimed at two of the current GE goals (working draft): communication—both writing and speaking, and critical thinking.

Rationale: Now, UND's new students take courses in their freshman year according to their own individual schedules. There are neither common courses nor common academic learning experiences for most new students (a small number of frosh do enroll in a learning community, Honors, or the Integrated Study Program, all of which are designed so that students study, work, and learn together). Consequently, the all-important year one of college at UND often lacks a powerful socializing experience into the academic issues and study.

A common learning experience can have several powerful effects. For students, sharing intellectual activity can help them take their academic skills—critical thinking and communication—to the next level (from high school). Furthermore, tackling big ideas and intellectual conversation together can be both comforting and energizing. For faculty, knowing that other instructors and their students are working with the same issues and content and are aiming toward the same goals can have a teaming effect that fosters the kinds of intellectual bridges that make it possible to address questions, ideas, and problems that don't fit neatly into the disciplinary categories that most of us work in here at UND. For the campus, too often the experiences that freshmen engage in together are social ones—that's not bad in and of itself—but can tilt a campus toward a climate that favors out-of-class activities and social and athletic events over academic activities and the "life of the mind."

We believe that UND needs to raise the level of intellectual engagement on campus, and this is especially so for new students as their first impressions and initial opportunities for participation in the university have been, up to now, mainly focused on making a positive adaptation to college life and "getting through your Gen Ed's so you can into your major" [which is what really counts]. We think that a common Freshman Seminar, if done well, has the potential to not only provide a serious learning experience for all new students at the same time, but would also enhance the campus visibility and discussion of academic life here at UND.

#### Requirement & Effect on the GER

- The Freshman Seminar would carry 1 credit, which would be earned on a Pass/Fail basis
- The seminar would be required of all new freshman students, who must take it in their first or second semester at UND. Transfer students who complete their GER through transfer would be exempt from the seminar; other transfer students, who need to complete at least some of their GER at UND, would be required to take the seminar.
- We propose that the seminar be built into the GER, but that it does not add credits to the 39 already in place. To do that—if necessary, we propose dropping 1 credit from the current GER. (We do not have a specific proposal at this time for what to drop.)
- Pedagogy: we propose a 25-student enrollment limit for each seminar. The idea of the seminar to encourage students to talk, discuss, and debate in classes and for them to read and write outside of class—by keeping class sizes relatively small, both students and instructors should feel comfortable with the workload.
- Although students would all be assessed on the quality of their written and oral communication as well as on their ability to think critically (common rubrics to be used throughout all seminars), the seminar grades would be given primarily on the basis of genuine participation. By grading on things like sharing in discussions, making presentations and engaging in debates, writing position papers, and so on, we hope that all students will be encouraged to actively participate in the life of the mind and get a good start on their "general education."
- GER validation/revalidation effects: initial validation would be by each individual seminar. Revalidations could be done as a group if planning or assessment was done by instructors working together. (E.g.. if seminars instructors planned their courses together).

#### Resources Needed

1. Instructors for approximately 60 seminars each Fall semester; about 4 seminars in Spring (about 100 new frosh in spring). This we see as the biggest practical problem to solve.
2. Coordination for planning, announcement, and enrollment for the Frosh Seminars (e.g., special section in time table, dedicated web site to Frosh Seminars to announce theme and locations of various seminars)
3. We would hope that an equitable system of furnishing seminar instructors could be developed, e.g., each dept. would furnish a frosh seminar instructor according to a formal timetable.
4. This kind of proposal indicates a need for a GE Office & Director, to administer and promote the program. Obviously this is something we all may well propose for other reasons as well, but the Frosh Seminar idea won't really work well unless there is administrative leadership dedicated to it.
5. Annual theme selection—two options: A) one theme for the campus annually, or B) each instructor selects and develops his/her seminar to focus on one theme from a list of possible themes. Option A requires a selected group (profs, staff, students?) to make the choice; Option B requires a list of possibilities to be

published (Frosh Seminar web page?). A offers more of a common experience through out the campus; B offers instructors more autonomy in developing themes important to them and in developing the seminar to focus on issues connected to their disciplines. Option A allows for campus-wide engagement; option B allows instructors work more closely within their expertise.

For Task Force approval (at Oct. 20, 2006 meeting):

1. Develop and adopt a general education seminar for all freshman students as part of the GE requirement. To be a seminar in which students are asked to think critically and speak and write clearly about an important intellectual issue or topic, as a way to introduce students to college-level "habits of mind."
2. The seminar is to be limited to a maximum of 25 students
3. The seminar is to carry (decide) one/two/three credits, and it will count toward the GE requirement,
4. Seminars will be graded on Pass/Fail basis, with a passing grade earned by students who demonstrate that they seriously and consistently engaged in seminar activities in which they addressed the issues and questions raised in the seminar. All seminars are to be designed to so they ask students to a) think critically and b) speak and write clearly and intelligently,
5. A student who fails the seminar must re-take it in their next term (Fall or Spring); a student may not defer the Freshman seminar later than their next enrollment. Transfer students who have completed their GER are exempt from the Freshman Seminar; transfer students who have not completed their GER (even if only a few credits short) is required take the seminar.
6. The seminar will focus on a theme that is shared throughout the campus for one academic year and is decided by a special selection committee (named and chosen expressly for this purpose)
7. Each department with undergraduate programs will furnish faculty, on a campus formula (to be developed), to teach the seminars. Departments with only graduate programs and extra-curricular units that offer academic programs for undergraduates (e.g., Learning Services, Student Union, International Programs) may also furnish instructors for the seminars.
8. Organization and management of the freshman seminars will come from a unit, to be established, whose job it is to promote, develop, advertise, and assist in assessment of the Freshman Seminar program. (We estimate that we need to offer about 60 seminars each Fall and about 5 in the Spring.)