SPECIAL REPORT

OF THE

ACADEMIC MATTERS COUNCIL

concerning

REVISION OF THE
FIRST YEAR SEMINAR POLICY

Presented at the
780th Regular Meeting of the Faculty Senate
October 18, 2018

COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP

ACADEMIC MATTERS COUNCIL

Wesley Autio, Carol Barr, Brian Beck, William Brown, Allison Butler, D. Anthony Butterfield, Marcy Clark, Elizabeth Connor, Sharon Domier, Wei Fan, Diane Flaherty, Laura Francis, Mark Guerber, Jennifer Heuer, Maeve Howett, Chair, Patrick Kelly, Kathryn Lachman, Meredith Lind, Linda Lowry, Roberta Marvin, Ernest May, David Morin, Eric Moschella, Ruthann Paradise, Sarah Pfatteicher, Jennifer Randall, MJ Peterson, Kregg Strehorn, Patrick Sullivan, Jack Wileden, Rebecca Woodland, and Kate Woodmansee

ACADEMIC MATTERS COUNCIL

The Academic Matters Council recommends approval of this proposal.

Briefly describe the Proposal

Organization and Approval of First Year Seminars

Background

In 2014 Provost Katherine Newman proposed organizing a significant expansion of the campus’s existing programs of relatively small sized one- or two-credit seminars for first year students beyond the already-existing offerings of the Faculty First Year Seminars and Commonwealth Honors College. The expansion was designed to provide all incoming first year students with an opportunity to participate in such a seminar during their first term on campus. It attracted considerable support because it coincided with an effort to improve the experience of first year students by replacing the large pool of “undeclared” students who had not yet selected a major
advised out of a single central office with smaller sets of students enrolled in exploratory tracks organized by colleges/schools and advised through college/school-level advising.

As a matter of campus governance, the set of proposed seminars were treated as analogous to creation of an experimental course, and allowed to run for three years before undergoing formal Faculty Senate review and approval. Such seminars were run in 2015-16, 2016-17, and 2017-18, so it is time for that review.

Rationale

During the fall terms of each of those years, when the preponderance of the seminars are offered, approximately 220 college/school First Year Seminars and some 50 Faculty-led First Year Seminars have been offered. On the whole, experience with the newer College/School-based First Year Seminars has been positive. They have provided Colleges/Schools with an opportunity to assist their first year students in acclimating to the University life, offered possibilities for a different type of teaching to graduate students, and newly-entered undergraduates with opportunities to develop a personal relationship with their instructor and fellow seminar participants and to pursue important topics with others who share similar interests. Though they do not exist independently of the wider effort to improve first year students’ experiences through the exploratory tracks and other chances in advising, they do appear to be contributing to improved first-to-second year retention.

Policy

I. The First Year Seminar Program consists of small seminars having a set of common requirements plus substantive elements reflecting topics pursued in academic research. The seminars which together comprise the program come in three distinct types:
   A. First Year Seminars (FYS) offered in each College/School for first year students who have the declared a major in one of the programs offered within that College/Schools or are enrolled in one of the exploratory tracks organized within the College/School (FYS) are the central type.
   B. Faculty First Year Seminars (FFYS) led by a regular member of the faculty are an alternate form open to first year students on all parts of campus.
   C. First Year Honors (FYHS) Seminars offered by Commonwealth Honors College are an alternate form open to first year students enrolled in Commonwealth Honors College

II. Each College/School retains the option of requiring first year students enrolled in exploratory tracks within that College/School to take their First Year Seminar within the College/School. This option should be exercised when clear program needs are met with a FYS and in a manner sensitive to requirements regarding FYS arising for students in Commonwealth Honors College.

III. First Year Seminars (FYS) organized and taught in the Colleges/Schools or their Departments and Programs:
   A. Shall include the following common elements:
      1. Meet once weekly in a 50-minute face-to-face session
      2. Enroll a maximum of 19 students per seminar
      3. Contain the elements of common content that
a. Enhance students’ engagement by informing them about opportunities and resources available to them.

b. Foster students’ connections with others on campus by helping students understand the transition from high school to college life and the core values and community standards defining what it means to be a member of the UMass Amherst community.

c. Increase students’ ability to become self-guided learners through instruction in the time management, study skills, and planning ability needed for high academic achievement and through helping them identify appropriate academic pathways towards their lives and careers after graduation.

4. Devote significant amount of class and outside class time to identifying and securing information about a substantive topic so to provide the enrolled students with opportunities for serious intellectual engagement with a small group of peers having similar interest in the topic, and for learning research skills.

B. Colleges/Schools or Departments may choose a common topic for all of their FYS, or select a set of topics from among those proposed by potential instructors.

C. Seminar leaders may be recruited from among the regular faculty, post-doctoral scholars, and graduate students.

IV. The Faculty-Led First Year Seminars (FFYS) coordinated through the Provost’s Office:

A. Provide students with a small-class experience with a member of the regular faculty

B. Shall include the following common elements:
   1. Meet once weekly in a 50-minute face-to-face session
   2. Enroll a maximum of 19 students per seminar
   3. Contain the elements of common content that
      a. Enhance students’ engagement by informing them about opportunities and resources available to them.
      b. Foster students’ connections with others on campus by helping students understand the transition from high school to college life and the core values and community standards defining what it means to be a member of the UMass Amherst community.
      c. Increase students’ ability to become self-guided learners through instruction in the time management, study skills, and planning ability needed for high academic achievement and through helping them identify appropriate academic pathways towards their lives and careers after graduation.
   4. Devote significant amount of class and outside class time to identifying and securing information about a substantive topic so to provide the enrolled students with opportunities for serious intellectual engagement with a small group of peers having similar interest in the topic, and for learning research skills.

C. Seminar leaders are selected from among members of the regular faculty submitting proposals to the Provost’s Office as outlined in Approval Process below.

V. First Year Honors Seminars (FYHS) offered for Honors students by Commonwealth Honors College:

A. Are separate 1-credit courses.

B. Shall include the following common elements:
   1. Meet once weekly in a 50-minute face-to-face session
   2. Enroll a maximum of 19 students per seminar
   3. Contain the elements of common content that
a. Enhance students’ engagement by informing them about opportunities and resources available to them.

b. Foster students’ connections with others on campus by helping students understand the transition from high school to college life and the core values and community standards defining what it means to be a member of the UMass Amherst community.

c. Increase students’ ability to become self-guided learners through instruction in the time management, study skills, and planning ability needed for high academic achievement and through helping them identify appropriate academic pathways towards their lives and careers after graduation.

4. Devote significant amount of class and outside class time to identifying and securing information about a substantive topic so to provide the enrolled students with opportunities for serious intellectual engagement with a small group of peers having similar interest in the topic, and for learning research skills.

C. Seminar leaders are appointed by Commonwealth Honors College using its normal rules and processes of recruiting instructors for its seminars.

VI. Approval Processes

A. First Year Seminars (FYS)
1. Each School/College will designate a central approval authority for assessing and approving FYS offered by that College/School or by its various majors and inform the Provost’s Office of its choice of approval authority.
2. Proposals for FYS are submitted to the School/College approver during the School/College’s annual call for proposals.
3. Proposers must identify the substantive area within which they will encourage students to do their work, include a draft syllabus and/or enough information to show coverage of common content and inclusion of requirements associated with a FYS, and indicate whether the seminar will use letter grading or pass-fail grading.

B. Faculty-led First Year Seminars (FFYS)
1. The Senior Vice Provost and Dean for Undergraduate Education approves FFYS.
2. Proposals for FFYS are submitted to the Provost’s Office in response to the annual call for proposals issued in the Spring term.
3. Proposers must identify the substantive topic they propose to cover, or the substantive area within which they will encourage students to do their work, and include a draft syllabus and/or enough information to show coverage of common content, and indicate whether the seminar will use letter grades or pass-fail grading.

C. First Year Seminars in Commonwealth Honors College (FYHS)
1. The Dean of the Commonwealth Honors College approves FYHS.
2. When proposing a FYHS, proposers must identify the substantive topic they propose to cover, or the substantive area within which they will encourage students to do their work, include a draft syllabus and/or enough information to show coverage of common content, and indicate whether the seminar will use letter grades or pass-fail grading.

MOTION: That the Faculty Senate approve the Revision of the First Year Seminar Policy, as presented in Sen. Doc. No. 19-010.