

# First-Year Seminar Instructor Resource Guide

Welcome to the UMass Amherst First-Year Seminar (FYS) Program!

UMass Amherst has a long-standing practice of offering top-notch one credit seminars for incoming students. Over the years we have provided a variety of models for targeted populations. Recently we have worked to provide this valuable opportunity to ALL first-year students. We currently have two basic models; The Faculty First-Year Seminar (FFYS) model, launched in 2007 and the school/college affiliated model which launched 5 years ago. Consistent across the models is that the UMass Amherst FYS program helps students adjust to college life. Every year faculty, graduate students, and other instructors offer roughly 300 sections of the FYS to the incoming class. Whether the specific seminar opens up an exciting topic in a specific field or focuses on college specific information, all FYS help students master the skills and resources that will enhance their success in college. First-year students consistently state that the FYS helped with their transition to college and made them feel prepared to thrive in their time at UMass.

What makes the FYS program positive? Much of this success stems from targeted goals. It might sound impossible to meet all these goals in a class that convenes once a week for only 50 minutes. But with thoughtful syllabus planning and clear classroom expectations, you can help ease students into the rhythms of college life. You don't need to teach them everything about campus. Instead, you can connect them to existing resources and model ways they can start to engage with the many things UMass offers.

In this document you will find articulation of the FYS targeted goals as well as some suggested methods for addressing the goals in your seminars. Feel free to contact us if you have any questions or would like additional support. Send an email to [seminars@umass.edu](mailto:seminars@umass.edu) and we can set up a call or Zoom meeting.

## Targeted Goals

### To Support Students as Self-Learners

Students often arrive on campus eager to learn but assume that someone will tell them how to do it. The FYS program emboldens students to take charge of their education. FYS instructors encourage students to meet regularly with faculty (not just you, but also other instructors), speak up in class, reach out for support when they need it, and build their time management and study skills. Which is all to say the FYS guides students to approach their education independently and with purpose.

### To Build Students' Connections and Appreciation for Others

Some students show up on campus with few friends, a hazy idea of what they want to study, and a limited sense of campus resources. Other students show up with a friend group and a firm idea of their major. Most fall somewhere in between. Participation in a FYS supports *all* students to make new connections - with people in their classes, in their major (or their prospective major), and across campus. The FYS also encourages students to seek out others who share their interests and pastimes, and at the same time to listen to and respect people from different backgrounds and perspectives. Finally, the FYS's small class size allows students to get to know at least one instructor by the end of their first semester: you!

### To Stimulate Students' Intellectual and Community Engagement

Some students come to college ready to dive in to their chosen field. Some come with no idea of their major and want to explore something new. The FYS informs both types of students of opportunities and resources available to them. The FYS also introduces students to internship opportunities, student government, domestic and international exchange programs, and research possibilities. In short, the FYS helps students build connections on and off campus, and to think about ways their education can influence life beyond academics.

## Ways to Achieve the FYS goals

### Supporting Students as Independent Self-Learners

In high school, students sit in class for long periods of time and have a modest amount of independent work. In college, students attend a few lectures each week and complete most of their work on their own. In short, college turns high school upside down. And now, in the world of COVID-19 they are faced with a whole new set of challenges. Some may be living on campus, others at home with their families. All will be having the majority of their fall semester classes taught remotely – with varying combination of synchronous and asynchronous structures. Some students may easily make this transition. Many will struggle. If they need help, they may not know where to find it. Indeed, knowing when and how to seek help is part of self-learning and a skill they need to master.

#### Ways to support independent learning and time management

- Invite students to **use a calendar** to block out study times. Most students schedule classes, work, and activities, but then forget to leave time to do their schoolwork. A suggested amount? Twenty hours a week of study is a good baseline. Scheduling study time also prevents students from feeling like they should be studying all the time.
- Encourage students to set up a **designated spot for their classwork**. It is important that students be situated in location with good Wi-Fi, has all the materials they may need (pad/pen, textbook, possibly headphones) and is free from distractions so they can focus well. Remember water and tissues!
- Suggest that students **explore different locations** for studying. Especially during this pandemic when all class time is tied to their computer and likely bound to their designated workstation, students may be in serious need of a change of scenery. Those who are living on campus can explore to find places that are open. Students living at home can try out different locations in their house or places in their town. Invite students to share ideas with each other.
- Invite them to find a **study buddy** to work (remotely) with, even if it's a friend at a different school. A weekly hour-long study party can provide tremendous support. There are even Apps to match students!
- At the beginning of the course, ask students to **write down a goal for the term**. Really, this can be just about any goal: to stop biting one's fingernails, to eat a piece of fruit each day, to achieve an A in at least one class, to make a new friend. Check in with them on their progress as the course continues and then, at the end, meet with them to talk about the goal. What went well? What didn't? How can what they notice impact changes for the future? What goals do they want to set for the next semester?
- If you feel comfortable, share **your own methods** for time management, academic study, and goal setting.
- Invite your students to participate in one of the [Success Toolkit Workshops](#) through Student Success. This can be in addition to or in lieu of one of your class meetings.

#### Ways to triage student difficulties

Direct students to various campus support services. Through these resources' students will discover peer support groups, lectures, and other events, most will have virtual services this fall. These might include:

- Academic supports such as [Learning Resource Center](#) or [The UMass Writing Center](#)
- Identity supports (such as the [Center for Multicultural Advancement and Student Success](#), or the [Center for Women and Community](#)).
- Invite students to enroll in a workshop through the [Smart About Money](#) program.
- Encourage students to explore a variety of opportunities related to their [Center for Counseling and Psychological Health](#).

## Building Students' Connections to (and Appreciation for) Others

This fall all students will be faced with the challenge of building connections in an environment that quite literally has barriers built in. Students learning from home will need to develop all of their connections through technology. Students living on campus will need to follow strict social distancing rules. This means the structure of the classroom plays an even more important role than usual in helping students to build connections. For students living on campus, many have left their friends and family for the first time - while students at home may be having difficulty getting privacy from their family. In addition, many students may begin college with pre-conceived notions of faculty as authority figures with little connection to their lives, the very titles of "Advisor" and "Professor" imply a level of expertise and experience that can feel intimidating. Some students are confident in the face of this. Others may be shy or worry that they will bother an instructor if they reach out to them with questions. They may not know how to enter a classroom conversation or may be unsure of what type of response they will get. Finally, many students may come with preconceived notions of students from different backgrounds. So how can you help make a college classroom (even a virtual one) a place to disrupt stereotypes and build connections?

### Ways to build connections and respect for difference

- Make sure that every student knows everyone else's name in the class. Zoom can make this easier since names are displayed automatically.
- Open space for *every* person to talk. This might mean calling on students with open-ended questions or asking them just to read from a text.
- Model active listening by repeating what a student says before you respond to it.
- Model debate either by asking students to consider two sides of an issue or by showing them the ways academics can disagree.
- Encourage students to be open-minded to different points of view and to listen to others with understanding and respect.
- Offer students opportunities for (remote) team or collaborative work.
- Break your class into smaller groups (through break out rooms on Zoom or on out of class projects) and encourage discussion at that level.

### Ways to build connections and respect for difference outside of class

- Ask your students to research information about their department or exploratory track. Who is their advisor? Is there a peer advising group? Have them report back to the group after having a meeting.
- If a student is living on campus, they have a Residential Assistant (RA) and a Peer Mentor (PM). For students living at home, they have an Orientation Leader (OL). Have them reach out to their RA, PM or OL to help them to find resources.
- Encourage students to (virtually) visit their other faculty members and their advisor in office hours. Require students to visit your office at least once during the term.
- Have your students research the various student groups ([Campus Pulse](#)) or support organizations and invite them to attend one or two meetings or events and report back to the class.
- Emphasize the importance of community support articulated on the [UMatter](#) initiative. ([UMatter at UMass](#) is an initiative intended to affirm the values the university set in motion 150 years ago: care, compassion and active engagement.)
- Explore the wealth of programs and resources through the [Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#)
- Take some field trips, either in real life or virtual. [DuBois Archives](#) or [Digital Media Lab](#), the [All-Campus Maker Space](#), the [Kinney Center for Renaissance Studies](#), the [University Museum in the Fine Arts Center](#).

## Stimulating Students' Intellectual and Community Engagement

This is perhaps the most straightforward part of the FYS. As we know, college is a time for students to explore big ideas. All FYS promote this concept, either through exciting topics like Race and Gender at the Movies, Women Scientists Who Changed the World, and Mass Incarceration in America or through opportunities to learn about the wide array of major areas of study that students have to choose from. You can build on this excitement to draw them further into college life, get students enthused about the life of the mind and all the opportunities it brings. Even students who claim to care only about career advancement are intrigued by the big ideas that drive research, engagement and opportunities.

### Ways to stimulate engagement with research and study

- Schedule a virtual presentation at the DuBois Library to introduce your students to research tools.
- Schedule a virtual presentation from [International Programs Office](#) or [Domestic Exchange](#).
- Introduce students to the [Office of Undergraduate Research Studies](#), which can connect students to a research project on or off campus and guide them in the steps to pursue it.

### Ways to stimulate engagement with social and real-world problems

- Invite students to brainstorm ways that your class topic might translate into social or political action.
- Make students aware of the [Civic Engagement and Service-Learning \(CESL\)](#) program and let them know that the university sponsors a variety of volunteer and service activities.
- Make students aware of the campus's central [Career Services](#), as well as the career centers in their college, which should be a resource for their future even if not now.
- Make use of the [ISSR's Racial Justice Integration Project](#). There are activities and datasets here for you to use for lessons. Students can research key words or look at the ways race intersects with the subject of your FYS class.
- Schedule a presentation by the [Student Legal Services Office](#), which can help students learn about their rights on and off campus.

### RESOURCES WHEN STUDENTS NEED HELP

[Dean of Students Office](#) serves as a single point of contact within the University for students and their families in time of crisis. They provide a wide variety of programs and services. Instructors can make referrals.

[Center for Counseling and Psychological Health](#) has a wealth of services and programming to support students.

[University Health Services](#) provides in-person and virtual visits as well as 24-hour health advice by phone.

[Academic Advising](#) offices are available for each school/college. Advisors are a wonderful resource to help support students.

[Disability Services](#) is committed to providing students with disabilities the most appropriate accommodations.

[Student Legal Services Office](#) provides free, confidential advice and/or referral in most legal matters for fee-paying UMass Amherst students.

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