ALL First Year Seminars, Faculty First Year Seminars and First Year Seminars hosted by the Schools and Colleges, being taught by the University of Massachusetts Amherst will provide coverage of common content. This common content has been identified via research of best practices and contributes to the goals of engaging our first year students and assisting them in their transition to the college environment.

Every First Year Seminar will contain the elements of the common content which attend to the following themes/goals:

1. **Enhance students’ engagement** by informing them about opportunities and resources available to them.
2. **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.
3. **Increase students’ ability to become self-guided learners** through instruction in 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.

We have expanded on the explanation of each theme attending to background and rationale, information and resources, and one or two suggested activities to assist faculty and instructors in developing a syllabus that reflects inclusion of these concepts into seminars. A variety of additional support materials will be available for faculty in the coming months, including additional suggested activities. All of the materials referenced below that are being developed for the students use will also be posted for faculty to access as soon as they are completed.

If you have questions or would like additional support after reviewing this document, feel free to contact Kathy Weilerstein at kathyw@umass.edu.

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**Common Content Theme # 1: Enhance students’ engagement by informing them about opportunities and resources available to them.**

**Background and Rationale:** As we all know, it is common for first-year students to hit some bumps in their early college experience, whether academic, social, emotional, and/or financial. As instructors, staff, and anyone with influence over first year students, it is important to normalize these challenges with hopes to prevent students from feeling isolated or paralyzed in their struggle.

For some students, this is the first time they are advocating for themselves rather than having a family member or another adult advocate for them. They might be used to a parent noticing their grades slip...
and connecting them to a tutor. There are other students that have plenty of experience navigating resources, but don’t know what is available at UMass, or feel embarrassed that they need help.

In addition to ensuring they find the support they need, we also want to encourage students to get involved, become engaged on campus, and to seek out new opportunities. If they remain inside their room all the time, binge watching shows or immersed in social media, they won’t meet new people, try out new clubs, or push themselves to explore all that college has to offer. Research is clear that students who become involved feel more connected and, therefore, achieve higher grades and satisfaction.

Students will benefit from guided conversations attending to the importance of finding the balance between pushing themselves socially and academically with doing things that make them comfortable and help them to relax. While the need to have down-time is real, so too is the importance of using their first semester as a time to try things out and get to know their campus community.

Students should not have to struggle through college alone, there are many offices which exist for the purpose of helping them be successful in college and so many great ways to get involved in and around the college community.

**Information and Resources:** We will provide all instructors with links to webpages that catalog a wealth of resources and opportunities on campus. We will also share with you the specific materials that will be distributed to all first-year students as they are developed. (academic planner, special handouts and residence life resources).

See Appendix #1 (page 6) for a list of the most widely used **RESOURCES**.

See Appendix #2 (page 7) for a list of most broadly chosen **OPPORTUNITIES**.

**Suggested Activities:**

**Resources:** As a homework assignment, have students look at the UMass website (and the resource documents they have been given) and find resources in the areas of: personal health and wellness, academic success, leadership and engagement, career development and internships, and identity and cultural support. Have each student add their findings to a master resource list or discussion board in Moodle, or even take time during a class session to list them all on the board to show the students the number of community resources that are available to them.

**Opportunities:** Have students select one of the options listed in Appendix #2 and write a brief reflection on their interest in that particular opportunity, how it connects to their short and long-term goals, and when they think would be the best time for them to participate. Have them attend an informational session or group meeting with a friend. Additionally, they should include any relevant information about that office, program, or organization that is important for a student to know (i.e., schedule of meetings, time commitment involved, costs?, etc.). (Note: Many students who are in a Residential Academic Program/RAP will be attending a “GPS Panel” during the fall semester. At this panel they will be hearing upper class students tell stories of their participation in the various opportunities listed in Appendix #2. These students could report back to the students in your seminar about what they learned about during the panel.)
Common Content Theme #2:

(Part 1) Foster students’ connections with others on campus by helping students understand the transition from high school to college life and

(Part 2) Reinforce the core values and community standards defining what it means to be a member of the UMass Amherst community.

Part 1 Connections

Background and Rationale:

Many people think students come to college understanding the importance of having interactions with faculty and advisors and expect that they naturally feel comfortable going to meet with them. However, it is very common for students to be quite intimidated. This has less to do with the actual instructor or advisor, and more to do with the lack of context for understanding the role and importance of developing these relationships.

Once on campus, first year students quickly realize there is a lot about college they do not know yet or completely understand. The very titles of “Advisor” and “Professor” imply a level of expertise, experience, and authority they are unfamiliar with. Students may be shy or may think their “simple” questions may be “bothering” the person if they go to their office. They may not know how to start the conversation or may be unsure of what type of response they will get. Research is clear that when students do have conversations with advisors and faculty they experience a stronger connection to campus and achieve greater academic success.

Information and Resources:

Students can find their advisor/advising center listed under “Primary Advisor” in the Student Center section of SPIRE.

Each School/College advising office information can be found at www.umass.edu/advising. On their college advising website students can find office locations and directions for how to make an appointment. Students can work with their advisor to ensure that they are on track making progress toward their degree, get answers to any questions regarding requirements and courses they need to take, and assistance if they are having difficulty with a course, or are thinking of exploring a different major.

Suggested Activities:

Re: Academic Advisors: Have the student look on Spire for their primary advisor (depending upon the major a particular person or an advising center may be listed). Also, have them check on the UMass website www.umass.edu/advising to learn the location of their advising office and method for scheduling an appointment.

Re: Professors and Teaching Assistants: It is helpful to remind students (from your experience) that professors/instructors don’t mind when students come to their office hours, and they really are there to help the students.

Ask the students to look through their course syllabi and make a note of each of their instructors’ office hours. Have the students identify when an assignment is due in class and schedule to meet with that
faculty member to discuss the assignment prior to the due date. Or have the students come to your office hours, even if you schedule them via an appointment process, just to talk and to get to know them better. The key is to get the students to understand the importance of connecting with their faculty, and not being afraid of going to office hours or asking for assistance if needed. Let them know that developing professional relationships with professors and teaching assistants will increase their success in college. Meeting with an instructor will help with motivation and engagement and often lead to a higher grade. And, when instructors know a student, they can write meaningful reference letters!

Part 2 Core Values and Community Standards

Background and Rationale: We would like for the newest members of our campus community, our first-year students, to understand right away what the campus is about, what it means to be a member of the community, and that we expect students to show respect and conduct themselves according to the values and community standards we have in place. This information will be reiterated in multiple ways including residential hall communications and activities, academic dean and advising information shared by their Schools and Colleges, Student Affairs events and activities, and through the First Year Seminars.

Information and Resources: At its most basic, the university articulates core values and community standards with expectations of students to understand and conduct themselves accordingly. The 2018-2023 Strategic Plan: Innovation and Impact also refers to our values of Excellence; Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness; Openness; Integrity and Stewardship; and Innovation and Impact. In addition, the UMatter at UMass initiative identifies the goal of creating a campus community of CARE, COMPASSION, CONNECTION, and ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT. The UMatter at UMass website provides information on the UMatter at UMass initiative: https://www.umass.edu/umatter/

During the Fall New Student Convocation, all first year students, will recite the UMass Pledge for students. This pledge, which is also on the UMass T-shirt they receive, states:

As a member of the UMass Amherst community, I promise:

- To pursue an education that emphasizes intellectual exploration and fosters individual growth.
- To practice and advocate for our shared principles of inclusion, safety, civility, and involvement.
- To serve as an active bystander in taking personal responsibility for the well-being of myself and others.

Suggested Activities:

As an assignment for class, you could have the students wear their UMass T-shirt that they received during Fall New Student Convocation which has the UMass Pledge written on the back. Have them recite this again during class to remind them they are now a member of the UMass Amherst community. You can also have them explore the UMatter at UMass website https://www.umass.edu/umatter/ and provide thoughts on what they found, helpful information, and what they learned by visiting the site.
Common Content Theme #3: Increase students’ ability to become self-guided learners through instruction in 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.

Background and Rationale
As we all know, college is different from high school in so many ways. In addition to the obvious academic differences, for many students, college is the first time they are living away from home. As such, their time is no longer structured for them. Now, they are on their own to make decisions such as when (and what) to eat, when to sleep, when (and where) to study, when (and if/how) to exercise, etc. Instead of their courses being clustered together for the majority of their day, their courses in college will be scattered throughout the week and they will likely have large gaps of time in between classes. Faced with making all these decisions can be exciting and empowering though can also become overwhelming. We want to be sure our students are making good choices as they set these new patterns. Ideally, students will avoid the development of bad habits that are difficult to break once set.

Students will also discover that the type of learning that is expected in college is different than in high school. They will be asked to think more deeply, more critically and utilize research methods in many courses. This may require students to change the methods they use for studying in order to achieve the same level of success they experienced in high school. Given that our students were all high achieving in high school they may be surprised to find their old methods do not produce the same level of success they did with high school work.

We want to be sure that they are seeing the reality of their achievements and challenges and taking ownership to take whatever steps may be necessary to achieve successful grades and a satisfying experience.

Information and Resources:
Students will all receive an Academic Planner which will include pages that have suggestions and activities related to time management, using a syllabus, monitoring their grades, utilizing advising, etc. Once developed, the content of these pages will be posted on line so that you can have access to the same information that they have received in the planner.

Suggested Activities:
You can provide students with some prompts to encourage them to be mindful of these differences with suggestions for how to avoid pitfalls. The prompts could be used as discussion in class, as reflections written in a journal, or shared on a Moodle discussion.

Prompts might include: Ask yourself these questions/Keep these things in mind:
- How many hours have you allocated to complete work for each of your courses? (College students should spend an average of 3-4 hours studying/working for each hour IN class.)
- Are you productive with your study time?
- Do you have a place to study that is conducive to success? (Have them share different places they have found across campus for studying – they can post photos of the places. They can also share the different ‘types’ of environments they each like.)
- Are your choices resulting in good grades? Or, do you think you are spending enough time but it is not reflected in your grade outcomes?
- Have you sought out assistance if you are struggling?
Remind the students that as they develop and implement new habits in college, it is important to recognize both their strengths and weaknesses. With this awareness, they can make conscious decisions to follow a mindful path to success. In other words, if something works well – find ways to repeat/replicate it. If something does not work well – make some changes in how you approach it.

Suggest this three-step approach:

1. **Review**: Look at your course syllabi, review your schedule for the day, for the week, plan and prepare based on what you have going on. Review your study system, your life balance, your approach to each and every day.
2. **Reflect**: Think about what is going well, what is working. How are your grades, how are your study habits, how is your balance of activities in which you are involved? What could use improvement, where you could carve out more time to dedicate to areas that may need more attention?
3. **Revise**: If it is working and things are going well, keep it up. If it isn’t working, be committed to making some changes.

**Appendix #1: RESOURCES**

**Learning Resource Center (LRC)**
- The LRC offers students a peer-supported environment to assist with understanding academic content and achieving academic success.
- Various forms of academic support are provided for over 200 courses including individual tutoring, supplemental instruction, and small group tutoring support.
10th floor DuBois Library, [www.umass.edu/lrc](http://www.umass.edu/lrc) 413-545-5334

**The Writing Center**
- Provides assistance to students at any stage of the writing process: brainstorming and outlining, getting feedback on a draft, developing revision strategies, and more.
- Individual meetings in 45-minute sessions, either in-person or online.
DuBois Library Learning Commons, lower level of library, [www.umass.edu/writingcenter](http://www.umass.edu/writingcenter)

**Center for Counseling & Psychological Health (CCPH)**
- Don’t let stress prevent success.
- A counseling service, staffed by licensed mental health providers, including social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and clinical nurse specialists.
New Africa House and Bartlett Hall, [www.umass.edu/counseling](http://www.umass.edu/counseling) 413-545-2337 or 413-545-0333

**Center for Multicultural Advancement & Student Success (CMASS)**
- Support students looking for social engagement, guidance in navigating the university, cultural connections, feedback on your plans for success, and to promote inclusion.
- Supports the student success and sense of belonging of first generation, students of colors, multiracial students, and low income students.
101 Wilder Hall, [www.umass.edu/cmass](http://www.umass.edu/cmass) 413-545-2517
Disability Services
- Direct services are provided for all types of documented disabilities.
161 Whitmore Building, www.umass.edu/disability 413-545-0892

Financial Aid Services
- Paying for a college education can be expensive and stressful.
- For assistance on financial aid (FAFSA form), loan opportunities, advice on understanding university costs and financial assistance.
243 Whitmore Building, www.umass.edu/umfa 413-545-0801

Appendix #2 OPPORTUNITIES:

Civic Engagement and Service-Learning (CESL)
- CESL provides opportunities to connect your classroom experiences with meaningful work on campus and in the surrounding communities.
- Take courses with service learning activities, volunteer with various campus or community activities and events, and/or earn a Civic Engagement & Public Service certificate.
611 Goodell, www.umass.edu/cesl 413-545-2015

Office of Undergraduate Research and Studies (OURS)
- The Office of Undergraduate Research and Studies (OURS) is a resource for all undergraduate students in any major.
- OURS helps students find research and scholarly opportunities on and off campus.
10th floor, DuBois Library, www.umass.edu/ours 413-545-5334

Domestic Exchange
- Study at one of 170 public colleges & universities in the U.S., Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands and Guam
511 Goodell www.nse.org 413-577-6767

Education Abroad: International Programs Office
- Explore the over 400 program options in more than 50 countries to study abroad.
- Participate in International Education Week on campus.
70 Butterfield Terrace, www.umass.edu/ipo 413-545-2710

Internships and Career Preparation
- Attend an information session in Career Services or get help in writing your resume.
- Explore career goals and find out about opportunities for internships and career preparation.
511 Goodell, www.umass.edu/careers 413-577-6767

Five College Interchange
- UMass students can enroll in courses at Amherst, Hampshire, Smith and Mount Holyoke Colleges for no additional cost
511 Goodell 413-577-6767

Join a Student Club or Organization
- Find out about the ever-growing list of student clubs and events and get involved!