

Proposal for the Revision of the First-Year Seminar Program at UCA

Introduction and Background

During the 2020-2021 academic year, the High-Impact Practices (HIPs) Working Group of the Council of Student Success was charged with conducting a review of one of the university's high-impact practices, the first-year seminar (FYS), and providing recommendations for revisions to the practice as implemented at UCA. The HIPs Working Group conducted an initial meeting to bring in stakeholders outside the working group's membership and generate foundational principles for a revised FYS Program, and an FYS review and revision working subgroup subsequently convened monthly to create the following FYS revision proposal.

The working group reviewed previous work conducted and recommendations made by the FYS Subcommittee of Core Council in the 2018-2019 academic year (Appendix A). Many of the recommendations based on best practices and UCA student survey data are reiterated in this proposal, which additionally formalizes goals and learning outcomes and recommends a process for implementation.

Working Group Membership

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The First-Year Seminar Defined

The term *first-year seminar* is defined differently depending on the institutional context of the course; however, most FYS courses are intentionally designed for first-year students to enhance their academic and social integration throughout their college experience.¹

The First-Year Seminar as High-Impact Practice

Kuh (2008) identified FYS as a High Impact Practice, an intentional program or experience that contributes to student learning and has an overall positive impact on students. According to Kuh (2008), elements that make an FYS high impact is its "strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies."²

Goals of the First-Year Seminar Program

The University of Central Arkansas dedicates itself to Academic Vitality, Integrity, and Diversity. As such, the First-Year Seminar Program will connect all UCA students with the university's mission and core values:

¹ Goodman, K., & Pascarella, E.T. (2006). First-year seminars increase persistence and retention: A summary of the evidence from *How College Affects Students*. *Peer Review*, 8(3).
<https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/first-year-seminars-increase-persistence-and-retention-summary>

² <https://www.aacu.org/node/4084>

Academic Vitality: Academic Vitality fosters the growth mindset and the capacity for lifelong learning. In order to educate students to be active citizens, we seek to create opportunities to foster the cultivation of knowledge that will develop the capacity to solve problems and effectively communicate and interact with others.

- **Knowledge:** To introduce incoming students to academic knowledge and ways of knowing
- **Resources:** To equip students with the skills and resources they need to learn and to thrive
- **Connection:** To build inclusive connections by fostering meaningful relationships with diverse faculty, staff, peers, and communities

Integrity: Integrity is indispensable to our mission. In order to foster excellence and prepare students with the highest standards of moral and ethical values and principles, we seek to create a culture that is based upon ethical conduct.

- **Social Responsibility:** To prepare students to take informed and responsible action to address the challenges of a diverse society

Diversity: Diversity fuels the scholarly advancement of knowledge. In order to foster excellence and develop culturally competent leaders, we seek to create an environment of inclusiveness and respect for the similarities and differences in our community.

- **Inclusivity:** To create a foundation for students that allows them to understand and challenge their cultural assumptions and prepares them to understand their contributions to a diverse society using their disciplinary training

Student Learning Objectives

To reach the goals of the FYS Program, the student learning objectives are organized under four overarching questions.

What is Academic Knowledge?

- Students will articulate the purpose and value of general education
- Students will articulate the purpose and components of the UCA Core
- Students will articulate the purpose and value of academic disciplines, including how disciplinary concepts and principles can address the challenges of a democratic society
- Students will reflect on disciplinary knowledge and their own perspectives in the context of the world's diverse values, traditions, and belief systems

How Will You Succeed in College?

- Students will apply and reflect on study, metacognitive, and time management strategies, and other academic success strategies in course assignments

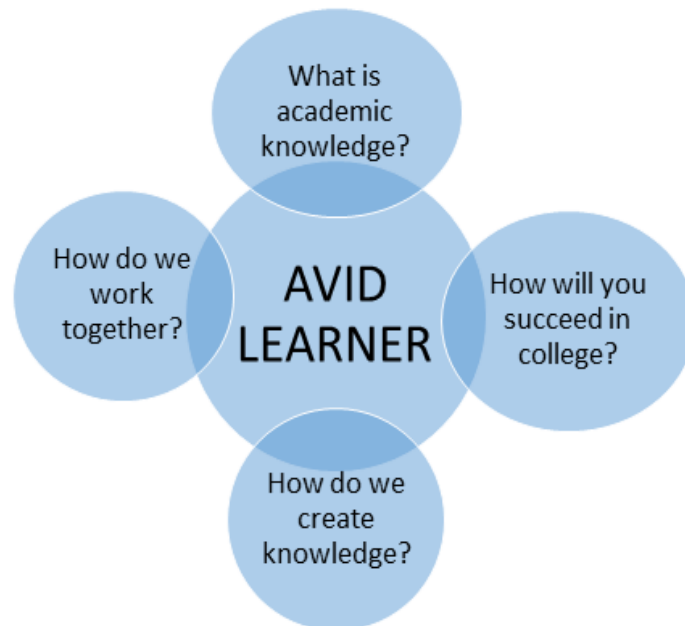
- Students will use the UCA library to conduct research for academic, professional, and public purposes
- Students will describe the relationship between well-being and academic success and identify resources to support well-being

How Do We Work Together?

- Students will reflect on their connections with peers, faculty, and other support networks within the university and/or community and the role that each serves in supporting their academic, personal, and/or professional lives
- Students will demonstrate an ability to engage with and learn from marginalized perspectives and experiences within and beyond the classroom
- Students will apply inclusive communication and problem-solving skills to collaborate with classmates on at least one course assignment

How Do We Create Knowledge?

- Students will apply information literacy skills and research ethics to identify and select relevant and credible sources for their research purposes
- Students will build upon diverse perspectives to communicate a position within a scholarly conversation
- Students will demonstrate the oral and/or written communication skills needed to share knowledge with an audience
- Students will articulate the broad implications of their knowledge for a diverse society



Course Design Principles

In order to achieve the goals of a rich academic and social experience for first-year students at UCA, First-Year Seminar courses must be built around a set of core principles that provide structure and consistency, but allow faculty the freedom to design an creative and innovative academic experience. To that end, FYS courses will

- Introduce students to ways of knowing, academic standards, and scholarly debates of an academic field through exploration of a special topic, centering global perspectives and traditionally marginalized voices
- Use assignment structures and pedagogical strategies that help students develop the skills needed to meet the academic expectations of college, such as labor-based contract grading, formative assessment, and scaffolded assignments
- Guide students in recognizing and using academic success skills such as academic reading, effective studying, and time management
- Integrate the use of university resources into required assignments and available course materials, and provide opportunities to identify how resources support students from different backgrounds and during specific circumstances
- Create intentional and extended opportunities for peer collaboration and support, such as writing or research groups, team project-based learning, community-based learning, and experiential learning
- Include intentional, required, and repeated opportunities for faculty-student interaction, such as individual conferences, recursive feedback and revision processes, and scaffolded assignments

Implementation Recommendations

To achieve this vision of a robust FYS Program at UCA and to ensure that FYS courses function as a high-impact practice when implemented, the following changes are recommended:

- FYS courses will be designed intentionally and exclusively as FYS
- FYS course enrollment will be capped at 15 students
- All first-time, full-time undergraduate students will be required to enroll in an FYS course in their first 30 hours at UCA
- A peer mentor program will be reinstated to support both FYS faculty and students in achieving the goals and outcomes of the course

Additionally, to ensure the long-term success of the FYS Program, an FYS Coordinator and FYS Advisory Committee (Appendix B) will be established to provide ongoing support, expertise, and oversight.

Curricular Revisions

In order to facilitate the implementation of an FYS Program at UCA that consistently fulfills the criteria of a high-impact practice, the following curricular revisions are proposed for FYS:

- Be removed from the UCA Core requirements and the UCA Core aligned with the state minimum requirements of 35 hours
- Use a single prefix or course number for all FYS courses to increase visibility and simplify advising, registration, and tracking
- Use restricted term to ensure that advisors must approve students dropping the FYS
- Revise the Core checksheet and academic maps to include FYS as a first-year requirement outside the Core

Peer Mentors

Because collaborative relationships with both peers and faculty are essential components of a high-quality FYS Program, and because the goals and objectives of the FYS Program are time-intensive for faculty, we propose the implementation of the peer mentoring program previously piloted for UCA FYS courses.

- Peer mentors will be embedded in the course to provide coaching support to students
- Second-year and third-year students who have previously taken the course and professor will be eligible to serve as peer mentors
- Training in mentorship through 1-hour course (preparatory training) in the spring of the first year and 1-hour course (field training) in subsequent fall will be required for peer mentors
- A stipend will be paid to peer mentors during the semester(s) they serve
- A graduate assistant will assist with the offering of the 1-hour courses, recruitment of peer mentors for the upcoming academic year, and support of peer mentors in FYS

Faculty Recruitment and Development

The success of a FYS Program rests squarely on the quality of instruction and faculty-student interaction that a student experiences. It is imperative that high-quality, engaged and engaging faculty who understand the unique needs and challenges of first-year students are assigned to teach FYS courses. Therefore, the recruitment, development, and support of faculty who teach FYS is of paramount importance. The university will need at least one FYS faculty member for every 15-30 first-year students in order to implement the FYS Program.

- FYS faculty will be trained through CETAL, with flexible faculty development options and ongoing support provided (e.g., Summer Teaching Excellence Institute, one-day orientation workshop, or asynchronous online course in addition to the First-Year Teaching track of the CETAL recognition program)
- Faculty may qualify to teach FYS through a variety of pathways, including a student nomination process, self-nomination, and selection by department chairs
- The FYS Coordinator and FYS Advisory Committee will closely monitor the diversity of FYS faculty and work with department chairs and deans to develop strategies to build an FYS faculty whose diversity reflects the diversity of the UCA student body

- FYS courses will be taught by faculty and qualified staff who are full-time, continuing employees of the university. The FYS Coordinator and FYS Advisory Committee will work with department chairs and deans to identify needs for additional faculty lines and advocate for pathways to full-time positions for contingent faculty members interested in and otherwise qualified to teach in the FYS Program.

Assessment

Prior to implementation of the revised FYS Program, the FYS Coordinator and FYS Advisory Committee will create an assessment plan that identifies appropriate measurable outcomes and targets relevant to the goals and student learning objectives of this proposed revision.

Timeline for Implementation

Courses currently offered as FYS may continue to be offered through Spring 2023.

We recommend that a Summer Teaching Excellence Institute be offered for FYS faculty beginning Summer 2022 and that a pilot group of faculty teaching FYS courses in the 2022-2023 academic year implement the recommended changes to course design and consult regularly with the FYS Coordinator to refine the program revisions prior to the campuswide launch.

All courses to be included in the revised FYS Program must be proposed to and approved by the FYS Advisory Committee. Courses may be proposed beginning in Fall 2022.

The target date for launching a revised FYS Program at UCA is Fall 2023.

Conclusion

This proposal builds upon recommendations developed by the Core Council FYS Subcommittee with an increased focus and emphasis on implementing the first-year seminar as a high-impact practice. An FYS Program intentionally designed to be high-quality and high-impact will require substantial changes and administrative support. A robust FYS Program that centers diversity and inclusion is not only critical to an engaging first-year experience at UCA, but also can and should serve as the intellectual foundation for students seeking to find their place in tackling the grand challenges our communities face. A revised FYS Program will make our institutional commitment to academic vitality, integrity, and diversity clear and concrete in incoming students' first experiences in the classroom and support students in extending those values beyond the classroom during and after their time at UCA.

Appendix A

UCA Core Council

FYS Sub-Committee Report and Recommendation

I. The Problem Defined

Since their inception in (roughly) 2014, FYS courses have failed to develop a clear identity. These courses, originally designed to be small, seminar style courses that incidentally informed students about the UCA Core as a coherent general education curriculum, to date still lack cohesion. There is no clear set of learning outcomes and no uniform curriculum or shared set of expectations or goals between sections. Although the problem originated with the expedited manner in which the UCA Core was adopted and implemented, FYS courses thus being poorly planned and administered in an ad hoc manner, the problem has persisted. Various efforts have been adopted to try and resolve this problem, but to date none has proven effective. Thus, the UCA Core Council decided to authorize the FYS sub-committee to revisit FYS courses and recommend a course of action.

The FYS sub-committee was charged with the following:

To reevaluate FYS courses at UCA and determine if UCA should continue to require FYS Courses of first year students and if so how ought these courses be designed and delivered. Points to be addressed/resolved over AY 18-19:

1: Review data from institutional research and:

- a. Make the effective case for the continuation of the FYS program or
- b. Determine FYS courses are of limited to no value.
- c. If A see 2. If B, stop: recommend discontinuation of FYS program

2: Construct/Compile outcomes for FYS courses

3: Determine structure of FYS courses

4: Determine Delivery of FYS courses including:

- a. Distribution: Where will the courses be delivered and by whom?
- b. Training: What training/certification should FYS instructors have?

5: Make recommendation to Core Council by Spring 2019 with fully articulated plan regarding FYS redesign.

The sub-committee is comprised of: Jacob Held (Chair), Ron Novy (DST), Rose McGarrity (SGA), Steve Nelson (CoB), Jennifer Parrack (CLA), Zach Smith (CLA), Stephen O'Connell (CNSM)

As noted above, the purpose of the sub-committee was to determine the value of FYS courses, whether as a practice they are worth sustaining, and if so in what form. What follows is a summary report of the sub-committee's deliberations, conclusions, and recommendations regarding FYS courses at UCA.

II. FYS at UCA – A Brief History

First Year Seminar (FYS) course were first recommended by the General Education Task Force in Fall of 2012. The task force recommended:

The First-Year Seminar

TF members agreed that a first year seminar (FYS) course would help students acquire skills for success in college along with a connection to UCA. Further, students would be introduced to the intended outcomes of the GE program, how they will be assessed, and the expectations of their performance as they progress through the university. A variety of courses could be used for the first year seminar. Preferably each College and potentially each major could offer one or more sections of a required general education course that would receive a special designation as a first year seminar course. Faculty members teaching FYS would be chosen by their department chairs on the basis of teaching effectiveness and willingness to adapt their course and approach to fit the FYS guidelines. Since allowing a FYS to count in place of a lower division communication course would run counter to the TF's recommendation that we increase student requirements in written and oral communication, a FYS could be offered in any area used to fulfill one of the lower division Core requirements except communication. Further details of the required content and organization of the FYS appear in Appendix L.

While the recommendation would be that FYS be taken in a student's first semester, it is expected that some students will need to take it the second semester (particularly in the early phase of implementing the UCA Core). Transfer students with more than 30 hours of transfer credit would not be required to take a FYS.³

Of note are the recommendation that these courses introduce students to expectations of students at UCA, while providing opportunities to develop skills necessary to succeed. In addition, these courses were to provide a connection to UCA. In terms of delivery professors would be hand selected based on their ability to teach first year students effectively and the course would be tailored to this end.

The General Education Council, upon review of the Task Force recommendation further recommended:

The GETF and GEC members agreed that a first-year seminar (FYS) course will provide an intimate educational experience, integrating knowledge and skills within an academic discipline and connecting students to UCA. Further, students would be introduced to the intended outcomes of the UCA Core, the way those outcomes will be assessed, and the expectations of their performance as they progress through the university. A variety of courses could be used for the first year seminar. *However, no department is required to put forth a course as a first-year seminar. Any course proposed as a first-year seminar must address the goals and outcomes of the appropriate academic area in the lower-division core (e.g. Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, Responsible Living, etc.) The intent of the first-year seminar is to emphasize academic knowledge and skills, not to teach study skills as content.*

³ **Redesigning General Education at the University of Central Arkansas**, Report prepared by the General Education Task Force September 4, 2012 (13)

The FYS courses would be specially designed and would address Communications outcomes, including written communication and collaboration, and either the Critical Inquiry, Diversity, or Responsible Living outcomes. Faculty members would be chosen by their department chairs on the basis of teaching effectiveness and willingness to adapt their course and approach to fit the FYS guidelines (listed below). Since allowing a FYS to count in place of a lower-division communication course would run counter to the GETF's recommendation that we increase student requirements in communication, a FYS could be offered in any area used to fulfill one of the lower-division Core requirements except communication requirements.

Required content of the FYS should include the following:

1. Written discourse, which will be assessed using the writing rubric;
2. Collaboration, which will be assessed using the teamwork rubric;
3. An orientation to the UCA Core mission, purpose, and general learning outcomes, which will be integrated into the course and assessed;
4. A focus on the basic principles of the discipline, which will allow the course to fulfill one of the lower-division Core requirements other than communications.

Assessments in these areas will be required for a course section to receive the FYS designation. Obviously, not all sections of a particular course will be offered as a FYS. Only sections which meet the specific requirements would be included in this category. As a 3-credit academic course, the FYS would not use class time to address the aspects of the university typically associated with orientation (e.g. health services, the counseling center, etc.); however, instructors would be informed about these resources so they could recommend them as needed to students. A list of all university services would be given to FYS instructors (with appropriate training regarding what to look for, etc.). The expectation is that FYS instructors would be aware of and able to refer students to special services (e.g., the Academic Success Center, the Writing Center, the Counseling Center, etc.) and have an understanding of how to weave basic academic success skills into the course without diluting academic content. The list of resources could also be made available via Blackboard or some other venue for the students in the class.

Additional considerations for first-year seminars include the following:

1. Class size must be small (25 students or fewer);
2. Faculty must be selected by the department chair and have demonstrated an aptitude for high impact teaching;
3. FYS faculty will agree to participate in more thorough assessment and additional training as needed (e.g. in teaching writing skills, developing collaborative assignments, etc.)

While the recommendation would be that FYS be taken in a student's first semester, it is expected that some students will need to take it the second semester. Transfer students with more than 30 hours of transfer credit would not be required to take a FYS.⁴

This revision of the FYS mission emphasizes the academic aspect of the FYS experience. Note the language: *“The intent of the first-year seminar is to emphasize academic knowledge and skills, not to teach study skills as content.”* as well as “the FYS would not use class time to address the aspects of the university typically associated with orientation (e.g. health services, the counseling center, etc.); however, instructors would be informed about these resources so they could recommend them as needed to students.” In addition, it was emphasized that there was an “understanding of how to weave basic academic success skills into the course without diluting academic content.” Thus, the General Education Recommendation, which would later be adopted, emphasized that although student success and connection to the university were laudable goals of the FYS course, the course was first and foremost academic in nature, with connection and success being a positive result of offering a particular kind of academic experience once rooted in a recognized academic discipline and not focused fundamentally on orientation or success style initiatives.

FYS courses were thus defined as small academic seminars, taught by selected professors with proven records or commitments to the needs of first year students, that would incidentally provide access to resources to facilitate student success and guidance as needed in this regard. Retention and persistence were thus conceived as a beneficial result of offering these academic seminars but not their *raison d’être*.

Although this was the stated mission of FYS courses, how to implement such a program across campus was not forthcoming. Thus, in implementation these courses followed a more ad hoc basis where we more built the ship at sea than steered a well-constructed vessel on a recognized course. Thus in application FYS courses were inconsistent in how they were offered, the experienced they afforded students, and guidance was lacking. Yet research, both external and internal, demonstrate the value of FYS courses in general, and our offerings in particular.⁵ (Appendix A) In short, students in FYS style courses have a statistically significant higher success rate than their counterparts who do not take such courses. Clearly, FYS courses are of value to UCA. We should continue to offer them. However, we need to do so in a more intentional manner, with a clear mission, defining what FYS courses are, their essential attributes, and implementing them consistently across campus consistent with this definition and these standards.

III. FYS at UCA – Reconsidered

The FYS sub-committee has, after considerable review, determined that a re-envisioning of FYS course at UCA is necessary. This new vision of FYS at UCA will respect the history of the practice at UCA, while adopting best practices across the academy to redefine what an optimal FYS experience at UCA would look like, and how best to implement this vision in a way that assures consistent practice across campus

⁴ **UCA Core: Recommendation to the Faculty Senate and the Council of Deans**, from the General Education Council (2012). Pp. 5-6.

⁵ See Joe Cuseo, “The Empirical Case for the First-Year Seminar;” Goodman and Pascarella, “First-Year Seminars Increase Persistence and Retention: A Summary of the Evidence from How College Affects Students” (Peer Review, Summer 2006, Vol. 8, No. 3) and selection from Summer 2018 report from Institutional Research at UCA (Appendix A-1)

and affords students the best possible FYS experience UCA can offer. The purpose in proceeding to is bring coherence and consistency to the FYS program through the definition and adoption of a shared curriculum (of goals and best practices to be integrated into disciplinarily distinct courses) providing students with an engaging, unique, and beneficial experience that prepares them for college while providing a quintessential collegiate seminar experience. In order to implement this revision of the FYS program, we will have to redefine what an FYS course is in terms of its purpose, articulate this purpose by means of goals consistent with both Core competency goals and the FYS best practices, and provide methods to achieve these. The sub-committee envisions First-Year Seminars (FYS) at UCA as:

Purpose: The purpose of an FYS course at UCA is *to provide students with an exemplary academic experience as an introduction to collegiate life at UCA.*

An exemplary academic experience is one rooted in the intellectual life of the university. As an introduction to collegiate life, this experience should help connect first year students to the university, namely, their peers, faculty, departments, and resources. In addition, as part of the introduction to the university students will be provide with resources and guidance with respect to these resources for success as a college student at UCA. The foundational goal of the FYS is the seminar experience rooted in the academic experience. Connection to the university and success is predicated on this academic experience. Students provided with an intimate, dedicated learning environment will succeed. Any course proposed as a first-year seminar must address the goals and outcomes of the appropriate academic area in the lower-division core. FYS courses are specially designed to address Communications outcomes, including written communication and collaboration, and either the Critical Inquiry, Diversity, or Responsible Living outcomes.

To this end, the sub-committee offers the following list of goals to further define and articulate the purpose of an FYS course:

1) Promote academic writing skills:

Suggested Activities

- Completing assignments connected to the writing process, for example, brainstorming, outlining, and/or drafting.
- Following the scholarly conventions of the field in which they are writing, including standards for citations.
- Revising at least one paper after peer or instructor review.

2) Promote collaboration skills (interpersonal communication and human relations skills):

Suggested Activities

- Engaging in at least one group assignment that requires them to present ideas effectively in order to enhance communication and collaboration with peers
- Developing appropriate verbal and non-verbal strategies to promote collaboration.
- Assessing the contributions of their peers with respect to shared project goals.

3) Promote the Core outcomes in Critical Inquiry, Responsible Living, or Diversity by means of disciplinary content:

Suggested Activities

- Engaging works within a specific discipline *on a focused topic*
- Discussing material in a seminar-style format that places priority on meaningful student contributions

4) Promote a connection/relationship with the University:

Suggested Activities

- Familiarizing themselves with the goals of the UCA Core and the university mission statement, as well as degree plan requirements.
- Completing assignments that require use of university services.
- Developing peer networks for both personal well-being and academic success.

5) Introduce students to college level expectations, as well as strategies for meeting those expectations:

Suggested Activities

- Attending periodic workshops on specific academic skills such as note-taking, reading, studying, writing, and time-management.
- Building basic research skills and developing informational literacy.
- Maintaining one's health and well-being.

Below are recommendations for FYS courses in order to assure success in achieving goals 1-5 listed above and to maintain the highest and consistent quality across all FYS sections.

Section size limited to 20 students.

All faculty who teach FYS courses to be certified as FYS instructors through completion of the Excellence in Teaching First Year students recognition track through the Center for Teaching Excellence. (Appendix A-2)

All FYS sections taught by full-time faculty in the discipline in which they received their most advanced degree.

Appendix B

First-Year Seminar Advisory Committee

Charge

The First-Year Seminar Advisory Committee will support the implementation of the First-Year Seminar (FYS) Program at UCA, including faculty development related to the mission of the FYS Program, development and approval of courses within the FYS Program, assessment and evaluation of the FYS Program, alignment of the FYS Program with other initiatives for first-year students, and ongoing guidance for the advancement of the FYS Program across the university.

Membership

This committee will consist of the following members:

- FYS Coordinator (Permanent, Chair)
- Director of New Student Programs (Permanent)
- Director of Academic Advising or Designee (Permanent)
- One faculty member experienced in teaching first-year students representing each of the academic colleges and one faculty member who is unaffiliated with the academic colleges, appointed by the Deans (Staggered three-year terms)
- Three student members appointed by SGA (One-year term)

Meetings

On call

Reports to

Provost