FYE Committee Minutes, 3/23/09

Present: Erik Craft, Joanna Drell, Joe Essid, Al Goethals, Libby Gruner (chair), April Hill, Dan Palazzolo, Carol Wittig

We began with a handout summarizing the upcoming forums, the goals we discussed in this morning’s forum, and a summary of key terms/concepts from this morning’s forum (attached).

Thanks to those who volunteered for the following upcoming meetings:

Monday 3/23                      9:10 – 10:10 a.m.   (Libby, Joanna, April, Joe, Joan)
Tuesday 3/24                     12:30-1:30 p.m. (Dan, Joe, Joanna, Al)
Thursday 3/26                    3:00-4:00 p.m.    (Dan, Erik, April, Carol, Joe)
also meetings with student gov’t associations:
Wednesday 3/25   5:35 – 6:00 p.m. WCGA (THC 305)
                   (Libby, Al, Joanna, Carol)
Wednesday 4/1  7:00 – 7:30 p.m. RCSGA (Whitehurst Living Room)
                   (Libby, Carol, Joanna, Dan)

We’ll divvy up the next set at our next meeting.

Our discussion today was about several topics:

1. How important is a common experience?
   We reviewed some of the findings from Core Course surveys about the value of the common experience. If students are not recognizing a “common intellectual experience” as an important goal of the Core Course, do we need to rethink our commitment to this goal? Is it more important for students to think about something well than to have the experience of all thinking about the same thing? Are we sacrificing thinking well for thinking about the same thing? We discussed various models here, including a common first-semester course followed by a second-semester seminar-type course (chosen, from a menu of options, by the student); a set of common first-semester courses (i.e., choose one out of only—say—four, all with common texts) followed by a larger menu of options in the second semester; clustered seminars; many choices each semester.

2. What kind of guidelines would a shared (but not common) experience have to have to make it work?
   We discussed sequencing assignments, minimum and maximum page limits, and possible shared themes or goals. Pedagogical support and robust guidelines are key to this approach.

3. Why don’t people teach Core? What would improve faculty buy-in for a FYE course?
   Our conversation centered more around unfamiliarity than time—that is, it seems that more people say they don’t teach Core because the material is too far outside their field than that it takes a full year. We discussed incentives for improving faculty buy-in, including consideration for tenure & promotion, released time, freedom of content,
reduced class size, support (including, perhaps, reduced course load and/or monetary rewards), incentives for departments (Stanford links new faculty lines to participation in the first-year course). The problem of providing incentives to tenured faculty also came up for discussion. Ultimately, we agreed that we need to change the culture that currently values research and research-based teaching (upper-division seminars, etc.) over first-year teaching.

4. How can we address the important values that underpin the Strategic Plan, including building community and navigating difference?

Here we talked about the possibility of holding these values in common but, rather than turning them into goals for the first year, allowing them to inform the content/form of courses offered under a FYE rubric. So some FYE courses might incorporate community-based learning, some might be linked to advising, some might have a significant component linked to diversity studies, etc. Another option might be to include a service project in orientation; some FYE course content might also migrate back into orientation (especially if, as the Strategic Plan indicates, we might move towards a week-long orientation).

At our next meeting we’ll debrief about the first set of open forums and try to move closer to settling on a model (or choice of models) for the FYE.