FYE (First-Year Experience) Committee Minutes, 4/6/09

Present: Erik Craft, Joanna Drell, Joe Essid, Al Goethals, Libby Gruner (chair), April Hill, Joan Neff (ex officio), Ray Hilliard, David Leary, Hugh West (guests), Scott Johnson (guest)

Today’s meeting was taken up with two important discussions, first of the First-Year Core Course as currently constituted, and second of advising.

Ray Hilliard made a brief presentation touching on issues of implementation and support of the current Core Course. He made four central points:

1) The Core Course meets its most important goal, which is to teach students to read important and difficult books with confidence and skill.

2) The program works despite limited support. The course is our signature experience but has not been presented as such to incoming faculty.

3) Over 40% of faculty surveyed support the current Core course and expressed an interest in teaching it. (This is a far larger number than have ever actually participated.)

4) The Provost has promised significant support to the program if the faculty vote to continue it.

David Leary followed up with comments on Core’s important place in the first-year experience. He noted particularly that the two-semester experience is important as students are “just getting it” by the end of the first semester. He made a distinction between “getting it” and “doing it,” noting that most students do understand how much time and effort is required to do well in the course even if they don’t do so. Two semesters with the same group of students is an important bonding experience for the students themselves as well as between a group of students and a faculty member. He noted that it is a very rare good student who doesn’t like and appreciate the course, and wondered whether some might transfer without that common intellectual experience.

Hugh reiterated his support for the two-semester experience. He noted that there is a practical pedagogical reason for teaching the same students for two semesters, giving the following example: 2/3 of students may earn a D on the first paper, and 50% may be getting Cs by the end of the first semester. Knowing that there is a second semester, with that much more opportunity for improvement, makes it easier to “give them what they deserve” in the first semester. He also noted the difficulty in getting the syllabus committee to agree on the texts for a 2-semester sequence, and wondered how much harder it would be with only one semester to work with.

David noted that there will be two experiential texts next year, noting also that the course has been responsive to issues on campus without any particular mandate to be.
Ray questioned whether we would be able to make the kinds of reading & writing required in a seminar consistent with the aims of the Core course, noting that the focus of the Core course is to grapple with the mind of an original thinker rather than to read for information. Many seminars might focus on information and on secondary texts.

Our guests then took a series of questions.
1) Why couldn’t we include primary texts and analytical writing assignments in seminars?
A: There would be problems policing the courses, and there would be no continuity of instruction as in the current Core.

2) Folklore is that there is lots of dissatisfaction with the course, on the part of both students and faculty.
A: Is that different from any other course? And: while we’ve all heard anecdotes about dissatisfaction, the data from students suggests that 40% are enthusiastic, 30-35% admit that it’s beneficial, and about 25% are true dissenters. Those dissenters complain mostly about difficulty, not about the course itself.

3) What kind of support would make Core more viable?
A: Rhetoric from upper administration acknowledging that this is our signature program, release time and monetary bonuses (perhaps a point system where faculty earn release time after teaching X number of times), systematic rotation in and out of the course.

David & Ray believe staffing is not the problem it’s made out to be, noting that they often approached faculty only to hear “my department doesn’t want me to do it” or “they say it’s not good for my career.” Broader buy-in from upper administration would help alleviate this problem.

4) Can a 2-semester Core meet the goals this committee has outlined, especially the information fluency goal?
A: Why does one course have to meet all goals? Why not build that aspect into other general education courses where it is more appropriate?

5) Scientists are shut out of the current Core course and couldn’t teach it except in teams. Further, they are dismayed to find primary texts offered without the “modern synthesis” that might help contextualize them.
A: The purpose of the Core course is more focused on rhetorical analysis than content study: how did these minds grapple with these problems rather than what did they teach us. Perhaps if we talk to each other more we can alleviate this problem. There is some support, for example, for providing information on what Darwin didn’t/couldn’t know, and where his analysis has later been revised.

At this point, we’d gone over our time by several minutes, so we thanked our guests and welcomed Scott Johnson to talk about advising.
Scott began by saying that the goal of the advising center is to support advisors in providing developmental advising for our students, advising that can help integrate them into intentional choices, including curricular and co-curricular choices. He mentioned the Road Map program as one way that advisors are helping students facilitate their progression through the liberal arts.

Asked to clarify what is meant by “intentional,” Scott said it does not mean “pre-professional,” but rather helping students be deliberate in their choices in relation to each other.

Asked about advising linked to the Core course, Scott noted that some professors did not want to grade their advisees, and some Core faculty didn’t have room for more than two or three first-year advisees, thus causing an imbalance in their courses. Core-based advising would also shut out the science faculty, who have liked being hand-matched with advisees.

Asked what the biggest impediments are to establishing a mentor relationship, Scott said that it was the advisors, who are not necessarily interested or trained in establishing such relationships. The advising center hopes to help advisors develop such relationships.

The average advisee load per advisor should be 12 advisees, counting both majors and non-majors. However, many advise many more than this.