Minutes, FYE Committee, 4/13/09

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

The meeting began with an update on two meetings earlier in the day, one with members of the Business School Academic Council (present: April Hill, Dan Palazzolo, Joan Neff, Libby Gruner) and one with the Jepson School faculty (present: Libby Gruner). While the B-School faculty was perhaps slightly more pessimistic, both meetings underscored the faculty’s willingness to participate in the first-year academic experience under the following conditions:

1. the needs of their departments/schools must come first
2. the faculty need to feel supported in their teaching
3. the faculty would be more enthusiastic if they could design their own seminars or teach their own interests.

Both schools have had limited engagement with the current Core course: three members of the Business School faculty have ever taught it, and two in the Jepson School. There is support for a hybrid model or a seminar model in both schools, though that support is contingent (especially in the Business School) on staffing and rewards. See attached handout, which was shared with the B-School Academic Council and formed the basis for our discussion in the Jepson School as well.

I also mentioned my meeting last week with Steve Bisese, who has reiterated his support (including, possibly, some financial support) for an integrated academic experience. Steve’s concern is that faculty know what they’re getting into with first-year students (this concern was echoed in the Business School, where they are increasingly recruiting with an eye towards participation in MBA teaching). He encouraged us to think of residential and advising-linked models, and can provide support for these efforts.

Our meeting continued with several important discussions:

1. The politics of voting on the FYE at the final faculty meeting. Need to make sure that there is no possibility for a “no” vote simply continuing the status quo. We need an endorsement of a framework or model, not a rejection that turns into a non-endorsement.

2. Options in the FYE: does it need to be in the first year? Our overwhelming consensus was yes, but we need to be able to discuss this if the question continues to come up.

3. Is there a one-semester option? All the models we have on the table are two-semester models. Some feel that one semester might be enough, but without a model in front of us—and with several of us strongly in favor of a two-semester experience—we can’t get much further in the conversation.

   Points in favor of a two-semester sequence:
   - students seemed to endorse it in our meetings with the student govts.
   - one semester is not long enough to realize and practice our goals
there are pedagogical benefits to development over time
the student development office supports a two-semester experience
all skills need to be practiced multiple times.

Points opposed:
logistically, one semester is easier to plan for than two
goals are already being met in other courses
students would have more choices overall if only one semester was
committed to the FYE
clear linkages to gen ed could make a one-semester course work

Al will consider developing a proposal for a one-semester FYE.

4. The “thinking” part of our second goal needs to be foregrounded, and perhaps
reiterated in goals two and three. (See attached handout.)

We agreed to continue our discussion of the various models via e-mail. There is little
support for the “Reading Richmond” proposal, though elements of it may find their way
into our final proposals—our discussions will then focus on the other three proposals, as
well as on a one-semester proposal if we receive one.

Upcoming meetings:
Monday, April 20
9:10 am: Open Forum, Gottwald Auditorium
Participants tbd

2 pm: meet w/gen ed committee, THC 333
Gruner, Hill, Neff, Palazzolo

2:30 pm: our regular meeting
**Gottwald Conference Room** (note change)

Tuesday, April 21
11:15 am: A&S Academic Council, THC 305
Gruner, Neff, Hill, Drell, Essid, Palazzolo

Wednesday, April 22
11:15 am: Open forum, THC 305 (note change)
Participants tbd

Thursday, April 23
3:00 pm: Open forum, Gottwald Auditorium
Participants: Gruner, Palazzolo
The strategic plan calls for us to “provide an innovative shared first-year academic experience for all undergraduates.” This should come in the context of “an academic enterprise that will be connected, innovative, rigorous, and personal,” and that “has, as a foundation of its undergraduate curriculum, an unwavering commitment to the liberal arts.”

We thus envision a first year academic experience that will

- expand students’ understanding of the world
- enhance their ability to think, write, and read critically
- enhance their ability to communicate effectively
- develop the fundamentals of information literacy and library research
- provide the opportunity for students to work closely with a faculty mentor

Models for a first year academic experience include:

- two-semester sequence, mostly common syllabus but with more choice in spring semester; research component; options for incorporating community-based learning, advising, etc.
- two-semester sequence, common syllabus in the fall and special topics seminar in the spring; special topics seminars may be team-taught, may involve interdisciplinary themes, and may encourage learning in community settings.
- two-semester sequence, “Reading Richmond” foundational seminars in the fall (multiple options all linked to Richmond metro area in some way), common syllabus in the spring.
- two-semester sequence, drawn from clusters of broad topics but offered with specific disciplinary (or interdisciplinary) focus; student and faculty choice of topics.

All models would require:

- incentives for departments & faculty members to be involved: for departments, post-doctoral fellows, “points” towards faculty lines, and/or other teaching support; for faculty, stipends, re-assigned time, recognition for annual review, tenure, and promotion.
- support for new pedagogy: writing across the curriculum, particular needs of first-year students, incorporating research at the first-year level, community-based learning, faculty learning communities.
- broad-based support (both rhetorical and material) from across the campus: courses offered through all undergraduate schools, integration with general education and major curricula, financial support via new lines, funding for course preparation seminars, etc.
- reduced class sizes: avg. 15-16 per section
- First Year Fellows program: upper-class students serving as writing fellows, speech fellows, mentors.