Introduction

This report presents the committee’s deliberations based on research and conversations with Hamilton faculty and administrators and with directors and teachers at other institutions. After reviewing models of first-year seminars at peer institutions and at Hamilton, we will attempt to evaluate some features of FYS courses as they might—or might not—be implemented here. We have seen our task as gathering information and identifying questions about first-year programs that CAP may decide to pursue.

First-Year Seminars: Models at Other Institutions

First-year seminars have been attractive features of the academic landscape for years at many institutions, from small, private liberal arts colleges like Hamilton to large public universities. Focusing on liberal arts schools, we corresponded or spoke with colleagues who directed or taught first-year seminars at Amherst, Bates, Bowdoin, Carleton, Colgate, Dartmouth, Macalaster, Middlebury, Reed, St Lawrence, Skidmore, and Williams. The format of seminars varies widely. Features of these seminars at our peer institutions include a residential component, assignment of first-year seminar instructors as advisors, co-curricular programming or social activities, and the use of student teaching assistants (see Appendix A for a spreadsheet of common features of FYS programs at other small liberal arts colleges). A common profile is that FYS are small, interactive courses which are intensive or distinctive in some manner. As they focus on the academic needs of first-year students, they aim to foster intellectual exchange between faculty mentors and students and among students themselves and to create intellectual engagement that extends beyond the classroom. A sample of representative descriptions and mission statements of first-year programs is attached (Appendix B).

First-Year Seminars at Hamilton

First-year seminars have a recent history at Hamilton, although we have never had a formal “program” and enrollment has always been voluntary. Between 1992 and 2004, faculty organized three multi-section courses as options in the fall for first year students: College 100, The Unity of Knowledge;
College 120, Hiroshima and After; and College 130, Coming of Age in America. A total of 27 sections of C100, 11 sections of C120, and 23 of C130 were taught over the course of a decade, 61 sections in all (see Appendix C). Resources for multi-sectioned first-year seminars disappeared with the advent of Sophomore Seminars in Fall 2003. More recently, Writing 100, sponsored by the Writing Program, has been offered as a first-year course.

The first-year College seminars were designed as courses that would be distinctive and that would present special challenges to students in their first-semester at Hamilton. Unity of Knowledge, Hiroshima and After and Coming of Age in America had different formats and curricular emphases, but all were interdisciplinary and involved either a common curriculum or some shared materials, as well as a degree of co-teaching or consultation among teaching staff and shared programming (films, speakers) or group activities (museum or theater visits). Certain sections included a residential component or assigned seminar professors as advisors. Following are brief reports based on our conversations with faculty involved. A sample syllabus for each class is included in Appendix D.

**College 100 (Carl Rubino)**

The committee heard from Carl Rubino who taught College 100, Unity of Knowledge, to our knowledge the first of the multi-sectioned, first-year seminars taught at Hamilton in the last few decades (we did not investigate options before 1990). Carl initiated and designed the class as an interdisciplinary, discussion-intensive course in which the professor played a subsidiary role to students in the classroom; he adapted the model from St. John’s, where Carl had taught previously. The course was writing intensive (and thus limited to 20). It began in 1992 and by 1994 had six sections, each of which operated autonomously but cooperatively, with some reading and activities common to all classes each semester. Instructors met to plan the course, discuss its progress, and to coordinate group visits (to Sculpture Space, the Oneida Community, and Syracuse Stage, for example). Faculty from different disciplines were invited as visitors to some classes. The course stressed interconnections between Arts, Humanities, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences.

Advanced student graduates of the course sometimes served as teaching assistants. Carl found
this aspect of the class particularly rewarding. The course sometimes had a residential component, wherein about half the students lived near each other. Instructors sometimes served as their students’ advisors.

Carl was highly enthusiastic about the course, which he viewed as an ‘introduction to college.’ He found students especially receptive in their first semester. In the end, the course lost administrative support. The demand for faculty to offer Sophomore Seminars made it impossible for departments to allow Carl and others to continue teaching the course. Carl expressed interest in reviving the course and in teaching it again.

**College 120: Hiroshima (Barbara Gold, Maurice Isserman)**

College 120 was a writing-intensive course about the impact of nuclear weapons on society. It had an interdisciplinary focus and was driven primarily by student discussion of the material. Topics included the science of atomic weapons, ethics and responsibility considerations from a foreign policy perspective, national security implications, and cultural reactions. It was essentially team-taught, with a variety of small-group discussions plus many large-group activities such as films and lectures by visitors from inside and outside the College.

**College 130: Coming of Age in America (Nancy Rabinowitz, Steve Orvis)**

The committee heard from Nancy Rabinowitz and Steve Orvis, both of whom had taught the course over several years. The course had impressively specific goals—to quote from the syllabus, “to look at how a particular topic (coming of age) is shaped by a variety of factors (gender, race, class, sexual orientation) and studied through a variety of disciplinary perspectives.” The key ideas of the class, as Steve explained, helped students become aware of factors that would allow for successful adaptation to college life. Nancy also stressed that the course was particularly demanding, a kind of “boot camp” introduction to intellectual life. Both Nancy and Steve stressed how much fun the course was to teach: that students in their first-semester were especially eager and cooperative, that close bonds developed in the seminars, and that the students really wanted to be in the class. Perhaps what was most striking to the committee was the level of passion for and commitment to the course on the part of its instructors.
Both Nancy and Steve stressed that the only reason the course stopped being taught was the staffing pressures created by the sophomore seminar program. Both are eager to begin teaching it again.

**Writing 110 (Maurice Isserman)**

This course is different from the three above, because it not a multi-sectioned, team-taught, interdisciplinary effort. We include it as exemplary of the range of courses that could be housed under the FYS roof. Maurice described College 110 as a first-year course taught within a disciplinary framework, the purpose of which was to teach writing. The course differed from a typical 100-level history course in two major ways: 1) 40% of course time was focused on history and 60% on writing (e.g. discussion of writing in class, writing exercises, infinite numbers of drafts, peer reviews) and 2) only two books were assigned, as opposed to the typical six or eight in a “regular” history course. The topic of Maurice’s course was the Lewis and Clark expedition; other faculty teaching the course focused on other issues (e.g., Sharon Williams focused on environmental issues).

**Remarks on First-year Seminars at Hamilton and Elsewhere**

It was evident from the committee’s conversations with Hamilton faculty veterans that these interdisciplinary, collaborative courses were especially challenging to create and run. But our colleagues were all very enthusiastic; they especially appreciated the bonds they were able to form with students, who became “engaged” and “connected” in important ways. Several colleagues claimed that these were among the most rewarding courses they had taught and were eager to repeat the experience.

To sum up, everyone with whom we spoke, at Hamilton and at other institutions, conveyed excitement and great enthusiasm about their courses. Positive benefits include: closer faculty/ students relationships; the opportunity to explore special topics, with some mode of “intensiveness” (writing, speaking, or quantitative) in small classes; interaction between faculty members on curricular and student issues if they are co-taught; opportunity for advanced students to be TAs; potential for strengthening academic goals (research skills, writing and oral presentation, adherence to the Honor Code). Committee members who began with generally neutral feelings about FYS courses were persuaded that they are worth reviving—and possibly expanding—at Hamilton. We hope that interested faculty will continue to offer first-year seminars as options within our College seminar program (as several professors apparently
plan to do). With fewer demands for seminars restricted to sophomores, it seems likely that more sections reserved exclusively for first-year students could be created (at least back to the levels of the mid-1990s, when we had nine sections each fall).

Should first-year College seminars be expanded into a more formal program? Should FYS courses be required? These questions are premature and beyond the committee’s purview. CAP may wish to pursue these matters further among themselves, with departments and the faculty at large. Faculty reservations about FYS, expressed in the December 2006 faculty meeting, are on record (Faculty Minutes, Dec. 5, 2006). A question that came up frequently during our deliberations—and one which the committee asked itself—was specifically why we “needed” such a program during the first year at Hamilton. What evidence is there that our students are not well served by the curriculum in place? What specific “wrongs” might a first-year program redress?

**The First Year at Hamilton: Could a Good Start Be Even Better?**

At the moment, by many accounts, much is going well for first year students, or, at least, nothing is seriously wrong. Proseminars, writing-intensive courses, and other special College courses offer numerous small-course options to entering students; introductory courses are carefully designed for new students and many departments offer small or writing-intensive sections of these. Student selectivity at Hamilton is at a record high; entering first-year students seem to us more academically ambitious, focused, and engaged than they have been in some years. Reports provided by Gordon Hewitt (see Appendix E) suggest that most students are “very satisfied or satisfied” with their overall college experience after the first year. In short, student satisfaction with their academic experience appears to be high.

However, committee members agree that much more could be done to enhance the writing and research skills of entering students. Our discussion with Sharon Williams emphasized the importance that writing courses play in the first semesters of college. Sharon noted that instruction in writing-intensive courses varies considerably among instructors: Some students receive little to no actual writing instructions in these courses. Others may take writing-intensive courses only in a foreign language or mathematics. Sharon outlined four objectives that she felt were critical to include in first-year seminars: a focus on argumentative writing, instruction in library research skills and citing of sources, instruction in
evaluating and using evidence to support claims, and grammar/style instruction (with mandatory corrections).

Members of the committee are particularly concerned about what seems to be a decline in—or, at least, a transformation of—students’ research skills. Increasing reliance on the internet before college means that students need an introduction to advanced library research in both print and electronic sources. We would welcome courses that devote significant time to discussing the principles and mechanics of academic practices upon which the Honor Code depends (use of sources, attributions, citations, summarizing and paraphrasing arguments with proper attributions, etc.). Whatever their thematic content or disciplinary bent, first-year seminars could become a place where research skills and academic integrity are taught hand in hand. Colleagues at other institutions stressed the importance of FYS in developing these skills (see Middlebury’s FYS Mission Statement, Appendix B). At Dartmouth, for example, most students are required to take two or three quarters of writing- and research-based seminars; the current Associate Dean there views these courses as invaluable.

Furthermore, student perceptions of the Hamilton first-year experience beyond the classroom are less glowing. Among students who leave Hamilton before graduation, the greatest sources of dissatisfaction are non-academic (e.g., geographic location, social life, Greek life, diversity of students, sports/athletics). Students in a 2004 national survey reported that they were “much less likely to collaborate with their colleagues and less likely to engage in active learning” than were students at peer institutions; first-year Hamilton students also rated “the quality of their campus relationships lower than other students” (see Appendix E, 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement (194 responses from freshmen)). Fewer than half the students in the 2004 survey felt that the college encouraged “contact among students from different economic, social, racial/ethnic background; helped students “cope…with non-academic responsibilities;” or provided “the support [needed] to thrive socially.”

According to Nancy Thompson, Dean of Students, students who leave or are dissatisfied with Hamilton commonly express the feeling that “they have not made connections” with others. There is, in short, often a gap between the classroom and extra-curricular life than can be disquieting, dissatisfying, or, at worst, alienating for some students. All of us on the committee have written letters of
recommendations for very bright students seeking to transfer, almost always because of a lack of “connection” between students’ academic and social circles.

Nancy Thompson views a FYS program as an opportunity to build a more productive bridge between the classroom and residential and campus life. She spoke enthusiastically about the potential for integrating intellectual and social life, for forging bonds between students. She admires the first year “experience” (as opposed to simply first-year seminars) at campuses such as St. Lawrence and Beloit, and she would like to see academic concerns better integrated into orientation, a better “flow” between orientation and coursework. She spoke highly of the system of upper-class mentors, intended to foster relations between students both intellectually and socially.

To sum up, while the first year at Hamilton is by no means unsatisfactory for the majority of students, we feel that there could be an even stronger emphasis on writing and research skills, a more dynamic intersection of intellectual and social energies, and even richer bonds between faculty and students and among different groups of students themselves. Various people reminded us that a FYS program should not be viewed as a panacea and that it should not be conceived as a solution for the problem of unhappy students who leave. Yet as Hamilton welcomes students from a broader geographic base and from more diverse student populations into its midst, first-year seminars might play an important role in fostering productive conversation and exchange. First-year seminars could make a solid academic experience even more vibrant and fruitful.

Features of First-year Seminars: An Overview and Preliminary Evaluation

In this section, we will consider some of the features of first-year seminars as taught at Hamilton and elsewhere. Beyond their small size (12-20) and intensiveness, FYS courses and programs have many different formats, variable features, and distinctive elements, some of which we’ll consider below. We would like to stress that this section should not be read as “recommendations” for a program, but rather as our preliminary thoughts about questions that will arise as FYS courses at Hamilton are discussed.

Team-taught? Interdisciplinary?

Hamilton’s previous FYS have been interdisciplinary and team-taught, but this need not be the only model. In other schools, professors offer unique courses of their own design, sometimes focusing on
their research interests, sometimes delving into areas they might not explore otherwise. Team-taught and single-instructor courses might co-exist at Hamilton. Flexible guidelines about format and content would allow many different kinds of courses—existing Sophomore seminars, College courses, 100-level courses in departments, and new courses—to be adapted for entering students in the first semester.

**An advising component?**

This is a tough question. There are obvious advantages to pairing FYS professors as advisors to their FYS students. But there are (at least) two significant drawbacks: 1) students with strong interest in science (or another specialized field) may benefit most from being paired with a professor in that discipline, rather than with their FYS professor; 2) FYS professors who taught courses of 15-18 students would shoulder a heavy advising load if they offered the course in a subsequent year; they might well be able to teach a FYS only once every other year. Given periodic leaves, a faculty member might offer a FYS course only twice in six years. The second problem would become critical only if a certain number of FYS sections had to be offered (i.e., if they were required). Although the advising component is one of the most attractive features to some committee members (and to at least one person who wrote to us), others feel that it is not essential. This issue merits further consideration.

**A residential component?**

Proximity among FYS students has its strong points, but housing FYS students together also presents logistical complications. No one we spoke to at Hamilton thought that shared residence provided enormous benefits, although at other campuses (e.g., Middlebury, St Lawrence), it’s a very important part of the program. We might consider a residential component as an option, but not as an essential element.

**What kind(s) of intensity: Writing, oral, or quantitative?**

We can imagine FYS courses being designed with “intensity” in any one of Hamilton’s traditional areas. This question could be revisited by CAP and the faculty in the future, after reports from all three sub-committees have been received. FYS or College seminars are ideal venues for the development of these skills. Carleton College, for example, has developed some first-year seminars that emphasize quantitative inquiry, reasoning, and knowledge (QUIRK).
Common readings?

It seems unlikely that Hamilton faculty would ever want to teach from the same syllabus. Professors of team-taught courses or cluster-courses usually assign at least some works in common. A common reading over the summer or during the course of the semester is another option.

How much in common?

Beyond a common reading, FYS might share other features, either with several other seminars or with all those offered in a given semester: guest speakers, films, field trips or cultural events, and meals. Several faculty members expressed distaste for “social engineering.” A heavy program of extra-curricular activities might well be perceived as a burden by students and faculty alike. A few such events, however, could add leavening to the mix and bring the first-year class—or part of it—together in memorable ways. The committee feels that some kind of “commonality” among a group of courses would be appealing. We hope that the Dean’s office will generously fund co-curricular events for first-year seminars (and for any other course as well).

Students collaborating with other students

Assigning advanced students as mentors or teaching assistants in first-year courses seems like an excellent idea, of mutual benefit to the mentor (who gains experience and learns through teaching) and the first-year students.

The student mentor/first-year student interaction might also serve as a stimulus for collaboration among students in the class themselves. Committee members felt that such collaboration among students, both within and beyond the classroom, was one of the most positive potential outcomes of FYS.

Should first-year seminars become a requirement?

The Committee has not seriously entertained this question, which it considers premature and which entails departmental resources and faculty allocations, matters handled by the CAP. At the moment, as recently-created Sophomore Seminars become optional, the faculty seems understandably reluctant to leap into new requirements or major curricular reforms. Several cycles of optional FYS courses, more discussion of curricular goals, and much broader investment in the issue by faculty across the disciplines
will have to happen before a motion for a required first-year program can be brought to the floor, with some hope of warm reception. As with all curricular matters, faculty initiative will be key.

A point made by several people at other colleges with successful first-year programs that is worth repeating here is that it is vitally important that the program be initiated, and thus “owned,” by the faculty itself. This seems true to the committee as well—that the best strategy is to grow a program organically from faculty initiative and interest. Success in rekindled and new courses will likely foster interest in expanding the program, especially if the success and values of these courses at Hamilton can then be made clear to the faculty in general.

We note that several schools offer first-year seminars as an option rather than a requirement, as we did here in the 1990s. FYSs need not be required to be successful. The faculty may wish to consider the impact upon students of a requirement in an open curriculum.

Conclusion

Our review of possible FYS features is by no means exhaustive. Our comments are intended as observations for further consideration, not as points in a recommended program. We close with a few suggestions:

If some of the ideas in this report strike a sympathetic chord, CAP may decide to pursue this issue. After CAP deliberations, departmental discussion seems to be the next step. Chairs could lead discussion among their colleagues about curricular possibilities and resource implications.

As stated earlier, we recommend continued support of College seminars for students in their first semester. Sections of College 100 or 130, Writing 110, and other College seminars for first-year students may well be in the works for the fall semester. If several such courses are proposed, instructors might want to form an exploratory committee this spring to discuss possible common elements for Fall 2007, or to decide to choose very different approaches. College course instructors could continue to compare notes and plan future initiatives during the fall. If interesting ideas emerge and if more faculty wish to join forces, FYS instructors might launch a pilot program in Fall 2008—with more FYS sections offered as an option—to explore new directions and try out various features discussed above.
We hope that this report will provide a springboard for further discussions and explorations of curricular possibilities by the CAP. First-year seminars have been in existence at Hamilton for over a decade, and at other institutions for much longer, offering many positive benefits for students and professors alike. As College seminars continue to enjoy a place in the curriculum, first-semester first-year seminars seem like a worthy option to explore.

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