

The First-Year Signature Course (FSC) Proposal

January, 2007

*Faculty teach best when they choose what to present in a course;
students learn best in courses they have chosen.*

*Any new requirements we impose must respect
the intellectual freedom of faculty and students.
To this I am firmly committed.*

– Paul Woodruff

Here are my personal reflections on the proposal as it now stands:

What is a first-year signature course? This is the only totally new required course under the proposed curriculum reform. According to the Faculty Council proposal, the course should have at least these features, which are not fully defined in the proposal: Its method should meet developmental objectives, its content should be contemporary and interdisciplinary, it should introduce students to unique resources of UT, and it should incorporate the University Lecture series. In this document, I try to explain what I take each of those features to be.

Why are we doing this? Our students should have a shared academic experience of some kind to start them off well in their undergraduate careers. For faculty, developing the course will invite members from all disciplines to join a conversation about the goals of undergraduate education. For students, the course will give them something academic to be proud of, while preparing them to be good university students.

Why call it a “signature” course? The FSC should be a course unique to the University of Texas at Austin; it should introduce students to at least some resources that are available only at the University.

Who should teach the course? Students in the FSC should get to know experienced regular faculty to whom they can return for advice later in their college careers. By bringing first-year students into contact with regular faculty, we begin to weave them into the academic fabric of the University.

What do we mean by “resources that are available only at the University?” The gems of UT: libraries, museums, special collections, research labs, distinguished faculty – anything that gives you bragging rights about UT that is not run by the athletic department. The instructor in each class choose the resource or resources that work best for that class.

Why difference does it make to call it a first-year course? If a course is aimed at first-year students, it should be designed to transform good high school students into good college students. This is the *developmental* goal of the FSC.

What are the developmental objectives of the FSC? The various committees who have discussed this question agree that we want college students to be able to:

- read with a critical eye,
- understand how data support or undermine theoretical claims,
- write and speak clearly and persuasively,
- express reasoned disagreement with each other and with their teachers.

Why allow individual faculty members to determine the content of the sections they teach? Why not ask a committee to select a curriculum for all to teach? Regular faculty at a research university are best able to teach the subjects they know best, and they are reluctant to teach a prescribed curriculum. We are committed to freedom for professors in the classroom.

If faculty members design their own courses, what will the different sections have in common? They will share contemporary, interdisciplinary content as well as developmental goals; they will also make use of the University Lecture series.

In what sense should the content be contemporary? Students should be able to see how the course is relevant to their lives, now or in the foreseeable future. For example, a course involving the study of Athenian or Roman imperial history would be of contemporary interest if it invited students to compare ancient with current events. A course touching on electrical engineering would meet the criterion if it addresses the uses of the technology it treats.

Why is the content interdisciplinary? It takes more than one discipline to answer most of the important questions that scholars and scientists ask. The FSC should give students a sense of the range of intellectual resources that a great university can bring to bear on a significant question.

Many fields of study are inherently interdisciplinary. Good examples are astronomy in the natural sciences, geography in the social sciences, and classics in the humanities.

What is the University Lecture Series? University lectures will be offered by distinguished local faculty or visitors in large venues on topics about which reasonable people may disagree. Faculty panels, drawn from a variety of disciplines, will follow each lecture with heated discussion that illustrates how disagreement can be reasonable and productive. Three lectures will form a one-week series early in each semester.

Each lecture-discussion will be designed to foment a campus-wide conversation.

All students in FSCs will be required to attend or to view the lectures and discussions on video recordings. A typical FSC syllabus will allow at least a week for discussion of the university lectures and will integrate them, as much as possible, with the course's own particular content.

What University Lectures are planned for 2007?

Stephen Weinberg, topic TBA (probably from the history of science)

David Oshinsky, History of Capital Punishment

Bobby Inman, National Security

A typical panel would represent different departments. For example, Larry Speck (Architecture), Linda Henderson (Art History), Mike Starbird (math), Paul Woodruff (philosophy and classics), Sanford Levinson (law).

How does the First-year Signature Course fit into the core curriculum? The state requires a core of 42 hours, which must be offered, and honored, by any state institution, so that students may transfer without retaking core courses.

The state prescribes the content of 36 of these hours, leaving an additional 6 hours to be designated by the institution. Currently, these 6 hours at UT consist of an upper division SWC course (011 – additional communication) and an additional science course (031). (The three-digit numbers represent a state numbering system for core courses.)

Under our new proposal, the SWC course will become one of the required writing “flags” outside the 42-hour core, and the FSC course will become an institutionally designated option (090).

May a section of the First-year Signature Course be restricted to certain majors? No. As part of the 42-hour core, the FSC must be open to all students. And as a general education course intended to introduce students to the university as a whole, the FSC should not funnel students into one discipline. Students in certain majors, however, may be advised to register for designated sections of FSC in order to satisfy multiple requirements with one course.

May the First-year Signature Course count toward other requirements? As part of the 42-hour core, the FSC may not count for any other part of that core; in the end, the sum of hours must be 42.

The FSC may carry flags as appropriate, such as the writing flag; that is, it could contain a substantial writing component (SWC), and may contain other components as well.

In order to accommodate majors, such as those in engineering, that require large numbers of hours already, we will have to consider every conceivable way of double-counting the FSC with other courses.

What size or format will most likely achieve our goals? This remains an open question. Large format courses taught by teams may deliver interdisciplinary content

more reliably; small seminars will probably achieve the developmental goals more successfully.

