

First-Year Seminar Program Faculty Toolkit

THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR PROGRAM creates an essential opportunity for incoming students to participate in the dynamic intellectual life of UC Davis in a specialized environment: small, highly interactive, discussion-oriented classes on topics of special interest to instructor and students alike.

More than many other courses, Seminars emphasize class discussions as an essential form of teaching and learning. And, in contrast to many other courses on campus, First-Year Seminars are not designed to help students master a sub-section of disciplinary knowledge at a clearly defined level of understanding. In both form and content, First-Year Seminars are typically something of an experiment for both students and faculty members. Seminar topics cut across traditional disciplines and departmental curricula.

The following materials may be useful to you in preparing or tuning up a FYS course proposal:

- [FAQ on teaching seminars](#)
- [A matrix](#) summarizing campus and program expectations for seminar content, format and assessment practices
- [An orientation to grading First-Year Seminars](#)
- [A report](#) that assesses student and faculty responses to the First Year Seminar Program and its offerings for 2005-06
- [Sample course descriptions](#)

For more information and sample course descriptions, consult the [First-Year Seminar Program website](#).

Educational effectiveness specialists from Undergraduate Education (UE) are happy to talk with you about your ideas for a new seminar or your experiences in teaching one in the past. To schedule a meeting, please send an email request briefly describing briefly the topics and questions you would like to pursue to Janet Chambers at jachambers@ucdavis.edu.

We are always interested in documenting the work that many students and instructors do in connection with the program. If you or your students have prepared course materials, completed assignments, or taken photos that might be of interest to other instructors or prospective students, please share them with us.

Thank you for your interest in the First-Year Seminar Program. We look forward to receiving your proposals.

Carolyn Thomas
Vice Provost & Dean for Undergraduate Education

Janet Chambers
Coordinator, First-Year Seminar Program

Faculty FAQ: First-Year Seminar Program

Who is eligible to teach a First-Year Seminar?

Anyone who holds an instructional appointment at UC Davis is eligible to teach a First-Year Seminar, including all members of the Academic Senate and all Lecturers, Visiting and Adjunct Lecturers and Visiting, Adjunct and Emeriti Professors. Members of the campus community who do not hold an instructional appointment can apply for one within their home department for the specific purposes of teaching a First-Year Seminar. Departmental teaching appointments of this sort make it possible for postdoctoral fellows, emeriti faculty, research associates, campus administrators and staff members to participate as instructors in the First Year Seminar Program. Instructors describe their intellectual interest and background for teaching a particular seminar in the seminar proposal.

Are graduate students allowed to teach First-Year Seminars?

Graduate students are not eligible to teach First-Year Seminars on their own. However graduate students can co-teach a First-Year Seminar with an instructor of record-.i.e., with someone who is a member of the Academic Senate, a Lecturer, Visiting or Adjunct Professor, or Emeriti Professor-if the instructor of record will participate fully in teaching the Seminar and attend a majority, if not all, class sessions.

Are there any special requirements for postdoctoral fellows?

Postdoctoral Fellows with an instructional appointment can teach in the First Year Seminar program. Postdoctoral fellows who do not have an instructional appointment can request an “Adjunct Lecturer” appointment from their departmental MSO and chair to teach a First-Year Seminar. Instructional appointments can be for the sole purpose of teaching a First Year Seminar, but they are available only through academic departments, not through the First-year Seminar program. Postdoctoral Fellows who lack a departmental teaching appointment may also co-teach a seminar with an instructor of record if the instructor of record will participate fully in teaching the Seminar and attend a majority, if not all, class sessions.

Can I be on sabbatical leave and teach a First-Year Seminar?

No, you may not teach a first year seminar while on sabbatical leave.

How are instructors compensated for teaching First-Year Seminars?

Aside from the satisfaction of engaging in a rewarding intellectual and instructional experience, instructors who teach a seminar as an overload to their regular teaching assignment receive an allocation of \$2,000 (for 2-unit courses) or \$1,500 (for 1-unit courses). These funds can be used for research and academic expenses, but not for faculty salaries. If a seminar is team-taught, funds may be divided amongst instructors. With the approval of the chair or dean, a few instructors also have taught First Year Seminars as part of their regular departmental teaching load.

What's the recommended format for a First-Year Seminar?

Seminars are offered as one- or two-unit course. One-unit seminars meet for 10 hours during the quarter and two-unit seminars for 20. Seminars can be designed for either letter grading or a pass/no pass policy. They can meet in regular classrooms, in departmental conference or seminar rooms, or in non-traditional settings. Laboratory work, site visits, and field work may be included in a seminar's design. Enrollment is limited to 19 students to facilitate student participation and encourage intellectual exchange between student and teacher and among students themselves.

How are First-Year Seminars graded?

Seminar grading is either pass/no pass or traditional letter grading (1 or 2 units of credit). As the primary instructor you choose which grading option is best for your seminar.

Are additional resources available to invite guest speakers or provide extra materials to my seminar?

Yes. Seminar instructors may apply for a Mini-grant of up to \$500 to cover eligible expenses of teaching a seminar. For more information, review the application and eligibility requirements on the [First-Year Seminar Mini-grants](#) page. Pre-approval of seminar expenses is required. Instructors cannot be reimbursed for expenses that fall outside the FYS Mini-grant guidelines.

I have a great idea for a First-Year Seminar but I want to know if there is someone in the Program who I can speak with to help me develop my seminar ideas and provide me with feedback prior to submitting my proposal online?

Absolutely, the First Year Seminar office is always available to refer you to an educational effectiveness specialist who can speak with you about your seminar ideas and to help you identify and describe course learning objectives, design alternative assessment approaches, and explore new strategies for stimulating student learning. To arrange a consultation anytime during the academic year, contact the First Year Seminars coordinator at jachambers@ucdavis.edu.

First-Year Seminar Content, Format and Assessment Practices

Campus and Program Expectations

[Link to Google doc version](#)

	Encouraged	Acceptable	Required	Discouraged	Prohibited
Seminar Content	Interdisciplinary themes and topics; engaging to instructor and students; accessible to new first- year students	Any topic of intellectual merit in any area of the instructor’s expertise and interest, regardless of formal academic training and current appointment	Appropriate for new first-year students	Mastery or skill- oriented instruction in academic or technical fields; duplication of existing campus courses; approaches that do not invite intellectual inquiry	Courses that depart from university policies regarding safety, student-faculty interaction, principles of community, etc.
Seminar Format	Emphasis on interactive and engaged class discussions; student projects, reports, and in-class presentations; student group work; a safe place for all students to share ideas	Discussions and all other forms of classroom instruction, including: projects, lectures, labs, fieldwork, studios, fieldtrips, performance, film screenings, debates, etc.	Opportunities for student-faculty discussion; opportunities for student-student interaction	Reliance on in-class lectures, demonstrations and other presentations	Class formats that discourage rather than encourage student engagement and class discussion
Assessment & Evaluation	Assessments that reflect student engagement with ideas; rubric provided to students outlining expectations, including what distinguishes excellent, acceptable, and unacceptable work	Letter grading or Pass/No Pass grading; description provided to students of instructor expectations in participation, papers, or presentations	Instructor evaluations of student performance and course effectiveness; student evaluations of teacher performance and course effectiveness.	Assessments that focus on mastery of specialized course content; final exams	Assigning course grade on basis of final exam

Grading Students in First-Year Seminars

First-Year Seminars differ from the kinds of courses that most students and many faculty members are familiar with. That's part of their attraction, but it can also create uncertainty about what kinds of work students are required to complete, how student work should be evaluated, and how students should be graded.

Apart from the option of using either pass/no pass or traditional letter grading, seminars have no special grading provisions or requirements. Seminars have two special features that are useful to keep in mind in designing grading policies and practices:

THE SEMINAR EXPERIENCE: More than many other courses, Seminars emphasize class discussions as an essential form of teaching and learning. A key goal of the First-Year Seminar Program is to create opportunities for first-year students and faculty members to meet face-to-face in examining a topic of mutual interest. Unlike most courses on campus, First-Year Seminars are not designed to help students master a sub-section of disciplinary knowledge at a clearly defined level of understanding.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIMENT: Many First-Year Seminars require students to complete assignments that are difficult to evaluate by traditional academic criteria alone. Instructors cannot require students to complete a final exam, and group presentations or individual projects appear frequently as alternatives (or complements) to term papers.

Given these features, two general patterns in grading have appeared.

- **Student grades may be relatively uniform.** Most instructors give low grades to students who fail to attend or to complete assignments, but most also give relatively high grades to students who do. Some instructors who emphasize the Seminar discussion process over individual assignments have given all students who participate fully the same course grade.
- **Many First-Year Seminar instructors emphasize classroom participation and student projects that are difficult to evaluate according to traditional academic criteria.** Students may complete group projects, make class presentations, engage in laboratory or studio activities, multi-media editing, or fieldwork. To clarify expectations for these non-traditional assignments, some instructors have created evaluation rubrics and scoring guides. Presented as a checklist, matrix or chart, these can be useful to students as they work on an assignment and to instructors as they evaluate student work.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: Additional information about grading provisions for individual First-Year Seminars can be found by looking at Seminar course descriptions posted on the First-Year Seminars Website.

A Report on UC Davis First-Year Seminars *abridged from the 2008 CETL report*

The UC Davis Freshman Seminar Program was established in 1988 to support a new kind of course through which faculty members and first-year undergraduates investigate topics of mutual interest in small, face-to-face discussions. (In 2010, the program was renamed “First-Year Seminars” to include transfer students. We use the name Freshmen Seminars here because this assessment was done under the old name.) Each seminar focuses on a topic, theme or perspective for which the instructor has special interests and expertise. Freshman Seminars provide faculty members an opportunity to teach topics that don’t fit well within departmental curricula. Seminars provide students with an opportunity to explore provocative ideas, perspectives and methods of inquiry with some of the finest minds on the campus. The small size and participatory nature of the Seminars help students sharpen their critical reasoning skills.

The program grown significantly since they were first offered. In 2013-14, we offered 180 First-Year Seminars, up from 157 seminars in 2004-05, and ~100 in 2003-04. We intend to continue the growth of this valuable program.

In 2008, the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, which formerly administered the program, conducted a review of faculty and student responses to help shape the program.

Faculty responses to the program

Faculty members who teach a Freshman Seminar are inclined to teach one again. Of the faculty who taught in 2005-06, 86% stated they were either “very likely” or “likely” to teach a FS again. The three reasons faculty members most often gave for participating in the Freshman Seminar Program:

Being able to teach in a special area of interest outside of their normal discipline. Many faculty members noted that they participated in the FYS because of the freedom to explore new teaching topics. The flexibility of the FYS meant they could pilot new classes in a relaxed atmosphere, teach on a topic completely outside their department, field or discipline, or design an interdisciplinary course with another instructor from another discipline.

Wanting to work with undergraduates, specifically freshmen. Many faculty were encouraged by the idea of working with new students, and “catching them” while they were interested in broad issues. Word of mouth recommendations were also important-faculty stated that they were often encouraged by other faculty members within their departments who said the teaching experience was fun and worthwhile.

The research account stipend (\$2000 for a two-unit or \$1500 for a one-unit seminar). Another oft cited reason was the value to faculty for the funds provided by the FYS. Usually faculty stated they needed the funds to buy computers, phone bills or other equipment unavailable for funding within their departments.

Student responses to the program

The majority of students gave high marks to their Freshman Seminars: the average rating was 4.8 out of 5.0 in agreeing with the statement “it was a good course overall.” The aspects of the course that appeared highly correlated with students’ positive experiences were the **small class size** and especially the ability of the **instructor to foster positive forms of debate and discussion** that encouraged their participation. These two reasons were also most often cited by students in their open-ended responses to what they liked about the course.

The majority of students who took Freshman Seminars in 2005-06 also strongly agreed (i.e., averaged 4.5 rating and above) about the following:

- The class stimulated my thinking
- Instructor respected divergent points of view
- Instructor and students treated me with respect
- Instructor is a good teacher

There were very few negative comments from students. Most were directed at the amount of work the instructor assigned (that it was too much for a 2-unit class) or that **the instructor “lectured” too often and allowed too little time for class discussion.**

Overall, students were pleased with the opportunity to work with a professor, and often commented favorably about the instructor’s knowledge and enthusiasm for teaching the topic (this is also reflected in the instructor evaluations and reasons for participating). **However, very few students felt that they actually “got to know” their professor or other students in the class.**

Suggestions for improvement

- **Encourage participation.** When asked what could be improved, both students and faculty most often mentioned social interaction and class dynamic: this included many comments about **lack of student participation**. Both **instructors and students** complained that despite small class sizes, many students did not participate actively in class discussions. Even students who rated the course highly did not feel they “got to know” the professor or other students in the class.
- **Foster a friendly class climate.** Higher student participation appeared closely tied to the instructors’ ability to foster a **friendly class climate**—those who gave the class high marks on class participation often wrote they enjoyed the professor’s personality, humor, and efforts to share personal opinions and thoughts with students. In their open-ended responses students also mentioned that opportunities to debate class topics were an important dimension of why they enjoyed the class.

These comments by students and faculty members suggest the value of helping instructors identify. Students offered several strategies that can encourage discussion and create a **more collegial atmosphere.**

- **Use PowerPoint less often:** students commented instructors’ over-reliance on this tool stifled their conversation with both the professor and each other. Lecture on “facts” less often, and **include more student debates in class** about the reading or lecture topics.
- **Decrease the amount of reading and outside work and increase the student work to be done in class** (many thought there was too much reading and homework for a 2-unit class, and that they never had a chance in class to discuss it)

Finally, many faculty evaluations reflected a **concern over whether they had met the critical thinking goals** of Freshman Seminar learning objectives. Some faculty rated this dimension low in evaluating their own seminar. This could be another consequence of stilted student participation in class discussion, but could also be an artifact of assessment tools that fall short of capturing students’ critical thinking.

Sample Course Descriptions

Title: Nanotechnology for the Built Environment (1 unit)

Instructor: John Bolander, Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering, College of Engineering

Description: This seminar course introduces several applications of nanotechnology within the built environment, as well as some of the issues surrounding the growing use of nanomaterials. The course begins with basic descriptions of components of the built environment (e.g. building systems) and how nanotechnology can be used to improve the performance and functionality of such systems. Nanotechnology is opening new frontiers in sustainable building practices, and the course places some emphasis on its use to enhance the performance of so-called green buildings. In addition to basic concepts and background information provided early in the course, a sampling of applications that use nanotechnology will be covered, such as building applications for energy conservation, self-cleaning, sequestering of pollutants, and sensing of environmental conditions for automatic control. The instructor will provide lecture notes and reading materials taken from a variety of sources.

Learning Objectives: Students will gain an appreciation and basic understanding of: 1) the different length scales involved in the design of modern building materials; 2) how nanotechnology provides markedly different capabilities from those achievable with ordinary materials and processes; 3) uncertainties and potential hazards associated with the use of nanomaterials; and 4) some current and foreseeable applications of nanotechnology within the built environment.

Format: The seminar group will meet one hour each week. The meetings will consist of classroom lecture and discussions. Reading and short homework/lab assignments; report on a pre-approved, relevant topic of the student's choosing.

Grading: Students will be given a letter grade based on two short assignments (30%), participation in classroom discussions (30%), and a report on a pre-approved, relevant topic of their choosing (40%).

About the Instructor: John Bolander is an Associate Professor within the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering. His teaching and research interests center on the effective use of both traditional and new materials within the civil infrastructure, with particular emphasis on cement-based composites. He is using computer models to quantitatively link micro-mechanical actions to performance measures defined at the structural scale. These efforts include the simulation of life-cycle performance based on durability mechanics.

Title: Integrity Under Fire: The Role of Courage in Criminal Justice (1 unit)

Instructor: Floyd Feeney, School of Law

Description: This class will explore the role that courage and integrity play in our criminal justice system. One of the central virtues promised by law is that individuals and cases will be judged fairly according to pre-established standards. Whether the law can deliver on its promise depends in part on the wisdom of concepts used to establish the country's system of law and criminal justice. The workability and effectiveness of the implementation methods employed is also critical. At least as important, however, as the abstract laws and plans are the human beings entrusted with the task of making the system work. Their competency, fairness, and effectiveness is vital to any system's success.

There are times, however, when competency, fairness, and effectiveness alone are not enough. Attorneys who defend highly unpopular clients, for example, often face severe hostility. Friends and acquaintances may shun them and their families. They may find it difficult to get cooperation from agencies or individuals they need to perform their function. And they or their families may face threats of economic or personal harm. In high profile cases defense attorneys often lose other clients, and things like death threats are not uncommon.

In the modern world problematic situations abound. A number of Saddam Hussein's defense lawyers were killed. A decade ago the Mafia killed a prominent Italian judge who had been investigating Mafia crimes. Even in the United States recent Congressional hearings suggest that seven U.S. attorneys may have been fired because they chose to be impartial rather than political in the cases that they investigated and prosecuted. If systems are to be able to deliver on fairness in situations like these, the humans who perform the key roles must somehow find the courage necessary to do their job despite all the problems that doing so may bring them.

Learning Objectives: 1-Increase knowledge about instances in which courage and integrity are necessary to carry out criminal justice functions; 2-Increase awareness about the necessity of courage and integrity; 3-Develop willingness to assume responsibility for important societal choices; 4-Develop analytical skills necessary to implement goal #3

Format: The class will meet one hour each week for eight weeks. The first four classes will be devoted to discussions of case examples prepared by the instructor. One of these will involve a German prosecutor who brought charges against a concentration camp commandant (Dachau) in the early days of the Nazi regime. The next four classes will concern case examples selected by the students. During the last four classes students will have an opportunity to make a brief presentation based on their class paper. The final class (two hours) will be a group exercise in which the students will serve as the board charged with fashioning training materials on courage for criminal justice officials in California. In addition to identifying the specific traits and qualities that criminal justice officials and leaders need to be successful, the group will select three examples of courage for inclusion in the training materials.

Grading: Each student will be expected to read the assignments, participate in class discussion and complete one 8-page class paper. Each student will also make a brief presentation of his or her class paper to the class. Grading will be based on the required written class paper (50%), the student's presentation of the paper (30%) and the student's participation in the general discussion (20%).

About the Instructor: Floyd Feeney has been a professor in the School of Law since 1968. His fields of interest include criminal justice and election law. Prior to coming to Davis, he served as a Law clerk to Justice Hugo Black of the United States Supreme Court and as Assistant Director for the President's Crime Commission. From 1968-1986 he was Executive Director of the campus' Center on Administration of Criminal Justice. Current projects include a book comparing German and American criminal procedure, a long-range study of criminal justice costs, and an analysis of the rules governing the initiative process.

Title: The History of the Motion Picture (2 units)

Instructor: Gerhard Bauer, Stem Cell Program, School of Medicine

Description: The subject matter addresses the history of the motion pictures, “the” novel and unique art form of the 20th century. We will explore the start of moving images in the 19th century, the first highly acclaimed artistic silent films of the early teens in 20th century, the introduction of color and sound in the 1920s, new aspect ratios and film formats in the 1950s and finally the “digital revolution”, digital sound and digital projection in the 1990s up to the present day. Film preservation and restoration will also be discussed, since many of our film treasures have been lost through film base decay and color fading. All this will be achieved through informal lectures, presentation of actual historic film footage, readings of original articles, and discussion.

Format: The seminar will meet for two hours each week for ten weeks. The time will be divided between informal lecture presentations, presentation of actual historic film documents and sound recordings, discussion of the presented topics, and student presentations. Reading material and links to appropriate websites will be provided. There is no text for the course.

Assignments: Students will be required to prepare a short paper (4 pages) on a topic to be chosen in consultation with the instructor. Students will also be assigned to present a summary of an article in oral form in front of the class. It should be 5-7 minutes long.

Grading: The course grade will be based on the quality of their written (50%) and oral (25%) presentations and on the frequency and quality of their participation in class discussion (25%).

About the Instructor: Professor Gerhard Bauer is a member of the faculty in the Department of Internal Medicine. Although his professional research focuses on translational research in the field of cellular therapy, tissue repair and HIV gene therapy, he has been for the last 30 years a collector and expert in historic movies. He owns an extensive collection of rare movies from the 1920s to the 1950s, among them a mint 35mm print of the first feature length Technicolor movie ever made. He also took it on himself to restore a long lost public domain 35mm Sc iFi feature film print from 1936 that he accidentally discovered in New Jersey. He has been consulted many times to give his expert opinion on film restoration and preservation, locating rare movie prints, and to hold film festivals. Currently, a feature article in the Sacramento Bee is being written about him, his film collection and the monthly rare movie shows in the private movie theater he built in his home.

Title: Digital Literacy in Higher Education (2 units)

Instructor: Victoria Cross, Department of Psychology, College of Letters and Science

Description: This seminar will explore what digital literacy means for students in higher education. The following questions will be posed: What does digital literacy mean? How important is it for success in higher education? How do students acquire digital literacy? Are incoming students already sufficiently digitally literate to succeed at UC Davis? If not, what resources are available to enable them to gain these skills? Following this exploration, the students will decide how they can best communicate their findings to the university community.

The students will examine the meaning of digital literacy in higher education. After having established a base of knowledge in the area through readings, they will assess the reality of the situation by conducting a brief poll of advanced undergraduates about the importance of digital literacy in their educational experiences as well as a poll of incoming freshmen about their level of digital literacy. They will then analyze the student needs and the UCD classes and other resources available to meet those needs. Students will consider how their peers acquired digital skills and how they would advise incoming freshman to go about getting those skills. Finally, the students will communicate their findings through digital publications, handouts, presentations, etc.

Learning Objectives: This seminar will explicitly raise awareness of the importance of information technology in today's education. Students will also experience hands-on research through design, data collection, analysis and presentation of their findings.

Format: The seminar will meet for 2 hours each week. Any field trips would be scheduled within the regular class time and would focus on tours of information technology resources on campus (computer labs, internships, etc.) A handful of journal articles will be assigned as required readings. The students will conduct their own poll of fellow students. The students will analyze any needs revealed by the poll in conjunction with UC Davis class offerings and other resources. The students will explore the resources at UC Davis including potentially making calls and office visits to campus departments and resource units.

Grading: Working as a team, students will each contribute to creating, conducting and analyzing the student poll. Students will each contribute to researching and evaluating the university resources. Students will each present to their fellow students a summary of an aspect of digital literacy. Students will each contribute to a written document communicating their findings and recommendations to the university community. Attendance each week is expected.

About the Instructor: Dr. Victoria Cross has had extensive experience in both teaching and educational technology. She has taught in the Psychology Department for the last 3 years. Her areas of expertise are cognitive and cognitive development. Prior to that, she coordinated the educational technology faculty development programs at the Teaching Resources Center. On campus, she has been involved in a number of campus committees concerning educational technology. Off campus, she has worked for EDUCAUSE, a leading national non-profit dedicated to furthering higher education through the use of technology. She has also recently coordinated a University of California system-wide conference on effective uses of educational technology in undergraduate education.