

Proposal for Interdisciplinary Junior/ Senior Seminar

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Rationale:

This proposal responds to widespread interest in providing some sort of culminating experience for majors and a realistic recognition that staffing constraints make a senior seminar impossible to mount in most departments and programs.

The proposal is also grounded in research that suggests students are attracted to and learn most from grappling with complex, messy problems that require multiple disciplinary perspectives and methods to analyze. Such topics might include sustainability and development; borders, immigration and globalization; human rights; multicultural competencies; media, representation, popular culture; creativity and design; and the digital divide, and topics on particular questions of health and disease, and ethical questions connected to phenomena, such as robotics and artificial intelligence.

The importance of an interdisciplinary approach is central to this proposal that highlights for students the particular strengths of their disciplinary training and the necessity of multiple competencies and collaboration in solving or understanding "real world" problems. An important outcome is an integrated, comparative understanding of a phenomenon, and recognition of the links between a student's major and a post-graduate world.

Goals:

Students would work on a common problem or phenomenon, comparing the ways the different perspectives they've gained through their majors are useful in exploring the roots of a problem or multiple dimensions of a phenomenon and the debates or contradictions within these approaches, as well as potential solutions. Each student would be expected to engage in this comparative analysis and also to produce a piece of independent research that contributes to the aggregate understanding of the topic.

Outcomes:

Each student's independent research (or a collaborative group paper) would result in a "white paper" that would be posted on a course website, and would become available to a wider Smith community. These white papers would be judged by our usual standards of effective writing, including the quality of the questions posed, the quality and relevance of evidence gathered, the cogency and economy of the argument, and a clear sense of audience to be persuaded. The reality of a community audience for this research might add to the motivation to see "independent research" in a larger context.

Benefit to the College:

The best of these websites and white papers could also potentially have an external link through the Smith webpage to showcase for potential applicants the kinds of independent research Smith students do.

Format: Modelled on the FYS, an Interdisciplinary Junior /Senior Seminar would be mounted as a limited number of extra-departmental courses, offering a flexible array of topics that would be expected to change from year to year.

Planning and publishing a two-year slate would give sophomores the ability to plan junior and senior choices. Having the seminars open to qualified juniors would give juniors a meaningful intellectual benefit for choosing to remain at Smith. Having a limited number of spaces, with competition to gain admission, could enhance the attractiveness of the seminars.

Staffing and Support:

A pilot group of 10 seminars, each with an enrollment of 12-15, and most likely team-taught, would require several forms of advance support and training, including modest stipends for course development, workshop support for integrating quantitative modules wherever possible, and support for basic web page design.

These seminars, like the FYS, would be proposed by faculty members or pairs and approved by CAP with guidelines developed for Interdisciplinary Junior /Senior seminars. Each seminar would be an ideal venue for offering writing-intensive courses for advanced students, and would also help realize College goals for increased opportunities for quantitative reasoning as well as independent research.

The budget would be comparable to that for FYS and much less than required to offer capstone courses in individual departments and programs.

Logistics:

Juniors and seniors would be eligible to apply and would have to offer evidence of preparation for doing advanced work on a particular topic. Some seminars would be more suited to some majors than others, and teachers would have the option of deciding, as with all seminars, the criteria for admission, including disciplinary background. Teachers would also be encouraged to consider Praxis experience as relevant background.