

## SENATE COMMITTEE ON UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

Report of the Ad Hoc First-Year Seminar Committee

Robin Bower, Chair

**Chair Blasko:** The first report is from Undergraduate Education and the Ad Hoc First-Year Seminar Committee. It appears on today's agenda as Appendix B. As you know, the committee has been working for a year on this report and the Senate leadership is very appreciative of their efforts. In order to have a full discussion and respect the time of our senators, I would ask that you confine your comments as much as possible to issues that have not already been raised in the discussion. I will attempt to recognize as many different people as possible.

FYS Committee Co-Chairs Patti Mills and Kim Steiner will present this report and respond to questions. Other members of the committee who are not senators but were on the First-Year Seminar Committee may have the privilege of the floor to make comments as well.

**Kim Steiner, Agricultural Sciences:** Even having served as Chair of the Senate, I have to tell you this; it can be a little stressful to stand down here and present legislation to the Senate. With an FYS proposal on the floor today, it feels like climbing up to a roof during a thunderstorm. We've already been warned that there may be some bolts out of the blue. That warning came from God, otherwise known as Susan Youtz.

The legislation today addresses the FYS requirement, a requirement that's been argued over and discussed in the Senate probably more than any other issue over the last ten years, if you count committee time. There are dozens of pages of Senate Records devoted to this particular topic since 1997. Some faculty like the requirement, some don't. Some administrators like it; some feel it's a burden. But probably more importantly, some students like it, and some do not. Many students have had disagreeable experiences with their FYS, and it's not uncommon for students to list their FYS course as being among their least favorite as they graduate from Penn State. That outcome is particularly disturbing because it's quite at odds with the original intent of the FYS legislation, which was to foster student engagement.

Most of you were present here in this room in January of 2007 when the Senate came within four votes out of 150 of simply dropping the requirement, and that measure probably failed only because an alternative motion was waiting in the wings, one that created our committee as a final attempt to find a solution. I want you to think about the fact that in January of 2007 very nearly half of the Senate was prepared right then to do away with FYS without any further investigation of a solution. I think that brings home the sorry state of affairs we have been in with this requirement.

After a year of hard work, Patti and I on behalf of our committee are returning to you with a recommendation. Before I describe that recommendation, I want to point out that if the recommendation fails on a vote of the Senate, we will then move to abolish the FYS General Education requirement. This, in effect, is a mirror image of the actions that were before the Senate in January of 2007. Basically what we propose to do is close the loop that was opened up a year ago, and if necessary return to the question that was before us in January of last year.

Now it's an "if then" proposition, not an "either or". It is still possible that we will reject both motions and retain the status quo. In other words, there are three possible outcomes to these actions. In sequence, they are 1) that we accept the recommendation that is in the report, in your agenda, 2) if we reject it, that we then vote to eliminate FYS as a General Education requirement, and 3) failing that, we preserve the status quo and retain exactly the requirement that we have now. I personally feel that the last outcome is a little doubtful, given the strength of feeling that is around the requirement and how much opposition has been voiced to it in the past.

The cornerstone of our proposal is the need to return to basic principles. These are the reaffirmation of the goals and objectives of student engagement that FYS was originally intended to address. These are listed in our report. They are lifted right out of the 2007 October Senate agenda. Those goals and objectives were never questioned in all of those dozens of pages of Senate discussions. I think what's happened is that as we've implemented FYS and made the requirement a routine part of our curricula, those goals and objectives have been largely forgotten, if not perhaps ignored. Approval of our recommendation would amount to recommitting to those ideas.

So, what's the recommendation? In a nutshell it's this: that Senate approval of our proposal would eliminate FYS as a General Education requirement in favor of a mandate that each college and campus prepare a written and published plan for achieving the goals and objectives of first-year engagement through its curricula and other programs targeted at first-year students. Those plans, if the proposal is approved, would be subject to one-time peer review and approval, and they must include a description of how the success of the plans will eventually be assessed. It is also expected that the Senate itself will perform an assessment of implementation and effectiveness of this legislation in 5 years.

The rest of the recommendation consists of a mix of restrictions, stipulations, and in some cases recommended guidelines for the plans. The principal constraint that our recommendation imposes on the plans is that University Park colleges must include at least one credit of a first-year seminar that meets certain criteria, and a rationale for that difference is laid out in our report. Otherwise, plans may include other small-class experiences, special advising programs, intensive orientation experiences, special programs offered by Student Affairs, and other approaches depending on the ingenuity of the unit.

Our plan recognizes that the goals and objectives of first-year engagement are valid for the entire University, but it acknowledges that there appears to be no single model for achieving those ends that is appropriate or workable for all units.

We understand that some of you may be disappointed that we did not discover in our one-year exercise the magic formula for a perfect FYS General Education course. Actually, I am a little disappointed myself, and I'm sure Patti is too. But we're not surprised, and it shouldn't be surprising if you consider that one Senate committee or another has been actively engaged in trying to find a solution to FYS beginning in February 2003. That's five years beginning with a special Task Force appointed by Jan Jacobs and John Moore in February 2003, followed by three successive years of charges to the Undergraduate Education committee to find a solution, followed by the one year that we've spent on this. Based on this history and our own very hard work, I am

convinced that there is no such model, at least one that would pass the Senate with broad support, and that goal has been sort of critical to our deliberations: what can we come up with that won't merely pass by a small margin, but will pass by a large enough margin that we can put this issue to rest for a few more years.

Finally, I want to add that on behalf of the committee, Patti and I have consulted with a great many individuals and groups; we haven't been doing this just in a vacuum within our committee. The feedback from these individuals and groups has greatly informed our final recommendation. I just want to mention that in many cases we've met with these individuals or groups twice, or three times: the Senate officers in formal session, Provost Erickson, again, other than casual conversations (twice) Vice-President Pangborn (twice), Director of DUS Eric White, Vice-President for Student Affairs Vicky Triponey, the Provost's Academic Leadership Council, the Administrative Council on Undergraduate Education (twice), the Campus Academic Officers, the Senate Committee on Undergraduate Education (twice), the Academic Affairs Committee of University Park Undergraduate Association, the Council of Commonwealth Student Governments, and the Commonwealth Caucus of the Faculty Senate (three times). This proposal comes to you with the unanimous support of our committee and the unanimous support of the Committee on Undergraduate Education. With that preface, we'd like to take your questions.

**Jamie Myers, Education:** Kim, I think you minimize what you have done here. There are two components that are buried in this larger recommendation that I haven't heard people talking about sufficiently in the past few weeks. So, I don't think they are quite clear to everybody. One of those components is the suggestion that First-Year Seminars can be taught by regular faculty, not just standing faculty. That means fixed-term faculty who are regular full-time on multi-year appointments, or maybe one-year appointments year after year, can teach a first-year seminar. That's a big change from the old First-Year Seminar requirement. I'm understanding that requirement change correctly, right?

**Kim Steiner:** The wording is a little bit different Jamie. Actually, fixed-term one faculty could teach First-Year Seminars under the original implementation back in 1998.

**Jamie Myers:** The second item that is here was really difficult to understand, and I have spent a few days trying to figure it out. That is the drop of a General Education requirement in favor of a graduation requirement. Now if I can make some comparisons and try to illuminate this a little bit; it means that a First-Year Seminar course is not required. A course is not required for General Education credits. In other words, students don't have to take that extra course to fulfill General Education, and a lot of students were taking an extra course that didn't count for their major or anything else.

**Kim Steiner:** That is correct. We would be eliminating the First-Year Seminar as a General Education requirement.

**Jamie Myers:** As a course, as a General Education course; as a requirement, as a credit requirement, that means it is exactly the same as a W course, a US or an IL course. The Senate has decided Writing Across the Curriculum is important enough that some courses should be writing intensive. They decided that US and IL are important for some courses to be identified

and those are not extra courses. They are graduation requirements and this recommendation would make First-Year Seminar the same type of requirement.

**Kim Steiner:** I don't quite see it that way.

**Jamie Myers:** I think it is that way and I think that's what you are minimizing. I think that is a very important and beneficial change, because now a First-Year Seminar counts for something. It counts for a General Education credit or it counts for major credit. So it has utility for the students; it's not an extra course.

**Kim Steiner:** It would be that way under our proposal. We are asking that those colleges that must do an FYS, which are the University Park academic colleges, would include that as part of their college or major requirements. So it would be counted for something; it would be like a requirement to take a particular math course or an English course, or particular course within the major or college.

**Jamie Myers:** I think those two changes I just described are very important to understanding First-Year Seminar in a different way than what it has been in the past.

**Kim Steiner:** We are basically changing the paradigm.

**Jamie Myers:** The other merit is the engagement plans, which really asks us in each of our units to contextualize our entire efforts to engage first-year students and not just to funnel them into one little course that we give students. I think that is the strength and merit in your overall recommendation. I think you minimize what you came up with here. It's not a magic bullet, but I think it has some significant changes that I can support. But I can't support the entire thing. There is one item in there that leads me not to support it, and that item is that I really believe we are one University, geographically distributed. I cannot support any motion which would establish graduation requirements at one campus and not at all campuses. That's a principle that doesn't really have to do with First-Year Seminar. It just has to do with the fact that I don't think I want to support a situation where we get into creating different Penn State degrees because at one campus we have these requirements and at another one we have different requirements.

The item in your recommendation which specifies that University Park colleges must have a First-Year Seminar requirement; whereas other units do not have to have, or may choose to have and are not required to, is an item which I think is very problematic in terms of the scope of the entire curriculum at the University. We just spent how long trying to get prefixes to be the same across the entire University. We have committees looking at degrees, at majors, trying to get them to be more resonant with each other so students can move and change assignment easier and not run into new requirements when they move from University Park to Erie, for example. I think it works against a general belief and principle of the Senate.

Therefore, I'm going to move to change that overall part of your recommendation as an amendment. There are two ways to move, one is to give every unit an option, or to require every unit to have this requirement. Again, I think that you have changed the nature of the requirement sufficiently that it's not a burdensome requirement for any unit to have a small class that carries the S or the FY suffix and need the graduation requirement. In fact, most of these classes already

exist, so I don't think it's a resource issue in making this a requirement for all units. So I'm going to move to amend that this be a requirement for all units, not just University Park. I would need a second on that motion.

**Senators:** Second.

**Kim Steiner:** Jamie, the only thing I want to point out is that we need to be clear on what we're talking about here. These requirements, if this proposal is accepted, are not General Education requirements. What we're asking in our proposal is that every college at University Park, include in its own college and major requirements an FYS type of course. It's not a University designation with the only exception that we're suggesting that S suffix may remain for courses that are other General Education courses, and may need to have this particular designation for a section. FYS, under this proposal, would disappear as a University-wide idea; it would become a course requirement within each college. There is no reason after that to be thinking we only have one credit of FYS in our college, but those students in another college have to take three credits because they actually are a different course or curricular requirement. I want everybody to understand that. What Jamie is suggesting in his amendment is that we ask that to be the case for every non UP location as well.

**Chair Blasko:** Is there discussion on that amendment before we vote?

**Cynthia Brewer, Earth & Mineral Sciences:** I've been grilled on the Senate floor a number of times this year and last. I think during one of the most recent ones when we were voting on amendments to the Post Tenure Review report, Kim said equal is not always equitable, or something to that effect. I think they were wise words and we ended up changing the report I was defending. I would like to say that I do not support Jamie's amendment to the report. I think the committee has done a good job on that; equal is not equitable. Many of the campuses have excellent small courses of standard experiences already, and we don't need an equal rule imposed on all of the campuses to maintain one University.

**Leonard Berkowitz, York:** I agree with Cindy. You may recall that in January or whenever it was in 2007, I spoke passionately about getting rid of the First-Year Seminar requirement because I didn't believe there was any way that we could fix what I saw was broken. I was pleasantly surprised to find that I was wrong. I think the committee has found a way to fix it, but a key element of fixing it is to make sure that we address the solutions to the places where there are problems. When Rob Pangborn first presented the General Education report to the University Faculty Senate and spoke to the Commonwealth Caucus, he pointed out that the First-Year Seminar part of the recommendation was to address a problem at University Park. He said "you people at the campuses already do what we're trying to solve up here, so perhaps you could find a way not to really have to do anything." That didn't really work and that's what led to the problems of the First-Year Seminar and so many complaints from the campuses. For the first time we found a committee willing to say, "if there's a problem in one place and not in another then the solution belongs in that place and not in the other." That's what the First-Year Seminar part in this recommendation does. On the other hand, there is a University-wide issue and it has to do with engagement. That part of the report applies to everyone. I urge my colleagues to vote against the amendment and to continue our discussion of the full report as proposed.

**Robin Bower, Beaver:** I would like to weigh in also against the proposed amendment. It was, in fact, the inequities introduced by the equality of the First-Year Seminar requirement that kept the discussions and solutions bogged down in Undergraduate Education for nearly five years. I was on Undergraduate Education for three or four of those five years and that was the stumbling block. The issues at the campuses with respect to first-year students in offering first-year educational programs were vastly different from the issues faced with University Park faculty and University Park first-year students. I think that the proposal as we have it on the floor very cogently and eloquently, and elegantly as well, addresses a disparity, perhaps that's not the word I want, circumstances that are subtly different without dividing the University in any real way. As Len pointed out, the University-wide issue of engagement is equitably addressed, just not equivalently. Thank you.

**Chair Blasko:** We'll need to have a vote on whether we want to end the discussion.

All those in favor please say Aye.

**Senators:** Aye.

**Chair Blasko:** Opposed Nay.

**Senators:** Nay.

**Chair Blasko:** The ayes have it and we will vote on the amendment. Does everyone have their clickers? Let's see the amendment please. We're just voting on the amendment now; please press A to accept the amendment, press B to reject the amendment.

The amendment has been rejected by a vote of 53 in favor, 103 opposed. Let's move back to the main report. Other issues; is there other discussion?

**Michael Anderson, Student Senator DUS:** I wanted to express the opinion of the Faculty Senate Student Caucus. The majority of the opinion that we came to was similar to that of Dr. Myers. Much of the report is great. We were really pleased with a lot of the recommendations, especially the engagement plans. We thought that was a great idea, but the problem is there is too much here for us to support. Our issue is with the continuing requirement of some type of seminar course being taught in all the colleges at University Park. We had a resource issue with it. We felt that while the engagement plan was a good idea and we hope the Senate would continue to look into it; we would oppose this recommendation on the whole, and be in favor of the second recommendation to drop it as a University-wide requirement and look into other ways to engage first-year students.

**Kim Steiner:** I just want to reiterate something that is already in the report. We know that the challenge is there at all campuses; it's not just at University Park, but the particular obstacle is different among campuses. The particular obstacle at University Park is the anonymity of young freshmen on a very large campus that is an order of magnitude larger than any other campus in the system. It was that fact that finally encouraged our committee to come up with that particular provision of the proposal.

**Chair Blasko:** Any other comments or questions? I think we are ready to vote. All those in favor of the report, press A and enter. All those opposed, press B and enter.

The report passes; 105 in favor, 63 opposed.

**Kim Steiner:** We didn't get a chance to thank the rest of our committee, but most of them are here and they deserve a round of applause.