

Draft Report on the First Year Course Requirement

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The catalog copy for the First Year Course (FYC) requirement that was voted on by the faculty in May 2005 was identical to the previous catalog copy. However, EPAG's supporting detail suggests some refinements to the requirement that needed further review. Also, in the process of examining the program, it became clear that there was no formal statement of the goals of the FYC program. While this may be due to the length of time it has been in existence, we thought now might be a good opportunity to clarify its goals and outcomes, and to explicitly list the criteria for courses in the program..

Requirement

The First Year Course requirement in the catalog is:

II. One (1) First Year Course completed in the first semester.

The current catalog also contains the following text about the First Year Course program, followed by several sentences describing the kinds of courses typically offered as First Year Courses:

IV. First Year Courses: All first year students will be required to take, in their first semester of attendance, one course with the following characteristics: 1) enrollment of no more than 16 students with registration reserved for entering first year students, 2) the instructor will normally be assigned as the students' adviser, 3) special instruction in writing will normally be offered, and 4) the course is offered for regular departmental credit.¹

EPAG's supporting detail includes one additional sentence: **All FYCs gather together three to four times per semester to hear an invited speaker discuss the ways in which his/her discipline or interdisciplinary program contributes to the liberal arts.**

Explanation/Rationale

The FYC requirement is designed to help incoming students to make a good transition to college, specifically to the liberal arts model, and to Macalester's academic expectations of them. It has a particular emphasis on college-level writing and basic library research skills. A critical component of the program is the role of the faculty member as adviser to the students.

The revised requirement seeks to make student experiences in First Year Courses more consistent. Additionally, the proposed speaker series would serve as a common experience for all incoming students in a given year, and would help to expose students to the philosophy of a liberal arts education. All first-year students would attend the same three or four talks over the course of the fall semester. The speaker series might involve on-campus faculty from a variety of disciplines, or invited speakers from elsewhere.

The goals of the First Year Course requirement are:

- To introduce students to critical inquiry within at least one discipline or interdisciplinary area,
- To help students adjust to Macalester's academic expectations,
- To connect incoming students to faculty advisers who get to know the students well from the start,
- To provide a supportive community of other first-year students with shared interests and experiences to aid in the transition to college,
- To instruct students in writing, and in library research skills.

¹From current catalog on Academic Records web site

Students enter Macalester with a wide range of experiences and expectations. Many have only the vaguest notion of what a liberal arts college is all about. It is critical for the students' success at Macalester that they receive extra guidance during their first semester to help them adjust to Macalester's expectations and philosophy. The First Year Course should lay the foundation for their future work at Macalester, and increase the likelihood that students stay and succeed here.

Student Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the First Year Course requirement, a student will:

- understand and have familiarity with one (or more) modes of inquiry,
- understand the philosophy underlying a liberal arts education,
- understand and have experienced the basics of good writing at the college level, including writing with multiple drafts, and appropriate citation of source materials,
- understand and have experience using the library resources available at Macalester,
- begun to develop good study skills, time management skills, and well-balanced living habits.

Specific criteria for course approval

The following criteria define what a FYC must include, along with some suggestions for what it should include.

- **A First Year Course may be either a regular course offering or a specially-designed first-year course.** It should be expected that regular course offerings need some modification to meet the criteria of a FYC.
- **Every First Year Course must set aside time for class discussions or reflections on the following:** the mode(s) of inquiry implicit in the course's subject, and how to access and analyze sources of information appropriate to the course's subject.

Ideally, class discussion or reflection will also be devoted to other goals of the FYC program, including how the course contributes to the liberal arts and/or the college's mission, and the development of skills for success in college, including college-level reading, study skills, time management, healthy living habits, etc..

- **Every First Year Course must participate in the library instruction program to ensure all students learn to use Macalester's resources.**
- **Every First Year Course must include at least one writing assignment that is graded for both content and writing style/mechanics.** It is strongly urged that the writing include drafting and revising a paper, including instructor feedback, researching and citing sources, and formulating an argument.
- **Every First Year Course must participate fully in the speaker series on how various disciplines contribute to the liberal arts.**
- **Every FYC instructor should participate in a FYC workshop prior to the first time teaching a FYC.** Faculty may choose to participate after that if they desire.

Implementation

A FYC Steering Committee should be formed, consisting of one representative from EPAG and three interested faculty appointed by the Provost or the Dean of Academic Programs. The faculty should be regular instructors of First Year Courses, participants in the workshops, and have demonstrated interest in the FYC program.

The steering committee would take responsibility for:

- Overseeing the approval of courses to be First Year Courses,
- Organizing and running workshops for FYC instructors,

- Overseeing the assessment of the FYC program,
- Advising EPAG and the Dean of Academic Programs when exceptional situations arise.

Supporting First Year Course Instructors

The FYC program as laid out above puts a significant burden on the instructor to go above and beyond the “normal” course. For some disciplines and courses, the requirements are more troublesome than for others.

Support and assistance for instructors should be a priority:

- Continuing workshops to help instructors to plan their courses to meet the criteria of the FYC program, and to help faculty become better advisers to students.
- Time outside of normal class meetings set aside and available for instructors to use for some of the discussions suggested above.

It was suggested that changes to the calendar are under consideration that would set aside a time during the school day when no classes are scheduled. This time might be used for the all-class speaker series. Perhaps FYC instructors might be permitted to use that time on an irregular basis (not every week) for class meetings or discussions that pertain to the FYC program’s goals.

- Continuation of current support from the Library, the Max center, and student writing assistants and preceptors. The current staff support for First Year Courses is of great value: these programs should be funded into the future.

The speaker series and the writing assignments must be integrated into the courses themselves to be successful. If they are seen as “busy-work” by faculty or students, then the benefits will be limited. Every FYC should try to tie the topics raised by the speaker series to the course, perhaps by in-class discussions of the ideas raised in the talks, and how the course or discipline(s) contribute to the liberal arts and the college’s mission.

For some courses it is a stretch to find a way to integrate writing assignments, particularly of the kind described above, into the “normal” content of a course. One alternative worth exploring is encouraging students to write about topics arising from the speaker series and the disciplines of the course, rather than the immediate course content. It is still necessary that the course instructor take these assignments seriously and count them toward the grade in the course.

Residential versus Nonresidential Courses

In a survey of students performed by EPAG’s student members in Spring 2005, repeated student comments suggested that the residential First Year Courses were highly preferable to nonresidential courses. Residential courses were perceived to create a stronger bond among students. At the same time, students in nonresidential courses felt socially excluded from residential course groups. At the current time, roughly half the FYC instructors choose a residential option.

Further study is recommended to a FYC steering committee to examine the issue of residential versus nonresidential courses. Are there clear benefits to one or the other? What factors play into an instructor’s choice of housing option? If the residential option is clearly superior, are there ways to overcome instructors’ hesitations?

Assessment plan

Assessment of the FYC program should be supervised by the FYC steering committee. It also should be a part of the larger campus assessment program. Within those bounds, however, we can see three different questions to answer:

- Does the course meet the criteria laid out for the FYC program?

A course approval form should be developed, with the supervision of the Dean of Academic Programs. Faculty proposing courses should produce a rough syllabus, and 3-4 paragraphs describing how their course will meet the criteria given above. The FYC steering committee should help the Dean to evaluate how appropriate the courses are for the FYC program.

A follow-up evaluation should be performed by a survey of students at the end of their first semester, to assess whether the course did what was proposed.

- Do the students coming out of the course have the outcomes listed above?

At the end of the first semester students should be asked to complete an assessment tool (knowledge survey, questionnaire, etc.) that addresses the desired outcomes listed above.

- In the abstract, does the FYC program succeed in its goals?

Regular evaluation of seniors to think back on their FYC experience, and assess it with respect to the program goals.

Resource implications

Additional funding might be required to continue the series of FYC instructor workshops that have been taking place, and, perhaps, to encourage faculty to participate in the program. The speaker series will require funds, particularly if off-campus speakers are included. Macalester faculty speaking to the series should receive some compensation to reward their efforts.