

College Seminar: The Quest for Meaning Master Syllabus

Core Goal Served in this Category

Goal 1: To help students develop the foundational skills and competencies of . . . critical inquiry and analysis, and technological competency and information literacy.

Core Learning Outcomes

A student successfully completing the College Seminar will be able to

1. Identify the tone, purpose, audience, and main ideas of a text and interpret its meaning through close analysis (Core Goal 1, critical inquiry)
2. Critically evaluate arguments (Core Goal 1, critical inquiry)
3. Synthesize materials to construct and express ideas, formulate positions, and solve problems (Core Goal 1, critical inquiry)
4. Formulate a research question or problem (Core Goal 1, critical inquiry)
5. Define and articulate the extent and type of information and sources needed (Core Goal 1, technological competence and information literacy)
6. Use appropriate technologies to access the needed information effectively (Core Goal 1, technological competence and information literacy)
7. Interpret and evaluate information and its sources critically and incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base (Core Goal 1, technological competence and information literacy)
8. Use information and information technologies ethically, legally, and effectively (Core Goal 1, technological competence and information literacy)

Catalog Description

An introduction to college-level academic study through a multidisciplinary examination of a topic of enduring human significance. Each seminar prepares students for subsequent academic work by emphasizing development of critical reading and reasoning skills, argumentation, information literacy, and academic research. Attention is also given to cultivating an appreciation for intellectual virtues that are characteristic of the liberally educated person, such as curiosity, open-mindedness, creativity, perseverance, and independent thinking. Several seminars are also thematically linked to another requirement of the Core Curriculum, creating a shared two-course learning community. Collectively, the seminar and learning community enable deep study of a perennial issue, sustained interaction with peers and professors, and practice in making connections across courses.

Introduction

The quest for meaning and purpose in our lives requires intellectual inquiry, debate, reflection, and a lifelong willingness to continue searching when answers prove elusive, contradictory, or transitory. Encouragement and guidance in our life-long journey can be found in the way

history's best thinkers, from a wide range of disciplines and cultures, have attempted to unravel the mysteries of human existence and chart a path toward a full, meaningful, and good life. The sections offered in the College Seminar provide students the opportunity to explore, individually and collectively, the ways in which other thinkers have addressed vexing issues and to begin the foundational work of examining their own lives and envisioning the lives they hope to lead. Each section of the seminar will focus on some facet of our quest for meaning: How should we live among one another in various communities? How is our unique identity constructed? How do significant values such as love, beauty, and truth give our life texture, depth, and purpose?

Each section of the College Seminar focuses on one of several enduring human quests for meaning (namely, our quests for identity, truth, love, community, and beauty). Students will read in a wide-range of texts that will inspire, provoke, challenge, illuminate, affirm and in many other ways contribute to their development as free-thinking, independent, liberally educated individuals steeped in the knowledge of intellectual traditions and conversant with the views of others. The college seminar experience will allow students to practice two fundamental habits of mind that characterize educated citizens: first, the ability to make connections, identify patterns, synthesize ideas, draw contrasts, reconcile contradictions, and integrate the various and divergent threads of learning into a more comprehensive understanding of the world, and, second, the ability to reflect upon new knowledge and experiences, to make learning meaningful and personal, and to develop an individual vision and a sense of their place in the world.

As a foundational course in the core curriculum, the College Seminar provides the basis for subsequent academic work as well as for success in professional, social, and personal environments beyond college. Students in the seminar will learn to read more perceptively, think more rigorously, write and speak more persuasively, and exercise curiosity and creativity when confronting big ideas and questions—characteristics and skills that will continue to develop in college and during a lifetime.

Intangibles / Aspirations / Other Category-Level Elements

In addition to the outcomes assessed in this category, other Core outcomes might be developed and addressed.

- To help students develop the foundational skills and competencies of written communication (Core Goal 1)
- Wonder, ponder, and ask thoughtful and insightful questions (Core Goal 7.1)
- Seek out and give a fair and honest hearing to multiple and competing perspectives (Core Goal 7.2)
- Exercise imagination to develop, express, and extend ideas (Core Goal 7.3)
- Embrace intellectual challenge and struggle, and put forth the effort to complete demanding work (Core Goal 7.4)
- Probe for deeper understanding and meaning (Core Goal 7.5)

Teaching Methods and Assessment

Professors are free to use a range of teaching methods and assessment strategies to facilitate and measure student learning (exercises, quizzes, tests, presentations, annotated bibliographies, short papers, and so on), though high-impact practices and active learning approaches should be privileged. That is, special attention should be given to critical inquiry, frequent graded writing, collaborative assignments and projects, discussion, debate, and the like. Given the seminar format and learning community context, opportunities for individualized attention to students should be structured into each offering.

Additional expectations include the following. First, students in all sections must complete at least one research-based assignment, preferably a brief documented essay (roughly 5-8 pp.) written according to APA, MLA or Chicago guidelines. To facilitate this project, all College Seminar sections must schedule at least one library session (on evaluating sources for reliability and appropriateness, strategies for searching for appropriate sources, etc.). Second, students in all sections must also complete at least one self-reflective assignment that provides an opportunity to consider on a personal level some aspect of the quest for meaning in life.

Texts

Each instructor will choose the texts for his or her section of the College Seminar. Professors should choose texts that represent a variety of genres and disciplinary perspectives (fiction, historical narratives, biblical and philosophical texts, reports and arguments from the social and natural sciences, expository essays, autobiographies, case studies, and so on). Since the course is intended to help students become better readers, professors are encouraged to select texts that range in length and sophistication and to include at least one book. At least one assigned reading—short or long—must model a reflective approach to the quest for meaning in life.

To acquaint students with the Core Curriculum and the College's commitment to liberal education, each section of the College Seminar must include at least one brief text that introduces students to the benefits of being liberally educated. A list of choices will be provided.

Additional Information / Resources for Instructors

Courses

Responsibility for designing a College Seminar rests with the instructor (choosing course readings, selecting assignments and activities, developing a schedule, and so on), though the design must comport with one of the following five "Quest" categories:

Quest for Community

“Community” is ubiquitous. We speak of local and regional communities, of national and global communities, of ethnic and religious and political communities, of physical and virtual communities. The term’s prevalence, of course, reflects its deep conceptual importance in our lives. How do communities provide us with a sense of belonging—to neighborhood, school, church, nation, organization, profession, and so on? How do various communities answer our lifelong quest to be accepted, to interact and forge relationships? How do communities influence the way we learn values and strengthen beliefs? How do communities both foster and limit our ability to develop independent identities? What is our proper role in the community? How do we exercise both dependence on and responsibility to others? While sections will vary, each will consider the complex roles that communities play in our everyday lives.

Quest for Identity

“Who am I?” is a fundamental question we begin asking ourselves at a very early age. How we answer it is influenced by a myriad of variables, including gender, age, social class, religion, occupation, ethnicity, and nationality. How do these variables shape who we are and what we become? What elements of our identity are beyond our control? What elements are the result of affiliations and designations that we freely choose? How do the questions of identity drive human behavior, choices, and self-perception? Why are questions about identity often so ambiguous and difficult to answer definitively? Sections of this seminar will vary topically, but all will consider the complexity of understanding one’s identity and how it gets formed.

Quest for Love

It’s been said that love is the most powerful force in the universe. It is a consistent theme in literature and art and has been debated in every imaginable context, from the theological or philosophical to the biological or psychological. The pervasiveness of this enigmatic concept throughout cultures and across time illustrates its conceptual importance to our lives. But what is love, exactly? How does romantic love differ from what we feel for parents, children, siblings, friends, and neighbors? What does it mean to love a nation, nature or God? What human behaviors can be justified by love? How does love contribute to the decisions we make? This seminar examines our quest to feel, find, and understand love in context with ourselves and our local and global communities.

Quest for Truth

Human beings are, at their very core, thinking creatures. We inevitably form ideas about the way things really are, about what the truth is. What, if anything, do we know? By what means and methods do we know what we know? Through personal experience? Through the systematic empirical observation and hypothesis construction encouraged by scientific disciplines? Through intuition? Through philosophical investigation, theological reflection, or artistic inspiration? In our pursuit of the truth, how often are we forced, despite our strong desire for certainty, to settle for--instead of well-grounded confidence--(modestly) reasonable beliefs, or even (half) guesses? When we form our beliefs, must we do so only on the basis of evidence? Or is it sometimes permissible to believe something because of the advantages it brings? What is the psychology or

sociology of belief? That is, how does the pursuit of truth function within a person or within a group? One or several such questions will be the focus of a College Seminar course categorized as "Quest for Truth."

Quest for Beauty

We call many things beautiful—a sunset, a turn of phrase, a dance, a face. But what exactly is beauty? How is it to be defined? Is it only “in the eye of the beholder”? Is beauty determined solely by cultural standards in a given time and place, or are there universal, timeless standards upon which all cultures would agree? Can beauty be measured mathematically or scientifically? How can intangible things—a life, for example—be beautiful? And why are we so drawn to beauty? What is the connection between beauty, love, and truth? Why do we describe encounters with beauty as transcendent and sublime? Should we resist certain notion of beauty? How, for example, is a critique of certain ideals of beauty a critique of power? Courses under this category will explore a section of the conversation about beauty, addressing a range of different notions of the beautiful, as well as the experience of beauty.