

## **I. An account of the process the DTF engaged**

The Disappearing Task Force on the Evaluation of the First-Year Experience was convened by the Academic Council on 3 March 2004. At this meeting, we reviewed the charge with Academic Council and discussed the context for our work, clarified the expectations for reporting and recommendations, and received assurances that our work should aim to make reasonable, broad suggestions about the first-year experience rather than detailed plans for implementation of a specific program.

In between the meeting of the DTF-EFYE with Academic Council and its first working meeting, President Pelton announced that the first-year residential commons would not be built at Kaneko for 2006 and, indeed, that the very idea of a first-year commons was now under review. Therefore, before the first meeting on 25 May, Gretchen Flesher Moon met separately with Dean Carol Long and with Academic Council Chair Pam Moro and Dean Bob Hawkinson to discuss the implications for the charge to the DTF-EFYE. It was agreed by all that despite the reference to a residential commons in the first sentence of the charge, the charge would stand and the work go forward as described there:

The first-year residential commons is expected to house its first class in fall 2006. In light of this significant change in campus culture, the Academic Council is forming a Disappearing Task Force to re-evaluate the role of the first-year seminar in Willamette's undergraduate curriculum. This evaluation will occur during Spring and Summer 2004. Possible resolutions range from keeping World Views as is, to developing a new course with modified objectives, to completely discontinuing the first-year seminar. The DTF should carefully assess how alterations in the first-year seminar will affect General Education requirements and the assignment of first-year advisors. The DTF should also keep in mind the staffing and resource challenges connected with the first-year seminar, where a diversity of experiences and expectations must be accommodated when faculty are drawn from across campus.

Moon also surveyed and reported on available resources for informing the task force's work: the work on residential commons and the first-year experience sponsored by Residential Life; books and bibliographies; conferences; Willamette's institutional research (see appendix v). Building on the research base of Residential Life—the US News Top 50 colleges from 2001-2002, with new additions to that list from 2003-2004—we then each studied 9 or 10 college websites to see what varieties of first-year curriculum exist in our comparison/aspirant schools.

We reported to one another by email and met 17 June to discuss our findings. What we learned then was that the curricular models are few:

- No dedicated first-year curriculum at all
- A core curriculum of 4 or more courses, generally taken in the first two years
- A requirement of Western Civ or Humanities to be taken only by first-year students
- A first-year seminar, either with a common syllabus (rare) or with individual topics (very common)

- A short list of alternative ways to meet a first-year requirement, generally including a first-year seminar as one of the options. (see appendix i)

We determined that we would interview key program people from the range of these options (excluding the no first-year program group) by telephone and settled on ten schools for further investigation:

Bryn Mawr  
 Carleton  
 Colorado College  
 Gettysburg  
 Grinnell  
 Hobart and William Smith  
 Lawrence  
 Sewanee (the University of the South)  
 Skidmore  
 Trinity  
 Wooster

We agreed on a set of interview questions, attached in Appendix iii.

These interviews were completed by 12 July, and we again discussed our findings at great length (see appendices ii and iii). Several salient features emerged as relevant to continuing discussions of a first-year academic program for Willamette:

- The goals that have defined Willamette's current first-year seminar—inculcating college habits of participation, inquiry, reading, and writing through studying an academic subject—are the same goals that define all dedicated first-year curricular programs.
- Institutional history matters in determining success of the program in attracting and retaining faculty.
- With rare exceptions, choice about seminars matters in the satisfaction of students and faculty.
- Administrative support—at the highest levels as well as in the program's own administration—matters to recruitment of faculty and the perceived prestige of the program.
- Equity, fairness, and predictability about faculty participation matter.

These features will be discussed in Part II of this report, the writing of which was shared by all members of the DTF during August after an initial outline was proposed on 3 August. At that meeting, we again discussed our findings in light of the specific provisions of our charge: to assess the effect of changes in FYS to the General Education program and to advising, and to be mindful of the faculty and economic resources involved.

We resolved to consider two models, a first-year seminar with a common syllabus and a topical first-year seminar. We determined that the goals of the first-year seminar could not be met in other existing courses and that other kinds of first-year curricula—i.e., a core

curriculum or a Western Civ type course—were incompatible with Willamette’s general education curriculum, the first because it would be redundant with our distribute modes of inquiry and because it allows neither faculty nor students choices about subjects as the rest of general education does, the second because our current Humanities faculty is not large enough to offer staff over 30 sections a year and because many Willamette faculty already find World Views difficult to teach because of its Humanities emphasis. These two models require the same number of faculty as are currently engaged. Nevertheless, we are mindful that faculty resources are already stretched in meeting the demands of the curriculum, especially in light of any adjustments to faculty workload that may be made if faculty numbers are not increased.