

Millikin University  
Student Learning in University Seminar (IN 140/IN 183)

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## **Executive Summary**

University Seminar is generally a positive experience for all. Instructors are genuinely excited to teach it and to introduce students to college scholarship. The general consensus is also that students are enjoying their Seminar experience and finding it to be quite purposeful.

The course asks teachers and students to do a lot of different things. This includes investigating the course content, performing service learning, discussing orientation topics pertaining to the first-year student, and developing communication skills through public and interpersonal communication experiences. The course that seem to be the most successful are those that weave these components together as seamlessly as possible. However, it is very easy for an instructor to feel they have a strong grasp on most of the components but not feel as confident in combining them effectively. For example, an instructor may have never done anything with service learning before. Not only does the instructor need to find a service learning site, but they must try to find a site that flows well with the course they will be teaching. The balancing act of the different learning outcome goals has been the biggest challenge for the instructors overall. This, of course, can then make it difficult for students to make sense of the course if it is too segmented.

As evidenced by examining syllabi, however, the good news is that more instructors appear to be realizing ways to get the course to accomplish its varied goals. This has been accomplished through more discussion among instructors over the past couple of years through workshops and a handbook that was created in the spring of 2005 (this handbook can be found in the appendix of this document).

Overall, the instructors of University Seminar have been quite successful with it, and the students enjoy it as well. Further investigation into how to balance the course components is necessary. Although the flexibility of the course is appealing more discussion on uniformity of certain aspects of the course should be addressed as well.

## **Goals**

### Learning Outcome Goals

University Seminar introduces new students to college life, both within and beyond the classroom. Crucial to academic success, this class exposes students to academic inquiry, and an exploration of ways of knowing through critical and moral reasoning. Seminar topics vary across sections. A common component includes an introduction to service learning to prompt student learning of a life of meaning and value. Additionally, the class emphasizes orientation issues, and demonstration of communication proficiency. Specifically, the goals for students taking the course are as follows:

1. Develop and utilize critical and moral reasoning skills.
2. Effectively adjust to college life both academically and socially.
3. Understand the significance of contributions to community through service learning.
4. Develop effective communication skills that can be applied in academic and social contexts.

A student successfully completing the University Seminar course will have examined issues pertinent to the first-year experience. The student will be able to adapt confidently to social and academic issues through learned orientation material in the course. In their "community" of classmates, the student will discover the importance of developing a personal life of meaning and value. Additionally, the student will learn the need to be not only a critical thinker, but also a strong citizen. Lastly, the student completing University Seminar will have developed their communication skills to apply in academic or professional settings.

Fundamentally, the University Seminar is an introduction into Millikin's academic community, with a specific focus on introducing the intellectual and the social components of university life. This introduction is framed under our core questions: Who am I? How can I know? and What should I do? Students will begin to examine these core questions in this seminar.

The University Seminar experience is intended to be a unique learning opportunity for first-year students entering the university. As much as it is an academic course designed to engage students in an academic discipline, it is also an opportunity for students to build community. The University Seminar classroom is intended to be a place of community, shared learning, and intellectual growth.

### **Snapshot**

The current number of University Seminar courses being offered during the fall semester is 28. This includes five honors sections and two "enhanced" sections. There is an additional section offered in the spring for those who do not pass during the first semester and for transfer students. Each section typically contains no more than 20 students.

The most recent data on University Seminar instructors shows 19 full-time Faculty members, 5 Adjunct Faculty, and 4 full-time Staff. Although most instructors only teach one section of the course, 6 are scheduled to teach two sections.

The course topics are varied and are selected by the instructor. However, all sections should have a service learning component, address orientation issues pertaining to the first year student, and give opportunities for students to enhance their communication skills.

All students enrolled in the fall semester participate in First Week. This gives the first-year student an opportunity to be acclimated to campus life and to meet with their University Seminar classmates. Each section is paired with an IN 150 (Critical Writing, Reading, and Research I) cohort. This gives the students the sense of a learning community for the first semester.

In addition to the University Seminar- IN 150 pairing, Instructors are responsible for setting up a service learning agreement with an agency to achieve the learning outcomes set forward.

An initiative that has recently developed is the communication between the IN 140 and IN 150 Coordinators regarding more effective cohorts. Cross-course meetings have been held, and the enhancement of cohorts relationships has been discussed.

A University Seminar Handbook has also recently been developed to give the instructor teaching guidance and promote a level of uniformity for the classes (see Appendix).

### **The Learning Story**

The way the student meets the learning outcome goals for University Seminar varies from section to section. The most successful courses are those that blend the goals of examining course content, communication, and service learning together. For example, a section that uses behavioral conditioning as its topic can cover theories pertaining to the subject, have students do service projects through a local animal shelter, then have the students give speeches about what they've learned. Additionally, there could be an orientation topic of citizenship applied here as well. Although the outcome goals seem diverse, the components can be efficiently woven together to present a cohesive structure (see Appendix for course syllabi examples).

The most successful University Seminars have the following characteristics:

- 1 They are taught by faculty who have a genuine interest in engaging with first-year students.
- 2 They are on a subject that is meaningful and accessible to first-year students.
- 3 They are designed to encourage critical thought and discussion.
- 4 They help students develop skills that will help them succeed at the University.

### **Assessment Methods and Assessment Data**

Student assessment will be done through a survey submitted to students regarding their University Studies experiences. Ten questions regarding the University Seminar experience have been included in the survey. Data collection and interpretation will be coming at a later date. Here is a list of the assessment questions for students (a likert-type scale is assumed to be used):

The Orientation Topics that were covered helped me to adapt to college life.

The University Seminar class helped me to become more comfortable speaking in front of my classmates.

The University Seminar class helped me to become a more effective communicator.

I could see direct connection from our course content to our class's service learning project.

Our section's service learning project was a purposeful experience.

The academic content of my University Seminar course was challenging.

I feel that the content of the course caused me to engage in a great deal of critical thinking.

I feel that the University Seminar course was worth taking.

There was a strong connection between the instructors of my IN140 and IN150 course.

The University Seminar course helped me feel more equipped to succeed in college.

Additionally, faculty have been asked to supply their syllabi for purposes of evaluating whether the learning outcomes are being effectively targeted. Of 19 courses examined, ALL had activities or assignments that covered the learning outcome goals. There were variations of how to meet the goals, but each section addressed the main areas.

Lastly, faculty feedback has been gathered. The questions proposed were those pertaining to challenges in teaching the course and best practices. A copy of the results for that survey can be found in the Appendix.

### **Analysis of Assessment Results**

1. Develop and utilize critical and moral reasoning skills. – Green

It appears that all sections of University Seminar are on target to effectively engage students through critical and moral evaluation of material at the college level. The nature of the course is to promote discussion that invites different perspectives including ethical and scholarly issues. *The student survey results will give more insight into whether the goals are being met.*

2. Effectively adjust to college life both academically and socially. – Green

The orientation topics address this issue well. There is coverage on a wide range of issues that affect the first-year student. Discussion time is allowed during the semester to cover the necessary items. *Student input to be analyzed.*

3. Understand the significance of contributions to community through service learning. – Yellow

Although most service learning experiences appear to be purposeful and effective, the overall results seem to vary from section to section. Service learning training has been recently held for instructors to learn how to incorporate it into the course. Also, general education on what constitutes service learning has been discussed to avoid what really amounts to "community service." A problem that has come up

often is the issue of trying to find a service learning project that deals directly with course subject matter. Some sections have been able to do this successfully while others struggle to make such a connection. *Again, student input will be helpful here.*

4. Develop effective communication skills that can be applied in academic and social contexts. – Yellow

This falls in line with the inconsistency of the service learning portion. Some sections are taking the time to give tips on public and interpersonal communication, while others offer just general discussion as the mode for developing communication skills. *Student input to be analyzed.*

### **Improvement Plans**

Overall, it appears that University Seminar instructors and students alike see the course as a positive experience. For instructors, they get the opportunity to teach a topic of their choice and to meet students outside of their teaching field. Students seem to enjoy the camaraderie the course offers. They generally like the fact that the class is unique from others they are taking during their first semester.

One main issue with University Seminar has been how to allow for flexibility in each section while maintaining some level of uniform academic rigor. Many students have been heard to complain that they are doing all kinds of work in their section while their roommate seems to have more of a light, fun time with theirs. Overall, it does appear that the learning outcome goals can be achieved in many different ways. Through holding workshops and other discussions with University Seminar instructors, these triumphs and trials pertaining to rigor issues have been addressed. There is not a clear answer on what, if anything, should be done about this. However, instructors seem to be gaining a lot of insight from one another on how to teach the course. Most, if not all, agree that there should not be a uniform text and that the flexibility allowed in teaching the course is a good thing.

As addressed in the analysis of assessment results, the areas of service learning and communication could be improved. It seems that the service learning component is seeing some progress. By educating instructors on how to effectively incorporate service learning, the experience is likely to get better for students. Again, the key is to have consistency for all sections. The experience can be different, but needs to be equally effective.

The communication component has gone from expecting "proficiency" to more of including a communication "experience." Proficiency is difficult to gauge, especially when an instructor is not well-versed in understanding true communication competence. This is one reason why the language has changed from the original MPSTL intent of proficiency to more of providing opportunities for communication skill development. If there are no set standards on how many speeches a student must give or assessing their interpersonal skills in University Seminar, then we are taking a risk of the communication component being a mere token. Communication skills cannot be effectively taught in a semester where so many other objectives are expected to be met. There is a definite need to require all students to take a stand-alone course in interpersonal and public speaking.