

First Year Seminar Proposal (Fall 2013)

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Title of seminar: Running and the meaning of life

Course Description: Oprah Winfrey said, "Running is the greatest metaphor for life, because you get out of it what you put into it." Mixing in science, philosophy, culture, evolution, history, and art, we will explore what running can tell us about life and our place in it. We'll explore the scientific principles behind how the body adapts to the stresses of running, making measurements on ourselves in a lab setting. We will ponder the mysteries of our mind, discussing how it sets limits on the body. Through intensive reading we will be inspired by the words and actions of other runners who have written about what running means to them and reflect on what it means to us. We will explore running in different cultures in order to understand why we do the things we do. Somewhere along the way we may find that running is a useful guide for how to be successful in college and in life. It does not matter if you are fast or slow but a commitment to training for a personal running goal is required. Life moves pretty fast, how fast can you run?

My approach to teaching First Year Seminar: I recently attended two events that have helped me clarify my own thinking about the ultimate purpose of FYS and how I hope to achieve that outcome. The first was listening to Cheryl Brickner speak during the First Year Seminar, Afternoon Break-out Session of the 16th Annual Teaching Conference held in January. Up until this time I had a limited vision for how I could fit the expected learning outcomes into a course that was about a specific topic. Surprisingly, just seeing how Cheryl intertwined a variety of activities into her class that were designed to meet the learning outcomes gave me some hope. Second, I attended the presentation given by UW Superior faculty about their experience with First Year Seminar. When Joel Sipress presented the two major designs of FYS (the Gardner approach which emphasized skill development and the Tinto approach which emphasizes student engagement) I was blown away. I understand the need for students to develop the necessary skills to be successful in college but I think this can be done almost imperceptibly within the Tinto model.

Succinctly, my approach to teaching this FYS would be to 1) make it fun, 2) create a community in the class, and 3) challenge them to be above average. I have taught freshmen before in our introductory Health Promotion course HPW 101 and what I have found to work well in that class is sharing a lot of me with them. Once they see that I have struggled with the same things they are struggling with they are more comfortable opening up. Once a dialog can be established, everyone benefits from each unique perspective. In addition, enthusiasm counts a lot with students and I am guessing I can keep half the class awake on enthusiasm alone.

Advancing Learning Outcomes of FYS:

Describe the importance of a liberal education and the ways in which academic study is structured at UWSP.

The importance of a liberal education will be revealed by the broad-based, multi-disciplinary (science, history, psychology, social, cultural, etc.) approach I will use to explore the topic "running."

Students will see that any given topic of interest can be a topic of study in multiple disciplines because everything in life is integrative by default. Any action we take, any thought we have, and issue we face in life can be understood, interpreted, or acquire meaning based on the context of our culture, value system, worldview, past experience, etc. Thus we can only truly understand what at first seems like a “fitness” or “scientific” topic after we explore it from different perspectives: its place/meaning in our culture, its role in the social and emotional aspect of our life, etc. For incoming freshmen who are in the throes of developing their authentic selves, this approach validates the notion that the meaning they ascribe to anything in life (e.g., their education, health, money, work, family) is theirs to define.

I intend this course to be reading intensive. Exposure to reading is essential for developing written and oral communication skills. We will do extensive journaling and each student will be presenting to the group. I am hoping to collaborate with professors in other disciplines to contribute presentations on the topic of running from their academic discipline. For example: Lee Willis could discuss running from a historical perspective; James Sage could present from a philosophical point of view; Celine Kline could explore the effect of running on spirituality, etc. Using the students own interests we will explore and find connections between running and life.

Describe the importance of critical thinking and information literacy and apply the associated skills.

This outcome is natural to me as an exercise physiologist. We will develop critical thinking skills by lab based experiential projects. I have access to the exercise physiology lab that we can use to study “how we know what we know about the adaptations to exercise”. In addition, there are thousands of books and websites just on the topic alone of “what is the best way to train”. In small groups, students will research a specific running-related fitness topic that is covered in the popular media. They will assess the validity of the popular press piece by researching the same topic using reliable health resources. This assignment will develop deductive reasoning skills essential for critical thinking. They will critically analyze sources for reliability. And they will build on this assignment by asking a final question “So what?” to develop an understanding for whether the fitness topic they explored is even meaningful to them.

Identify and apply appropriate note-taking, test-taking, and time-management strategies to their academic studies.

Based on my experience, students often don’t know what their intellectual skills are. Their major learning strategy is to “look at their notes”. Using the running metaphor, note-taking is training for an event, test-taking is running the event, and time-management is integrating the training into their life. We will examine how a runner prepares for their chosen challenges and discuss how this relates to a student facing the challenge of succeeding in college or an adult striving to live a fulfilling life. I am hoping to recruit a couple students in the HPW major to serve as peer mentors.

Describe the importance of co-curricular involvement and how it enhances their academic study at UWSP.

Just as cross-training is important for the overall development of a runner, the college experience is more than simply academic training of the intellect: involvement in activities outside the classroom is essential for students to develop cognitively, emotionally, and socially. Students will be required to participate in one event in each of the following four categories: on-campus athletic, artistic/cultural, and academic event; off-campus/community event. Through journaling and

discussion students will explore the impact of these events on their worldview and self-understanding. This was an idea from Cheryl Brickner from her FYS.

Identify and utilize UWSP programs, resources, and services that will support their academic studies and co-curricular involvement.

Very early in the semester, small teams of students will take a “scavenger fun run” around campus to discover the location of these resources and what they offer. Soon thereafter, again using the analogy of running (where does a runner go if they have questions about shoes, or an injury?), each group will identify a college-related question or issue they would like to know more about and each group will reach out to TLC, career, advising, or counseling services staff and invite them to present briefly to the entire class. Thus students will be required to take initiative and ownership of understanding the university community of which they are apart, analyze how they are navigating their new environment, identify the appropriate support service, and ask for assistance.

Develop a plan that demonstrates their responsibility for their own education, specifically how it relates to their interests, abilities, career choices, and personal development.

Students will develop a training plan to accomplish a running specific goal and use this model to similarly develop a plan for their education. By having students assigned to specific topics (of personal interest) where they will become the experts and teach the rest of the class I hope they will see that learning is not about being fed information but that true learning comes by teaching others and that true growth cannot occur in a vacuum but is maximized by sharing ourselves with others.

Meeting additional outcomes for GEP categories:

I don't anticipate that it would count for any of these. I could design the course to count for experiential learning by incorporating more labs and having a larger project at the end (e.g. Organizing their own race as a fund raiser for a class identified charity). However, I think for the first time around I think it would be better to omit this.