

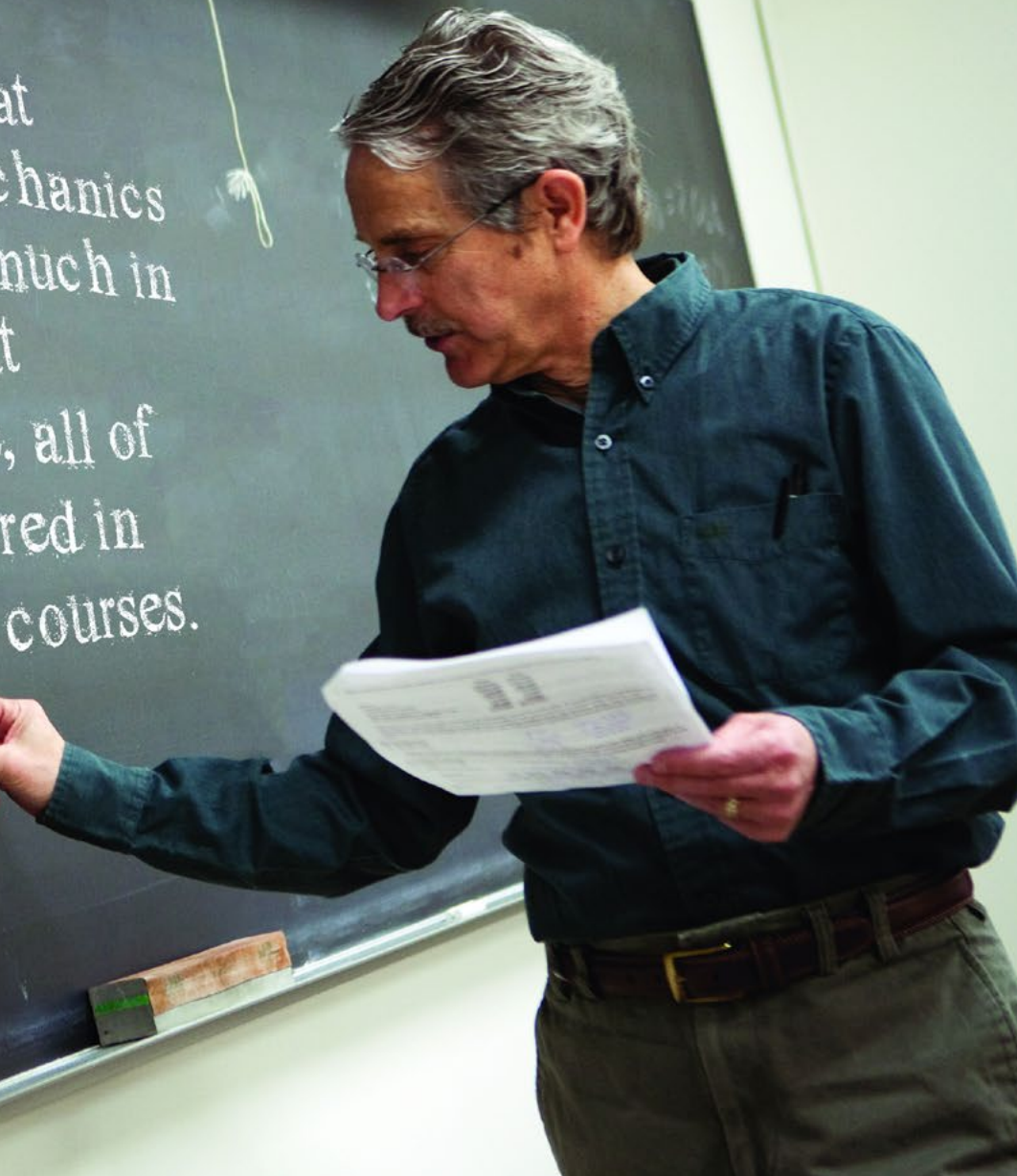


FIRST TERM SEMINAR

Introducing
Students to a
Liberal Arts
Education.



Most people may not think that multilingual students, the mechanics of voting, and the '60s have much in common, however this fall at Gustavus Adolphus College, all of these topics are being explored in First Term Seminar (FTS) courses.



Now in its 20th year of existence, the FTS program involves specially designed courses intended to introduce first-year students to the aspects of a liberal arts education. Courses must meet several criteria and address questions of values while teaching writing, critical thinking, and oral communication skills. The program also has an advising role as a student's FTS professor directs them to college resources and serves as their faculty advisor until they declare a major.

"The First-Term Seminar is intended to introduce first-year students to the excitement of the academic conversation they will share with their peers, faculty, and texts for the next four years," said Kate Knutson, Associate Professor of Political Science and current

director of the FTS program. "In these small, highly interactive classes at the beginning of their college experience, students develop the skills they need to engage fully in the liberal arts-based curriculum offered at Gustavus."

By providing this introduction to a liberal arts education, the First-Term Seminar plays a crucial role in the College's mission "to help its students attain their full potential as persons, to develop in them a capacity and passion for lifelong learning, and to prepare them for fulfilling lives of leadership and service in society."

A professor wishing to teach an FTS course can teach it on just about any topic, but they must apply and then go through a training program, consisting of five intensive days of learning

how to advise students and how to teach the three skills that the FTS program focuses on: writing, critical thinking, and oral communication.

Students can choose from a number of FTS courses covering a wide array of topics. Here is an in-depth look at three of this fall's FTS courses, including "Why Multi Matters," "How Do We Vote," and "The Sixties."

Bilingual Benefits

"Why Multi Matters: Multicultural, Multilingual, and Multiliterate," is a new FTS course this year taught by Associate Professor and Chair of the English Department Rebecca Fremo.

Senior Mathematics Major Vang Yang came up with the idea for the class, thinking it would be beneficial for students and would expand the English Language Learning (ELL) resources already offered at Gustavus. Some students in the class speak as many as four languages.

The class looks at connections between literacy, language and identity. According to Fremo, some people assume that it is less advantageous to be bilingual. "The idea of the class is to start talking about how a bilingual background actually prepares you better for academic challenges you may have," she said. "Gustavus has been paying more attention to ELL recently and we need to be ready for a large group of students with this background so that not only do they come here, but they succeed when they come," said Fremo.

Fremo says that students begin with some shared assumptions and experiences stemming from what they've learned as multilingual students before coming to Gustavus. "This creates a unique class dynamic which then allows them to speak more freely in class and to engage in peer review activities with one another's writing," she said.

Students in the class are reading several books, fiction and non-fiction, all written by multilingual writers including *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, *Hunger for Memory* by Richard Rodriguez, and *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston. Students are also reading several non-fiction articles about multilingualism, higher education, and what it means to be an educated citizen. The students then produce a portfolio of essays, both argumentative and narrative, that engage critical questions related to those texts.

"The experiences they share as multilingual students break all sorts of barriers, enabling lively conversation during class and whole-class discussions of student's papers," Fremo said.

The class has met for dinner multiple times and has had some panel sessions, talking with successful multilingual upperclassmen as well as talking with faculty members about communication in their particular fields of study.



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Discussing Democracy

“How Do We Vote,” another FTS course in its first year, has students examining policy issues connected with the mechanics of voting. It is taught by Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science Max Hailperin.

The class looks at verifying the eligibility and identity of voters, how people gain confidence in vote totals that come from computerized voting equipment, as well as instant runoff voting: a relatively new type of voting where voters rank their choices, allowing people to vote for a third party without throwing away their vote.

“The class has really made me think about my opinions and the reasoning I have to support them, not only in the political spectrum, but concerning all subject matters,” first-year student Brynn Makela said. “It has taught me to critically analyze information I’m given and, from there, form a sound argument.”

All students in the class were engaged with the election in early November. Seven of Hailperin’s students ran the voter registration event on campus in collaboration with the College Democrats and Republicans, successfully registering 232 Gustavus students to vote. Four other students served as election judges on election day, helping with registration, the distribution of ballots, and making sure the rights of voters were protected. Another four students observed work done after the polls closed, including the process of counting ballots and certifying results.

“I gave them a palette of opportunities,” said Hailperin. “I think it’s important that the range of opportunities included an

observation component. I can’t compel students to take part in anything or compel them to vote, that would be wrong.”

Another part of the class involved writing a letter to the editor in favor of or against the constitutional amendment concerning photo ID. They were given specific guidelines about quoting and making an argument and were graded based on that.

“My favorite part of this class has been the idea that no answer is right or wrong; there is only sound or unsound reasoning,” Makela said. “I think this class is perfect for students my age. We have only just entered the world of the voting citizen and need to be aware of what is happening around us. We have learned about voter fraud, voter disenfranchisement, and the misconceptions behind both. It forced me to really do some introspection and form my own conclusions.”

In addition to instruction from Hailperin, several guest speakers have visited the class to share their insight on a number of topics. Minnesota’s Secretary of State Mark Ritchie spoke to the class before the election in early November on a range of election-related topics, such as the need for contingency plans to deal with natural disasters. In the final weeks of class the students will hear from guest lecturers Jay Weiner and Chris Gilbert. Weiner is a journalist and author who wrote a book about the 2008 senate race and recount between Norm Coleman and Al Franken. Gilbert is a political science professor at Gustavus who will speak to the class about instant runoff voting. The class will also be simulating a meeting of a committee of the Minnesota House.

Turbulent Times

“The Sixties,” an FTS taught by Professor of History and Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies Greg Kaster, addresses the FTS components from the angle of the ‘60s and with a history perspective.

“All kinds of values were challenged and questioned in the 1960s by both sides of the political spectrum, and this works well with the core values of the FTS program,” Kaster said.

Kaster introduces students to what it means to think historically and what it means to do history. “I get really excited when students in class use Gustavus as a prism for understanding larger issues,” he said. For example, some students have looked at what kind of anti-war protest was going on at Gustavus during the Vietnam War.

“It’s a turbulent period in our nation’s history. As I am coming into my own college experience, we are learning a great deal about the huge boom in student activism as colleges across the nation became hotbeds of protest and political participation,” said first-year student Sam Panzer.

Panzer enjoys the course’s healthy approach toward history. “Rather than being fed interpretations of events and regurgitating them on papers and exams, we are supplied with a wealth of primary and secondary sources,” he said. “It is then up to us to take in these sources and understand their background, context, and implications. In addition to giving us a better understanding of the events of the ‘60s, this approach also enriches our ability to effectively reason and analyze in any setting, from political reasoning to simple daily conversation.”

Kaster is excited that his students have been showing initiative and encourages his students to utilize technology in and out of class.

“We frequently use a class Facebook group to communicate and share videos, music, and documents,” Panzer said. “We’ve used the Facebook group for everything from bouncing around essay topic ideas to getting groups together to watch required films.”

“This class has definitely increased my appreciation for the political potential college students wield. I’ve found myself able to draw many parallels from the political and social havoc of the ‘60s to many figurative battles our citizens and representatives are fighting today,” Panzer said.

For more information about the First Term Seminar program at Gustavus, you can contact Kate Knutson at knutson@gustavus.edu or 507-933-6224.

This article was written in December of 2012. For updated information, contact Matt Thomas, director of Media Relations, at mthomas@gustavus.edu or 507-933-7510.

Matt Thomas is the Director of Media Relations and Internal Communication at Gustavus Adolphus College. After graduating from Gustavus in 2000 with degrees in Communication Studies and History, Thomas worked mainly as a sports journalist in the western suburbs of Minneapolis before returning to Gustavus in 2007.