

STOCKTON
FIRST-YEAR

SEMINAR

**FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS:
A HANDBOOK FOR FACULTY**

**STOCKTON UNIVERSITY
REVISED SPRING 2023**

ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

This Handbook was first created in 2014 by GT Lenard and updated by her in 2016. GT served as Coordinator of the Freshman Seminars for more than a decade. She demonstrated a steadfast commitment to the faculty who teach these courses and the students who take them. GT helped the program become the defining academic feature of the first-year experience. Revisions and changes will be made through the years, but we'll always have started this Handbook with GT's ideas, enthusiasm and commitment to the success of all new students.

The Handbook includes Acknowledgments, a description of the Essential Elements of a First-year Seminar (updated and revised in 2022), and a brief history of the First-year Seminars at Stockton by Bob Helsabeck. A list of past Common Readings and Convocation Speakers is also included to maintain a record of these important components of the program. The sample syllabi from First-year Seminars remain an important and useful part of the handbook for faculty interested in teaching a First-year Seminar. These syllabi represent the wide variety of interests that instructors bring to their First-year Seminars, and put on display their pedagogical expertise and creativity. Our seminars are academic courses taken from the rich General Studies curriculum that serve to introduce students to "the life of the mind" at Stockton and carry credit towards graduation. The courses are highly varied in their subject matter and approach, but are united in the enthusiasm of the instructors and their emphasis on the Essential Elements.

If you have questions or concerns about the content of this Handbook, or anything else related to First-Year Seminars, please reach out. I'm always happy to lend a hand.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people to thank here and not enough time. But, in brief, the individuals mentioned below keep this First-Year Seminar operation running smoothly. Dean Rob Gregg is so committed to the First-year Seminar program that he even teaches a course. This hands-on experience helps him advocate for both professors and students in a way that ensures success for all of us. Dean Gregg has also graciously supported Summer Institutes consistently over the years, with recent Summer Institutes in 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2023. Claire Lopatto is about to retire and has been the brains behind the operation for many years – she will be sorely missed. The GENS staff are always friendly and kind as they help with the many tasks of coordinating a program with more than 60 courses and dozens of professors. Thank you especially to Liz Masterson, Shawn Manuloa, and Lauren Rivera for helping to solve every problem that's brought to them.

The recently re-established First-year Seminar Advisory Board meets to generate ideas, solve problems and ensure that our program is a success, and also is connected to, and in conversation with, other related programs and offices across campus. The current members are: John O'Hara, Josh Duntley, Alaina Walton, Ana Edmondson, Ariane Newman, and Candace Mitchell.

Each year a major role is played behind the scenes by the First-Year Seminar "Book Club" that is made up of faculty from the program who volunteer their time to read and review dozens of potential books for the Common Reading and meet several times throughout the year to determine the finalists. This job is enjoyable (because reading is fun!), but relatively thankless in that "Book Club" members do not get paid and sometimes are criticized for the books they support. But these thoughtful individuals understand the importance of the Common Reader to our students, and do a tremendous job of finding books that will be engaging and valuable to incoming students at Stockton. Thank you to the members who have been a part of this group during the last few years: Aleksandra Hultquist, Michael Rodriguez, Nancy Reddy, Donni Allison, Lauren Fonseca, Rodger Jackson, David Lechner, Emily Van Duyne, and John O'Hara – your insights are invaluable and your work is greatly appreciated.

Of course, the success of any program depends on its members, and the faculty and professional staff who teach our First-year Seminars are the real superstars of this team. In the simplest of terms, our faculty is remarkably dedicated, diligent, intelligent, creative, and caring. We all owe you a debt of gratitude for the important work you do every year in helping to lay the foundations for the success of thousands of Stockton students.

Thank you for all that you do in support of First-Year Seminars!

ACADEMIC REQUIREMENTS & COMMON ELEMENTS FOR ALL FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS

(Revised May 2022)

First-year Seminars play a highly important role in a student's first-year experience at Stockton. A seminar should introduce students to the skills necessary for success in college and connect them with a skilled and compassionate educator. Taking a First-Year Seminar should help each student to become a critical thinker, competent reader, careful speaker and listener, and capable researcher. The student will know and be known by a full-time faculty or staff member.

Required Components for All First-year Seminar Classes

1. **CRITICAL THINKING** – First-Year Seminars are courses adopted from the General Studies curriculum that must teach their chosen content areas while deliberately cultivating their students' critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is the ability to address complex topics rationally and empathetically, and students should be shown how to be active, fair-minded learners who can conceptualize, analyze, synthesize, and assess various types of information.
2. **READING** – Each seminar must require engaged, active reading. Students should be introduced to college-level reading practices and the mechanics of reading academic prose: annotation, underlining, note-taking on the required reading, etc. Instructors must emphasize close reading skills and occupy students in the process of becoming curious readers, involved and challenged by the text.
3. **COMMUNICATION SKILLS** –
 - A. **Writing:** Instructors must require routine writing from each student. Although First-year Seminars may not carry the "W" designation, all class sections must feature college-level writing assignments that get read and responded to as a core component of the course.
 - B. **Speaking and Listening:** Instructors should encourage class participation in all forms, including asking questions, and understand that active listening is also a form of class participation. Instructors should encourage students' and instructors' active listening to each other and respect for the speaker by not interrupting or otherwise discouraging the free exchange of information, point of view, and instruction. More formal presentations (by individual students or groups of students) are also encouraged in each seminar.
4. **INFORMATION LITERACY (RESEARCH/LIBRARY)** – Each seminar must require some kind of research project. That project should include oral presentation or written work by individuals or groups; evaluating and using

print and/or electronic resources; and instruction in understanding/avoiding plagiarism, as well as instruction in all areas of academic honesty. Seminars must also include instruction in the use of Library resources.

Suggested Components for First-year Seminars

1. COMMON READING – The Common Reading provides a vital shared academic experience for all first-year students. Therefore, teachers should make room in the syllabus for students to read, examine, discuss, and/or write about the Common Reading selection, whether it is thematically linked to the main course content or not. Attendance at the First-Year Convocation should also be encouraged or required of all students (and instructors).
2. CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT – Instructors should encourage (and model) involvement in the intellectual and cultural life of the university. Students should be informed of notable events on campus and encouraged to be active participants in clubs, intramurals, lectures, concerts, etc.
3. DIVERSITY INITIATIVES – Instructors should encourage respect for diversity in people, cultures, and points-of-view. This should be cultivated through course materials and assignments focused on the complexities of race, gender, disability, religion, etc.

THE COMMON READING AND THE CONVOCATION LECTURE

We introduced the Common Reading program for first-year students in 2006. The Common Reading is meant to introduce students to college-level critical reading and to ensure at least one significant academic commonality for all incoming students. As a way to accommodate professors with different types of courses, we traditionally switch between fiction and non-fiction books each year. The First-Year Convocation Lecture is a major event on campus each fall, and whenever it is logistically and financially possible, we invite the author of the Common Reading to campus for this lecture. This special event offers an unprecedented opportunity for a shared, insightful intellectual experience for Stockton's first-year students and instructors alike.

We ask First-year Seminar faculty to include the selected Common Reader as a required text for the class. Because the First-year Seminar faculty teach such diverse topics in the liberal arts, it can be difficult to select a book that fits into the course topics of dozens of different courses. We always do our best, and are lucky that our instructors do such an outstanding job of figuring out a variety of ways to incorporate the book and the Convocation Lecture into their courses.

Year	Common Reading	Author(s)	Convocation Speaker(s)
2023	<i>Team Human</i>	Douglas Rushkoff	Douglas Rushkoff
2022	<i>Sweat</i>	Lynn Nottage	Lynn Nottage (Pappas Lecture)
2021	<i>Between the World and Me</i>	Ta-Nehisi Coates	Ta-Nehisi Coates (Pappas Lecture)
2020	<i>Binti</i>	Nnedi Okorafor	Nnedi Okorafor
2019	<i>Factfulness</i>	Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling & Anna Rosling Rönnlund	Sister Deirdre Mullan
2018	<i>Station Eleven</i>	Emily St. John Mandel	Emily St. John Mandel
2017	<i>Trust Me I'm Lying</i>	Ryan Holiday	Ryan Holiday
2016	<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian</i>	Sherman Alexie	Ellen Forney (book's illustrator)
2015	<i>Whistling Vivaldi</i>	Claude Steele	Valerie Purdie-Vaughns
2014	<i>Orphan Train</i>	Christina Baker Kline	Christina Baker Kline
2013	<i>Spook: Science Tackles The Afterlife</i>	Mary Roach	Mary Roach
2012	<i>This I Believe II</i>	Jay Allison & Dan Gediman	Dan Gediman
2011	<i>Shoeless Joe</i>	W. P. Kinsella	John Thorn (MLB Historian)
2010	<i>Outcasts United</i>	Warren St. John	Luma Mufleh (main character) Warren St. John (also spoke in October)
2009	<i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i>	Moshin Hamid	Sehar Tariq
2008	<i>Unbowed</i>	Wangari Maathai	Charlie Savage
2007	<i>A Long Way Gone</i>	Ishmael Beah	Ishmael Beah
2006	<i>Bayou Farewell</i>	Mike Tidwell	Mike Tidwell

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FRESHMAN SEMINARS

By
Bob Helsabeck

In the mid-1980's several faculty and administrators at the College wished to provide a freshman seminar in some form to give our students a significant beginning to their experience at Stockton. At that time, the prevailing model of the freshman seminar was "University 101." It was typically a one or two credit course in which students were "oriented" to college life. These courses – however – lacked academic credibility – neither the students nor the faculty seemed to take them very seriously.

While exploring the literature, we learned of a very modest approach taken by the University of Puget Sound – a college, like Stockton, that was trying some alternative approaches to undergraduate education. In their effort to better serve their first-year students, they placed the letters "FA" (freshman advisor) next to courses in which the faculty member stood ready to give extra advice and counsel to freshmen. These professors, in effect, were agreeing to provide some of the services generally offered in "University 101" as a bonus to their regularly offered courses.

We thought we could "go one better" by attaching still broader freshman seminar functions into regular courses (not just the advising function). We would try to create seminars which would have the credibility of bona fide courses, not like University 101. In addition, Stockton, unlike most colleges, had the advantage of a separate General Studies curriculum made up of courses that had more malleability for first year students than the standard disciplinary "Intro." courses. We thought this use of good, existing G-courses would be attractive to faculty and would minimize the faculty recruitment problems for the seminar program.

The College received a substantial grant to be administered over a three-year period, giving us resources for paid faculty workshops held in the summer. In essence we sought the best faculty we could find, asked them to tailor one of their best courses to first-year students, and teach it in a seminar mode for about 20-25 students. In addition to teaching the content of the course, we expected the faculty to give the students a genuine seminar experience in which they would gain the intellectual skills of good speaking and critical listening. (We preferred to leave the intensive writing instruction to the writing courses offered specifically for freshmen.) Furthermore, the participating faculty would encourage students to engage in the broader intellectual life of the college and learn to make optimal use of the library. That was about it. Good things would happen because we had good people and a good structure to facilitate such.

Most recently, we have expanded the expectations for the seminars and now expect faculty to include some portion of the both forms of language skills – oral and written. We also adopted a full year focus on the first-year experience. This broader focus is consonant with Ernest Boyer's classic study of College.¹ We continue to involve strong faculty in serving this important program and are pleased with the quality of the experiences available to our first-year students.

¹ "The foundation for a successful undergraduate experience is proficiency in the written and the spoken word. Students need language to grasp and express effectively feelings and ideas. To succeed in college, undergraduates should be able to write and speak with clarity, and to read and listen with comprehension. Language and thought are inextricably connected and as undergraduates develop their linguistic skills, they hone the quality of their thinking and become intellectually and socially empowered." From Chapter 5, Language: The First Requirement, in Ernest Boyer. College, Harper and Row, 1987.

FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS TODAY

May 2023

In June 2020, the faculty teaching these important seminars voted to change the name to First-year Seminars. This change is in sync with the national programs focused on students transitioning to college and the linguistic trends toward gender neutral language. In the most recent Leadership agreement, the position of First-year Seminar Convenor was generally preserved, ensuring that this program and leadership by faculty is entrenched in this institution.

HELPFUL LINKS:

[LINK TO SAMPLE SYLLABI FOR FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS](#)

[LINK TO 5-YEAR SELF STUDY \(FROM 2019-2020\)](#)

[LINK TO EXTERNAL CONSULTANT REPORT \(NOV. 2020\)](#)