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Enriching the First-Year Experience

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Since its inception in 2002, Brown's First-Year Seminar Program has provided an entrée for students into Brown's open academic culture. Capped at 20 students each, the seminars offer first-year students a welcoming environment to learn about a new field, and to develop a bond with a Brown faculty member. The 2007-2008 academic year marks the fifth anniversary of the FYS Program, so it is a fitting time to reflect on the benefits of this special program for students and faculty alike.

The First-Year Seminar Program was conceived as one of the major initiatives of the Plan for Academic Enrichment. Linked to the Plan's goal to increase the size of the faculty by 100, the program was initially overseen by Armando Bengochea, then Associate Dean of Freshman Studies at Brown. Bengochea, now Dean of the Campus Community at Connecticut College, explains that the FYS Program's aims were initially quite simple: to promote close interaction between faculty and students in a setting that encouraged curricular innovation and pedagogical experimentation. Some hoped that the seminars might also allow students to develop certain skills, such as the ability to communicate effectively in writing, but in the end the program developed according to the interests of the faculty who participated, without an overarching set of goals or course requirements. The largest goal, Bengochea says, was simply to create and offer 60 seminars a year.

The College met that goal in three years. Since fall 2004, 60 different seminars have been offered each year in all areas of the curriculum. Of course, with a first-year class of nearly 1500 students per year, 60 seminars are not quite enough, and the First-Year Seminar Program continues to be a top priority of the College: our current goal is to offer enough seminars so that every incoming student can enroll in at least one. To that end, a spring 2008 grant program funded the development of 24 new seminars that emphasize writing, scientific thinking, global awareness, and instruction in a foreign language. The result is that 80 seminars are on offer for the 2008-2009 academic year. As I write this

article, almost 1,000 first-year students have been placed in their first or second choice seminar, a number that represents a 25% increase over previous years. We anticipate placing an additional 300 students in seminars before summer's end.

Jim Valles, Associate Dean of the Curriculum and Professor of Physics, directs the First-Year Seminar Program and spearheaded this year's grant program. Valles says that he was stunned by the richness and range of ideas in the course proposals he received. He also reports that directing the Program has deepened his understanding of the various functions that first-year seminars perform for students and faculty. Many Brown students arrive on campus equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to navigate the open curriculum. Other students are less savvy about how to function within Brown's academic environment. First-year seminars can help all students transition to Brown by developing their understanding of many aspects of college-level work—the types of assignments they might encounter in courses, the need to prepare for seminar discussions, faculty's expectations about written communication, and the necessity of being able to work independently.

The seminars also provide students with an essential personal touch in their first year at Brown. Mino Fadaifard '08 took James Anderson's FYS, "Computing as Done in Brains and Computers," in her first semester at Brown. After taking the course, she said, "[T]his first-year seminar has helped immeasurably with my adjustment to college. I have found it very easy to ask questions in Professor Anderson's class; the small discussion group is far less intimidating than larger lectures." A caring, supportive faculty member can help students develop the ability to converse comfortably with faculty as well as other students. And not only that: some students discover their future academic path in that first classroom experience. Arvid Tomayko Peters '07, who came to Brown to study music, ended up as a dual concentrator in Music and Geological Sciences because of a First-Year Seminar he took with Tim Herbert and Annie Schmitt.

Teaching first-year seminars also benefits faculty. As James Head of the Geology Department states, "Faculty who may have forgotten what it is like to be challenged by general questions and detailed small group discussion are truly renewed by teaching a [first-year] seminar." The program also allows faculty to create courses around topics of special interest to them that may not fall within standard departmental course offerings. The continued strength of the program points to what Valles referred to as faculty's "instinct" that teaching a first-year seminar can be fun.

Teaching first-year seminars is a joy for faculty, Valles thinks, because they remain an important expression of Brown's commitment to an open learning environment. In first-year seminars, students begin to explore what one might call the Brown way—they put their own thoughts out, they are creative in front of their peers and a faculty member, and they begin to collaborate with one another. By allowing faculty to create new courses and to share their evolving interests with students, the First-year Seminar Program itself

models for our students the kinds of freedom made possible by the open curriculum and the work required for each learner to meet his or her own learning goals.