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Teaching Critical University Studies: A First-Year Seminar to Cultivate Intentional Learners

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Abstract: The first-year seminar *Why Are We Here? Student Culture and the Problem of College (WAWH)* helps high-achieving students become motivated agents in their education by changing attitudes toward themselves, college, and their roles as students. The author presents the intentional design, execution, analysis, and results of the WAWH seminar, a curriculum that combines content and methods from the discipline of Critical University Studies, layered high-impact practices, student-curated and student-led discussions, and explicit instruction on metacognition in teaching and learning. The decennial study (2008–2018) involves eighteen sections and over 300 students, all with similar written assignments, reflections, and final course evaluations. Results indicate that students gain clarity in the understanding of their own values, opinions on issues, and sense of self as learners; of the purpose of college and liberal education; and of issues involving the U.S. education system and the academy. The author posits the WAWH model as a means for synthesizing theory and practice in education; securing honors programs' impact and relevance within institutions; and maximizing institutional investment in high-achieving student populations. Learning outcomes and implications for scalability are discussed.

Keywords: first-year seminar (FYS); high-impact practices; student-led seminars; metacognition; scaffolding (teaching method)

Research has shown that multiple high-impact practices (HIPs), of which first-year seminars are but one, have greater impact on students' academic success than HIPs offered alone or no HIPs at all (Hansen and Schmidt 1). However, while students may be exposed to a broad spectrum of curricular

and first-year student success programs in various academic units, they may be ill-equipped to synthesize their experiences. In research into HIPs in honors programs, Cobane and Jennings cite the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) finding that “on almost all campuses, utilization of active learning practices is unsystematic, to the detriment of student learning.” They assert that the resulting lack of coherence can diminish the effectiveness of HIPs by making them feel transactional to students (41).

Based on the assumption that the institution has a responsibility to coordinate first-year experiences for students, we developed a course titled “Why Are We Here? Student Culture and the Problem of College” (WAWH). The WAWH model is intended to yield maximum benefits and coherence by being both theoretically grounded and highly intentional in design, execution, and mutual reinforcement among components. The WAWH model combines layered high-impact practices; student-led discussions; explicit instruction and practice of metacognition in teaching and learning; and methods and content from the field of Critical University Studies, a self-reflexive discipline predicated on critiquing higher education. The model offers students scaffolded learning so that they can ultimately assume ownership of the seminar. This course is not a mere pedagogical exercise but was constructed as an intervention to empower a generation of honors students whom we perceived as passive consumers of educational experiences, making them motivated agents in their education by changing their attitudes toward themselves, college, and their roles as students.

Throughout this study, I refer often to “we” as a direct result of the way the WAWH model has transformed the first-year honors seminar into a mutual scholarly endeavor between faculty and students. I, as author of this essay, am not solely responsible for designing, implementing, and assessing the WAWH model. Twelve years have turned students and faculty into collaborators, who between them have amassed a shared repository of thousands of pages of course documents and hundreds of media artifacts, coming to share a sense of ownership of the seminar described here.

THE PROBLEM OF COLLEGE

It may seem counterintuitive to assert that honors students have a unique need for a first-year seminar on finding academic purpose. We assume that our most academically successful students must know why they are striving so hard to achieve so much, but a decade and a half of teaching first-year students taught me otherwise. When polled on the first day of class on whether

they have ever been asked why they are going to college, rarely do more than two respond positively, and they are almost always the first in their family to attend college. The vast majority have never questioned if or why they are college bound; it is simply an assumption transmitted by family, friends, and teachers.

When required in the first assignment to articulate their reasons for enrolling, few students have answers beyond their need for a degree to get a good job and “become a well-rounded person.” By semester’s end, students offer much more nuanced rationales for attending college in their personal philosophy of education. In the months between, we problematize both the system in which class members have been processed into college students and the institution of higher education to which they have blindly delivered themselves. They realize that they made a life-changing choice without knowing the difference between a college and university and that they have no idea of the faculty reward systems that are some of the greatest influences on their academic experience. They are unaware of contemporary debates over the purpose of a college education; skeptical about educational structures because of ability-grouping in secondary schools; shaken to learn that racist federal real estate lending laws from the 1930s continue to perpetuate inequality in the school systems of which they are products; and deeply discomfited by the material effects of history that challenge their belief in meritocracy. They are surprised to learn that the majority of college students who go to college with a major change it or that the last U.S. census found that only 27% of adults with a terminal bachelor’s degree have a career directly related to their major. Last year’s class was incredulous when they learned that employers will never see their college transcripts. “What else haven’t they told us?” sputtered one student.

Having witnessed a steady increase in students’ lack of academic purpose, I designed a first-year seminar to help incoming students situate themselves within the discourses of the academy and become intentional, independent learners and agents of change. The WAWH model offers concentrated experiential learning to yield the most generative relationship between form and content. Like Knapp et al. in their work on first-year honors students, we explicitly sought to create a transformative educational experience. We developed the following research questions:

- What if we developed a model for an honors first-year seminar to serve as an academic, intellectual, and personal intervention to change the way students see college and how they see themselves as students and adults with political agency?

- What if we focused its pedagogy on teaching students how to learn by teaching them how to teach themselves, how to reflect and take academic and intellectual risks?
- What if we intentionally compounded all that we know about first-year seminars, student development theories, high-impact practices, and how learning works to build the single most impactful honors first-year seminar possible?
- How might we create mutually reinforcing results if we combined student learning outcomes (SLOs) for honors programs, first-year seminars, and Critical University Studies?
- What if, in constructing the content, structure, activities, skill building, and experiences, we sought to cultivate in our first-year seminar “the kind of students we wish to have in senior seminars?” (Schilling 119)

I. GOALS AND OUTCOMES:

A PACKED AGENDA

The result was a course titled “Why Are We here? Student Culture and the Problem of College.” Student learning outcomes were derived from three sources: the first-year seminar program, the honors program, and content and practices within the disciplinary field of Critical University Studies.

First-Year Seminar Student Learning Outcomes

First-year seminars (FYSs) are one of the high-impact practices proven to yield the greatest benefits to student success. An extensive body of research from the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience on best practices in first-year seminars (especially Barefoot and Gardner) has delineated specific structures, goals, and student learning outcomes for helping first-year students make a successful transition from high school to college, including:

- Persistence to second year
- Feeling connected to the campus community
- Written and oral communication skills
- Knowledge integration and application
- Academic engagement

- Values clarification (education, success, academic risk)
- Involvement in political activism/social advocacy (Keup and Petschauer 40–41)

Each institution determines SLOs to target in its first-year seminars; the three chosen by our school are (1) identify and articulate assumptions that underlie an idea, argument, or creative work; (2) develop and evaluate arguments; and (3) advance your skills as a writer, speaker, thinker, and scholar.

Layered High-Impact Practices

Hansen and Schmidt, Kuh, the AAC&U, and others have written extensively on the ways high-impact practices affect each other synergistically. The more HIPs students experience, the higher their GPAs and their retention, graduation, and satisfaction rates (Hansen and Schmidt 57). The first-year seminar is in itself a HIP, but to maximize impact the WAWH model includes five others:

- Collaborative learning
- Academic challenge
- Writing-intensive coursework
- Undergraduate research/time on task
- Public sharing of research

Honors Cultural and Academic Induction

Every honors course at our institution is assessed on the extent to which it offers academic challenge, deep student engagement, discussion-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and cultivation of students as active producers of knowledge. Research into the effectiveness of first-year seminars points to an advantage for honors programs. The greatest impact on students' collegiate and lifelong learning habits is derived from an FYS that includes significant academic challenge, and first-year seminars that are academically challenging have greater benefits for students' lifelong learning orientations (Padgett et al. 145).

In striving to help students develop intrinsic motivation and redefine their identities from high school students to collegiate scholars, the WAWH model is designed to help students reframe their relationship to grades and interpersonal competition. We try to include enough academic challenge to

make honors students strive without triggering undue anxiety in a population susceptible to perfectionism. We also try to prepare them for inevitable challenges to their identities as smart, high-performing students. The syllabus includes a preemptive policy about resisting the urge to demonstrate just how knowledgeable they are when their identity feels threatened; it explicitly states that collegiality is rewarded over competition and that it is demonstrated by building on each other's ideas and thanking each other for provoking thought.

Further, since honors students are especially sensitive to grades, first-day ground rules include direct talk about the perils of intellectual prostitution, which is not a synonym for plagiarism but rather the practice of saying or writing what you think the teacher wants to hear in the mistaken assumption that this will yield a good grade. Our syllabus comprises issues that are at once personal and political, topics on which class members are likely to have opinions. The bottom line is that we do not have to agree with each other but we do have to demonstrate respect for each other, meaning that if a student writes a well-reasoned, evidence-supported argument for a position to which the professor is diametrically opposed, an A paper is still an A paper, and intellectual integrity always wins.

Goals for a Course in Critical University Studies

The objectives about which students are initially most concerned are those relating to content. Many class members are not accustomed to being both the scholars and the subject of their study, and they are intrigued to discover the relationships among course content, form, process, and participants. The stated course goals are:

- Clarify your values and goals for your own college education, so you can articulate your academic purpose and answer: *Why am I here?*
- Develop a sense of political and academic agency to advocate for research-supported change on an issue that is meaningful to you.
- Cultivate intellectual curiosity and challenge yourself to become an intentional, self-determining, and intrinsically motivated learner.
- Understand the purpose and value of liberal education.
- Make connections among our course, other courses, and prior knowledge to develop the integrative habit of mind (integrative critical thinking).

The result of these synergistic, first-year-seminar SLOs combined with honors program objectives and disciplinary objectives is a packed agenda that squares with the WAWH model's ethos of making every moment and feature of the first-year honors seminar pay off in as many ways as possible.

II. DISCIPLINARY CONTENT: CRITICAL UNIVERSITY STUDIES

The choice of Critical University Studies (CUS) is a natural fit for an honors first-year seminar; this relatively young discipline is rooted in cultural studies and combines education, sociology, politics, literature, economics, and history to turn a critical lens on the academy itself. The term was first defined by Jeffrey J. Williams in a 2012 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: “An Emerging Field Deconstructs Academe.” Williams describes the criticism of higher education that emerged in the 1990s and continues to grow. Drawing on feminist, socialist, legal, and liberation education theories, CUS is deliberate in its work to trouble commonsense assumptions about the academy and to restore historical and cultural context in order to examine how power functions and whose interests are being served. CUS problematizes college by examining “the policies, practices and problems of contemporary higher education. . . . It analyzes how our social institutions foster injustice or perpetuate inequality, and it advocates for their fuller democratic possibilities” (Williams 149). The discipline is predicated on the understanding that “all research and teaching is shaped by political, cultural, economic and historical forces [despite the fact that] we often teach and publish knowledge as if it is divorced from political and economic concerns” (Samuels 2). As the discipline becomes more institutionalized, it has become the subject of book series from such presses as Johns Hopkins, Palgrave, and Berghahn, and of scholarly research groups, conferences, and graduate critical theory programs at the University of California at Berkeley, the University of British Columbia, and Northwestern University among others.

Critical University Studies also emphasizes students as researchers and promotes projects that require students to combine research with writing and social justice goals and to share their knowledge via multiple modes in order to create more equitable public and academic access to their findings. The goal is for students to become producers of knowledge contributing to the discourse as opposed to passive consumers of information produced by others (Steffen), thus aligning directly with the goals of honors programs.

Highly Relevant Course Content

Course content is selected based on relevance to entering first-year students but also on its ability to spark engagement, deep reflection, increased understanding of social injustices in access to education, and personal, political action. While CUS focuses on higher education, the syllabus for the WAWH model includes the study of K–12 education because first-semester students have the greatest experience with it, and this gives them confidence on which to build a critical practice for studying the culture and institution they have just joined. Teaching students to critique the academy aligns with Cargas’s assertion that teaching honors students potentially divisive issues develops their disposition toward critical thinking: “Analyzing controversies in a way that requires deep consideration of all the sides of an issue induces the kinds of discomfort that leads to serious thought” (126). All of this serves one of the primary purposes of both Critical University Studies and the course: to render visible the water we swim in, thus making it possible to question why things are the way they are and to create interventions for positive change.

Over the twelve years this seminar was offered, we amassed a collection of thousands of pages of articles, political cartoons, plays, short stories, and media links contributed by faculty and students who have experienced, heard about, or observed our class. This collection lives online in our learning management system, and student leaders use it as the foundational library from which they can pull materials and media for their units. It is telling that course alumni both continue to contribute to it and use it as a resource in their academic and personal lives long after their first semester.

Educating the Critic

Asking class members to define the characteristics of a good student is illuminating since it requires a significant effort for them to excavate and examine their assumptions about being a learner. Initial responses point to lower-order thinking, such as memorization, and obedient behaviors, such as raising one’s hand to be called on and turning in homework on time. Only with prompting do they get to active attributes such as intellectual curiosity, creative problem solving, and persistence. The majority think that professors value and reward compliance.

Students are more expansive in their definition of good teaching although they have a hard time separating it from their definition of a good teacher, which plants the seeds for a conversation on the difference between liking

and respecting a faculty member. Letting students realize that they prefer to be taught good content by a professor whom they respect and who respects them is far more powerful than telling them what they should value. This realization lays the foundation for reflection on the kind of teacher they want to be not only when they are leading class discussions but when they are writing their papers and want to be seen as knowledgeable, credible, and engaging. Such discussion sets the stage early in the semester for students' becoming educated critics within the academy and partners in their own education. When they understand the formative pedagogical uses of assessment and evaluation, both in their work and the instruction itself, they better understand and engage with these processes.

As part of our introduction to Critical University Studies, we read competing arguments about the role of course evaluations and how they should shape classroom instruction, faculty tenure and compensation, and curriculum. Students are surprised to learn that treating a course evaluation as they would an online review for a local restaurant is an abuse of their power. We discuss the ethical dimension of anonymous instruments and the human urge to strike back in a charged, power-imbalanced relationship like that between student and professor. Students need to learn how to exercise their agency constructively and responsibly, so we teach them both why and how to complete a course evaluation. The process takes student engagement to another plane.

Preparation for the final course evaluation is the "Last Class" protocol for reflection and assessment (Bleicher 2011). Students complete a worksheet that prompts them to review readings, reflections, notes, and assignments before we gather to tear the syllabus apart and rebuild it to make it better for the next year's students. Class members understand that they have the power to revise the course because they both taught and took it. This lesson not only demonstrates to students how much they have learned about themselves, the course content, and learning, but it also communicates what we value as an institution and how we want them to approach their studies moving forward. As a result of this cycle of assessment and revision, primary course content includes the following units of study:

- a brief history of higher education from the pre-industrial revolution to the present, with an emphasis on consequences of the GI Bill and democratization of access to higher education, followed by the defunding and privatization of higher education in the Reagan years and beyond;

- competing theories and contemporary debates on the purpose of college, purpose of tenure, effects of tenure requirements, and effects of labor practices on the student experience of higher education;
- the definition, purpose, and benefits of liberal education;
- why we have required courses;
- youth as consumers of culture, goods, and services, along with the rise of commodification and the consumerist ethos within higher education;
- contemporary youth as producers of culture and the historical role of students as agents of social justice and political change;
- the historical and political legacy of real estate redlining and its impact on equity in contemporary K–12 schools, college admissions, and student success, including high school and college graduation rates;
- meritocracy and the effects of ability grouping, access to advance placement or college credit, and honors/gifted programs on students and school systems;
- the role of prestige ranking and brand names in college selection, including the real and perceived impact on graduates' personal happiness and professional success;
- student development theory: what social science shows that students experience in the first year;
- personal relationships in college;
- learning from failure and taking academic risks; and
- the last class: critical thinking about students' experience of the curriculum.

Real-World Application in Real Time

Our grounding in Critical University Studies led us to create room in the curriculum for a unit on meritocracy; without highly targeted readings and media, students had difficulty understanding why meritocracy does not work for all youth in our country or to critique the ways honors education can help perpetuate social injustice. These issues existed long before Black Lives Matter, but a unit on meritocracy gives us room to discuss such specific

movements in the moment, along with the role of affirmative action as a path toward diversity but not automatically inclusion and equity. As protests rocked our campus in 2015, students in the course joined others and successfully agitated for the removal of the college president, who had made a series of insensitive statements both on campus and in the national press. The course offered students an academic and historical context for these events as well as a place to process their experience academically and intellectually, not just emotionally. This hands-on and immediate application made them see the relevance of what they had learned in the course.

A generic unit on problems in college led to one focused exclusively on personal relationships. Students had long been pressing for its inclusion, but it became especially relevant to the course in the wake of the #metoo and #timesup movements focused on sexual violence. When we incorporated this unit, which had always been proposed as one on sexual and romantic relationships, students chose first to study the way college affects relationships with family and friends. Only then did they turn to competing definitions and expressions of intimacy; the need for “relationship ed,” not just sex education; the impact of social media and online dating on students’ emotional development and sexual habits; and debates about consent and how to obtain it responsibly.

III. PEDAGOGICAL THEORY INTO PRACTICE: CONSTRUCTIVISM AND METACOGNITION

We approach our ambitious agenda through theories derived from the fields of education and psychology. Students learn upfront that the course is designed and conducted according to constructivist pedagogy (Piaget and Dewey), which posits that students learn most effectively by building new knowledge together, from the ground up, in partnership with a teacher who serves less as a font of wisdom than as a knowledgeable guide. This mode is the opposite of behaviorism, where students are passive recipients of information delivered by a wise teacher and are rewarded by demonstrating desired behaviors, such as submitting correct answers on tests or writing papers that include all elements on a rubric. From the outset, students learn that they will become the teachers. Some are puzzled, but most are curious; occasionally one drops the course to find a seminar with a more familiar, traditional structure.

Ownership of the course is first scaffolded and then transferred to the students. This process is predicated on John Dewey's active learning theory of education and experience; Bloom's taxonomy, which describes a graduated path to cultivating higher-order thinking; and Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding. Dewey made the radical assertion in 1933 that educators should lecture less and engage students more. He claimed that experience without reflection was rarely educative, so it behooves teachers "to think of education as reflection and action, intellectual inquiry and dialectical process, whose ultimate purpose is to enable learners to create meaning through direct experiential activity" (Nash and Murray 92). For this reason, some faculty begin the course by introducing themselves not as the professor but as the captain, cruise director, or Sherpa for the students' journey through the semester toward a deeper understanding of the workings of the academy and themselves as learners.

We introduce Bloom's taxonomy to help students understand distinctions among the kinds of learning tasks they are asked to perform, the level of effort required, and the rationale for each. Faculty who maintain a constructivist teaching practice assume it is our responsibility to "[e]xplain why: If we wish students to become independent, lifelong learners, we need to help them understand both their own learning and the reasons that we ask them to learn in certain ways" (Erickson, Peters, and Strommer 255). As students learn to process the heavier reading load in college and consciously develop their skill in conducting discussions and asking effective questions, they are consistently and explicitly urged to cultivate and require higher-order thinking from themselves and their classmates in writing and speaking. The earliest questions in the course require participants to remember and understand the readings, but as they grow more experienced, they push each other to apply, analyze, and evaluate what they are learning, preparing them to create new knowledge, the highest order of thinking, in their synthesis projects at semester's end.

Metacognition on Teaching and Learning

In teacher education and some psychology courses, meta-analyses of a teaching method's effectiveness and the gap between a teacher's intention and a student's learning are often discussed within or immediately after a given lesson; this is not a common practice in most college classrooms, but it can be transformative. Students may be startled when the professor stops mid-sentence and asks why they are disengaged or requests that a student reframe the core concept to communicate it in a different way. These moments of metacognition, of forced awareness and of inquiry into their thought processes,

create a divided consciousness about learning and teaching that students find particularly compelling, creating a dramatic shift in their understanding of the power dynamics in our classroom.

In the WAWH model, we often prompt students during and outside of class to engage in metacognition about their own learning processes, their experience of classroom instruction, and the ways these differ across disciplines. What we offer is the promise that by thinking deeply about how learning does and does not work, they can understand themselves and how they learn so that when they are confronted with an unfamiliar discipline or a classroom practice that is not effective for them, they can discover how best to teach themselves.

IV. STRUCTURING THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE: SCAFFOLDED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (TEACHING TO LEARN)

The three essential components of Vygotsky's scaffolded learning are a collaborative relationship between "expert" and "learner"; knowledge of the individual and collective levels of development; and the scaffolding itself: a combination of supports and guidance provided by the expert, that is gradually removed as the learner becomes more proficient (Murphey). By leading discussion and processing students' responses to pedagogical choices in the first month of the semester, the professor learns where students are on a variety of spectra, including academic preparation, social skills, emotional intelligence, intellectual development, and maturity, thus determining how to group students for their mutual productivity and growth as well as the level of scaffolding a group may need.

The practice of assuming course ownership cultivates Bloom's higher-order thinking and constitutes a compact, intense form of experiential learning in which students learn by doing and then reflecting on their experience (Dewey). Evidence from decades of research demonstrates that students who tutor and teach typically benefit at least as much if not more from teaching as those who are being taught (Kuh 195). This practice helps meet the goals of first-year seminars insofar as "[t]eaching and helping others, and feeling good about it in a group, instills belonging and gratefulness, creating a sense of community" (Murphey 252). Further, the shared curatorial and leadership responsibilities constitute the high-impact practice of collaborative learning and include three of the recommended practices for enhancing student

success: teaching new students the value and skills of active and collaborative learning; requiring students to provide feedback to their peers through structured course assignments; and cultivating service, experiential learning, and community orientations (Kuh 2006).

Like Vassiliou, who has experimented successfully with student-led honors courses, the professor begins the semester by determining the readings and media, leading discussions, and demonstrating a variety of active learning strategies for discussion (114). These strategies may include traditional hand raising; one student calling on the next; prepared or spontaneous debate; Socratic seminar or fishbowl, in which a small group of students discuss a reading in the center of the room while the rest take notes; graffiti, in which students respond to questions and each other on poster paper around the room; and anonymous card passes to solicit points of confusion or “stupid questions.” We discuss the merits and drawbacks of each method at the end of class. After the first month, students assume leadership of the course.

Honors Students and Collaborative Learning

Collaboration skills are consistently ranked in the top ten characteristics employers seek in new graduates, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, but honors students frequently come to college with a fraught relationship to collaborative work. Some have been burned by classmates who have failed to do their share on group projects. Others have been consistently paired with less skilled group members who offer them little challenge or effective feedback.

To rehabilitate students’ expectations for collaborative learning, we discuss past frustrations and assumptions openly in order to establish common ground for class participation and teach explicit guidelines for constructive feedback on verbal and written argument and class participation. Students not only adopt these guidelines willingly, but they have on occasion taken steps to protect their learning environment by calling out class members who have clearly not done the reading and asserting rules for classroom citizenship in discussions of hot-button issues. When one student blurted an ad hominem assertion, her seatmate humorously chided her about undermining her own credibility. In enforcing individual responsibility for the collective good, students hold themselves and each other to higher standards.

With ground rules firmly established, students are assigned to a unit of their preference in groups of two or three and provided with a guide to over two dozen active discussion format ideas. They are required to confer on

readings or media they wish to assign and to research fresh materials to use. Unlike Vassilou, students curate the content of their assigned unit and are only required to share their decisions with the professor in order to obtain guidance on academic challenges and realistic reading loads. Students take pleasure in choosing and preparing materials and discussion formats, having come up with some creative ideas; one such idea was to demonstrate the emotional impact of ability grouping in schools by distributing different kinds of candy to signal skill levels, and another was the “Game of (College) Life,” in which players simulated outcomes of accreted curricular, extra-curricular, social, and economic choices made in college.

In the student-led portion of the course, the role of the professor is to correct factual errors, clarify questions (often about history), identify off-topic discussion that is not productive, and ensure equity and respect in discussion leadership. In our classroom, the professor has to follow the established discussion method and raise a hand or otherwise request to participate. Leaders have the right not to call on the professor or to limit participation at their discretion. In the earliest days, when leaders ask questions, participants direct their answers to the professor but are then guided to speak with each other, not to perform for the teacher.

After the first two student-led units, leaders discuss their experience to help those who will follow them. Most describe preparation and teaching to be simultaneously stressful, exciting, and exhausting. They recount the terror of a two-second silence after a question and how much work it is to incorporate disparate but interesting contributions. In written reflections, they note the complexity of trying to lead students to come to their own conclusions through effective questions and how often students take a direction or offer an interpretation they had never considered. In short, they note how teaching taught them something new. Occasionally, a class will vote to have students write and submit to the prior week’s leaders a reflection on what they took away from each unit. Since the leaders read and assess these reflections using a brief class rubric, they gain a heightened understanding of the labor and time intensity of grading papers.

V. COMMUNICATION AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

As noted above, the more high-impact practices a student experiences in college, the better their academic success and satisfaction with their college years will be (Hansen and Schmidt 57; Kuh 86; Cobane and Jennings 43). In addition to the first-year seminar being a HIP in its own right, we deliberately

incorporated multiple, mutually reinforcing ones to create synergy and maximize the WAWH model's potential impact, namely writing and speaking for understanding, argument, research, synthesis, and academic challenge.

Academic Challenge

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) asks students to describe how much time and energy they devote to tasks correlated with college success. Such questions include amount of time and effort devoted to preparing for class, reading assigned and other materials, and writing reports and papers; extent of engagement in activities requiring analyzing, synthesizing, applying theories, and making judgments; frequency of encounters with performance standards that compel them to work harder than they thought possible; and the degree to which the college environment emphasizes spending time on academic work (Kuh 177). Our institution administers the NSSE to first- and fourth-year students to gauge our success in integrating high-impact practices and challenging students to do their best work. Five years ago, our honors program added some NSSE questions to our course evaluations to gain specific information on our population and to communicate to students what we value as a program since students infer "it must be important if it's on the test."

Best practice dictates that institutions communicate clear academic expectations to all students, not just those in honors, from the day they hit the front door at orientation and that they reinforce this message throughout all course work, especially in the first year. The research points to five practices that engage students positively in academic challenge: inform students of high expectations from the onset; communicate the expectation of significant time-on-task for writing, reading, and class preparation outside of class; promise and deliver support to students who need or want skill development; provide a rigorous culminating experience; and encourage students to share results of their scholarly work with public celebration (Kuh 192). Acculturation to the demands of college is not a one-and-done proposition, however. Faculty and staff, including residential assistants, must reinforce the same messages in the early weeks of the semester, and faculty must design assignments that challenge and engage students for longer periods of time, hold students accountable for the quality of their efforts, and sometimes challenge them to exceed what they think they can do academically (Kuh 101).

Writing to Learn

Depending on high school preparation, students experience varying degrees of challenge in the shift to a college-level reading load, but nearly all except the most advanced are challenged by the transition to college-level writing. The uneven quality of dual enrollment and Advanced Placement courses across the country leads many to arrive with an exaggerated sense of their writing skills, so this can be a particularly sensitive issue for honors students.

In designing assignments, the WAWH goal was to build skill, capacity, and stamina. In addition to short reflections on each student-led unit and the experience of teaching a unit, the backbone of the course is three major writing assignments that teach a succession of related skills and can, but do not have to, include linked content. All address the first-year seminar goals of improving students' abilities to analyze and develop arguments and advance their writing and thinking skills. The first analytical paper requires students to engage in higher-order thinking by closely reading a cultural artifact such as a music video, an advertisement, or an object or place used by or targeted at college-aged youth. The questions of what the object communicates to youth about what they should be, do, think, believe, or desire are engaging and enable students to work from a sense of expertise as members of youth cultures. This assignment provides a foundation for teaching the components of a complete thesis statement and concepts and vocabulary from cultural studies.

The second argumentative assignment requires students to describe a problem currently affecting the lives of young people, convey what is at stake, advocate for change, and call the reader to action. Students report that this assignment has given them a platform to advocate for either issues about which they had prior knowledge or newly investigated areas of concern. The assignment is directly tied to the course objective to help students develop a sense of political and academic agency. As Nash and Murray point out, "When students see the organic connections between subject matter and their interests in performing service to others or dedicating themselves to a social cause that results in self-transcendence or creating . . . their learning becomes intense, focused, integrated and full of passion" (105). Students know from the outset that while they can develop their advocacy paper into their major research project, they are not required to do so. While some find the argument a springboard to the larger project, others determine that they wish to spend a month of their lives on a different issue, so it is useful either way.

Research and Extended Time on Task

The largest assignment is deliberately sequenced not to fall during final exam week. The synthesis project requires students to combine their analytical and argumentative skills with primary and secondary research and to communicate these ideas through the genre that best suits the project's purpose. Student control over genre aligns with practices in Critical University Studies (see Steffen, especially). The most common projects have been the traditional research paper; curriculum development for a course or workshop; experiment and findings; social justice work and reporting; and documentary film. All require extensive research and writing (usually 20–25 pages, but some students have submitted more than 50). Sample projects have included:

- Documentary films on student food waste, the need for explicit education in conducting romantic relationships, and financial need-blind versus need-aware college admissions
- Workshop curricula on choosing the right college, the importance of pap smears for college-age women, and developing guidelines for responsibly depicting mental illness in the media and entertainment industries
- High school course curricula on religions and spirituality, mental health and wellness, and media literacy
- College course curricula on using popular culture to study contemporary issues of power and justice and film to study contemporary inequalities in the American educational system
- Research papers on the efficacy of International Baccalaureate versus Advanced Placement Programs, challenges and solutions for helping teens in foster care transition to college, and a revamped K–12 civil rights curriculum

Public Sharing of Scholarly Work

All students at Ithaca College have the option of sharing their synthesis findings publicly, which is potentially as impactful as conducting the research itself. In our institution's NSSE results, our seniors report having had this experience at a higher rate than the national average, which is a source of pride for our institution. In addition to offering students the chance to participate in honors theses, faculty-collaborative projects, and mentored independent

research, our college holds an annual undergraduate research symposium, but this event has traditionally been populated by juniors and seniors. While having first-year students attend the symposium might expose them to academic conference culture, it does not have the same impact as the experience of becoming presenters themselves.

To foster this type of experiential learning earlier, the first-year seminar program launched its own research symposium, held in the last week of fall-semester classes. This condensed, three-hour event includes the same presentation formats as the all-college conference: poster sessions, creative performances, and both podium and interactive laptop presentations. Offering students this high-impact practice in the first semester of their first year has had a variety of transformative effects, the most powerful of which is a change in how participants perceive their academic labor. As one put it, they are “no longer writing for the teacher” but joining a larger, ongoing disciplinary conversation. They see their work as relevant and their advocacy as meaningful. Another reflected: “I care about this, and I was able to tell hundreds of people why they should, too.” Perhaps the best result is that younger students are increasingly presenting in the all-college symposium in the spring.

The Final “Exam”

In keeping with the goal of explicit instruction and practice in reflection, the final assignment requires students to reflect on their first semester of college and write a 750–1000-word personal philosophy of education, which constitutes a bookend assignment to their initial reflection on why they are going to college. The final assignment offers students a specific time to consider how the course has influenced their beliefs, understandings, and commitment to their college education for better or worse; a prompt to start to synthesize what they learned about learning from taking four to six disparate courses; and a place to articulate how their beliefs will be incorporated into their personal educational practices over the next four years. Designing the final reflection this way puts into motion the conditions for students’ realization that they alone will become the “ultimate experts in creating purpose, point, and rationale in their own lives” (Nash and Murray 95).

Students are urged to begin the composing process early enough to enjoy thinking and talking with friends about the evolution of their thoughts and beliefs and to leave sufficient time to concentrate solely on the writing for at least one session of revision. Again, students choose the genre that best suits their content and goals. The most popular have been a letter to their

senior-year self, a commencement address for high school students, a convocation address to incoming college students, and a letter to a younger sibling or friend. That said, one student wrote an op-ed piece that appeared in his hometown newspaper, and another created a forty-page graphic novel.

Peer Leaders and Alumni as Partners in Establishing Purpose

One of the most effective strategies for both the writing-intensive and collaborative high-impact practices has been the strategic deployment of course alumni. Our first-year seminar program offers training and support for peer leaders, who conduct some of the transition to college sessions. Peer leaders offer conversation hours, host study breaks, and educate students about campus resources. All our peer leaders are WAWH alumni; the competition for this unpaid, for-credit leadership position is fierce, and our seminar is now known for providing many others with highly engaged peer leaders.

The peer leaders also recruit course alumni to serve as volunteers in one of three capacities. Some participate in a panel on how to tackle the synthesis project and manage a large and complex research task. Many help facilitate an early-semester community building activity, the cross-cultural simulation “BaFa BaFa,” to sensitize students to invisible cultural differences. A few prefer to coach students on their presentations before the symposium. The sustained engagement of alumni demonstrates an ongoing sense of ownership of the course, an endorsement for incoming students of the scaffolded experiential learning method, and a reassurance that the academic challenges posed by the WAWH seminar are achievable and confer skill and confidence. As one alumna said, “After completing the synthesis project, no one can ever scare you again. You do that in the first semester, the rest is cake.”

VI. ASSESSING IMPACT

No one objective measure can indicate the impact of the WAWH model given the many factors influencing students in a first-year seminar and within an honors sub-cohort. Further, students are not randomly assigned to seminars, and specific attributes of students who self-select might skew any results. Grade point averages as well as retention and graduation rates proved statistically insignificant, leaving only data from compromised sources such as the final course evaluation created by the honors program, which includes supplemental questions specific to the seminar but composed of biased language. However, potentially useful patterns of student response did emerge from the

qualitative portions of first-year seminar course evaluations and students' written reflections as well as, indirectly, the replicability of spin-off courses. Between 2008 and 2018, the WAWH first-year seminar was offered 18 times to groups of between 14 and 22 students. Given that the primary goal was changing how students see themselves, college, and roles as students, their reports on their experiences afforded the greatest weight.

In course evaluations, students regularly report an increased awareness of their personal responsibility for making discussions successful in other classes as well as pleasure in studying issues and sharing ideas, readings, and media that matter to them. As a result of teaching, reflecting on their teaching, and critiquing curricular design, content, and delivery, the students provided evaluations consistent with those of Thompson et al., reporting shifts in their understanding of faculty and student responsibilities:

Changes in Views of Faculty Roles and Responsibilities:

- Expect more of professors in teaching style, personal attention to students, and answering questions
- Notice boring classes and student attention spans, especially during non-involving lectures
- Wonder about the teaching styles and critique them internally
- Critique testing strategies and classroom mechanics
- Gain awareness of mixed signals professors send and how they might confuse fellow students
- Notice “wait time” and perceive it more negatively when professors don't give students the chance to answer the questions (perceived as incivility)

Changes in Views of Student Roles and Responsibilities:

- Pay more attention to syllabi
- Go to office hours more often
- No longer skip class or arrive late—these are newly perceived as disruptive, embarrassing public actions
- Ask more and better questions in class, do not hesitate to ask “dumb” questions, be more involved in classes, understand that professors want students to ask questions

- Gain awareness of personal behavior in class, and how it might look to the professor
- Establish higher standards of responsibility to classes, spend more time in self-evaluation as students (Thompson et al. 58)

This final item is significant in that it connotes nascent intrinsic motivation, increased self-understanding, and a shift in identity from self as student to self as learner and maker of meaning.

The most profound impact of learning how to constructively critique teaching is students' recognition of their responsibility in the learning process (Kinland et al. 175).

Qualitative Course Assessments

Evaluations were analyzed for patterns of response that correspond to the goal of changing students' attitudes toward themselves, college, and their roles as students. Respondents answered three open-ended questions appended to the standard first-year seminar evaluation. Despite biased language, the results offer a sense of how the course influenced student thought and some behaviors. The most prevalent responses to the questions are grouped by level of frequency, along with important minority voices.

While the majority of students disclosed positive answers to Question 1, a few shared that undertaking a systematic critique of the academy, the purpose of a college education, and their reasons for attending college was anxiety provoking. In their research on first-year honors seminars, Knapp et al. note that "a transformative learning model encourages disruption in the classroom through the integration of critical thought on ideas that reveal difficult truths applicable to the individual's life" (123). A few students said they wished they had taken a seminar that was less personally and emotionally challenging.

Not all students have a positive response to the course. A few are unable or unwilling to make the leap to the teaching-to-learn model. The more self-determined learning style is unfamiliar, requires students to develop interesting problems to solve for themselves, and suspends the absolute authority of the professor, requiring students to reflect and assess their own performance and abilities. Some students may come from behaviorist, authoritarian systems of education that reward passive compliance; they may be resistant to assuming active leadership roles. As Knapp et al. observe in their survey of teaching practices in honors courses, implementing new structures to foster student transformation "can be an uncomfortable and risky experience for students

at different levels of readiness for the process” (124). Further, a few are not mature enough to engage in metacognition and self-reflective discourse. A teachable moment occurred when a student responded to a (forbidden) text message at the very moment a classmate was sharing compelling data on the impact of emotional intelligence in the workplace; everyone but the texting student understood the irony instantly. Further, as Vassilou has noted, a few students have a hard time completing course evaluation questions about the professor because they do not perceive the professor to have been teaching during the student-led part of the course. Over the years in the study, the

Question 1:

What parts of the course have had the most impact in helping your approaches to college-level work and college life evolve?

Greatest Impact:

Helped clarify my values, opinions on issues, sense of self and self as learner

Majority Included:

Changed how I see the purpose of college and my understanding of liberal education

Increased my awareness and understanding of the U.S. education system and the academy

Helped me become an intentional learner to create the college experience I want

Many Included:

Gave me a real community/sense of belonging

Increased my sense of social/political awareness, agency and motivation to take action

Offered real-world applications for class content

Increased understanding of college academic expectations and needed habits/work ethic

Improved my ability to understand or empathize with others who hold different opinions

Some Included:

Spurred me to set or change specific academic goals

Made me get more involved on campus

Changed my relationship to risk and failure

Important Minority Voices:

Led me to change my major

Confirmed that going to college is right for me

Left me more confused than when I arrived at college

occasional student has asserted that the teaching-to-learn method means the professors are not doing their jobs.

Two other groups of students may find the teaching-to-learn method challenging. We include in our seminar an interest inventory that helps students brainstorm potential professional interests. Students who identify with a particular strand of interests are attracted to structures, rules, order, and regularity. These students sometimes find that the frequent changes in discussion formats in our class are stressful. These formats may also be difficult for students with learning disorders that make them better able to meet expected participation standards when they remain consistent. That said, one year the students adapted the discussion format entirely to their own needs. When I suggested that they had become overly reliant on the fishbowl format, with students rotating into the small group in the center, they politely told me that

Question 2:

To what extent do you perceive the course affected your critical, analytical, and synthetic abilities to respond to contemporary issues in education?

Greatest Impact:

My writing skills and ability to write long papers (stamina) improved

Majority Included:

My ability to analyze materials and issues improved

My abilities to participate in/lead discussion and speak in public improved

My critical thinking skills improved

Many Included:

My ability to make arguments and use evidence improved

I now make connections and integrate what I am learning

Some Included:

This course/research project has increased my sense of confidence

This course/research project has given me a sense of accomplishment

My primary and secondary research skills improved

Important Minority Voices:

My listening skills have improved

I am better able/more motivated to engage in reflection

most of them were introverts, that some had social anxiety disorder, that they thus preferred small group discussion, and that as they owned the course, discussion would be conducted in this way for the rest of the semester. It was.

Over the years in the study, some negative responses were reduced or mitigated by clearly communicating to students the structure of the model and by older peers' assertion that the course offers intellectual freedom, stimulation, and growth as compensation for taking the risk of a non-traditional, student-centered pedagogical approach.

NSSE Questions and Student Course Evaluations

Honors course evaluations from 2013 through 2017 incorporated questions from the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE). Analysis of the first two questions includes 21 sections (270 student responses) of non-WAWH honors first-year seminars and 5 sections (89 student responses) of WAWH courses taught by the author from 2013–2017. The p-values represent testing if the proportion of responses from WAWH is greater than the proportion from the other courses. In both cases, the WAWH courses had statistically significant greater engagement, using a 0.05 cutoff.

Question 3:

To what extent has this course encouraged you to take responsibility for your contributions to class and your own intellectual growth?

Greatest Impact:

It made me feel responsible for the success of our course

Majority Included:

It made me understand I am responsible for my own education

It gave me an academic challenge/high standards to strive for

Many Included:

I valued the instructional variety

I valued the intellectual stimulation

I valued the intellectual freedom

I experienced significant intellectual growth

Important Minority Voices:

I should not have to teach myself

The third question includes 17 sections (234 student responses) of non-WAWH first-year seminars and 4 sections (69 student responses) of WAWH courses taught by the author from 2014–2017. (In 2013 the questions grouped responses in two-hour categories (i.e., 1–2, 3–4), and starting in 2014 each hour was distinct.) There is no statistical difference when testing if the mean preparation time was the same or not for each group.

Students in the WAWH model reported greater participation during class periods and fewer incidents of coming to class unprepared than students enrolled in other honors first-year seminars. Given the high response of students feeling responsible for the success of the course, this difference may be

NSSE Questions	WAWH FYs	All other Honors FYs	P-value
How often have you asked questions or contributed to course discussions in other ways?	very often or often 85%	very often or often 61%	0.000
How often have you come to class without completing readings or assignments?	sometimes or never 94%	sometimes or never 87%	0.033
In a typical 7-day week how many hours did you spend preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing and other academic activities)?	4.78	4.49	0.564

FYS Course Evaluation Questions Applicable to WAWH Outcomes	5-Point Scale
Extent to which this course:	
Stimulated student to intellectual effort beyond that required by most courses	4.7
Inspired students to set and achieve goals that really challenged them	4.5
Found ways to help students answer their own questions	4.6
Gave projects, tests or assignments that required original or creative thinking	4.6
Related course materials to real life situations	4.8
Involved students in hands on projects such as research, case studies or “real life” activities	4.4

attributable to positive peer pressure. The WAWH students perceived themselves to be writing extensively but not having a preparation load materially different from that of their peers.

First-Year Seminar Course Evaluations

Students in the nine sections offered in the first five years of the WAWH model (2008–2012) completed an all-college instrument that included some items correlated to WAWH learning outcomes, but data from other honors FYs are no longer available for comparison.

Final Essay Elements

Scanning over 200 essays for patterns of response revealed common elements across genres.

Most Frequent Themes

- Sense of accomplishment in completing first semester
- Description of future self, academic and professional goals, including on-time graduation
- Hopes for a healthier environment/ecological sustainability
- Sense of college as a time of personal growth/description of personal transformation
- Goals of studying, attending class, achieving and learning to meet one's own standards as opposed to those of parents or teachers
- Assertion that it is okay not to know what you want to do with/for the rest of your life
- Confirmation that going to college was the right choice

Most Common Advice

- Take responsibility for finding your own path/making your own education meaningful
- Stop doing the minimum for a grade and learn to labor to capacity for yourself
- Engage in curricular and extracurricular pursuits that give pleasure, not just points for admissions officers or résumés

- Do not be ashamed of your enthusiasms; love what you do openly
- Take academic and emotional risks instead of protecting a grade point average or ego
- Learn to learn from rejection, failure, and disappointment
- Form relationships with faculty and students
- Become an agent of change
- Live with and learn from others who are not like you

The preponderance of students imagining their post-college selves in their first semester aligns with Cobane and Jennings' work on the intentional layering of high-impact practices to help honors students actively plan a personal educational path that leads to the future self they envision.

Some students used the final essay as an opportunity to synthesize what they learned in the seminar and assess its utility in preparing for other endeavors. Samples from their reflections are included to offer a sense of how they perceive the course's impact on their first semester of college. Students' names have been changed with their permission to preserve their privacy.

College has illuminated what I value and prioritize in education. . . . Experiential education has become a priority for me, as well as learning, writing and completing assignments about issues that are relevant. . . . I realize how vital it is to have diverse narratives rather than one-dimensional discourse in class. Robust, meaningful conversation is elicited when there is equal effort on the behalf of students and professors to vary teaching styles and discussion formats. . . . The way I envision college has morphed. I believe that college is an institution for life readiness. (Meghan)

By contrast, some felt transformed from the forever-future orientation of K–12 education and the college admissions process to engagement with and presence in the moment. “When I got here I was convinced that I was here because I wanted to learn and prepare myself for the future. After a lot of thinking and a lot of homework, I realized that I am here to prepare me for *now*” (Andre).

Several students expressed concern over the sustainability of the environment and worry about the impact of technology on young people's abilities to form and sustain personal relationships, but most who mention concerns also express a sense of agency and a desire to intervene in contemporary issues.

One of the most powerful things I learned is that youth can act as agents of change. While I always knew in the back of my brain that I had the power . . . I didn't really believe it until taking this class. I was inspired by Craig Kielburger, who . . . said youth need to realize that we can play a positive role through very simple, very concrete, actions. . . . [I]t reminded me that you don't have to be some superhero . . . you just have to take small actions. I will aim to take action for change whenever possible, and not sit idly by, in the future. (Charise)

Though the students generally complain about the difficulty of reading excerpts from Cardinal Newman's "The Idea of the University," many attribute to it the spark for intellectual epiphanies. They understand his assertion that the purpose of college is to develop the integrative or synthetic habit of mind: the ability to make connections between what they have learned and are now learning.

Integrative thinking just got very real for me. In Western Religions class one day, the connections I was making between my all classes came to the front of my mind after we began discussing the poetry of Theodore Roethke, whom my poetry class just studied. I was bridging gaps between the logical arguments about free will or God in philosophy with the topics in religions class and my Honors first-year seminar. As my learning increases . . . my understanding of the world and others increases. . . . I found that the more I integrate my learning to a world that is inherently integrated, the more I am able to understand. (Lucas)

Reflective Practice

Students in the WAWH seminar, who received explicit instruction in reflective practice, reported improved ease in completing reflections on artifacts in their electronic portfolios but not improvement in their skill. Some also described a sense of satisfaction, mastery, or pleasure from being able to coach friends on how to complete reflections more effectively. The comparative quality of reflections on artifacts between students completing the WAWH seminar and the other honors FYs has not been assessed.

At the end of their first semester, all students completing the model FYs placed a copy of their final reflective essay about their personal philosophy of education in the capstone section of their honors electronic portfolio, turning the piece into a time capsule of their first-year self. Some seniors have

reported that the final essay helped them write their capstone reflection, but more described the experience of rereading their original manifesto as a generative prompt to reflect on how much they had matured as people and as scholars. One student wrote, “You always told us to be kind to the person we were, because she got us to the person we are today. When I re-read my philosophy of education, I got to visit her! I can afford to be kind about her ignorance now, because I know more.” The majority who reported that the course helped them clarify their beliefs, opinions, and sense of self may not see that this clarity may be attributable to the reflection required by the course.

Campus and Global Engagement

Over the decade under study, the WAWH model seminar became a known feeder program for student leadership positions. Though we do not collect data on campus employment of students in the model seminar, and honors students have a reputation for being more engaged, WAWH seminar alumni are well-represented in paid positions in campus life and academic affairs, such as orientation leaders, resident assistants, student leadership consultants, president’s hosts, peer career advisors, peer success coaches, writing center consultants, and tutors. Course alumni also rise to positions of leadership in student government, including a former student body president, and they populate the executive boards of many of our student organizations, some of which have service and social justice agendas. Over a dozen have won the two highest campus life awards. Many have gone on to graduate studies and careers in student affairs.

Honors admits 120 first-year students per year. Within the years under study, 4 of the 25 students at our institution who have been awarded Fulbright scholarships have been WAWH alumni compared to six honors students from all other first-year honors seminars combined and 15 non-honors students.

Scalability and Spin-off Courses

Cobane and Jennings note that “[h]onors has a long tradition of being a place for pedagogical and co-curricular experimentation,” and that many of today’s recognized high-impact practices emerged from honors programs (43). In keeping with this tradition, perhaps the greatest testament to the WAWH model’s utility is the extent to which the model course has been adapted and scaled for other populations and the number of student-led courses that it has

spawned. WAWH was taken as a prototype for the creation of a one-credit gateway course for undecided/undeclared students. That course is focused on helping students develop an academic plan for the curricular, extra-curricular, personal, and professional experiences they want to have in college; cultivate decision-making skills and personal knowledge about their decision-making process; learn how to research majors, minors, and potential career interests; clarify their values to make academic and professional choices that align; and articulate a personal philosophy of education to guide decisions over the next four years. This course enrolls approximately 200 students per year in 12 sections taught by faculty from across the college and is entering its ninth year. Unlike the statistically insignificant retention rates of students completing the first-year honors seminar, students who complete the 1-credit course have a 10% higher retention rate than undeclared students who do not.

The students themselves also saw the potential to take the WAWH model in new directions. For their synthesis project, an English teaching major and an integrated marketing major developed a curriculum for a one-credit honors seminar using contemporary feature and documentary films to study issues of equity and problems within K–12 and higher education in the U.S. They secured a faculty sponsor to serve as “instructor of record,” obtained permission from the honors program, co-led the course according to the principles of teaching-to-learn that they had experienced in their first-year seminar, and then trained two new students to assume leadership the following year. In a subsequent semester, a politics major and a physical therapy major designed a one-credit honors seminar using the *Dark Knight* trilogy of films to study issues of power and justice, which constitute one of the themes in our general education curriculum. The culminating event of this course, which was offered by five different student leaders over three years, was a researched and argued trial of Batman. The course registered to capacity in all three years.

Between the two extremes of students leading in a faculty-designed course and a fully student-designed and -implemented course lies a third fruitful configuration. A faculty member proposed a hybrid in which faculty and students collaborated on the content for a one-credit honors seminar on politics and protest in contemporary music. On day one, the professor presented a menu of genres and political issues, with potential music, media, and readings for each unit. The students nominated additional genres and issues for consideration and voted to determine the units that the course comprised. In the first year, students added only two units to the final syllabus. In the second, students proposed half of the selected units. In all units after the

original one demonstrated by the professor, students curated the contents and assumed leadership of the course from the third week onward. Course ownership was accelerated by the presence of experienced alumni from the WAWH seminar who brought their expertise to the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HONORS PROGRAMS AND INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The first-year seminar model *Why Are We Here?* can be useful for students across the academic spectrum and at a variety of institutions. All contemporary students, attached as they are to technological devices that mediate both self-image and social interactions, would benefit from guided self-examination and instruction in reflective practice. Further, in an era when access to education is increasingly portrayed as a right or at least a universal good, institutions need to help students develop, articulate, and act on a sense of purpose.

Critical University Studies has the potential to lend to honors programs a form of universally applicable content that can serve institutions' interests in both student success (including academic challenge, induction into collegiate study, and metacognition) and institutional success (such as curricular integration and coherence and inquiry-based structural metacognition). Perhaps the greater contribution is the way in which CUS can secure identification of honors programs as incubators for academic solutions. The criticism that honors programs are educational units without a subject is false; our subject is enhanced education.

The *Why Are We Here?* model is an intentionally constructed intervention in young learners' attitudes and habits of mind at the outset of a long process that is notorious for not offering a guaranteed outcome. The model offers a way to construct a foundation for a fully realized four-year experience that incorporates critical self-examination as a regular practice within the honors program and the college. If the honors first-year seminar is "*Why Are We Here?*," the senior capstone could be "*What Did I Do?*": a guided reflection on the intellectual journey from orientation to commencement that enables students to understand what they know, how they learned it, who they were, and who they have become at our institution.

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