Toward That Second Century: Making Liberal Education Inclusive
By Carol Geary Schneider
Narrow instrumentalism and anti-intellectualism may be at high tide in this moment of recession-fueled economic anxiety. But an empowering and liberating education is what Americans urgently need. And we now have the tools in hand to help all our students achieve it.

Rethinking the Student Course Evaluation:
How a Customized Approach Can Improve Teaching and Learning
By W. Lee Hansen
By incorporating required questions from standard evaluation forms, individual faculty members can create evaluation forms that meet their own needs as well as those of their departments.

Globalizing the Curriculum: How to Incorporate a Global Perspective into Your Courses
By Frank Louis Rusciano
Integrating a "global perspective" into courses necessarily involves examining whether our traditional disciplinary assumptions still apply in a global context and, if not, how they need to be translated in order to remain relevant.

Redesigning the First-Year Orientation Course:
How a Discipline-Specific Approach Can Deepen Student Engagement
By Ivan Fuller
The challenges first-year orientation courses are designed to address can be met more easily when students have a common interest in the subject matter and are in the same class as their fellow majors.
28 Cultivating "Sparks of the Divinity": Soul-Making as a Purpose of Higher Education
By Bobby Fong
What is needful in higher education today is a renewed urgency and commitment to assist
our students in forming their souls. And if soul-making is integral to education at colleges
and universities—whether secular or religious—then it ought to make itself felt in all areas of
academic life.

36 A New Paradigm for Liberal Education
By Robert J. Thompson Jr.
To be responsive to twenty-first-century societal needs for civic-minded graduates who have
the capacities and dispositions to engage difference and generate knowledge in the service of
society, higher education needs to recommit to providing a formative undergraduate
liberal education and adopt a developmental model to guide educational practices.

46 O Taste and See: A Commemorative History of the Wye Seminars
By Robert Holway
From the beginning, the appeal of the seminars has been the experience of reading
important texts, taking extended time for reflection, and engaging colleagues in
thoughtful and rigorous discussion. Participation offers a powerful renewal in the
deeper meaning of liberal education and intellectual community.

56 Standing Up to Managerialism
By Stephen Rowe
"Managerialism," a relatively new orientation to college and university administration,
is a major factor in struggles over the shape and substance of education today—one that is not
friendly to education as the cultivation of the kinds of human beings so urgently needed.
Redesigning the First-Year Orientation Course

How a Discipline-Specific Approach Can Deepen Student Engagement

In November 2011, I attended a joint symposium of the American Conference of Academic Deans and Phi Beta Kappa that was designed to wrestle with the question of why the humanities matter. At one session, we discussed three educational outcomes that are central to the humanities: critical thinking, empathetic thinking, and creative thinking. As I listened to a history professor lament that she doesn’t have time in her Western civilization class to engage students in any significant, in-depth critical thinking, I had my “ah-hah” moment for this particular conference. Such moments are common enough at conferences, but they typically fizzle under the pressures of job realities awaiting the return to home base. This time, however, I was able to turn that “ah-hah” into an “oh, yeah!”

The history professor’s explanation for not having time to dig deeply with her students rang true to me. As a professor of theatre history, I have faced the same demands of breadth over depth. I’ve also struggled with the fact that most students don’t know how to dig deeply on their own, nor do they have any real desire to do so. Instead, they simply memorize the information for the exams and promptly forget about it thereafter. What would happen, I wondered, if I could get my hands on these students when they first entered as freshmen? What if I could spend time with them in a course focused on the joys of digging deeply, a course where quality trumped quantity? Such a course would, I believed, better prepare them to get more out of the courses they would take in subsequent semesters. And if I could also focus on developing creative and empathetic thinking, as well as freshmen survival skills, perhaps this course could make a significant difference in their academic lives.

After returning from the conference, I was able to garner the support of my department and dean to design and pilot just such a course. The result was “Arthur Miller and Social Drama,” a new first-year orientation course for theatre majors I taught in the fall 2012 semester.

Background

Many students begin their higher education careers poorly prepared to meet the challenge of thinking clearly and critically on their own about academic topics. While they have been trained to be test-takers, there usually has not been a strong focus on training them to be strong and independent thinkers. Additionally, many students lack the confidence, comfort, and courage to engage actively in classroom discussions. Fortunately, however, first-year students are ripe for improvement. In Ernest Pascarella’s study of the cognitive impacts of the first year, he notes that “the net effect of the first year of college on critical thinking skills . . . was nearly
75% of the estimated net effect of the first three years of college.” This statistic clearly indicates that the first year is a critical time in the academic life of students, representing a “substantial part of the total growth attributable to the entire undergraduate experience.”

But more specifically, what sort of challenges should a first-year orientation course be designed to address? In Generation on a Tightrope, Arthur Levine and Diane Dean present a list of characteristics that today’s students bring to the college classroom. College students today tend to be:

- weak in face-to-face social skills;
- immature, needy, timid, protected, and tethered to parents;
- pragmatic, career oriented, and determined to do well;
- hard working, but confuse quantity of work with quality of product;
- issue oriented, rather than ideological;
- weak in basic skills and cultural knowledge.

This portrait of today’s students rings true to me, based on my own teaching experience. It was my hope that the challenges represented by these typical characteristics could be more easily met in a first-year orientation course if students had a common interest in the subject matter and were in the same class as their fellow majors. It was my belief that if these challenges were addressed successfully, student satisfaction with the college experience overall would increase and student retention would improve. Students in the course would struggle with difficult material, but it would be material they cared about and they would not be struggling alone; they would have a support group of fellow majors. I also hoped that the preparation provided by such a course would enable them to dig more deeply into the survey-type courses they would take in subsequent semesters. Finally, the kind of orientation course I had in mind would encourage their empathetic understanding and their ability to engage the divergent ideas of their classmates.

First-year students should learn to debate each other respectfully, while also learning to embrace multiple perspectives.

But there was one other important aspect of the first-year orientation course I wanted to design that required institutional support. Although I would be taking a discipline-specific approach, I proposed that the students should be excused from taking the university’s standard orientation seminar for new students. This would mean that, in addition to the disciplinary subject matter—in this case, Arthur Miller and his works—the course would need to cover the typical college survival information that has become the mainstay of our first-year program.

Application

Ultimately, “Arthur Miller and Social Drama” was approved to run as a pilot course. Scheduled to meet on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, this three-credit course would be the very first college class for these students, the one to welcome them to their new adventure. In all, eighteen students enrolled—an ideal number for what I had in mind. The syllabus included the following explanation of the course objectives:

This is a brand new course specially designed for you, freshmen theatre majors. It is designed to help make you as successful as possible in your academic studies. It is designed to thrill you and excite you by helping you become an expert on all things Arthur Miller. By the end of
the semester, you will know more about Miller and his work than anyone else on campus (well, except for Dean Fuller!). You will understand what is expected in a classroom discussion. You will understand what is expected from a college-level paper. Most importantly, the class will help you understand what it means to be a theatre artist/scholar.

The coursework consisted of reading and discussing five plays and ten essays, watching and discussing two films, and attending our department’s production of The Crucible. Students each wrote a paper based on a Miller play that was not read for class, and these papers were presented to the class in a formal symposium at the end of the semester. Scattered throughout the semester was time devoted to the first-year issues related to stress and time management, institutional values, and academic advising.

As I designed and then taught the pilot course, I kept in mind the characteristics of today’s college students listed above. It was my hope that the course would effectively address the challenges they present and, in doing so, have a positive and lasting impact on the students.

Weak in face-to-face social skills
A primary goal was to break down barriers that might prevent students from actively engaging in the course. Because the course relied predominantly on class discussion, it was critical that the students should feel comfortable with each other and with me. Therefore, I made sure that the first class meetings provided non-threatening opportunities for everyone in the class to say something. The use of typical icebreakers allowed us all to learn more about each other. The result was the creation of a “safe zone” where students quickly learned that I valued their contributions and that I would insist on respect and empathy in response to opinions expressed during class discussions.

An exciting example of how this played out occurred toward the end of the semester, when we discussed Miller’s play The Ride Down Mount Morgan. This is a play about a polygamist who has kept his two families ignorant of each other’s existence. While there was heated debate, with the dominant opinion being one that condemned his actions, I was happy to see that the majority of the class displayed empathy for the character. This appears to be one of the play’s goals, and the class mirrored Miller’s desire to feel empathy for his character while not condoning his behavior. This valuable life lesson had not been displayed earlier in the semester, when the students were much more closed-minded and judgmental about characters in the plays we read.

Immature, needy, timid, protected
Understanding who my students were and what internal hurdles they brought to the classroom was important for helping them feel better able to succeed in the often more challenging academic world of higher education. As we worked through the readings, I encouraged them to ask questions when they didn’t fully understand something they had read. I helped them feel comfortable doing so by sharing my own struggles with some of the material. I let them know when I encountered words that were unfamiliar to me, for example, and I struggled along with them to decipher the ideas communicated by particularly challenging passages in Miller’s essays.

I also encouraged the students to stand up for their own opinions when they said they disagreed with a point being made by a classmate (or me). I challenged the depth of their thinking at times, which often meant asking them to consider a broader realm of possibilities, rather than the singular, narrow view they were presenting. We discussed the merits of both depth and breadth of thinking. Throughout the semester, I continued to acknowledge the “fear” they were bringing to this new academic setting and tried to maintain a sense of safety in order to enable them to share their ideas openly with others.

Pragmatic, career oriented, determined to do well
A student’s perceived need to take only those courses that will help them find employment after graduation could make it difficult to “sell” an in-depth, discipline-specific course such as this one. To focus so narrowly on one playwright for an entire semester is often the work of a graduate course, so why force that upon students just starting their college careers? The rationale I’ve already provided might make sense to those in academia, but a first-year student is not likely to understand. To anticipate this potential concern, I spoke about—and tried to infect the students with—my own thirst for knowledge, my ongoing pursuit to be a lifelong learner. I told them about the “adventure” I set for myself of reading everything published by Miller, the joys of watching an
artist grow and struggle to reach the highest levels of success. Most importantly, I told them that I had become an expert on Arthur Miller and that they would become experts as well.

To stand apart from others in any discipline requires hard work, deep knowledge, and a thirst to know as much as possible. I told the students that there were too many people out there who would be competing for their jobs and that one thing they can do in order to rise above that competition is to learn as much as they can, to embrace the academic challenges that come their way, and never to settle for knowing just enough to get by.

**Hard working, but confuse quantity of work with quality of product**

This challenge was not terribly difficult to meet because of the "hard working" aspect. I simply had to redirect their focus from quantity to quality, to help them understand that "more is not always more." The first hurdle in this redirection came in the form of the class discussions. A number of students had no difficulty speaking up and would easily chew up valuable class time before they said anything of true value. Getting them to speak succinctly was difficult but rewarding work. Being able to get them to see things from an audience's perspective was one way of helping them get to the point.

I also took advantage of opportunities to point out that simply doing what was required was not good enough. Lots of people can put in the required number of hours or write the required number of pages, but that doesn't equal to value. A good example to support this idea came from Miller's play *The Man Who Had All the Luck*. In this early work, Miller gives us a character, David, who works hard and always has great success in any venture he undertakes. David believes that he's just lucky, unable to accept that there's anything special about the work he actually does. By the end of the play, he comes to accept that his good fortune is the result of his quality work and the choices he has been making, not the result of simply putting in a lot of hours on his various projects. He comes to this realization when his brother, who has practiced all his life to be a professional baseball pitcher, learns that he just doesn't have what it takes because he has spent all of his time practicing one aspect of the game. His quantity of work was high, but the quality was lacking.

**Issue oriented, rather than ideological**

I found this characteristic to be only partly reflected in my students, which led to some interesting classroom debates. Some of my students were firmly set in their ideological ways. While that is not necessarily a bad thing, it did give me the opportunity to encourage a more open mindset. It also meant that these particular students had to defend their ideologies. Simply parroting the beliefs of their parents, for example, was not going to work. I believe that while some adjusted their thinking, others learned to strengthen their beliefs through well-supported debate.

Where Arthur Miller proved to be a most effective choice for this class was in his issue-focused writing. As a social dramatist, Miller always took a high moral ground in his attempts to help readers and audiences face societal challenges. Reading *All My Sons*, for example, led us to discuss the serious consequences of actions taken, and *Death of a Salesman* enabled a discussion of personal integrity. *The Crucible* spun its theme of hypocrisy into our discussions, while the essay "Kidnapped" allowed us to talk about the traps of assuming the worst in others. Because many of the students did tend to be issue oriented rather than ideological, these class discussions were especially lively. Indeed, student engagement was higher than I've experienced in nearly thirty years of teaching.

**Weak in basic skills and cultural knowledge**

It is hardly news to report that student writing skills are in a sorry state today. Most first-year students are required to take a composition class in their first semester, but these classes are often large and unable to provide individual attention. This is why, for one of the paper assignments in my course, I required the students to turn in a draft and to meet with me about it in an individual conference setting. Even for students fortunate enough to have a good freshman composition class, this writing requirement was, I believe, a valuable addition.

Time management was also addressed. This is certainly a skill that most first-year students lack, and that lack is especially noticeable to them as they are now solely responsible for getting themselves up and moving. We devoted a day to focusing on time-management skills directly related to their current schedule of classes and the syllabi they had collected. We worked together on a system to organize their schedules.
Students are capable of rising to the bars we set for them.

Results
A course evaluation was administered in the final week of the semester, and I waited anxiously, as most faculty do, for the results. Several weeks later, when I got the evaluations back, I was pleased to discover that they were very positive—so positive, in fact, that I worry about being able to repeat the success with a new class. Following is a sampling of the students' responses to the question, "In what ways has this class impacted your life?"

- Through this semester I came to better understand what it means to be human and treat other human beings the way you want to be treated.
- I have come to understand what we often discussed in class: the unspoken social contract that we all share with each other.
- I feel that now I have a need and a wish to speak out that I did not have before. I can be very reserved with my opinion when I should not be, and this is a realization that I have come to thanks to this class.
- This class allowed me to develop a new passion, one that I didn't know I had before.
- We read so many of Miller's works, and I left wanting to read more. I've set a goal for myself to try and read every one of his plays.
- I think one of the biggest lessons I've learned because of this class is to respect the opinions of others.
- We all had such different opinions, and I was able to become closer with my classmates because of what we shared with one another.

While it is still too early to make any conclusive statements about the course's impact on retention, I can report that from the fall 2012 to the fall 2013 semesters, the retention rate for students in the pilot class was 100 percent. While this rate is certainly not solely attributable to the Arthur Miller course, I do believe the course made several important contributions. Students in the class found a group of fellow majors with whom they could engage and argue, led by an administrative faculty member with whom they became very comfortable. I have had many interactions with the students since the class ended and believe they would not hesitate to come to me and discuss any aspect of their academic life. They learned academic survival skills, and they got to know people who could help them in their academic journeys. They learned that the challenges of higher education coursework can be met successfully when they raise their personal engagement with the material. And they learned the valuable social lesson of how to engage with others.

Final thoughts
A discipline-specific approach to the first-year orientation course opens up many possibilities across the campus. The pilot course described here was focused on theatre, but faculty in other disciplines could also pick a narrow topic in which first-year students can dig deeply and wrestle with some of the same thematic issues raised here. It may be easy to imagine such a course for any discipline in the humanities, but what about the sciences or business? Would a focus on ethics work well for an orientation course for first-year students in these fields? I would hope so. It seems that we often wait too long in a student's college career—and, in some cases, until graduate school—before we start challenging their ethical standards. But why wait? Students are capable of rising to the bars we set for them. And a discipline-specific orientation course for first-year students offers an excellent early opportunity.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@acu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

NOTES