

## **UNIV 160: University Scholars Transition Seminar Proposal for New Course Number**

### **Rationale**

The Transition Resource Center and the University Scholars Program have had a long and interconnected history, a crucial element of which is the offering of a University Scholars-specific section of UNIV 100. As both programs evolve, some careful consideration and revision of the particular structures and forms of that collaboration is necessary. The core of the UNIV 100 curriculum is strong, and all University Scholars benefit greatly from engaging these topics. However, the University Scholars would benefit from greater flexibility in terms of the course's pedagogical approach and particular assignments, which would allow the Director to further tailor the course to their particular transition needs and to integrate of the University Scholars Portfolio into the course.

### **Pedagogical flexibility – the unique needs of the University Scholars, and the unique position of the Director**

The University Scholars share a unique profile among Mason students: drawn from all disciplines, represented all of the University's colleges, they are selected on the basis of three categories or qualities:

- An outstanding record of academic achievement and evidence of intellectual vision.
- The potential to solve problems and overcome obstacles.
- And a commitment to meaningfully contributing to their communities (whether local, regional, national, or global).

As such, their transitions manifest in ways that may be different from many other Mason students; furthermore, their approach to learning and to coursework does not easily fit with some practices crucial to the pedagogy of UNIV 100. In theory, the University Scholars should be academically capable and intrinsically motivated, and they should each possess an outstanding work ethic and a desire to engage the campus community immediately. However, given their history of high achievement and recognition, they often struggle around issues of entitlement, overconfidence, over-commitment, and a disinclination toward self-reflective thought. In addition, they often fail to take seriously any academic experience that they do not view as rigorous or immediately connected to their other intellectual interests or to their progress toward a degree.

The transition seminar is an opportunity to address each of these particular issues in a way specific to the cohort. For instance: the UNIV 100 curriculum, like many freshman transition and freshman writing seminars, leans heavily on self-reflective writing. Students of the University Scholar profile often dismiss these assignments out-of-hand, partly because they view them as soft or unserious, but also because they are intimidated by the questions these assignments necessitate and the uncertainty they invite. In our experience, such students learn more effectively if

they are presented with either (a) the abstract, theoretical, and political or (b) the quantitative and structural manifestations of an issue **before** they are required to position themselves within a particular context. This applies equally to discussions of diversity, intellectual and academic integrity, and even study skills. Assignments and discussions have to be tailored to address this mode of learning; as such, the Outside Event essays required by the course add little to the University Scholars' experience; they must require a greater depth of engagement in a question or topic if they are to be taken seriously and to elicit a meaningful response. In short, writing about an event strikes them as busy work, but answering a question about a social or educational issue, even if their evidence is drawn from their personal experience, is more likely to seem meaningful.

Secondly, the transition seminar is essential in the broader effort to deal with a pressing threat to each University Scholars' development and integration into the campus community: entitlement. These students are lauded for their achievements throughout high school, and they are highly recruited by many institutions. Their transition into membership and leadership roles within the Honors College and broader Mason community must be carefully facilitated; they must develop a sense of responsibility rather than a sense of superiority. The seminar is the best place for those discussions and transitions to occur, and space needs to be accorded to this particular outcome.

In addition, the co-teaching model that is so essential to UNIV 100 is not ideally suited to the particular role of the University Scholars Program Director or that of the Honors College. Currently, the Director serves in the College's senior leadership; teaches within the Honors curriculum; advises students; and mentors the University Scholars throughout their time at Mason. Given this, it is likely the Director will have some ongoing relationship with the Peer Advisor outside the context of the transition seminar. Placing them in a peer-role can potentially complicate these other relationships, which are more conventionally hierarchical. These roles need to be carefully managed; PAs and TRC staff need to be aware and comfortable with a difference in this relationship and in the discourse around it.

Finally, the University Scholars transition seminar is the ideal vehicle to introduce and establish the foundation for the University Scholars Portfolio. The portfolio will provide a way to track and holistically evaluate progress and performance of all University Scholars. The University Scholarship is Mason's largest and most prestigious merit award, and given the scope of this opportunity, Scholars are obligated to do more than simply maintain a minimum Grade Point Average. But it is also a pedagogical tool that encourages the students to take ownership over their personal, professional, and intellectual development. This use requires careful discussion and facilitation, all of which can be done through the transition seminar. A full description is available on the attached addendum.

## **Addendum: The University Scholars Portfolio**

Following each semester, all University Scholars are required to update an ongoing record of student development and achievement; it includes brief summaries of goals, obstacles, and achievements in three key areas (Academic achievement, Experiential Learning, and Citizenship and Community Engagement), as well as selected examples of student work and a regularly updated resume.

### **Areas of development defined**

- *Academic achievement:* The work of the classroom. University Scholars are expected to take on challenging courses and to excel in the classroom.
- *Professional Development & Experiential Learning:* The intellectual work of the classroom must be complemented by its application in other venues and learning situations – e.g., undergraduate research, internships, international study, and student leadership.
- *Civic and Community Engagement:* The Honors College and the University Scholars Program both aim to foster in each student a commitment to something beyond him/herself, as well as an ability to apply the intellectual work of the classroom to problems of local and global significance. At a minimum, all University Scholars should be able to articulate how their use of the opportunities offered to them benefits a larger community.

### **Portfolio contents**

#### *1. Semester summary*

A brief (1-2 page, single-spaced) summary of significant development and achievement during the previous term.

#### *2. Resume/CV*

Updated each semester to reflect recent student activities and achievement

#### *3. Statements & Evidence of Development*

Academic achievement

- Brief (2-3 paragraph) statement of academic development, including challenges faced, achievements made, and goals met with regard to classroom activities and activities related to major field of study.
- Statement of specific academic goals for the coming year.
- Relevant examples of student work.

Professional development/experiential learning

- Brief (2-3 paragraph) summary of research experience and/or pre-professional experience, including internships and other informal professional development opportunities.

- Brief (2-3 paragraph) summary of study abroad experience or other global education experiences.
- Statement of relevant goals for the coming year.
- Relevant examples of student work.

#### Citizenship and Community Engagement

- Brief (2-3 paragraph) summary of public service experiences, leadership opportunities and development, and other opportunities for fulfilling responsibilities of engaged citizenship
- Brief (2-3 paragraph) summary of contributions to the University, the Honors College, and University Scholars Program.
- Statement of relevant goals for the coming year.
- Relevant examples of student work.