

FIRST-YEAR RESIDENTIAL SEMINAR



Since the early '90s, first-year students at Williams have had the opportunity to participate in an innovative program called the First-Year Residential Seminar (FRS). Students who elect to take this seminar live in the same residential entry and take the course together in the Fall semester. The program is designed to foster interconnections between students' social and intellectual lives, partly via its residential dimension—discussions in class can be readily continued beyond it, and students can test or refine their ideas about an assigned text with their peers before coming to class—and partly by the seminar's central engagement with the question of what intellectual life is “for” and how it impacts our daily lives.

The heightened interconnection between the social and academic experiences of FRS participants is designed to help students establish comfortable and productive relationships with classmates and professors during their first year as undergraduates, and to encourage them to integrate their intellectual interests with the rest of their pursuits at Williams. By providing students with texts and issues they negotiate collectively and collaboratively both in the classroom and beyond, the program encourages students to share with one another their ideas, passions, values, and beliefs, and to benefit from and come to terms with the differing approaches, ideas and opinions of their peers. The FRS program thus seeks to reduce the sense of separation between classroom life and dorm life, to emphasize that the process of learning is not restricted to the classroom, and to promote a fuller awareness among Williams students of their opportunities and responsibilities in contributing to one another's education and intellectual life.

The course will seek to exploit the unique residential aspect of FRS by posing questions of a kind that first-year students are likely to find fundamental to their experience and concerns in assimilating to college life, and which will naturally lend themselves to robust debate. The course also aims to be both a foundational introduction to comparative methodologies and to the multi-disciplinary intellectual opportunities of the liberal arts experience at Williams.

It should be stressed that FRS is not an advanced placement or honors program; its academic standards and expectations are similar to those in other first-year courses. In the case of over-subscription, FRS participants will be randomly selected. It is expected that this opportunity will appeal to a broad cross-section of the entering class. In the past, FRS students (like all Williams students) have pursued highly diverse academic and extra-curricular interests. It should be noted that participations in FRS does not limit or interfere in any way with the pursuit of other interests and courses outside of the program.

The real test of any program, though, is not its theory but its practice. Perhaps the candid comments of students who have taken an FRS class will express best the excitement and intense feeling created by the program.

What's amazing about FRS isn't bringing the class into the social sphere as much as bringing the social rapport into the classroom. Class is like sitting around with your best friends talking about issues you know mean something to each of you.

Coming back to the entry after having discussed a disturbing subject in class was sometimes difficult. But the process of assimilating the views and ideas brought up in class with day to day life in the entry pushed us together in a way that allowed and respected difference – which is no small thing.

The residential aspect encourages me to consider topics in ways that I never have before because one does not stop thinking upon leaving the classroom. Talking with the people I live with keeps the issues in my mind, which in turn allows me to develop more sophisticated ideas for discussions or papers or life.

I have never been in an environment more academically disturbing. All I can say is wow!

FRS was by far the most frustrating experience of my first-year. I was always angered by other people's narrow-minded views; and became even angrier when I realized my views were probably just as narrow-minded.

The course was challenging and stimulating both in and out of class. Talking things over in the entry always forced me to think more critically and rigorously – I didn't just have to defend my previous intellectual assumptions, but sometimes had to outright abandon them.

When I visited Williams, a FRS student invited me to stay in one of the entries. After about an hour, I thought I had found what I wanted in college. My own FRS was never that – never perfect. We never overcame apathy, close-mindedness, or factionalism. But we had temporary successes, hard-earned moments in which we found the ability to listen to each other with respect. In those moments, I glimpsed what education should be.

For 2008-09 there will be two separate FRS courses offered. They are as follows:

FRS 101(F) Interpreting Human Experience (W)

How we make sense of the world, and of our lives, depends to a considerable degree on the intellectual methodologies we apply to the task of interpretation. Freud, for instance, saw selfhood and perception as fundamentally determined by the structures of the psyche itself; Marx, by contrast, argued that our sense of reality is conditioned primarily by our material and social circumstances; more recently, historian of science Thomas Kuhn has emphasized that the underlying assumptions which shape the very questions we pose as thinkers significantly influence and limit what data, and thus what reality, we are most likely to observe. This course aims to provide a foundational experience for the liberal arts education, by engaging with key religious, political, literary, anthropological, philosophical and psychoanalytic texts with a view to complicating our sense of the purposes and possibilities of intellectual life and confronting the challenges of epistemology. Readings will include works by Plato, John Stuart Mill, Marx, E.M. Forster, Freud, Rousseau, Brecht, Dangarembga, and extracts from the Bible and the Qur'an. In keeping with the aims of the FRS program, the course is intended to foster productive connections between what we discuss and debate in class and your broader experiences as students. The course will invite and promote interdisciplinary connections between core ways of seeing and interpreting the world, with a strong emphasis on improving your critical skills.

Format: seminar. Requirements: regular short writing assignments designed to hone your reading skills; four papers ranging from 3-5 pages; and active contribution to discussion.

Enrollment limited to FRS students. Enrollment limit: 19 (expected: 19).

Satisfies one semester of the Division I requirement.

Instructor: J. PETHICA

FRS 103 (F) Perspectives on Sex (cross-listed as PSYC 103 and as WGST 103)

This course explores the biological and social factors that shape sex, sexual orientation, and sex behaviors. We will begin by examining the biological processes underlying mammalian sexual differentiation and explore how these developmental processes alter anatomy and brain organization. We will then consider how these biological underpinnings influence sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex behaviors. During the semester, we will evaluate multiple methodologies used to assess human sex behavior, and discuss the ways in which research with other species can inform our understanding of human sex behavior. We will also investigate how social factors across the lifespan influence sex behavior. This course is not a substitute for Psyc 101 and does not satisfy the prerequisite for upper-level psychology courses. Format: Seminar. Requirements: position papers, presentations, midterm exam, and final paper.

Enrollment limited to FRS students. Enrollment limit: 19.

Satisfies one semester of the Div III requirement.

This course is part of the Critical Reasoning and Analytical Skills initiative.

Instructor: N. SANDSTROM

FIRST YEAR RESIDENTIAL SEMINAR 2008–2009

The First-Year Residential Seminar is a program designed to help students explore new ways of integrating their social and intellectual lives. Students who participate live together in the same residential unit, and take the seminar together during the fall semester. Enrollment in the seminar is restricted to students in the program. The seminar explores topics and issues that can be expected to promote lively discussions both in and out of class. It may be team-taught and may contain interdisciplinary subject matter. All entering first-year students have the opportunity to express interest in participating; if more students are interested than there are spaces available, selection is done randomly. Participants must commit themselves to taking one of the FRS courses.



I would like to participate in the First-Year Residential Seminar Program. By enrolling in this program, I understand that I am agreeing to take the FRS course and to live in the FRS entry. During the on-line registration process, I will enroll in the FRS course that I have selected below. In the event that I am not admitted into the course, I have indicated my alternate course preference below.

(Your name: please print clearly)

Williams ID#

I am interested in being considered for enrollment in:

FRS 101(F) Interpreting Human Experience (W)

FRS 103(F) Perspectives on Sex (cross-listed as PSYC 103 and as WGST 103)

If I am not selected to participate in the FRS course that I have indicated, I would like to register for the following alternate course:

Alternate fall course preference

Return this form no later than June 13 in the return envelope enclosed.