To: John Sloop, Associate Dean, College of Arts and Science; Cynthia Cyrus, Blair School of Music; Art Overholser, School of Engineering; Jim Hogge, Peabody College
From: Frank Wcislo, Dean of The Commons
Subject: Proposal for Commons Seminars

This proposal seeks to develop a structure of “Commons Seminars” in The Commons beginning in AY 2008-9, which would be offered through each of the four undergraduate schools. These Commons Seminars are optional, one-credit, graded academic seminars for first-year students to be offered in the fall and spring semesters, beginning on an experimental basis in AY 2008-9. Commons Seminars are expected to be accessible to and benefit from the participation of students from a wide array of backgrounds. They thus would invite enrollment of students from all four undergraduate schools. Commons Seminars should not be perceived as competing with academic seminars now offered to first-year students in the four undergraduate schools, nor with Vanderbilt Visions. The proposed Commons seminars complement both of these existing programs, which remain centerpieces of the first-year experience at Vanderbilt University.

Each seminar would be taught for fifteen classroom hours, subject to a limited amount of flexibility. The topic, organization, and pedagogical strategy of the course would be left to the decision-making of the participating faculty member(s). Each seminar would be owned and administered by the School or College of the sponsoring faculty member. Faculty from graduate and professional schools would be able to teach these seminars by arrangement with one of the undergraduate schools. Each seminar would be designed to encourage registration of first-year students from all four undergraduate schools and capped at a limit of 15-20 students. Each seminar would be offered in classroom facilities of The Commons, and advertised (via digital and print resources available beginning April 2008) to first-year students as “Commons Seminars.” This proposal assumes a suspension of tuition exchange for these seminars for one year, 2008-9.

Fall and Spring variants of these courses are proposed, distinguished principally by the degree of first-year student participation in defining course topics:

a) Commons Seminars offered in Fall Semester. These seminars would be proposed in the spring semester of the preceding academic year by interested faculty, prior to the matriculation of the first-year class. The seminars would be grouped around common themes established by the Commons Council. One such theme already in place for AY 2008-9 is “Energy, Sustainability, and the Environment,” with four faculty members already having expressed interest in teaching seminars associated with it. Several other themes are currently being developed. A maximum of twelve of these Fall Seminars are envisioned.

b) Commons Seminars offered in the Spring Semester. These seminars would be based on topics generated in the fall semester from within the Houses of The Commons by resident first-year students with the help, advice, and facilitation of their Faculty Head of House and the House Staff. Instructional faculty from the four undergraduate schools or the graduate professional schools would be encouraged to participate in these discussions.
via a Faculty Head of House or the Dean of The Commons and to generate a topic proposal for review in the appropriate school. Approved topics would be offered in the spring semester. Non-VU faculty may participate team-teaching with qualified VU faculty acting as collaborating Instructors of Record for accreditation purposes.

Rationales

1) Commons Seminars would facilitate two long-term objectives of the Commons project: increasing faculty involvement in the intellectual and educational experiences of undergraduates outside the classroom; and encouraging innovations in undergraduate teaching and curriculum.

2) Commons Seminars would address goals of the Quality Enhancement Plan [QEP] developed by Vanderbilt in response to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools reaccreditation review, “Building a Bridge to The Commons: Vanderbilt Visions and Student Learning at a Research University,” has committed the university over the five-year period 2007/8-2012/13, to assess four domains of student learning relevant to the first-year experience of undergraduates at a research university, and develop responses to those assessments. These are:

- social acculturation, which refers to the personal development fostered by participating in interactive social systems of fellow students, faculty, and other members of the university community;
- academic acculturation, which refers to engagement in the academic life of the university, through the development of academically meaningful networks of peers, such as collaborative and shared learning groups;
- cognitive acculturation, which refers to learning about and participating in scholarship and research, and learning to appreciate the intrinsic value of their products;
- values acculturation, which refers to the acquisition of the norms, values, and ethics necessary for life in the democratic and global communities of the 21st century.

3) Commons Seminars would build upon the foundation created in The Commons by Vanderbilt Visions, the university core program which in 2008-9 will be a one-semester rather than two-semester not-for-credit, ungraded, but required part of the first-year Commons experience at Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt Visions chiefly addresses the social acculturation of first-year students and lays the foundation for their academic, cognitive, and values acculturation. Commons Seminars would allow non-residential faculty who do not participate in Vanderbilt Visions to play a leading role, together with first-year students, in accentuating these three forms of first-year student acculturation in the living and learning community of The Commons.

4) Commons Seminars would enhance the academic life of the Commons, provide opportunities for first-year students to take leadership roles in the academic life of the university, and augment the traditional curriculum with experimental and innovative educational experiences.