Thanks so much for agreeing to teach an Honors College sophomore seminar. For many, even most, of our students, the HCOL sophomore seminars are a highlight of their undergraduate careers, and we’re delighted that you’ll be part of their experience this year.

This document is meant to be an introduction to some of the resources available to you in the Honors College and also to some of the issues that professors often ask about when preparing to teach a seminar. But first, as we in the Honors College continue to shape our curriculum, it’s also an opportunity for us to put the sophomore seminars into context for you and thus, help you to design learning goals and outcomes that mesh with the larger (and evolving) aims of the Honors curriculum.

I like to think of the Honors curriculum, ideally, as a kind of arc:
The students begin in the first year (those who do begin as first-year HCOL students) with a common course, “The Pursuit of Knowledge.” Students are divided into 20-student seminars, but they are all working from the same syllabus, and the faculty are meeting once a week to discuss the common aims of the course and learning outcomes. The syllabus for that course is broad and multi-disciplinary. Broadly put, the aims of the course are to whet students’ intellectual appetites for many of the different ways we approach knowledge at the university, to inspire further intellectual curiosity, to introduce them to the active, collaborative space of a discussion class, and, not least, to work really hard with them on their writing. In the spring of the first year, the students take individual courses under the general banner of “Ways of Knowing.” Those seminars, most of which satisfy a D1 or D2 requirement, continue to work on the skills the students have been developing in the fall, but focus a little more intently on an area of study (disciplines of the professors come a little more focus on these syllabi), and also all involve a significant group project, allowing us to put a little more emphasis on the skills necessary for productive collaboration. In terms of foundational learning objectives, the first-year courses stress:

- Critical reading and thinking
- Effective college-level writing, including the necessity for substantive revision
- Effective discussion and presentation skills
- Collaborative learning (including group work)
- Information literacy
- The creation of a community that fosters intellectual curiosity

In the sophomore year, which also sees an influx of about 120 new HCOL students (who apply out of their first year), the disciplinary lines are becoming yet more distinct, and students will often choose a seminar based on a developing sense of their major or minor. We look to the sophomore seminars to continue the focus on writing, discussion, and group work that was so much a part of the first-year course, but also to begin to introduce students to some of the specific ways in which scholarly research is conducted at the
university. We don’t think of the seminars as methods courses—those should probably be reserved for courses the students take within their majors—but we do hope that they will be able to see inside the discipline and your own research a bit further than they would have in any of their first-year classes, and we do expect them to engage pretty deeply in the issues of the course. The sophomore seminars are the places where you get to see the students start to spread their wings and fly—something most of them were just too nervous to do in their first year. Still, while we encourage a serious research component in the sophomore seminars, we ask you to keep in mind that for many of these students, it will be the first time they have encountered, in a hands-on sort of way, in-depth research. There has sometimes been a tendency to see these students as mini grad students, but that inevitably results in disappointment and frustration (on the part of student and teacher both). They do very much appreciate a challenge, but try to remember that a majority of them will be meeting some of those challenges for the very first time.

I might mention here that for many of our students, the sophomore year is also an entrance into educational experiences outside of the classroom that will significantly contribute to their intellectual and personal development. If your course lends itself to an experiential or service-learning component, we very much encourage and support that sort of student engagement.

The junior year is the year in which students find themselves deep within their major, and so we transfer most of the Honors curricular responsibilities to the individual colleges and schools, all of whom offer the students at least 3 credits of course work aimed at preparing them for the thesis. In other words, the research activity they began in their first-year and sophomore seminars intensifies tremendously as they enter fully into their majors.

The senior year in the Honors curriculum is made up entirely of 6 credits of thesis work—an independent research project (that they proposed to their College thesis committees at the end of their junior year) that they undertake with a faculty mentor. Thus, from a first-year/first-semester common course that is drawn in broad brushstrokes, they proceed through a curriculum in which the finer details of research and the presentation of that research gradually come into tighter and tighter focus.

Hopefully, the above narrative will help contextualize the sophomore seminar a bit for you: they’re not experts yet, nor are they probably ready to be experts. But they are quite hungry for a taste of the intellectual pie that will nourish them as they move closer to the thesis. They’re a little more ready for complexity, for the intellectual struggles and open-ended questions that characterize so much of our research.

I have a multitude of examples of sophomore seminars that have admirably fulfilled, in very different sorts of ways, the slightly abstract learning goals I have here outlined. And while I won’t go into detail with any of those examples here, I am more than happy to provide those details to anyone who might desire more information. The best way to do this is with a conversation—and you’re more than welcome to come by for a chat any time. Please do not hesitate to do so.
What follows now is a short inventory of some other points you might find helpful as you prepare for the semester:

- All three classrooms in the HCOL are fully wired for technology. Please note, if you will be using your own Mac laptop, you will need to bring along your own adapter. Tina and/or Brit will be available throughout the semester for any technology assistance you might need.

- Be aware that there are two “cohorts” making up your sophomore seminar. I alluded to them earlier: a group of students continuing from their first year in the HCOL, and a group who have been newly admitted to the sophomore year. The former group can be a bit cliquey (perhaps even in an obvious sort of way), and so we recommend, if you’re planning to do group projects, that you try to integrate the groups a bit. If you’re wondering who fits into which category on your roster, just stop by our office with your roster and Brit or Tina can enlighten you.

- A couple of things about evaluation:
  - Do expect a range of grades in your class. There have been times when every student in a seminar has received a grade in the “A” range, but more typically, there will be a range of grades, even if the range might be a little narrower than your regular classes. **If, however, you have students doing “C “work or lower, please let us know—for all of these students, a grade in the “C” range or lower would be cause for concern.** (For that matter, please let us know if you have any reason to be concerned about a student’s intellectual or personal well-being. Together with our Residential Life staff, we are quite well-equipped to handle these issues, and would very much prefer to know sooner rather than later if you perceive a student to be struggling in any way.)
  - You will encounter a variety of student attitudes toward grades and grading, but consistent in all of these students is a genuine desire for regular feedback from their professors. Please do your utmost to make sure that students have substantive feedback from you before mid-semester.

- At mid-semester, the students will receive an on-line survey administered by the HCOL asking them some broad questions about their seminar (we’d be happy to show the survey questions to you if you’d like). These are not course evaluations, but they do often provide extremely valuable feedback for professors as you move into the second half of the course. We will, of course, share the results of the survey with you, and Abu or I will meet individually with each member of the sophomore faculty following the survey.

- Each class has a $150.00 “enrichment” budget—you can use this money for speakers, field trips, class books, etc. Brit is happy to help you (paperwork wise) with any spending you plan to do. But here’s something to keep in mind always: she will need itemized receipts from you for anything you spend that money on. Please also note that this money cannot be used for food unless it is enriching the curricular content of your course.
Again, if you have any questions about anything I’ve written above, or if you’d simply like to chat more about your syllabus, or assignments, or anything to do with the seminar as you plan your class, I’m more than happy to meet. Interim Associate Dean Ian Grimmer or I can be reached by phone at 656-9100 or by email at ian.grimmer@uvm.edu or Lisa.Schnell@uvm.edu. We’re so looking forward to working with you in the upcoming semester!