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Monday, Sept. 22, 2008

K-STATE EXPERIMENTS WITH SMALLER CLASS SIZES FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

MANHATTAN — Kansas State University is working to make the transition from high school to college easier by implementing first-year seminars: special classes for incoming freshman that are capped at 22 students.

A pilot study, which started this fall, will examine the feasibility and effectiveness of the first-year seminars program in enhancing the learning experience of first-year students at K-State.

"K-State is a student-centered university, and the first-year seminars study aims to advance the academic success of our newest students and to help them with the transition to college-level learning and college life," said M. Duane Nellis, K-State provost and senior vice president.

The pilot study consists of 16 sections of first-year seminar courses in five K-State colleges. It is being directed by Gregory Eiselein, professor of English and K-State's 2008-2009 Coffman Chair for University Distinguished Teaching Scholars, and Emily Lehning, assistant dean of student life and coordinator of new student programs.

"Should the pilot study be successful and should resources be available, we want every student to have the chance to have a first-year seminar in either their fall or spring semester," Lehning said. "Students would have that small class experience — that more accessible connection to faculty and connection to other students early in their academic career."

The idea originated in 2006 when Nellis assigned a task force to brainstorm ways to create a unified, first-year experience for K-State students. The task force discovered through research that first-year experiences help students succeed by keeping them interested in college and on the path toward degree attainment.

"Research shows that the one thing that seems to matter the most is the students' classroom experiences," Eiselein said. "That is the most important location for helping new students with the transition to college and for helping them succeed."

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The first-year seminars are taught by some of the most outstanding faculty across campus. Susan Williams, associate professor of sociology, is teaching Introduction to Sociology as a first-year seminar course this fall.

"The students have a lot more face time with me in the seminar because of the small size," Williams said. "We also can have portable students — I can take a group of 22 outside the class a lot more easily than I can a group of 300."

The first-year seminars also aim to connect classroom learning with campus events and activities outside of class. This year, all of the sections will be attending an election watch in the K-State Student Union on the night of Nov. 4.

"For many students who are starting out at K-State, it will be their first presidential election," Lehning said. "They'll have a chance to cast their vote. There is a high degree of interest in getting to choose for the first time."

Several criteria are being used to evaluate the effectiveness of the first-year seminars program. K-State has enlisted a team of outside scorers who will be looking at anonymous samples of student work and scoring it in terms of how well the work exhibits critical thinking.

"It's one of our beliefs that critical thinking is a defining feature of college learning," Eiselein said. "When students come to college they're not expected to just read the book, listen to the lecture, memorize and then repeat. At a university, students have to take it beyond simply memorizing the information delivered."

Students who were enrolled in a first-year seminar course this fall will be taking part in a survey at the end of the semester. The survey will help determine their level of engagement — their involvement in the course work and campus life combined. Students also will take part in small group discussion with project leaders to assess the effectiveness of the smaller class size.

The pilot study will continue into next year with the addition of a few more classes. After this two-year period, project leaders will begin to track students as they move on in their college careers to determine if the first-year seminars were beneficial in their success.

"For K-State, I hope these seminars become a valued part of our culture and are a significant piece in the K-State experience that helps make our students successful," Lehning said.