

CASE STUDY

NEW CENTURY COLLEGE, GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

Self as Citizen: A First-Year Course on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

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Self as Citizen is being offered in its 11th successive year in the spring of 2007 at New Century College of George Mason University, a public, four-year institution in northern Virginia, enrolling over 30,000 students. New Century College (NCC) offers students a small college interdisciplinary education within the context of a large state university. NCC meets this challenge by having students interact closely with faculty; engage in critical thinking, problem solving, creative activity and leadership development; and participate in experiential education. NCC's First-Year Experience serves primarily traditional-age first-year students who arrive on campus directly after finishing high school. This year's cohort numbers 167 students – 126 residential students in the program, 33 of whom live in NCC's Living Learning Community in the George Mason residence halls. The remainder of the students live off campus.

The NCC-FYE is an innovative general education program which allows freshmen to earn 32 of the 40 credits of university-wide general education requirements during their first year through a sequence of four integrative courses.

Self as Citizen

NCLC 140: Self as Citizen is an integrative learning community, the fourth and final “unit” of the First-Year Experience curriculum in New Century College. This eight-credit, writing-intensive learning community carries three general education credits of social science, two credits each of literature and fine arts and one credit of information technology. The first “unit” of the First-Year Experience, Community of Learners, examines the idea of “self” as it relates to ways of learning and knowing. The second and third “units” emphasize the ways in which the self is biologically determined (The Natural World) and socially constructed (The Social World). Self as Citizen, the final “unit,” highlights individual agency and explores various notions of citizenship to help students develop a coherent framework for participating as citizens in a democratic society. Effective Citizenship, one of nine core competencies emphasized in NCC, is a major focus in this course.

Self as Citizen is taught by an interdisciplinary faculty team with a student-to-faculty ratio of approximately 20:1. The 5-7 member faculty team is comprised of full-time (tenure/tenure-

track or term) NCC faculty members; adjunct faculty; and graduate teaching assistants. One instructor acts as the faculty team leader, taking on substantial administrative and logistical responsibilities in addition to teaching. A graduate teaching assistant carries out support tasks that range from room and equipment reservation to web page administration to technology workshop facilitation.

Self as Citizen considers the construction of self in relation to ideas of governance and explores the ideas and values that influence social contracts for living together in communities in the United States. Students in Self as Citizen spend four mornings a week in a seminar, analyzing and discussing course readings. Early on, they read political writings by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Adam Smith, and consider the influence of these thinkers on the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Discussion of selected Federalist and Anti-Federalist Papers helps situate the Constitution historically and foreground matters of importance to the framers and their critics. As the course continues, it builds on this foundation by introducing students to works of literature and political theory that explore core issues of democratic citizenship in various historical and thematic contexts.

Each week these issues are reflected in questions that help frame discussion of and writing about course texts and experiences. Sample weekly questions include: *How have ideas and values such as “individualism,” “democracy,” “human nature,” “social contract,” and “equality” influenced our social, political and economic systems? How do our choices and actions reflect what we identify as our most important relationships and responsibilities? What rights and responsibilities do individuals have with respect to government? How can citizens and communities create change? What are the ways you see yourself participating as a citizen? What will be the most important or difficult issues for citizens in the future?*

The Citizenship Essay is a major writing assignment that asks students to “converse” with course authors in an essay that shows intelligence, courage and honesty in examining one or more of the many difficult, complicated issues that face people who take citizenship seriously. Students build their essays throughout the course, using weekly journal reflections and a series of peer- and faculty-reviewed drafts to continuously deepen and refine their visions of citizenship.

Another major assignment for this course is Practicing Citizenship, an experiential learning project that confronts students with the challenge of working in a large (20-25 member) group to research and teach their peers about a citizenship-related topic of their own choosing. Practicing Citizenship focuses as much on process as product. Each group begins by creating a management plan, a social contract that establishes community guidelines for completing assigned tasks, working together productively and resolving differences. Throughout the project, group members use face-to-face discussions, blogs and formal writing assignments to reflect on their struggle to produce successful collaborative work while staying true to core democratic principles—equality, deliberation, civility, cooperation and respect for difference—encountered repeatedly in course readings.

Assessment

NCC's First-Year Experience has fared well in national efforts to assess students' satisfaction with their college experiences. In the 2003 National Survey of Student Engagement, for example, NCC first-year students reported substantially higher levels of satisfaction and academic engagement than general George Mason University freshmen. Specific findings indicate that NCC freshmen engage in more writing and critical thinking assignments, they are more likely to stay at George Mason for their college careers, and they report "higher levels of academic challenge, more engagement and collaboration in learning...and a more positive environment on campus."

Below is a selection of comparative data reflecting aspects of students' overall satisfaction with their educational experiences:

Satisfaction with educational experience (4-point scale):
NCC Freshmen: 3.53 General GMU Freshmen: 3.06

Willingness to attend GMU again (4-point scale):
NCC Freshmen: 3.52 General GMU Freshmen: 3.03

Quality of relationships with other students (7-point scale):
NCC Freshmen: 6.12 General GMU Freshmen: 5.52

Quality of relationships with faculty members (7-point scale):
NCC Freshmen: 6.40 General GMU Freshmen: 5.16

Below is a selection of comparative data reflecting students' evaluation of their own academic and personal development.
Institution's contribution to student's knowledge and personal development (4-point scale)

Contributing to the welfare of your community:
NCC Freshmen: 3.59 General GMU Freshmen: 2.23

Developing a personal code of values and ethics:
NCC Freshmen: 3.52 General GMU Freshmen: 2.68

Working effectively with others:
NCC Freshmen: 3.77 General GMU Freshmen: 2.90

Writing clearly and effectively:
NCC Freshmen: 3.69 General GMU Freshmen: 3.04

Thinking critically and analytically:
NCC Freshmen: 3.78 General GMU Freshmen: 3.18

Narrowing the focus to Self as Citizen, this learning community's dual emphasis on the individual and the community is best reflected in the assessment strategies associated with the Practicing Citizenship assignment described above. The faculty team grants students the authority—and responsibility—to assess themselves and their peers as individuals, and to work collectively to assess their group as a whole. Individual students post, on the group blog, their weekly reflections on the group process. At the conclusion of the course, students fill out a quantitative instrument that asks them to assign numerical values to every group member's contributions (see attached file—"group peer evaluation"). Each group also submits a 3- to 4-page paper that addresses the group's collective learning about working in large, complex collaborative bodies (see Practicing Citizenship guidelines on Self as Citizen web page).

Supplemental Materials

The Self as Citizen web page can be accessed at <http://classweb.gmu.edu/nclc140>. This resource includes the course syllabus and assignment guidelines for the past three iterations of Self as Citizen.

I. Contributor's Contact Name and Information

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II. Institutional Description

- a. New Century College of George Mason University, Fairfax, VA
- b. Four-year
- c. Public
- d. Residential/Commuter
- e. 30,000
- f. This year's cohort numbers 167 students.
Of the 126 residential students in the program,
33 live in NCC's Living Learning Community in the
George Mason residence halls. The remainder of the
students live off campus.