

***FIAT LUX* FRESHMAN SEMINAR PROGRAM  
TWO-YEAR ASSESSMENT REPORT**

**2003-2005**

**Office of Undergraduate Evaluation and Research  
Undergraduate Education Initiatives  
UCLA College**

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Judith L. Smith  
Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education

## INTRODUCTION

The *Fiat Lux* Freshman Seminar Program is designed to deepen student learning early in the undergraduate experience by offering small classes – with a maximum of twenty students – that foster dialogue and participation in learning, increase student interaction with ladder faculty and peers, and expose students to new areas of scholarship in environments that allows them to feel comfortable exploring varied areas of the curriculum. These one-unit courses are taken Pass/No Pass and do not require a final exam or paper.

This report documents the experiences of faculty and students who participated in the *Fiat Lux* Freshman Seminar Program during Academic Years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. Surveys were designed to provide information on course format and explore several dimensions related to intellectual growth, including degree of participation, level of interaction, and intensity of intellectual engagement. The report that follows highlights findings related to each of these dimensions and documents student and faculty satisfaction with the seminar experience. Specific suggestions for enhancing student engagement and learning in this unique seminar setting are also outlined. The report is designed primarily to inform faculty who want to learn more about the program and to help instructors produce successful seminars.

## METHODOLOGY

The evaluation relied on the voluntary participation of students and faculty in nearly 400 *Fiat Lux* seminars offered during two academic years. For the 2003-2004 academic year, student and faculty surveys were exclusively web-based. In an attempt to increase response rates for 2004-2005, a paper version of the student survey was created and administered in class.

For 2003-2004, all students enrolled in *Fiat Lux* seminars received a notice through *MyUCLA* during week 8 inviting their participation in the evaluation and assuring them of response anonymity. At the same time, all *Fiat Lux* instructors received an email invitation directing them to an on-line survey about their experiences. Additional email reminders were sent to students and faculty to increase the response rates. Professors were also asked to make a class announcement encouraging student participation in the survey effort.

During the 2004-2005 academic year, faculty were instructed to administer the paper surveys to their students during the last scheduled class meeting of each quarter. While students were completing the evaluations, the faculty members were asked to leave the classroom and have a student volunteer return the evaluations back to the Office of Undergraduate Evaluation and Research (OUER). Only faculty new to the program were asked to complete the instructor survey.

Two different surveys were created, one for students and one for faculty.<sup>1</sup> The student survey contained a combination of both close-ended and open-ended questions which focused on the students' perceptions of their seminar academic engagement, their satisfaction, and their suggestions for improvement. The faculty survey contained open-ended questions and asked for comment on techniques used to engage students.

A total of 2364 students and 194 faculty members participated in the 193 seminars offered during the 2003-2004 academic year; a total of 2739 students and 181 faculty members participated in

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<sup>1</sup> The 2004-2005 student survey was modified slightly from the 2003-2004 student survey. The faculty survey remained identical for both the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 academic years; see [www.college.ucla/up/eval/projects](http://www.college.ucla/up/eval/projects)

the 188 seminars offered during the 2004-2005 academic year. In 2003-2004, nearly 41% of the students and 57% of the instructors completed the on-line surveys. In 2004-2005, as a result of the class administration, the student survey response rate increased substantially (Table 1).

**Table 1. Summary of Response Rates**

	Seminar Participants	Survey Respondents	Response Rates (%)
A. 2003-04			
Students	2364	961	41
Faculty	194	111	57
B. 2004-05			
Students	2739	1976	72
*Faculty	75	40	53

\* Only faculty teaching a seminar for the first time were surveyed.

The 2003-2004 students who responded to the survey were representative of the seminar participants along two dimensions, entry year and academic affiliation (Table 2). Most of the respondents were freshmen and the largest groups of enrolled students were those majoring in the life sciences or who were undeclared. The profiles of students in the 2004-05 seminars were similar, and those data have not been included here.

**Table 2. Student Participants and Respondents for 2003-2004**

Characteristics	% of Participants (n=2,364)	% of Respondents (n=922)
Female	65	69
<b>Freshman Year at UCLA</b>		
2003-04	72	76
2002-03	17	14
2001-02 (or earlier)	11	10
<b>Major at entry</b>		
Life Sciences	28	33
Undeclared	27	24
Social Sciences	22	19
Humanities	9	9
International Institute	2	2
Physical Sciences	8	9
Professional Schools	3	4

Overall, faculty who participated in the *Fiat Lux* Freshmen Program during the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 academic years represented a wide range of academic disciplines and held a variety of positions across campus, including ladder faculty (90%) and administrators and staff without ladder faculty appointments (10%). Of the 375 faculty participants, 26 (7%) taught more than one seminar. In both years, faculty survey respondents were relatively representative of the participants (Table 3). All active ladder faculty were encouraged to participate in the *Fiat Lux* Freshmen Program and were offered a modest financial incentive to teach a seminar as an overload teaching assignment.

**Table 3. Faculty Participants and Survey Respondents for 2003-04 and 2004-05**

	% of Participants		% of Respondents	
	2003-04 (n=194)	2004-05 (n=75)	2003-04 (n=111)	2004-05 (n=40)
<b>Unit Affiliation</b>				
College Ladder Faculty	58	65	66	65
Professional School Ladder Faculty	29	28	23	30
Others	13	7	11	5
<b>Seminars Offered</b>				
Arts & Humanities	34	16	28	20
Culture & Society	46	43	50	30
Science & Technology	20	41	22	50

**RESULTS**

The survey results provide information on course format and delivery and illuminate the degree to which the *Fiat Lux* seminars provided students with opportunities for intellectual involvement and growth. Both students and faculty commented on course delivery, degree of dialogue, level of interaction with faculty and fellow students, and level of intellectual engagement. The survey findings also document faculty and student satisfaction with the *Fiat Lux* courses and provide suggestions for enhancing student engagement and learning in a seminar environment.

**Course Format and Delivery**

Most students (83%) indicated that their seminar included some combination of discussion and lecture, though the balance varied by seminar. Very few students described their seminar as being “all lecture” (3%). Some students (10%) indicated that their seminar was “all discussion” (Table 4).

**Table 4. Fiat Lux Seminar Format**

Which category best describes your seminar format:	% of Respondents
All lecture	3%
Primarily lecture	16%
Even balance between lecture and discussion	35%
Primarily discussion	32%
All discussion	10%
Other	4%

The balance between lecture and discussion depended on the instructor and the goals of the course. Some faculty noted that lectures were necessary to provide students with a base of knowledge on a particular topic. Many professors valued and tried hard to facilitate discussion. Most students reported they enjoyed interacting with the professor and other students. They also typically enjoyed the lectures and, in some cases, wanted more. Students often expressed appreciation for a mixed approach to teaching. As one of them indicated:

*They lectured, but they kind of walked the students through the critical thinking process, so that we as students understood and evaluated the concepts ourselves. We were not just passive listeners.*

In addition to maintaining a balance between lecture and discussion, faculty found flexibility in structuring their seminar meeting time and place. While most seminars met one hour each week,

some faculty chose to meet two hours biweekly (or consecutively for five weeks). Others took the seminar experience outside of the classroom, incorporating field trips, conferences, retreats, and social events (e.g. dinner). A strong majority of students (85%) agreed that meeting one hour each week or two hours biweekly allowed for enough time to discuss the class material.

Nearly one-third of the faculty commented on the gap between what students knew and what they expected them to know. They noted that the students had “a great deal of endearing enthusiasm” but had trouble accessing some topics. One professor indicated that he anticipated gaps in students’ knowledge about the information presented, and gave them articles to read before each seminar meeting. Another professor asked students “to post weekly issue papers on the discussion board of the class website” in preparation for seminar discussions.

The unique nature of these seminars attracted all students, not just freshmen. Although first-year students were given priority in registering, and comprised 72% of seminar participants, upperclassmen expressed continued interest in accessing this curricular opportunity:

*I don't think it should be limited to freshmen. All students could benefit from it. I don't like the idea that only as freshmen do you deserve to be exposed to many things so that you can figure out what you like. There are seniors still trying to figure it out.*

The resulting mix of class levels in these seminars led to some concerns about the seminar atmosphere. While many enjoyed the opportunity to interact with a variety of students, the presence of upperclassmen seemed to intimidate some freshmen, affecting their confidence with respect to participating in classroom discussions. These first-year students felt their seminar experience could have been improved “if there had been less upperclassmen.”

Faculty also noted the disparity in knowledge, skills, and expectations between first-year students and upper class students, and considered its impact on their teaching. One instructor remarked, “There is tremendous difference between freshmen and juniors/seniors. It’s like day and night.” This demographic mix could affect seminar teaching approaches. As one professor explained, “Make sure you have a plan as to how to teach to both freshmen and more senior students because there is likely to be a mix.”

**Student Dialogue**

Most students indicated that they felt comfortable participating in class discussion (90%), and more than two-thirds of the students agreed that the seminar experience helped them feel more comfortable participating in other class discussions (Table 5).

**Table 5. Seminar Participation in Fiat Lux Seminars**

<i>Thinking about your seminar experience, please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements:</i>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Unsure/ No Response</b>
I felt comfortable participating in class discussions during the seminar.	90%	8%	2%
The seminar helped me feel more comfortable participating in discussions in other classes.	71%	20%	9%

Several comments directly illustrated students’ generally high comfort level with discussions, that involved both their peers and the professor. Among them:

*We had small and large group discussions on the novel we focused on. This helped a lot in sharing ideas, particularly the small group discussions. Going from those groups to the large group gave me confidence to speak up more in the large group.*

*I had considerably more interaction with the instructor than I would have with professors of my large lecture classes. The interaction helped me to get over my hesitation when approaching my professors and participating in class discussions.*

Faculty often underscored the importance of dialogue in the classroom. One professor, for example, felt strongly that:

*It's an outstanding way to engage students to talk about difficult subjects while creating a safe and welcoming space. It also has proven to be a wonderful method of teaching students about becoming allies for anyone who is different from oneself regardless of what that difference might be.*

Faculty also noted how student engagement in discussion increased (sometimes slowly) as the seminar unfolded:

*It took a while for a number of the students to participate in our discussions. In part, I believe that some of them were intimidated by the challenge of talking about poetry. In part, some of them seemed relatively new to the seminar format. That said, most of them appear to have engaged the readings and, by the end of the quarter, the majority were offering comments in class.*

Students valued professors who promoted discussion and shared their thoughts on how professorial efforts to engage students encouraged a new sense of connection:

*He would email us during the week, was willing to talk outside of class, and the entire seminar was discussion, so we really could interact in ways you usually can't with experienced professors.*

*It helped that we had to do a presentation and that we needed to see him in office hours to get the topic approved. [X] is a great professor and a good person to talk to in office hours, and it really did make a difference having him as a seminar instructor. I doubt that if I had had a different (lecture) class with him that I would have gotten to know him at all.*

### **Student Interaction with Faculty and Fellow Students**

Students appreciated faculty who made efforts to get to know them and many (83%) agreed that the seminar format allowed them to get to know their instructor. The seminars also seem to have facilitated interaction among students. Most students, for example, reported that they were exposed to new ideas by other students (87%) and that the seminar format helped them to get to know each other (71%) (Table 6).

**Table 6. Student Interactions in Fiat Lux Seminars**

<i>Thinking about your seminar experience, please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements:</i>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Unsure/ No Response</b>
The seminar format allowed me to get to know my instructor.	83%	15%	1%
I was exposed to new ideas by other students.	87%	11%	3%
The seminar format helped me to get to know other students.	71%	27%	3%

Many students commented on the high quality of interaction with their seminar instructor and that resulting effects were “meaningful” and otherwise quite positive. Students expressed especially high regard for faculty who shared ideas, welcomed and respected others’ ideas, and made sure the students understood the material.

A small number of students indicated that they did not enjoy interacting with their professor and, in some cases, noted that the professor made them feel unintelligent. For example, two students registered the following complaints:

*He made people feel stupid for asking questions during seminar. If you asked afterward, he was very helpful.*

*Unnecessary and harsh criticism constantly made me very apprehensive to participate. Some is good but she went too far—trying to prove stupidity of students.*

Although students indicated satisfaction with their access to faculty, in many cases they hoped for more. Student observations about the amount of interaction with their seminar instructor were also mixed. Several students indicated frequent interaction with their seminar instructor. As one noted, “there was plenty of interaction.” An equal number of students noted that this interaction was not frequent enough. As one student said:

*I really enjoyed my instructor, but I rarely spoke with him. I do wish I had more because it definitely made the seminar better*

Students especially valued the opportunity to interact with each other and to learn from each other:

*The quality of interaction with other students was fabulous. Often times, our conversations would continue past the class, out the door, and all the way back to the dorms. I have become good friends with them and regularly hang out with some of them.*

*We don't get many opportunities to get to know our classmates, much less our teachers. In this university, students are very much individual, independent people that rarely interact with each other if the university didn't provide means for us to get in small groups and make friends.*

*I found other students' personal experience, comments to have been truly enriching—biographical stories of language policies in post-invasion Czechoslovakia, Korean and language revitalization efforts spurred many student-led discussions.*

In some cases, students indicated that that their peers were “eager to join in discussion.” Many students, however, expressed disappointment with the frequency of interaction with their peers. A significant number of students experienced only limited direct discussion with their classmates:

*I had very little intellectual engagement with other students. I think most of us were not very comfortable with the material and couldn't hold very high quality discussions.*

*The students weren't really speaking to each other. Most conversations were with the professor. This detracted from the seminar experience.*

Students also commented on strategies used to promote peer interaction, noting the value of student presentations and collaborative work:

*The presentation we had to do in class was a good opportunity to hear what other students had to say about the class material...each student took a different angle...I think without the other students and their inputs, the class would not have been as interesting or fulfilling.*

*Being able to first discuss issues in small groups and then sharing your opinions in bigger groups was a good way to start off the conversations and open up the communication lines between the other students.*

Faculty noted that getting students to interact was sometimes a challenge, and that a variety of pedagogical approaches could be useful in encouraging them to participate. Comments from two expressed this view:

*They talked little amongst themselves it seemed, even when I put them in breakout groups. They were fine answering direct questions but did little themselves in taking the initiative to start or to continue a class discussion.*

*Some students were more hesitant to speak up in class, even if it was a small class. These students seemed to feel more comfortable posting online comments and had good insightful comments posted there. I would not have been able to tap into their thinking with just a traditional classroom discussion. They were also responsive and courteous to others' comments. There were some, on the other hand, who did not like to post and felt completely comfortable commenting in class. Using different modes, I think I was able to stimulate interaction in the class.*

Faculty were asked to comment on the quality of their interaction with their students and the interaction between students, with half the faculty indicating success and the other half indicating mixed results. The following comments were characteristic:

*I was generally pleased with it. Though there were disagreements, the tone was generally pretty good. I was happy to have the occasional student stay after to discuss more and to get the occasional email about a news item pertaining to our topic sent to me by students.*

*The students were at first a bit shy, which is understandable. But as the class progressed and more discussion sessions were conducted, they were able to express themselves and interact with me more freely. In the end they were very comfortable in discussing issues with everyone in the class.*

*The students in general were shy about interacting with me, compelling me to ask questions. The level of the questions varied widely, from very basic comments to perceptive analyses. Overall, most were shy about expressing personal interpretations.*

### **Intellectual Engagement**

The majority of students indicated that the seminars were intellectually engaging and highlighted topics that held their interest, were valuable, and prompted critical and analytical thinking (see Table 7).

**Table 7. Intellectual Engagement in Fiat Lux Seminars**

<i>Thinking about your seminar experience, please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements:</i>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Unsure/No Response</b>
The course topic held my interest over time.	90%	8%	1%
I have learned something in this seminar I consider valuable.*	93%	6%	1%
The course prompted me think (critically and) analytically.	93%	6%	1%

\*Note: This item was a close-ended item on the 2003-2004 survey. On the 2004-2005 survey, this item was reworded as follows: "What did you learn in this seminar that you consider valuable?"

Most of the students (90%) indicated that the course held their interest over time. Not surprisingly, students generally appreciated the opportunity to learn something new. For example, one student noted that he had learned about “many important issues that [he] would have never learned without the seminar.” Another student echoed this sentiment:

*I was enthralled with the subject of linguistics in that I have never before taken a course in the field. I was very appreciative that I learned both current and historical information that I will continue my interest in the subject.*

Most students (93%) also indicated that they had learned something valuable in their seminar. When asked “What did you learn in this seminar that you consider valuable?”, answers focused most commonly on the subject content of the seminar:

*Even though it should be well known, I entered this course not knowing too many details regarding international status. I definitely learned about our ideals as a nation and what we hold to be important.*

*I learned to be more aware of gender issues that surround me—for example, for my final project, I analyzed gender roles at my work. Having done this, I will carry what I learned far into the future.*

Many of the students also reported that learning things within the seminar that were applicable to life in general was extremely valuable:

*I learned something in this class that I would have never been able to learn in any other class. It may sound simple, but I learned how to be mindful which is actually something very profound and has really affected my life.*

*This seminar has changed my life. The way I look at the world is different. I value my life and every minute of it so much more. Because of this seminar, I am a happier, more confident, more relaxed, more successful person. In a phrase, this seminar taught me how to live.*

*I have been introduced to things that I have never thought about before but are serious issues. I am happy about this class because it has made an impact on my perspective and how I want to do things.*

Students clearly valued both the explicit subject content of their seminars and the associated broader learning that they perceived to be directly relevant to their lives. They also valued developing their analytical and critical thinking skills and learning about different perspectives. For example, one student said “I learned to be open to new views.” Another added that “there are a lot of different people in the world and everyone should respect each other.” Some students therefore began to consider issues from other viewpoints:

*The format of our course was discussion. Our professor did not require any written papers or proposals. I feel like I was asked some difficult questions during discussion, and I had to think hard to respond. Many times, I could see the validity of the opinions of both sides of an issue. I feel like the professor did a good job probing issues and pushing us students to think about things critically. She really challenged us to look at issues from different perspectives and consider them in different ways.*

Students also appreciated learning something new and being able to learn through discussion.

Most students (93%) indicated that the course prompted them to think critically and analytically. For example, one student said:

*It was really interesting to learn all about the inner workings of the intelligence community, and it taught me more about problem-solving, judging situations, and other skills that I can apply to other classes.*

Several students indicated that they “learned how to think critically about issues” and look at issues from alternate perspectives. One student shared the following example:

*... to think analytically about terrorism and its place/function within the global community and not take media statements at face value. Furthermore, to take a hard look at the policies and ideas needed to be implemented to combat terrorism.*

Faculty were interested in pushing students to think critically. According to one,

*My aim was to show students how theories are constructed, and how they are empirically explored. I wanted them to see that the ideas and evidence they are taught are intellectual creations, constructed to understand the world and tested against observations or secondary sources. In short, I wanted them to recognize from the outset of their college education where theories come from and how they are evaluated. I also wanted them to see that concepts and theories have a human face—real people create them.*

The faculty teaching the seminars were also interested in developing analytical skills that students could use in other classes:

*I think they enjoyed what I had to say. It was a bit difficult for them to keep up. So they sometimes sat there pretty quietly. But I hope I made them think. And I hope that when they cover the material again in a more advanced course, there will be a flash of recognition.*

In some cases, students reported that their seminar experience helped them to see the importance of sharing knowledge with others. When students believed that they were being exposed to such important issues, some felt compelled to share this knowledge with others:

*The content of this seminar – diminishing biodiversity on the planet – is critical to all of us. Before the class, I knew the environment was important, but didn't care so much about doing anything to help it. Now I feel the urgency of its dwindling state, and how important it is that everyone understands what's at stake.*

The seminars provided students with opportunities to pursue their interests, whether in their chosen academic disciplines or far a field:

*I learned a lot of interesting information about a topic that interests me and I don't think I could have learned about these things to the extent that I did in another environment. I felt that I could ask any questions that interested me and be received with a helpful answer and encouraged to ask again. It was an awesome atmosphere for learning.*

*I like to have a balance to my science classes, and since I have a science major, I need to take a lot of those. To balance the science, I like to read literature and analyze it, and having this seminar does not add more pressure to the pressure I already feel with the science classes. By having this seminar, I can maintain the enjoyment I feel when I read literature for leisure.*

Many of the students indicated that their seminar discussions facilitated intellectual engagement. One student noted:

*The intellectual engagement of this class was the highest I have ever experienced. It refreshed my memory after a long day of analytical calculating in my math and physics classes.*

Students appreciated the informal class format, many looking forward to going to class each time. One student commented: “We got to feed on each others’ opinions and that opened our eyes to different understandings.”

Half the faculty indicated that they were successful in engaging students with the course material, while the remaining half indicated mixed or no success. As one professor explained:

*I think the students were very engaged in course because I required them to interview an immigrant to the US (someone they already knew) for each session and report to the class. Each week, they took turns presenting their findings from their interviews. Also as a class, we designed the interview protocols. Given their responses to the mid-term evaluations I conducted, I’m not sure they got as much out of the readings as they did from the interviews. However, I think they really began critically examining the material for the last class when I asked them to integrate what they learned from the readings with their interview data. I wished we had been able to reach this point sooner but we only had 5 meetings over the course of the quarter!*

Faculty mentioned a variety of techniques they used to actively engage students including having them make presentations, soliciting their opinions, inviting guest speakers, providing videos, and organizing field trips. Many faculty observed that when they teach a seminar again, they would reduce lecture time. Others noted they would add structured readings, provide more activities, and most important, try more creative ways of engaging students.

### Student and Faculty Satisfaction with the Seminar Experience

The majority of the students (85%) rated their satisfaction level with their instructor as “High” or “Very High,” while almost three-fourths (72%) rated their seminar as “High” or “Very High.” The overwhelmingly high ratings for both the instructors and the seminars reflects tremendous overall student satisfaction with the *Fiat Lux* Seminar Program (Table 8).

**Table 8. Student Satisfaction with *Fiat Lux* Instructors and Seminars**

<b>Please rate the following:</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>High/Very High</b>
Your overall rating of the instructor(s).	2%	13%	85%
Your overall rating of the seminar.	4%	23%	72%

Most students (75%) also indicated that they would recommend their seminar to other students. One student explained the seminars’ attraction:

*This is the second seminar I[‘ve] taken and I think they are often times more engaging than a normal class. They cover topics which are relevant to life in a comfortable setting where interaction among different types of students can take place. I felt this seminar was demographically diverse and that added to the effect it had on me. These seminars should continue to provide space for student discussion without the worry of a grade.*

Students who were not sure about recommending their seminar mentioned specific concerns, such as poor course organization, a misleading course title, a heavy workload, or the need for more background information/preparation. Much of this dissatisfaction stemmed from what students perceived as too much lecturing in a seminar course:

*I think if there was more interaction between students and professors the course would improve. Often there were general questions/curiosity that I was too afraid to ask because of not wanting to interrupt the lecture.*

*It could have been improved if the professor didn't lecture the entire time and if he didn't jump in to downplay certain ideas students had pertaining to the subject matter we were talking about. Basically, he should have been quiet more often and should have let students talk on a more regular basis.*

Students who had rewarding experiences in their seminar and often shared general comments such as these:

*I'm very glad I took this course. It's helped me to become more aware of the world around me and the effects I have on it. Thanks for offering the class!*

*This class was the only one that I took this quarter that I could say I looked forward to. The content and the format of the class made it pleasurable and gave me a drive to look for similar connections in other classes.*

Many faculty participating in the *Fiat Lux* seminar program expressed satisfaction with the experience. Some of this satisfaction arose from the prospect of research funding. As one professor noted, "The financial incentive can be very helpful to faculty research in these tough times." Most found the *Fiat Lux* experience enjoyable because it allowed them to engage intellectually and interpersonally with undergraduates in a different context from the lecture format. One professor said, "It is rewarding to watch young minds grasp and struggle with important issues. Other observations included:

*[I] try to keep a positive, open attitude in the room. For me, that means not judging anyone. I just try to ask the class the next indicated question, to keep the discussion going.*

*I would encourage instructors to take advantage of what is a very enjoyable, and relatively stress-free format. The short meeting time is quite nice, though sometimes limiting. I would encourage people to perhaps explore topics that lie at the edges of their expertise, rather than at the heart of their research. This can be a stimulating experience in that way.*

The *Fiat Lux* seminars also provide a rare opportunity for faculty to get to know undergraduates, especially freshmen, in a relaxed and intimate setting. Two professors expressed this view:

*Do it. It is a really fun experience, and as a faculty, you learn more about students and how they learn than in any other environment at UCLA.*

*Take the plunge—they are great experiences and you can really deal with the issues you find exciting. Have fun and let the students have fun. They are genuinely interested in learning.*

### **Students and Faculty Suggestions for Enhancing Student Engagement and Learning in *Fiat Lux* Freshmen Seminars**

Students provided several suggestions for improving the seminar experience. They expressed interest in having broader exploration of topics, changes to class format, improved class organization, increased discussion and interaction, and fewer readings. Some students indicated an interest in learning more about the seminar topic but were quick to recognize the limitations of time. One student indicated, “The only thing I suggest would be more class time so that all the material could be covered.” On the other hand, some students noted that the seminar topics could be more interesting and in a few cases, recommending that a particular professor not teach. Common complaints were that some professors did not know the material, were intimidating, or did not facilitate discussion.

Students had varying opinions on class format, some wanting to meet once a week and others preferring to meet every two weeks. The benefits of each model were noted:

*One hour every week would have been more enlightening. There would have been less time to forget the reading and more instances of recognition with teacher and classmates.*

*Sometimes the material seemed redundant from week to week. Perhaps meeting every other week (so five times total) would be better.*

Regardless of the course format, several students expressed an interest in having more discussion and interaction. Some students hoped for more discussion, more group work/activities, less presentations, less writing, and less reading. Overall, students wanted more “student to student time.” One student suggested:

*The seminar could be improved by allowing students the time within the seminar to converse with each other about the reading for the week and make comments in groups of two or three, so that there is more interaction overall.*

Some students expressed disappointment with their peers and found they lacked motivation. Students encouraged instructors to create ways to increase student participation that included making the reading of texts and course papers mandatory so that students would be more informed during discussion.

Students also noted that more class structure and organization would be helpful. For example, students suggested providing students with questions to review prior to each seminar meeting and believed that this step would help facilitate seminar discussion. Some students also suggested not scheduling all the presentations at the end of the quarter, though they appreciated culminating events:

*Not all the presentations (or the majority) should be left till the last session. Information overload! However, I think the fact that the seminar culminated in a field trip to apply whatever we’ve learned was a great way to conclude the class!*

While many of the students had positive experiences with the instructors, some students also expressed concern about faculty who were biased and not welcoming of different perspectives:

*The extreme liberal bias of the class forced a lot of hesitance to participate.*

*It seemed a little biased toward the anti-war aspect of the war on terror. Seeing the other side more would have give[n] a more comprehensive view in my opinion. More equality in the two sides presented in readings.*

The participating professors also had a number of suggestions for encouraging student engagement and enriching the seminar experience. Their suggestions paralleled those of the students and fell into broad categories, including class organization, working with first year students, content, expectations of students, facilitating discussion, and flexibility.

Faculty participants had a number of suggestions related to class organization and setting clear seminar expectations early in the course. Many professors noted that undergraduate students, especially first year students, are not familiar with what is expected in a seminar and those expectations need to be “spelled out.” Student roles and responsibilities in the seminar need to be clearly explained:

*It is really a wonderful experience. Most of your time goes into designing an interactive class rather than preparing for weekly sessions. Most students, especially freshman, don't really understand what's expected of them in a seminar so you need to give clear and specific assignments and activities that engage them as active participants. However, once the students get their hands on the material, the momentum comes from them. The instructor's job is to be able to fuel the discussion when it needs it.*

Professors also suggested:

*Provide outlines of materials covered in class (i.e. notes about lecture, questions to consider with readings, etc.) so students can focus on participating in discussion, rather than taking notes or having to struggle with the reading assignments.*

*Have assignments turned in before class so that students' thoughts can be incorporated in lesson plan (via email).*

Several faculty members were attracted to teaching a *Fiat Lux* seminar because they would be working with first-year students. They were quick to note that the seminar needs to be structured with this population in mind. As these professors observed:

*Remember that these are freshmen students and, while bright and enthusiastic, can be limited in experience and the course offers limited time.*

*Consider that students may not always be able to think quickly on their feet so discussion may initially be slow or hesitant. Many freshmen may be shy or unsure about participating in class discussion.*

Faculty also suggested trying to develop a sense early on about who the students were in the seminar and how much background knowledge students had on the seminar topic. Suggestions included getting “a sense of students’ knowledge at the first meeting” and “have students talk about themselves.” One professor added, “Be prepared to teach students at different knowledge levels and class levels.”

A number of faculty commented on the importance of selecting an interesting seminar topic, one that is current and controversial. Suggestions included:

*I think controversial topics work best for these seminars, given that the students are not required to write papers and the work is primarily based on discussion.*

*Do something they think is fun. Have lots of student discussion. This is not typically the mode in science courses, where the subject matter is not amenable to debate (it's fact!). However, there are discussion topics in science that are suitable for a Fiat Lux. Money, for one.*

*Teach a topic that is not typically studied by undergraduates, especially first-year students*

Faculty generally felt it important to keep the demands of the class reasonable. Specifically, faculty felt that they should not have unrealistic expectations for *Fiat Lux* seminars: “Remember that it is only a one unit class, and so you shouldn’t expect students to work as if it were four units.” Another professor felt that it was also important to keep the amount of the readings for the course reasonable, and suggested giving the students one or two questions to consider and discuss with each reading assignment. Otherwise, he felt that “students are sometimes not able to think on their feet with new material.” A third professor felt it best to “Devise a strategy that will work whether or not students do the assignments outside of class.”

Facilitating student discussion was particularly exciting and challenging for faculty participants. In order to increase student discussion, faculty members suggested a variety of strategies, such as asking basic questions or having students propose discussion questions. As one faculty member stated, “It takes a lot to bring students up to the level where they can discuss issues in an intelligent fashion. Ten hours isn’t a lot of time to be doing that, so stick with basic questions.” Another faculty member suggested having students write the discussion questions themselves because “it got them personally involved.” Whatever the particular strategy used, the importance of increasing student discussion was underscored. As one faculty member elaborated:

*We should probably all focus more on strategies to make them discuss with each other. Perhaps a particularly good instructor or two could share some methods with us all the first week of the quarter.*

Other suggestions for increasing discussion were:

*Let students be part of determining what direction the discussions go in.*

*Find multiple ways students can participate (in class discussion, reflections, on-line posts, etc.).*

*Ask students to respond to points raised by each other, before responding. This helps bring out those who might otherwise not speak.*

*Give students problems to figure out, don’t tell them the answer, and have them come up with answers as a group.*

*Give the students one or two questions to consider and discuss with each reading.*

*Use technology (i.e. use of web, emails for reflections, discussion, homework) to stimulate interaction in class.*

*Devise a strategy that will work whether or not students do the assignments outside of class.*

*Do not let the students sit back and just listen. Call on students if that is what it takes to get them involved.*

*Prepare points of discussion ahead of time, but leave some room for spontaneity.*

*One thing that is immediately clear is that the students tend to be intimidated by being in a small group and being asked to discuss issues. So it is important that the instructor create a relaxed environment for the students to feel comfortable participating in discussions. One thing to do is give students some topics at the beginning that everyone would have something to say about and gradually increase the level of difficulty of the material.*

*Get the students talking and participating at an earlier stage in the class; maybe also organize an off campus excursion.*

While faculty members had suggestions for improvements, many of the faculty found teaching a *Fiat Lux* seminar(s) a positive experience. They especially noted how teaching a *Fiat Lux* seminar was a “rare opportunity” to help students look at a topic that interested them within a pressure-free context (i.e., no grading). While some faculty members mentioned the financial incentive as a motivating factor for teaching a *Fiat Lux* seminar, most found the experience rewarding in itself, and enjoyed getting to know the freshmen. As one faculty member concluded:

*Getting freshmen to engage is not always easy, but it is always rewarding. I would simply say, “teach a Fiat Lux course at least once – it is a great experience.”*

## **SUMMARY COMMENTS**

According to UCLA students and faculty, the *Fiat Lux* seminars provided the desired opportunities for intellectual engagement and growth. Students generally reported that they valued the small class setting that promoted learning through discussion with faculty and peers. They found that the topics were engaging and promoted the development of critical and analytical skills. Students also noted that they learned something useful and felt the importance of sharing knowledge with others. Students enjoyed having a voice in the classroom and appreciated faculty interest in eliciting their input. Student satisfaction with the seminars was high and many students indicated they would take a seminar again.

Most professors enjoyed the opportunity to teach first-year students in a small class setting. They offered the strategies they used to engage students in discussion and were quick to acknowledge that this process was challenging and took time. Faculty also provided a number of suggestions for improving student engagement in their seminars. These included having students make a presentation in class, meeting with students individually, and communicating electronically with students. Faculty were sometimes very impressed with their students, one noting “the undergraduate students’ openness and intellectual curiosity was much more impressive than that typically shown by the graduate students in my own department.”

While there are certainly lessons to be learned from the various responses cited in this report, the overall message from our assessment has been that these seminars offer a valuable service in broadening the scope of education for first-year students at UCLA, activating them as learners and deepening their personal engagement with both the faculty and their undergraduate curriculum.