

Bard FYSEM Podcast

00:00 Josh: Welcome back everyone! This is Josh Tyler and welcome to another edition of our Bard Admission podcast series. As always, I'm here with our Director of Admission, Mackie Siebens.

0:11 Mackie: Hi everyone! As Josh said, I'm Mackie Siebens, Director of Admission, I'm also an alum, as is Josh. We are joined here by three faculty members who are in charge of creating First Year Seminar and designing it. We're going to have them introduce themselves and we're going to answer some questions about First Year Seminar. So, we'll start with you Lauren.

0:33 Lauren: I'm Lauren Curtis.

00:36 Daniel: I'm Daniel Mendelsohn.

00:37 Omar: and I'm Omar Cheta.

00:39 Mackie: Wonderful. So, the first question that we have is really asking if you could share with us the origins of the First Year Seminar program at Bard, why we have it, what the purpose is, so we'll start there.

0:55 Lauren: So, maybe I'll start with that. First Year Seminar is really one of the oldest and most distinctive aspects of the Bard curriculum, I think. After the second World War, a lot of American colleges were redefining what we mean by liberal arts education, one of the most important questions, and ways of asking those questions that students could be participating in. At Bard, really the sort of big innovation at that point in the mid-20th century, was putting together this First Year Seminar program. All of the students in a seminar format read a shared set of books that look at big questions about the human experience. And there have been lots of topics, there's a different topic every few years that they focus on. What is freedom? What is the human? Questions that are impossible to answer but we still try! And the question at the moment that our students are currently looking at is, what is the relationship between the self and the world?

1:57 Josh: Great! Now, this First Year Seminar, we have a unique first year program. What part of the first year does this happen? Is it one semester, is it two?

2:09 Daniel: So, the First Year Seminar is a mandatory, two semester sequence course. All first- year students have to take it in the first year. It's part of a sequence of first year experience courses, L&T, which is before the beginning of the semester, then there's First Year Seminar, which is fall and spring, and then in between those two semesters there is Citizen Science. So, it's part of a trifecta of mandatory but incredibly fun first year programs.

2:47 Josh: Now do students choose this class as they would other Bard classes? Or is it directly assigned to the students by the college, since it is a class that everyone has to take?

2:57 Omar: it's a mandatory class, it's the common course. Every student has to take it. There are, depending on the year, sometimes scheduling becomes a way in which students end up in a particular section. But regardless, the syllabus is shared across all sections.

3:16 Mackie: How are the texts chosen for this particular First Year Seminar?

3:22 Daniel: Well, every few years, the curriculum changes. Traditionally, it's been every three years, there's a new set of directors, and the curriculum, the syllabus is completely rethought, which we think, is a healthy way of responding to things that are happening in the larger culture, so that's it's not a fixed set of texts that goes on for decades and decades, because everything else around the course is changing. So, the process of choosing the syllabus is very complicated, long, and interesting.

3:58 Lauren: It involves a lot of us really putting our heads together, instead of having this sort of fantasy football style conversation about what are the most important books for students to be reading in their very first year, when they first come to college, and then obviously consulting with a lot of colleagues, faculty, consulting with students, consulting with the administration.

4:21 Josh: How did the current curriculum come to be? How did you decide on what should be First Year Seminar for the next few years?

4:29 Daniel: One of the, we got together as the three co-directors, and we started batting around ideas for a theme. Every First Year Seminar starts with a theme, and then you try to fill in the blanks of what texts would support the theme. As Lauren said, our theme, I think fairly early on, evolved as the "Self in the World," what is the relationship of one's experience as one goes through life to the larger world, to the family, to the community, to politics, to empire, to religion. And then you sit around in a lot of rooms with a lot of different groups of people trying different things on. I think the course has evolved an incredible amount from our first, it's unrecognizable, really, from where we started. But I think it's benefitted from every round of vetting.

5:24 Mackie: And there are different faculty that teach First Year Seminar, right? The conversation of course, depends on the individuals in the room, including the students. Can you talk a little bit about how First Year Seminar is interesting in that different professors from different fields teach the same course?

5:44 Omar: This is a text-based course, so we have a number of books, I believe 11 books, that we're reading throughout the year, in addition to selections from other works that we read in conversation. The syllabus itself has a literary backbone, and from there we step outside of that zone to read in relation to other genres of writing, or other literary genres in relation to what we're reading. Our idea is, and this is the idea of First Year Seminar throughout, is that the faculty who teach this course, are not specialists in the subject they are teaching. So, they are teaching... they are thinking of universally shared modes of reading intellectually, engaging with those literary texts. In addition to what's happening in the classroom, we have roughly every once a month, we have a forum which takes place typically in the Fisher Center, which is the main theater center on campus, which features either an artistic performance that is in conversation with something we are reading in the classroom, or a conversation about... at the beginning of this year we had a conversation about local history and how it relates to some of the texts we're reading, and so on. So, the experience itself is not based on any particular discipline. But it has this literary core, and from it, we have the seminars themselves, we have the conversations happening around them, for the community at large through the forums and so on.

7:32 Daniel: I think it's a great strength of the course, and I think it's worthwhile for students to understand this, that we think a great strength of the course is that the professors – because every student takes this course, so we have to have lots and lots of sections, and obviously, what is it, 35 sections of this course, you're not going to find 35 literature professors at Bard. And so, we have to reach into other fields, but we think that's one of the strongest aspects of the course. Everyone, in a funny way, even the faculty, are coming to it the way the students are coming to it, which is everyone's involved in a common project of being exposed to these texts, and sometimes you're not a great expert on it, but that we think adds to the experience of learning. A lot of the students are in the same boat as the professors. Obviously, the professors have a lot of experience in general with literature and these different fields, but it's a common course, it's a general course, it's about general life questions to which everyone brings something from a slightly different angle. We think that's one of the greatest parts of both teaching the course, and we hope, learning in the course.

(continued)

8:46 Omar: In a very practical way I think, it also breaks assumptions about specialization and professionalization and so on. The idea is that any informed reader, the professor being more experienced, as Daniel said, the students are becoming experienced, can actually open a text, go through it, and get deep into uncovering its logic and engaging with it. So, in that sense it's a strength, and it's built into the logic of the course. To not only have literary scholars, or to have say, historians, or sociologists, or again social scientists who work with texts, but also artists, scientists, so professors whose disciplinary training is not linked to reading texts necessarily, but if they can do it basically, then they become models for the students as well, should never be intimidated by any of those books, should not fear critiquing them, uncovering their logics, getting interested in them.

9:50 Daniel: Or even seeing their weaknesses. Not all of these texts are perfect, they're not all products of cultures that we necessarily approve of, but that's part of the game.

10:02 Lauren: You can tell we're giving long answers to these questions, because it's something we're really passionate about, the pedagogy of the course. One thing I would just add if I can, is that in a lot of places these kinds of mandatory general education courses are sort of lecture courses, right, where you'll get an expert in to talk about Caribbean literature, and then another expert in to talk about Rousseau. That's not the way we do it here, the way we do it, exactly as Omar and Daniel are suggesting, is that your first-year group of around 15 students, will have one faculty member, all semester, to read this kind of arc, to go on this journey together. Not only do you get to know each other, you get to know your professor very, very well. Every group will have a common experience to some extent, but they'll also have a very unique experience. And for me, we've all taught it many times, and now we're leading it, for me that's one of the things I really love about teaching the course, the kind of relationship you start to develop with your students. Meeting up with them as sophomores, to have dinner and see how they're doing! To kind of see what majors they're gone into, and having dinner with them in the dining hall, and it's a very unique and personal experience.

11:09 Daniel: And it does, I mean I think it's also important for people to know, that it does create an intellectual community. Because you know as a student walking from one end of the campus to the other, that every other person that you meet has read the same texts at some point in their career, and that really does create a kind of intellectual community. You can talk to anybody, when you sit down in the dining hall, and you can at least talk about Frederick Douglass, or Rousseau or whatever, because you know that's part of their equipment that they've acquired. I think that's different from many other places. And I think it's one of the special things about First Year Seminar. And it's special for teachers, too, because you know whatever you're teaching, at whatever level, that all of your students have at least read those 11 things and you can always refer to them. So, it has benefits all across the board.

12:02 Mackie: And we did sort of, and I'm glad that Daniel and Lauren that you both mentioned that the reason why there are so many faculty members teaching this course is because they are small. They are 15 person classes, which is something that I think we maybe take for granted, having worked here or gone here, that the small class is really something that contributes to the unique qualities of First Year Seminar, and to classes at Bard in general. But yes, these classes for those listening, are really very small, and you do spend a lot of time with these students and your professor.

12:35 Lauren: And that factors into every part of the pedagogy. I mean not just the discussion and what's going on in the group in conversation, but also with writing. It's really one of the parts of the Bard curriculum that is specifically aimed at helping students developing their writing style and their writing voice. All of the students write a certain number of papers, and every semester for First Year Seminar those are revised. We have a real sort of pedagogy of writing and revision, helping students find their voice, and becoming clearer more confident writers. And you can imagine, with 15 students, and one faculty member, there's a lot of one on one work that can happen with that. That's something that we really try and work hard on.

13:15 Daniel: Yeah, do the math! If you're a professor and there are 40 papers to grade, you're not going to be able to spend as much time on it as if you have only 12 or 15. You can really roll up your sleeves and get involved.

(continued)

13:28 Mackie: I would love to finish, unless Josh you have any other questions that come to mind, with asking you if there's any advice that you would offer a student that is considering Bard, and then considering this entire curriculum, and how they might think about approaching First Year Seminar, how they could prepare, I suppose.

13:53 Daniel: Well, there's a lot of conversation, and certainly students who are thinking of choosing colleges are aware of these conversations about great books courses, mandatory common courses, and it's a subject of discussion. One of the things we encourage, and this is the only piece of advice I would give to a student, is the point is not to intimidate people into being convinced that these are the greatest texts ever written. The point is to argue. Always remember that. You can push back. You can think Plato is not so great, you can have an argument with Homer. You can be skeptical about Rousseau or Frederick Douglass or whoever it is. That's the point of assembling in small groups, and really being able to roll up your sleeves and take a bite out of these texts. The point is not to cower you into submission. The point is to really say what are these things about? Are they as great as they're cracked up to be? Or why did people think they were great at some point? Don't be intimidated. Push back. The price of admission is not that you have to love everything, or agree with everything. The price of admission is that you have to be able to have an intelligent argument with the text.

15:18 Omar: The language of a mandatory course, a common course, et cetera, suggests that the students have no choice, and this creates a certain expectation of what these are going to look like. But just exactly as Daniel was describing, in the section, we want the students to take control, take charge of the course, and to really decide for themselves, as they sharpen their analytical tools, their tools of writing, close reading, those kinds of universal skills that will be useful for them throughout their college experience and beyond, they can use this common course to sharpen those tools, basically. They will find, I'm sure, many inspiring ideas in those texts, but that is a secondary effect of why we've created this course.

16:10 Lauren: I'll be the practical one. You can go on our website, you can google Bard First Year Seminar, I think it's bard.edu/fysem, and take a look at the current syllabus. We have listings of all of the events that all of our first-year students are enjoying right now. We had a performance of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, we're going to have professional actors come in and perform scenes from *The Tempest*. Take a look at what's going on right now and see if it's the kind of thing that appeals to you.

16:36 Omar: And the profiles of the faculty teaching it, it's a very wide range of faculty with very different disciplinary trainings, and backgrounds.

16:45 Lauren: That's right, you can read their biographies, read their profiles. They may not necessarily be teaching you, but it certainly gives you a sense of who we are and what we do.

16:54 Mackie: Great! Well, thank you all very much for joining us, it's been a lot of fun and I hope we've answered some of your questions, listeners, about First Year Seminar. If you do have other questions for us about First Year Seminar, or about admission, Bard College in general, please reach out to us at admission@bard.edu, or give us a call at the Admission Office. Our number is on the website. Thanks so much for listening!

17:20 Josh: Thanks everybody! We look forward to next time.