A Second Call for “I”-Series Courses

Earlier this semester, the University’s Task Force on General Education initiated the pilot signature set of courses for the nascent General Education Curriculum. The faculty responded enthusiastically, and eventually the Committee received more than 50 proposals for innovative courses. Only 20 courses could be selected for this first round, and sadly many excellent proposals had to be turned away. The finalists were announced on October 19, and since then the selected courses have been placed in the Spring 2010 schedule of classes. Student interest appears to be high. Against this background, Provost Nariman Farvardin and Senate President Elise Miller-Hooks, with the support of Dean for Undergraduate Studies Donna Hamilton, have decided to continue and expand the “I”-Series Course pilot into academic year 2010-2011. These new “I”-Series courses offer another opportunity for faculty to add new, intellectually engaging courses to the undergraduate curriculum.

This RFP calls for proposals for a second group of signature courses for the new General Education program, 40 to be taught in the Fall semester and 40 in the Spring. Some of these courses will repeat those already part of the “I”-Series course repertoire. But many will be new, enlarging and deepening the pilot program. As with the Spring 2010 pilot, faculty who create new “I”-Series courses will receive a stipend and additional resources to support the course. They (or their department) will be asked to teach their course at least twice during the next two academic years, if the campus adopts the new General Education program. Please read this Request for Proposals carefully and with an eye to creating a new course or reconfiguring an existing course to address the signature as described below.

As in the first call for proposals, the Task Force seeks courses that meet established goals of the University’s undergraduate program: critical thinking, effective communication skills, media literacy, technology fluency, and human understanding. Chosen signature courses will improve undergraduate pedagogies and academic culture, elevate the level of intellectual engagement on campus, foster faculty mentorship, and increase students’ commitment to their own education. “I”-Series courses are designed to engage students from all majors in thinking about pressing issues from a variety of academic perspectives. In short, the signature courses allow the University of Maryland to continue to strengthen its place among national leaders in undergraduate teaching and learning.

Background: Changes in General Education

The University’s new strategic plan, adopted in 2008, charged the Task Force on General Education with revising the University’s General Education Curriculum. That work is ongoing,
addressing, among other matters, revised requirements for Distributive and Fundamental studies as well as matters of diversity. However, the Committee has established an outline of what it believes will be the signature of the new General Education program: novel courses that are issue-driven explorations into a variety of intellectual endeavors.

The first set of “I”-Series courses (See http://www.provost.umd.edu/GenEd2009/) provides models for proposers who seek to develop new signature courses. This first set uniformly features engaging topics that are issues of societal concern and include both present-day problems and timeless dilemmas of human society. Some “I”-Series courses are interdisciplinary, while others examine compelling subjects through a single disciplinary lens. All selected courses focus on intellectually engaging readings and other instructional materials, and all employ pedagogies that lead to active learning and student engagement. Students in “I”-Series courses will read and write, but they will discuss, debate, explore resources, and present results of research to their peers.

Until the new plan for General Education is approved, the “I”-Series courses will meet qualifications for CORE general education categories. They will be academically demanding, will cover significant materials, and will require that students participate in their own learning through discussion, research and writing.

The “I”-Series Course Signature

As the centerpiece of the University’s new General Education program, “I”-Series courses will become the intellectual and pedagogical marker for which the University of Maryland is known: broad, analytical thinking about significant issues. In branding the University’s General Education curriculum, the signature courses begin the process of defining what is unique about education at the University of Maryland. Through these courses, students will be challenged from their first moments on campus to master the intellectual tools needed to wrestle with matters of great weight and consequence, the so-called Big Questions.

A signature course could take students inside a new field of study, where they may glimpse the utility, elegance and beauty of disciplines that were previously unknown, unwanted, disparaged, or despised. Students may be able to see how such areas of investigation could become a subject for extended study, a major, or even a lifetime commitment. By addressing both contemporary problems and the enduring issues of human existence, the signature courses will speak to the University’s historic role both as a timeless repository of human knowledge and as a source of solutions to burning issues of the day. At their best, the signature courses might do both. The “I” Series offers extraordinary opportunities for increasing the level of intellectual discourse on campus and for providing occasions where new pedagogical methods may be introduced. The possibilities are large and exciting. (For more a more detailed description of the “I”-Series courses, please refer to Appendix B of this document.)

Information for Faculty Submitting Proposals

To expand our pilot test of the “I”-Series in practice, the University will accept up to 40 “I”-Series courses in Fall 2010 and another 40 in Spring 2011. Again, each college will be expected to sponsor at least one new “I”-Series course. Deans and department chairs will take responsibility for each such course to support the “I” Series much as they do CORE or the recent...
innovation of Marquee Courses in Science and Technology (see http://www.marqueecourses.umd.edu/aboutmarquee.html). The Task Force welcomes new courses in all fields, as well as established courses that can be reconfigured to meet the requirements of the “I” Series.

Each “I”-Series course that is selected as a new offering will receive a faculty overload payment of $5,000. Funding for one Graduate Teaching Assistant will also be provided.

PLEASE NOTE THIS CHANGE: submissions will go first to the department chair and to the office of the dean of the home college of the proposing faculty member (by a deadline established by the college). For example, a proposer who is an English professor will submit their proposal to their chair and to the Dean’s Office in the College of Arts and Humanities. Committees in each college will rank proposals from that college and send all proposals and their rankings to the Task Force on General Education by 5:00 p.m. on January 22, 2010.

Professor Ira Berlin chairs the Task Force, jointly appointed by the Provost and the University Senate. Members of the Task Force, with input from the rankings of the colleges, will evaluate the proposals and notify professors whose courses have been selected for inclusion in this second group by February 3, 2010. The Task force will also notify deans and department chairs on February 3. A public announcement of winners will be made on Friday, February 5.

Publicity about “I”-Series courses will appear on the Provost’s website and in campus media. Most importantly, scheduling offices in home departments will ensure that each new “I”-Series course will be scheduled and listed in Testudo to be available as students register for Fall 2010. Sixty percent of seats in these courses will be reserved for students who have completed less than 60 credits. A complete timeline for the “I”-Series course process, along with other requirements for proposals, can be found in Appendix A of this document.

Proposal Specifics

Each proposal for an “I”-Series course will be submitted by faculty members (assistant, associate or full professors; also full-time lecturers) to their department chairs and to their college deans, who in turn will rank the set of proposals in the college and forward proposal materials in pdf format to Professor Ira Berlin, Chair, The Task Force on Undergraduate Education, in care of Ms. Helena Iles, at hiles@umd.edu.

Proposals should be no more than two pages, outlining the problem or question to be addressed and briefly stating its significance. Proposals should then explain, again briefly, what problem or question forms the focus of the course and how this question will provide a useful platform on which to build an “I”-Series course as described in this document. Each course that is proposed must address a topic of significant interest from one or more disciplinary perspectives. Proposals must explain how courses engage students in thought-provoking reading and discussion, encourage timely projects and presentations, and perhaps inspire research and reaction papers. All proposals need to explain what makes the proposed course an “I”-Series course.

Proposals must consider that the audience for the “I”-Series courses will be large and active. Students in “I”-Series courses will be expected to take responsibility for their learning and for demonstrating their mastery of the material in their course work. Courses will be expected to attract
an initial enrollment of between 60 and 100 students and to be offered at least once each academic year.

Selected courses, if not already CORE approved, will be eligible for provisional CORE status with an appropriate category designation. Once a new General Education plan is adopted, each course will be evaluated for an appropriate category in the new framework. At the end of the pilot period, “I”-Series courses will be collectively assessed for appropriate learning outcomes.

Questions about “I”-Series course proposals may be addressed to Task Force members Betsy Beise, Associate Provost for Academic Programs at beise@umd.edu, or to Katherine McAdams, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies at mcadams@umd.edu.

Specific details that must be included in each proposal are listed in Appendix B of this document.
Appendix A
Guidelines for Proposals for “I”-Series Courses

Proposals will be submitted to college deans, through department chairs, by a deadline set by each college.

Deans will submit all proposals in pdf format, with rankings, by 5:00 p.m. Friday, January 22, 2010. Proposal materials will go to Professor Ira Berlin, in care of Helena Iles at hiles@umd.edu.

Submitting faculty members, their deans and their department chairs will be notified of selections for the new set of “I”-Series courses on Wednesday, February 3, 2010. The public announcement date will be Friday, February 5, 2010.

Proposals should include the following information:

- Course title. (Titles must be to the point, engaging, and an accurate description of course content.)
- Course description in 200 words or less.
- Proposed course size.
- Need for Undergraduate or Graduate TAs.
- Description of the role of TAs.

Proposals will answer the following questions:

- How does the course fulfill the mission of the “I”-Series courses?
- How will the course provide valuable knowledge to students in all majors?
- How will the course be evaluated?
- How will student learning be assessed?
- Please include two or three sentences that could be used to advertise your course to students. Again, this should be to the point, engaging, and an accurate description of course content.

Proposal Requirements:

All “I”-Series courses will be taught by tenured and tenure-track faculty or by full-time lecturers or professors of the practice. Faculty will be named in the proposal.

Course proposals will bear college or departmental approval and signatures.

Courses must be self-sustaining, that is designed so that others might teach the same course in the future.

Course enrollment will be approximately 60 to 100 students, and courses must be designed to involve recitation, discussion, or learning laboratories for this size class.

Courses must engage students in critical reading, writing, and discussion, and/or making
formal presentations in groups or as individuals.

Proposing faculty members must be willing to participate in meetings of “I”-Series faculty and TAs.

It is expected that all “I”-Series faculty and TAs will meet twice as a group during the Spring 2010 semester to discuss goals and progress of the courses.
Appendix B

The “I”-Series courses bearing the University’s signature will investigate significant issues with imagination and intellect with a belief that they will inspire future investigation and provide concrete mechanisms to implement innovative ideas. Not surprisingly, the Committee has tentatively called the courses the “I” Series: Issues, Imagination, Intellect, Investigation, Inspiration, and Implementation.

The “I” Series attempts to view large problems from the perspective of defined disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives (for example, cognitive science or African American studies) and particular fields of study (for example, engineering or education). “I”-Series courses have two purposes: first to investigate a significant matter in depth and second to understand how particular disciplines or fields of study address problems. How does a biologist, engineer, poet, or sociologist think about human diversity? (The “I”-Series draws upon the successful Marquee Courses in Science and Technology, first developed in 2007 to increase scientific knowledge and engagement among students who are not science majors).

“I”-Series courses are not surveys. Their goals do not focus primarily on coverage of specific knowledge: for example, mastery of the basic facts of plant biology, early modern history between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, or the course of romantic poetry. Instead, they provide students with the basic concepts, approaches, and vocabulary of particular disciplines and fields of study and an understanding of how to employ those concepts, approaches, and vocabulary. Indeed, while “I”-Series courses ask questions—when did life begin? What is the solution to the energy crisis? How can poverty be abolished? Why the Holocaust?—they do not necessarily attempt to answer them. Rather, they aim to examine the ways in which diverse intellectual traditions address those questions.

Courses in the “I”-Series aim to speak both to students with a deep interest and even a degree of expertise in the matter at hand and also to students unfamiliar with the subject but eager to expand their knowledge. Considering this diverse audience, faculty members are not expected to teach a traditional introductory course in their discipline, but rather to use their disciplines to teach students about how a scholar or practitioner approaches the question at hand. Many of the courses will be problem-based, requiring students to struggle with contemporary issues or challenges (for example, global warming, immigration, health policy), while others will address the ageless dilemmas of human existence (for example, political power, war, sexuality, ecological sustainability, wealth distribution, leadership). Rather than focusing on the broad content of a discipline, courses in the “I” Series will aim to equip students with the intellectual tools required to address major questions and issues around which the course is organized. The depth of knowledge involved should be approximately what an attorney preparing for a case or a congressional aide preparing for a hearing would need to know.

By focusing on a specific problem or issue, the students will gain an understanding of the processes, policies, and disciplines employed by a scholar or practitioner to approach problems: What information is needed to address a specific problem? Where can that information be found? What constraints limit the application of potential solutions? How does one discover what is known on a topic? How does one confirm the reliability of information? What is the process used to acquire new
information? How is information applied to provide a solution to a problem? What methods can be employed to assess results or to validate conclusions? Students should develop an understanding and appreciation of how knowledge is created and applied, how it evolves through publication and peer review, and how conflicting theories are reconciled. In short, “T”-Series courses can be eminently practical or deeply theoretical. In either case, they incorporate transferable skills, among them writing, oral presentations, and the use of library resources and other research techniques.