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“Ya Gotta Declare Yourself”:

Reshaping the Sophomore Year at St. Lawrence University

Since I began working in Academic Advising in the fall of 2005, I have become convinced that, now institutionalized as it is, the FYP needs to be followed up in the sophomore year with other initiatives that build on and extend it. The FYP-FYS sequence, while helping students make the transition from high school to college, teaches basic skills and raises critical questions. It is an apt start, certainly. During the second year, following this, students continue the process and also explore their options more broadly—taking into account their possible life and career trajectories—once they have made the transition to St. Lawrence and have settled in here. That year is one of both exploration and anxiety, a time during which many students could use more help in sorting out personal directions. We need to offer this help *before* these students have committed to a major. That is, we need to do more during the sophomore year.

The purpose of this paper is to offer some context for a broader discussion of the sophomore year at St. Lawrence and to propose some modest Sophomore initiatives to complement and extend the work done in the FYP. The operative word here is “modest,” for any such development needs to be achieved within existing structures and offerings.

## Characteristics of the Sophomore Year

The historian William Cronon has argued in “‘Only Connect . . .’: The Goals of a Liberal Education” that a “liberal education is not something any of us ever *achieve*; it is not a *state*. Rather, it is a way of living in the face of our own ignorance, a way of groping toward wisdom in full recognition of our own folly, a way of educating ourselves without any illusion that our education will ever be complete” (79). As faculty who regularly teach in the FYP—and those who teach first-year students in other venues as well—know, these students often initially approach their college courses with the attitude that there *are* always answers to be found, and that the teacher has them to give. These students in effect say to us, “Give me the answers” or “Tell me what you want.” Those who persist with this point-of-view as they proceed with college-level work are frustrated in their courses, certainly, but during the first year most make a shift in the direction of Cronon’s assertion. They realize the truth of what the typographically challenged poet e.e.cummings embodied in a line: “remember seek(forgetting find)” (688). As Cronon maintains, seeking is at the very heart of what a liberal education is and, in his fine article, he articulates not only its direction but he also defines ten characteristics of a liberally educated person. The very characteristics we wish to instill and develop in our students, certainly.

In most ways, First-Year students are unable during their first year to really get all this going. They are in a new place, their decision to come to St. Lawrence in some sense equivocal, they have to make friends and figure interpersonal things out with a roommate and within the tight circumference of a FY College, they are no longer at home so they are missing people there and, to top things off, we faculty demand that they see education

differently. Often too they are on a team. It's a phenomenally busy year. No wonder that most students see the first year as something of a rush—a period of time in which details blur, one thing leading swiftly to the next. And then it's May.

This year is followed, usually, with a summer at home—the place they left the previous August and one that, mostly because of what has occurred in the meantime, just does not seem to be the same place. Whatever they do then, students often describe this summer as a time of reflection, a time during which they are able to think about what has just happened. When they return to St. Lawrence in the fall to begin their sophomore year, these students are very aware that they are no longer new and special, as they were the year before; that they already know the place, its workings, and some of its people. They return here heading toward something, and they do so with the awareness that St. Lawrence is no longer a new place: it is *their* place. And while attitudes and understandings vary considerably, most students begin their sophomore year with an awareness that they need to decide just what they will do with the three years of college they have left at St. Lawrence. A major is part of this equation, certainly, but it is a very long way from all of it. Study abroad options, minors, professional preparation (for example, for a health career, for law, for graduate school), career possibilities and attendant internships, and other issues impinge on their thinking.

Given this position—between a past childhood and high-school experience at home and the possibilities of the next three years at college—it is not surprising that the sophomore year is a time of confusion, questioning, and some exploration. In keeping with this, at St. Lawrence sophomores come into Academic Advising on their own at a far greater rate than members of any other class, and the questions they bring are usually

more philosophical than functional. Because, like most liberal arts colleges, we require sophomores to declare a major by the end of March during the spring semester, some portion of this inquiry is major related, yet much of it is not; it is broader, very much the sort of seeking inquiry which Cronon describes as “groping toward wisdom in the face of our own folly.” Fair enough: the word “sophomore,” from the Greek, means “wise fool”—the second year of college is a time for sophomore students to be, as they become the adults they are becoming, both wise and foolish. As Cronon asserts, such an oxymoronic position is at the very heart of the liberal arts.

It is during the sophomore year, too, that colleges see a continuation of student departures at a high rate, either for purposes of transferring to another college or to leave college altogether. For some this is simply a cost-benefit problem—we have all known students who came to St. Lawrence in the first place without a clear sense of why they were doing so, and some first-year students have always displayed behaviors suggesting that they are not mature enough to do serious academic work in a focused way. That said about matters of attrition and retention, it is also quite possible to argue that liberal arts colleges, after attracting high-school seniors with promises of close student-faculty interaction, lose some of those students after the first year because we have failed to deliver on those promises.

Not much of this is news, certainly. College administrators have become increasingly aware of the importance of the sophomore year—many schools have appointed people whose responsibilities are focused on second-year students. There is a growing body of scholarly literature focused on sophomores, and in this work it has become common to refer to the “sophomore slump” or to call a student’s second year in

college “the lost year” (see, for example, Schreiner and Pattengale, Schaller, Gahagad and Hunter, Powers). Some colleges have begun programs aimed specifically at sophomores—for example, Beloit College has had a “Sophomore Year Initiative” for fifteen years, Colgate has “Sophomores and a Good Book” and Colorado has a “Sophomore Jump” program (see, respectively, Flanagan, Taylor and Bellani, and Stockenberg). During 2006-07, St. Lawrence joined a consortium of four selective liberal arts colleges—with Colorado College, Connecticut College, and Skidmore College—to study the attitudes and expectations of our sophomore students under the aegis of a grant from the Teagle Foundation, “Engaging Sophomore Students with Deliberative Dialogues: A Pilot Project to Enhance Liberal Learning.” In June 2007 the consortium sponsored a day-long pre-conference workshop on the sophomore year held at St. Lawrence prior to our conference on the first year to celebrate the Twentieth Anniversary of the First Year Program. The workshop was conducted by Jane E. Pizzolato (University of Pittsburgh) and Molly A. Schaller (University of Dayton), two of the leading scholars working on the sophomore year.

Viewing the college years developmentally and certainly consistent with my own experience as a faculty member and one working in Academic Advising, Schaller has argued that the first year is one of “random exploration” while the second is one of “focused exploration”—after that comes a “tentative commitment” to a major and a career direction and, in the senior year, a firm “commitment.” Pizzolato, for her part, has examined and elaborated the technique of “self-authorship,” in which advising sessions are explicitly designed to focus on personal goal selection and career planning—students

are asked to formally reflect on their goals through written assignments done before such advising sessions.

Taken together, the various issues I have briefly sketched out here suggest that the developmental circumstances of sophomores require more, not less, academic advising. That advising needs to be of a broader nature than mere course or major selection; it needs to provide space for students to reflect explicitly on their own goals, to talk to one another about those goals, and wonder over the examples of the well-lived lives they of which happen to be aware. And while the scholarly literature certainly suggests that all colleges ought to have advising-related programs aimed directly at these needs of sophomores, it is also clear that such programs are a particular necessity for liberal arts colleges given the promises we make in the admissions process.

### **The Peculiar Circumstances of St. Lawrence Sophomores**

While it might be reasonably argued that every sophomore, irrespective of the college attended, faces these issues, each college defines its own context within its own program. At St. Lawrence, because of the structure of the First Year Program—the fact that the academic advisor is also one of her first teachers—St. Lawrence students are in a peculiar position vis-à-vis their advisors once the first semester is over. When the FYP was a year-long program (up until 2000), the second semester was frequently a time when advisee and advisor consolidated their relationship in light of their shared experiences during the first semester. Separate First Year Seminars have changed that relation. While most of us believe that allowing students to elect FY seminars based on interests is a vast improvement over the former year-long FYP course, there is no

question that the creation of interest-based FY seminars diminished the advising relationship created in the full-year FYP. While some small portion of FY students follow their advisors into a First Year Seminar, most do not. That they do not is indicative both of larger developmental issues and those specific to St. Lawrence because of the FYP.

Thus the intensity of the first semester's advisor-advisee contacts is now frequently followed with might be called "advising drift"—that is, both advisor and advisee have to consciously connect during the second semester and into the sophomore year (since most students retain the same advisor for two years). Often by mutual consent, this does not happen. Students—and especially young men, it frequently seems—look at their "FYP Advisor" (as these faculty are often called) as harkening from an earlier, more naïve, time in their college career. That is, the advisor is associated with a student's first, neophyte, semester—a time she or he has grown beyond. Advisors, for their part, often have a new group of first-year students who have, in effect, supplanted the students from the previous year's class. In some sense, then, our sophomores *are* lost—no longer in the FYP class and college, in a new living environment, launched on an academic path that is still not altogether clear, and having (or choosing to have) to seek advice on their own. While the degree to which these generalizations are true of any single student varies, there is no question but that some large portion of our sophomores could use more formal help in making their decisions.

**“Ya Gotta Declare Yourself!”: The Background of a Sophomore Advising Program  
at St. Lawrence University**

Since the 2005-06 academic year, the Office of Academic Advising has begun coordinating a variety of initiatives aimed at sophomores. Working with colleagues in student affairs, especially Peg Kelsey Cornwell, former Project Director of the Leadership Academy and advisor to the Sophomore Council, and Carol Bate, Director of Career Services and Leadership Education, we have been piloting a program called “Ya Gotta Declare Yourself!” Its colloquial name is meant to both catch attention and to highlight a sophomore student’s most pressing obligation: declaring a major, certainly, but as each does that she is also declaring a direction for personal inquiry—by avocation, by intended career path, by the range of interests which the person wishes to pursue.

Before describing the program in any detail, some background information about the programs run in Career Services and Leadership Education. That office has long organized and run “Charting Your Career Path,” a six-part workshop for sophomores in which participants “identify their skills, interests, values, and aspects of their personality that are important when making career-related decisions, and will learn the fundamentals of decision-making and goal setting.” It regularly fills up, as does that office’s “Shadow a Saint” program, which gives “students a chance to spend a day with an alumnus/a in his or her place of employment,” usually between their first year and their second (Career Services). Given that these programs, as well as others, are well-established already, the academic initiative which “Ya Gotta Declare Yourself!” represents is serving as a complement to them.

In large measure copying what Colorado College calls its “Sophomore Jump” program, “Ya Gotta Declare Yourself!” has sponsored a series of sophomore dinners during 2006-07 and now, under the Teagle grant, during 2007-08. Held in Herring-Cole,

each of these dinners has featured a group of about twenty sophomores and a faculty speaker identified and invited by the students themselves. The speakers have been asked to offer an intellectual autobiography, to retrospectively explain the process and path that led them to St. Lawrence. So far speakers have included Margaret Kent Bass (English), Bob Cowser (English), Richard Jenseth (English), Patti Frazer Lock (Mathematics, Computer Science, and Statistics), Assis Malaquias (Government), Alan Searleman (Psychology) and Robert Wells (*emeritus* Government).

This academic year, because of the terms of the Teagle grant, we have had the same student groups back a second time and the discussion at the second meeting has been recorded and transcribed. Those of us who have led these discussions have been struck by just how animated the students were, how keen they were to discuss the differences they felt, and how anxious they were about the many things they felt impinging on them as sophomores. In addition to the discussions, students have completed pre- and post-presentation forms in which they spoke directly to many concerns: doing better in classes so as to go abroad, to get an internship, or to get into graduate school; to clarify their personal goals which, one wrote, is “more important than changing the world” while another wrote just the opposite; and many admitted to worrying about loan debt, figuring out a direction they would be comfortable with, deciding on the right major, and wondering over whether or not they would ever be “completely prepared for life.”

As these initial responses indicate, these dinners are proving successful and our students’ responses certainly appear to be in keeping with what Schaller, Pizzolato, and others argue are characteristic of college sophomores. Even so, it is clear that St.

Lawrence has reached a point at which we need to consider other initiatives aimed at sophomores under the “Ya Gotta Declare Yourself!” program. Specifically, we need to consider the sophomore year more as the site of focused exploration rather than, as is arguably so now, a year to be gotten through on the way to a major. The FYP allows us a strong institutional foundation that could serve to launch two additional sophomore initiatives in particular.

Each of these, by way of the first year, might rest on the concept of “self authorship.” An illustration: over the past three years, in concert with the summer advising program run by the First Year Program, many incoming first-year students have been asked by their advisors to write the a letter of introduction in which they explain their background, aspirations, and reasons for coming to St. Lawrence. While the utility of the response has varied, of course, there is little doubt that asking such questions elicits what might be called a “deep response” from many incoming students, who see such questioning as just why they are coming to a liberal arts college. But given the rush of the first year, the FYP is not the place to institutionalize such a process of self-authorship. The sophomore year is.

### **Proposed Academic Additions to the “Ya Gotta Declare Yourself!” Program**

*Sophomore Seminars.* Beginning with the fall 2008 semester, at least four faculty members will pilot a series of .5 unit sophomore seminars as special-topic courses in their respective departments or programs. These will be offered in the departments and programs during the fall semester (at least initially) and coordinated (and advertised to sophomores) by the Office of Academic Advising. Offered once a week for 90 minutes

(or more frequently for shorter periods), these seminars will be characterized by two features: first, they will focus on questions of personal values and direction and, second, they will involve student responding to course materials in ways that encourage them to examine their own direction and to ask where their education is taking them. In addition, these seminars will be small by design and will also serve as a deft way to further explain the disciplinary practices at hand. That is, these seminars might well be used as spaces to recruit majors since, most likely, students will take sophomore seminars in departments and programs which they are considering as possible majors.

Attached here as appendices are a proposed seminar syllabus by Laura Rediehs (Philosophy), “The Meaning of Life,” along with descriptions of two others, one by Steve Horwitz (Economics) and another by me to be offered in English. (Parenthetically, these .5 unit seminars will also be utilitarian—they will allow students to earn the .5 unit required of all St. Lawrence students sometime during their four years. Right now, about half of our seniors still need to earn .5 as they begin their last year. Also, since students may take up to 4.75 units for the comprehensive fee, these seminars would not usually involve an overload.)

*Sophomore Mentors.* As already explained, owing to the structure of the FYP, students frequently return to campus in the fall of their sophomore year with little inclination to see much of their advisor. Sometimes this owes to a particular experience (disciplinary or academic-honesty issues, incompatibility), but often this disinclination is a matter of the student feeling otherwise directed. That is, the advisor reminds them of who they were during their first semester and, in the last year, they know they have changed a lot. Given

this, it makes sense to recruit and coordinate a cadre of “sophomore mentors,” designated faculty—from across the divisions—available and willing to connect with these students. Some of these people, doubtless, would be teaching a sophomore seminar, but they might also be faculty whose advising load is low owing their particular circumstances (small number of majors in the department or not in the FYP). Steve Horwitz plans to hand out a change-of-advisor/major card with the syllabus and, as a function of his seminar, discuss the various advising options available to sophomores. Having sophomore mentors willing to step in, too, would simplify the present (and often awkward) practice of reassigning students when their FYP advisor goes on leave. Many second-semester first-year students and some sophomores are simply not ready to declare a major yet, nor to even take tentative steps in that direction, so having designated mentors would certainly appeal to them.

I would envision that those faculty offering sophomore seminars and those willing to serve as Sophomore Mentors would, by virtue of that willingness, become a defined group. As such, it will make sense for this group to meet periodically to exchange views, to discuss the advising goals of the seminars, to talk about the ways that the APR system might be used as a site of student reflection (one that can be viewed by major advisor once a student has declared), and to hear speakers who have something to say about the sophomore year. More than this, such a group of faculty would be well-poised to participate in a discussion of the various issues involved in moving newly arrived first-year students to a major. As it is now, we simply ask our students to declare a major. But if, as Cronon asserts, an liberal arts education is a process, “a way of groping toward wisdom in full recognition of our own folly,” we may want to make our major declaration

process very much a part of this groping, less a simple declaration—the filling out and signing of our ubiquitous yellow card—but rather an assertion, and application, and explanation. Some departments ask prospective majors to explain themselves, to detail their accomplishments and interests in the subject, before they are admitted to the major. We may talk about requiring this of all our students as we consider various competency-based outcomes.

Wise fools that we all are, still groping with our own folly as we continue our own liberal education, we could certainly do worse than concentrate on our sophomores, our own wise fools, teaching them in specially designed seminars and mentoring them toward better understandings of the meaning of life. The poet cummings had it right: “remember seek(forgetting find)” (688).

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## APPENDICES

## Sample Sophomore Seminars

**Sophomore Seminar: The Meaning of Life**

(Laura Rediehs)

As a sophomore, you don't have to figure out the full meaning of life, thank goodness: you only have to declare a major! Yet, somehow, even this comparatively simple task can seem overwhelmingly daunting. In fact, a careful consideration of some of the grand philosophical questions about life can be helpful in providing a basis for making our most important choices in life, including one's choice of a major. In this half-unit course, we will read through and discuss one of the most fascinating philosophical works ever written, Plato's *Republic*. It is a book that reflects in depth on human nature and ambitiously tries to create a perfect world. It is a book that is all about how to live life well. It explores the question of what counts as true wisdom, and the question of how an educational system should be structured. It ends with a dramatic story about the choosing of lives. How much did *you* drink from the River of Forgetfulness—enough to forget who you are, or *just* enough to *just* remember, step by step, what you really hope your life to be like? You'll get to discuss questions like this (and receive *credit* for it!) if you take this course.

Dual-listed as ND 1xx, and PHIL 1xx

I'd like to offer two sections, one meeting on Tuesdays for 1 ½ hours once per week; the other meeting on Thursdays at that same time.

I'd like to cap each section at 10.

Course schedule:

Week 1: Introduction to Course; Preliminary Discussion about liberal education, the links to Plato's *Republic* (where an educational system is outlined that has some interesting resemblances to our own), and the Meaning of Life.

Week 2: Plato's *Republic*, Book I. Discussion Questions:

- Is there a truth, or is there only power?
- Is it better to seek truth, or to seek power?
- What is power for?
- What is harm?
- Is it ever just to harm anyone? If so, who, and why? (If you fulfilled those characteristics in relation to someone else, is it just for them to harm you?)
- What is justice?
- What is the best way to learn the truth?
- What kinds of dialogues/debates/discussions are there? What are their purposes?

Week 3: Plato's *Republic*, Book II. Discussion Questions:

- What is the just society?
- What is the just person?
- Do we have "fevered souls," and if so, do we need to keep them in check? What is the best way to do this?

Week 4: Plato's *Republic*, Book III. Discussion Questions:

- Do you think that people are born with certain inclinations, or are they wide open to all possibilities at birth?
- In the city are guardians. What plays this role in individual human souls?
- Why does it matter how the guardians are educated?
- What do you think is most important in early education?

Week 5: Plato's *Republic*, Book IV. Discussion Questions:

- Plato thinks the soul is structured by virtues. Do you agree or disagree? What do you think human nature is made up of?
- Do you strive to be an excellent person? What does this mean to you?

Week 6: Plato's *Republic*, Book V. Discussion Questions:

- Plato has an innovative idea about how to liberate women from taking care of the children and the household, and giving them full access to the kinds of roles and jobs that men have. Most people are outraged at Plato's solution. Can you think of a better solution?
- Plato discusses who is least likely to be a good ruler, and who is most likely to be a good ruler. What is this difference? Do you agree or disagree?

Week 7: Plato's *Republic*, Book VI. Discussion Questions:

- What is wisdom?
- What analogies does Plato use to describe wisdom?
- How would you describe wisdom?

Week 8: Plato's *Republic*, Book VII. Discussion Questions:

- Discuss the famous "cave" analogy. What is Plato doing, in relation to the rest of his book, by presenting this analogy? (What question is he trying to answer, and how does this analogy answer that question?)
- The cave analogy is cited out of context so often because it is so striking and applies to life in so many ways. What does it mean to you? Does it apply to your own life in any way?

Week 9: Plato's *Republic*, Book VII continued. Discussion Questions:

- Plato describes the ideal education of the ruler. Map this out. Compare with higher education today. Discuss the major similarities and differences. What do you think is the ideal education for a leader?
- What do you think is *your* ideal education?

Week 10: Plato's *Republic*, Book VIII. Discussion Questions:

- Here Plato describes the four corrupt kinds of governments. But remember that examining the structure of society is, in the *Republic*, for the purpose of examining in detail the structure of the human soul, and so do these four kinds of corrupt government correspond to four kinds of corrupt people?
- How would we translate these into how we understand human nature today?
- Was Plato's account of four kinds of corruption accurate, and complete?

Week 11: Plato's *Republic*, Book IX. Discussion Questions:

- What is happiness?
- Who are the happiest people?
- Is happiness a worthy life-goal?

Week 12: Plato's *Republic*, Book X. Discussion Questions:

- Why is Plato so hard on art and poetry? What exactly does he mean by these?

Week 13: Plato's *Republic*, Book X continued. Discussion Questions:

- The *Republic* ends with the Myth of Er. Do you believe that you have the power to choose your life?

Week 14: Course conclusion: The Rest of Your Life

The assignments will be:

1. Ongoing written reflections in response to the readings and class discussions to be shared on the ANGEL system. The focus of these assignments will be to help the students formulate their own responses to these questions, as a way of clarifying who they are, how they regard human nature, and how they wish to structure their educations and their lives.
2. A final integrative essay due at the end of the course in the form of a letter written to their intended major advisor that would serve as an "application" for their intended major (or double-major, or major and minor).

Econ 248A and B: Two Great Books (.5 unit).

Steve Horwitz, Department of Economics

This course will meet for 90 minutes each week and will be a semester-long discussion of two great books by economists chosen because the authors disagree significantly on some of the most fundamental issues in social thought. This fall we will read books by F. A. Hayek and John Kenneth Galbraith, two of the most prolific and wide-ranging economists and social thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our collective project in this class will be to understand what each author is trying to argue, examine how and why they disagree with each other, and to explore the relationships between their views and social issues of contemporary concern. In addition, this course will ask you to write and speak with each other as part of the learning process and will focus on improving those skills as you begin to articulate your own perspective on the issues under discussion. In particular, we will pay attention to what it means to talk with, and learn from, people who disagree with you, and how such situations can lead to real learning rather than frustration or anger. Finally, you will be asked to be consciously reflective about the ways in which the experience of confronting serious thinkers, including your peers, who disagree in good faith speaks to the learning goals of St. Lawrence and a liberal education more generally. *Prerequisite:* Econ 100 or Permission of the Instructor. *Open only to Sophomores.*

Proposed English 248 (.5 Unit) Course

Robert Thacker

Sophomore Seminar: What's Important to Me? Reading Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*

Dedicating a copy of her just-published novel, *The Professor's House* (1925), to Robert Frost, Willa Cather (1873-1947) called it "a story of letting go with the heart," echoing one of the poet's own lines. To another person she wrote that it was "a nasty, grim little tale" and wondered why it was selling so well. Other contemporaries called it a middle-aged story and, writing about it since, biographers and critics have seen *The Professor's House* as indicative of Cather's own midlife crisis at the time.

While this may not sound like a promising book for a group of young people still beginning their lives, their educations, and their careers, it really is. Set in the middle of the "Jazz Age" of the 1920s made famous by F. Scott Fitzgerald's writing generally and his *The Great Gatsby* particularly, *The Professor's House* is a detailed meditation on personal values, social values, and the meaning of each person's life. How should I best spend my time?, it asks. What questions, issues, and things are most important to me? Should I be altruistic or narcissistic? What are the ultimate meanings I find in work, in family, in friends? Cather accomplishes this interplay of issues by creating a unique form for her story: there is an inset short story that might stand alone but it is set within the bookends of two other narrative sections that render the professor's personal and family life story, a place which complicates its meanings and foregrounds the conflicting values between and among characters.

Our seminar's purpose will be to read the novel carefully and completely, to contextualize it within Cather's career and within the history it delimits, and to wonder over and debate the questions of values it raises as they apply to each of us in our lives today.

Meets once a week for 90 minutes; enrollment limited to Sophomores.