

## Seminar Skill Training for Difficult Dialogues

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The challenge is to ensure that serious discourse concerning difficult topics can occur on college campuses. In order to conduct effective seminars within the Freshman Year Experience model, faculty and staff must be able to model the skills required for participation in serious dialogue. These include the creation of seminar-sized learning communities capable of handling and exploring difficult and often controversial topics while also insuring maximum participation. Faculty and staff facilitators must model the skills of listening accurately to one another, setting aside their own assumptions, opening their minds to others' frames of reference, and distancing themselves from the personal passions they may have about a topic. Faculty and students must also understand and come to terms with the ways power is used and misused within group discussions, and develop tools to counteract those imbalances of power. All participants must hone their understanding of group dynamics and its role in fostering serious inquiry, critical thought and the collective development of oral communication skills. Building these skills requires methodical and focused practice.

The suggested model for seminar skill development is for a pilot cohort of faculty and staff to experience an initial, half-day training in late fall 2005 or early spring 2006 followed by a series of monthly seminars using the Touchstones program of strategically paired interdisciplinary texts examining a variety of critical issues from both historical and current perspectives. The short texts address issues such as the meaning of freedom and community, the use and misuse of power, the importance of understanding diversity and difference, the role of factions, exclusion, judgment, law and the nature of pluralism. In addition to directly discussing the challenging issues raised by the texts and their contemporary relevance, the participants also focus on the equally challenging dynamics occurring within the learning community, and collaborate to find effective, education-enhancing solutions to the problems that arise.

### Timeline

Fall 2005	Half-day training session for 10 faculty (Group 1).
Fall 2005-Spring 2006	Group 1 participates in 6-8 facilitated seminar sessions over the course of 4- 6 months to develop an effective learning community while gaining expertise in seminar facilitation.

Ideally, this model of seminar skill training should precede or parallel the total process of lecture course and FYE evolution. If effective, such a training program could then become a regular feature of the FYE, insuring that new faculty and staff could be brought into the program already prepared to meet a series of key learning objectives.