

## First-Year Seminars

A first-year seminar, often a 290 course, extends a one-time orientation event by orienting graduate students to graduate school for an entire quarter. First-year seminars should introduce the graduate program and cover topics on: mentorship, professional development, funding, diversity, and mental health and well-being. [Sample First-Year Seminars](#).

### Student Feedback

A majority of students rated the overall educational value of the course high (excellent or very good) and preferred having the content delivered via a graduate seminar versus an orientation event or written handbook. A majority felt all the topics included in the seminar were relevant to their graduate studies and that they better understood the expectations of graduate school from taking the course. Several students also appreciated building community amongst their cohort.

*"I didn't realize I had so many questions until we reviewed these topics during the seminar. Everything I needed or wanted to know about my first year in grad school was covered nicely during this course."*

The topics that were most useful were: mentorship, mental health, financial wellness, social justice, imposter syndrome, qualifying exam preparation, networking, grant writing, and lab rotations. Overwhelmingly, the graduate students found mental health and imposter syndrome topics the most helpful.

*"Imposter syndrome and mental health were the most pivotal for me. I struggled finding the necessary resources until they were thoroughly discussed during the seminar."*

*"It was nice to have this class because it showed the program cares about our well being and being prepared. They want us to be successful."*

*"(The course) IS A BIG BOOST OF MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE. Students may not otherwise seek help if this seminar was not offered. It is a safe space and is EXTREMELY important for confidence."*

One student did feel that sessions on social justice could better address systemic issues and actions to take, rather than just individual education and awareness. Some students indicated they would like more professional development topics on time management, data management, and professional networking activities within the field. The course could also include small assignments for different topics such as, identifying one or two fellowships or grants to apply for in the future or drafting emails to contact faculty.

### Summary

Extending a graduate school orientation over an entire quarter allows graduate programs to cover multiple topics critical to graduate student success, ensures graduate students get access to the same information, and allows for community building within cohorts. This interactive and engaged method

increases graduate student understanding of graduate school and provides a foundation of support for new graduate students.

Graduate programs can distribute some of the faculty burden of instructing this course by incorporating faculty guest speakers and panels, as well as late-stage graduate students. A number of the seminars also invited staff experts from across campus to come and present.

It is clear from the feedback that first-year seminars should be considered a best practice for all graduate programs. In the future, programs may wish to consider extending these seminars to an additional quarter or a full year to allow for more topics and even greater learning outcomes.