

feature

The Wisdom of

SAGES

Learning is an active process and is most successful and long-lasting when students are engaged on many levels. By its very design, the university's SAGES program pulls students out of their seats and into the real world.

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We’ve all received sage advice and promptly forgotten it, or memorized facts to regurgitate on a test that suffer the same fate. The odds of retaining knowledge once the class ends or the lecturer leaves the stage increases exponentially when we practice what we learn and take learning to an active level.

“Lectures are an incredibly efficient way of projecting knowledge; but to learn skills, we need practice. The half-life of lecture knowledge can be weeks,” says Peter Whiting, Ph.D., associate dean in the College of Arts and Sciences and professor of geology.

Extending this half-life of knowledge through skills acquisition is the cornerstone of SAGES (Seminar Approach to General Education and Scholarship). SAGES students develop and practice critical thinking, oral communication and cogent, influential writing in a seminar setting. Each seminar is designed to engage students in an active way, allowing for experiential learning through exposure to real-world situations.

Whiting, who is the director of SAGES, helped launch the program four years ago as a pilot program. This spring he will usher the first group of students to complete all four years of SAGES through their senior year experience. All incoming Case Western Reserve University students are now automatically enrolled in the program as it has become the university’s general education requirement.

Experiencing the Unexpected

The seminar setting of courses starts fall semester of freshman year with First Seminar. These classes are limited to 17 students and focus on extensive reading, writing, and discussion of a topic. Topics encompass timeless academic questions that can lead to lively discussions.


First Seminar topics fall within three major domains of thinking about the natural or technological world, the social world, and the symbolic world. They have ranged from the Chemistry and Biology of Drugs, to Murder One, to Math, Sex, and Philosophy. The intent of each class is to provide broad topics that bring together students with diverse majors and interests.

The faculty charged with developing SAGES determined that to be successful in their chosen careers, students must develop the ability to make persuasive arguments—it is a skill that makes leaders, regardless of their field of expertise. “You won’t have the impact you deserve to have without compelling arguments,” says Whiting.

Eliciting opinions is the first step to creating an environment of debate and, according to senior Neil Ursic, SAGES courses set that stage. “In most classrooms you’ll have students who are naturally outspoken and others who aren’t. But the books you read and the topics you discuss in SAGES aren’t bland, they empower you to think or say ‘I strongly agree or disagree,’” explains Ursic, who is majoring in psychology.

During Ursic’s freshman year he took the course, Sports and American Culture in the Twentieth Century and remembers it as one of those opportunities to actively debate a topic he hadn’t considered before—steroid use in baseball. “At one point we had a mock trial with two sides debating the issue. The instructor also brought in the assistant general manager of the Indians to talk about steroid use,” says Ursic.

For senior Amanda Hong, who is double majoring in economics and biochemistry, SAGES also gave her a chance to step out of her comfort zone. Her seminar class met in the Cuyahoga County coroner’s office and was led through old cases from the 1970s. “Meeting in the coroner’s office gave us a glimpse into the real world,” says Hong.



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SAGES student Amanda Hong

During her class on religion and ethics, she chose a subject matter she really had no previous interest in, but the course made an impact on her. “Rather than creating skills on everyday life, this class raised awareness – rather than teaching facts, it opened you up to how you can make a difference,” explains Hong.

Perhaps most important, introductory seminars give freshman a base from which to launch their college careers. “We really invest in our freshman seminar. We slather on the attention because getting to know faculty is a well-known factor for student satisfaction and retention,” Whiting explains. For that reason, faculty members who teach First Seminar are also the student’s academic advisor until he or she declares a major.

“It was nice that your advisor wasn’t just a random person, in a random field that was just assigned to you,” says Hong. “Having your SAGES professor also be your advisor guaranteed that you had day-to-day and weekly contact with them.”

After First Seminar, students take two University Seminars by the end of their sophomore year. These involve more disciplinary-focused writing and discussion. “The arguments students make are longer, more sophisticated, and cite more resources,” Whiting explains.




The Professional Communicator

Knowing your audience is a common phrase, but the ability to engage an audience, whether one on one or in a presentation setting, is an acquired skill that can take years of professional experience to develop. SAGES addresses that important skill during the Junior Year Seminar.

“This is where students marry disciplinary expertise with the modes of communication for that discipline—they learn the standards of their future colleagues,” Whiting says. Giving a lengthy PowerPoint might be effective for a group of scientists, but completely unpersuasive for a group of business people or civic activists. Whiting adds that his departmental seminars require students to use correct geological citations in all their writing.

What all these developed SAGES skills lead to is a senior capstone project. Capstones last one or two semesters and have certain common requirements: a written and oral component, regular reporting to faculty who will grade them, and results presented in a public setting.

“We try to stretch [presenting] beyond the classroom,” Whiting says. The geology department has Senior Day when students present their capstones to department faculty and students, plus parents and friends. Some capstones are showcased at the SOURCE (Support of Undergraduate Research and Creative Endeavors) Symposium in the spring. Whiting has attended the SOURCE Symposium and been amazed at what SAGES students produce. “One of our students was off at an observatory in Chile; another published reproductive information for Indonesians. I love the capstones because they’re celebrations of all the seniors have learned,” he says.

SAGES is unlike other college seminar programs that are only open to honors students or students who elect to participate. “We could have just added courses—another writing composition class, public speaking 101,” Whiting explains. But he believes skills-based knowledge interwoven with curriculum is the way to grow and retain critical skills. “It’s like riding a bike or playing tennis. You may get rusty, but you retain the ability.” 

SAGES students can choose from hundreds of university and department courses. Here is a sampling of some course titles from the 2007-2008 academic year.

- Religion and Ethical Bodies
- The Scientific Mind
- Beethoven and the Age of Revolution
- Revolution and Cultural Change
- Transformation of the American South
- Trauma and Memory
- Nonverbal Communication
- Censorship and Iconoclasm

Sarah Jaquay contributed to the writing and research of this article.