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An Exploration of Learning

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an *Exploration* of Learning

THE LAUNCH OF THE FYS PILOT PROGRAM

STORY BY ASHLEY WILDA

Focus. If University of Richmond's First-Year Seminars (FYS) pilot program could be summed up in a single word, this would be it. The new program, split into fall semester 101 courses and spring 102 courses, launched this semester and is intended to aid freshmen in honing their writing skills.

In an interview, FYS coordinator Professor Sydney Watts explained that the format of the new program is essentially the same two courses with different teachers on separate topics but the goal is for students to more efficiently learn the components of academic writing and implement them into more complex research. These tiered goals are "geared toward certain aspects of writing, reading, and research," Watts said. She will be teaching FYS 102 in the spring, during which students will engage in "historical research, community-based learning, and more of a semester-long project." The first semester focuses on shorter assignments that teach basic writing skills, and the second on fewer but more involved assignments. Students can then hone communication and research skills with the writing fundamentals well-ingrained from the previous semester. When asked why faculty felt this pilot program necessary, she replied that they "felt like [the students] weren't getting enough attention to writing" and that too

many different goals were overwhelming them. Watts believes that keeping the same goals but executing them differently will more effectively teach academic writing to first year students.

Professor Daniel Palazzolo, a current FYS 101 professor, also agreed that the pilot program is changing the way writing is being taught. "I think it's been good because we [have] the ability to focus a little bit more," he said, "Students need work on paragraph

its goals are implemented. "They really like the idea of it," said Watts. "[It's] not going to demand a lot of change." Palazzolo also expressed a hope that this program will be helpful. "[Discovering] a sequence of learning goals will be the trick," he said. While the courses progress, involved faculty will continue to monitor the program, hoping that these experimental courses will enable students to focus on expressing their arguments in a more effective manner.

"Your *focus* needs more *focus*"
— Mr. Han, *The Karate Kid*

construction and sentence structure." After this foundation has been laid, students can then focus on research. Palazzolo calls this "more of an integrative exercise [with] pieces of things that you've found, like you're putting together a puzzle." He said that with this background in producing solid academic writing, students can then focus on enforcing their claims.

As students complete the FYS pilot courses, faculty will continue to analyze the effectiveness of the program and tweak how

Professors at Richmond would say to students, as does Mr. Han does in *The Karate Kid*, "Your focus needs more focus." The hope is that FYS courses will give this focus to them, especially in regards to their writing. As this new program pilots explores different territory for the university, faculty and students will continue to collaborate to achieve successful academic writing and discover the best learning environment for the generations to come.