

## **Attachment 14B**

**“Signature Courses: Transitioning High School  
Learners into College Scholars”**

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Signature Courses: Transitioning High School Learners into College Scholars

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**Abstract:** This article illuminates and evaluates the effectiveness of Signature Courses at a large research one university in the Southwest. This article provides the background for the formation of these courses, both in the literature and at the institution. It also describes the critical elements of the courses, with emphasis on interdisciplinary perspectives, how the courses became part of the University's core curriculum, and methods and findings of assessments. The findings from the analyses show that there is "value added" by including these unique courses in the First-Year Experience.

**Key words:** First-Year Experience, Critical Thinking, Interdisciplinary, Success Skills

Background and Significance

High school students have a good understanding of what they need to do to get into college, and of the importance of attending college for career and financial success, but they have an undeveloped and even unrealistic understanding of what it takes to successfully transition, persist and graduate from college (Hirsch, 2010).

Transitioning college students commonly struggle with stress, time management issues, and belonging uncertainty, and all three are correlated with poor outcomes across a variety of academic and well-being metrics. In contrast, social connectedness and sense of purpose are overwhelming linked to positive outcomes at college (Sanderson, Greenberg & Ogle, 2017). Unfortunately, learning in high school too often means memorizing and regurgitating information. The process of coming to know, or learning, is often grossly oversimplified into

grades, testing, and regurgitation of information. In truth, memorization is a process, which essentially bypasses real conceptual learning.

Higher education curricula is understood to be an educational vehicle to promote a student's development, in large part around a body of knowledge, one must examine connections between knowledge and student being and becoming. Ronald Barnett, President of the Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education Society, describes, "A distinction is made here between knowing as such and coming to know, with the focus on the latter. It is argued that the process of coming to know can be edifying: through the challenges of engaging over time with disciplines and their embedded standards, worthwhile dispositions and qualities may develop." (Barnett, 2009).

### Replacing "College 101"

Numerous colleges and universities have experimented with "College 101" courses, designed to help students to transition from being high school students to being young, independent, scholarly adults. Many of these high school students, however, have learned to simply synthesize and repeat information rather than to effectively and critically analyze it. Transforming them into being competent collegiate learners, innovators, and citizens of the university, community, state, and world thus takes a unique approach. That said, research has shown that while College 101 courses were widely supported by stakeholders, contextual factors made implementation challenging and undermined the courses' potential to create long-lasting impacts on students' outcomes (Karp et al, 2012). Conceptually, although College 101 courses provided students with important information, they often "did not offer sufficient opportunities for in-depth exploration and skill-building practice" (Karp et al. 2012: P. ii). The Signature Course is the ideal solution to this problem.

Faculty members nationwide, regardless of the selectivity of the university, expressed near-universal agreement that students arrive largely unprepared for the intellectual demands and expectations of higher education (Conley, 2003). Research shows that the students have difficulty formulating and solving problems, evaluating and incorporating reference material appropriately, developing a logical and coherent argument or explanation, interpreting data or conflicting points of view, and completing their assignments and projects with precision and accuracy (Conley, McGaughy, and Gray, 2008).

#### Specialization in the Study of Essentials

Historically, our university has undergone numerous attempts to improve undergraduate education. In the fall of 1979, the University Council Committee on Basic Educational Requirements made recommendations to update the Graham Committee Report of 1955, which had laid the foundation for this institution's undergraduate education. Specialization was undermining, de-emphasizing, and even potentially eliminating students' study of "basic" and "essential" topics. As reflected in the Chronicle of Higher Education (Clune, 2015), students were not equipped with foundations for their learning. For example, there were students completing degrees, having placed-out of English, without ever having to write a significant paper in college. In addition, the committee noted that student preparation for college, as evidenced by standardized tests, was declining. They expressed that students must be able to "express one's thoughts clearly and correctly" as well as "have critical appreciation of the social framework in which we live." Finally, they noted, "One must have insight into the creativity of the human spirit." Thus, the committee alluded to the values of critical thinking, interdisciplinary education, and effective communication (Holleran Steiker, 2015).

In 2001, this Southwestern university celebrated its 125th anniversary of serving as what the state constitution of 1876 had mandated as a “university of the first class.” The University President convened a group of 218 committed citizens from diverse backgrounds representing 22 states and three countries. The group included prominent administrators, physicians, educators, pastors, lawyers, poets, playwrights, writers, regents, businesspeople, strategists, and other influential community leaders. Chartered on the University’s 125th birthday, the group was appropriately named the Commission of 125. Aiming at “a disciplined culture of excellence,” the report articulated the need for the creation of a new Core Curriculum. In contrast with the insufficient, ever-narrowing, specialized version of higher education, the Commission emphasized that a first-class undergraduate education should:

- Expose students to culture, literature, foreign languages, the humanities, and the arts
- Explore mathematics, science, and technology
- Teach students to think and read critically, write cogently, speak persuasively, and work both independently and as part of a team
- Engage in open discussion, inquiry, discovery, research, problem-solving, and learning to learn
- Examine questions of ethics and attributes of effective leadership
- Acquire a sense of history and the global community together with a respect for other cultures

(Holleran Steiker, 2015).

In order to achieve this, The School of Undergraduate Studies (UGS) was designed as a new administrative structure with responsibility for maintaining the Core Curriculum. Its critical functions were to serve as the “guardian” of the core curriculum, to be the inaugural college for

any undecided student at the university, and to coordinate academic and career advising for undecided students, and those students who are considering a change of major.

In addition, an innovative augmentation to the core curriculum was a new degree requirement called the Signature Course. The Signature Course represented a new aspect of the core specific to the university, as it was designed to fulfill three of the six institutionally designated components of the forty-two-hour core curriculum mandated by the state. The Task Force on Curricular Reform believed Signature Courses would “expose each entering student to the broad goals and possibilities of a university education” by preparing students for collegiate academic standards. Furthermore, the Task Force outlined the need for these classes to be taught by distinguished faculty members on topics that were both contemporary and interdisciplinary in nature. Signature Courses were designed to cultivate the same universal skills prescribed by the Commission of 125 such as writing, communication, and critical thinking. Creating a new core course taught by distinguished faculty on over 200 different topics, while also providing students with a common set of essential skills for leaders in twenty-first-century careers, communities, and global citizenry, was a bold and ambitious undertaking (Holleran Steiker, 2015).

UGS developed a system through which faculty members submit proposals for Signature Courses they designed themselves using their area of passion, research and expertise as the vehicle for transitioning first year students into college thinkers and effective performers. The only required parameters are the inclusion of the essential elements of a Signature Course, which means faculty have considerable latitude to design courses around their own interests and expertise. The system created in 2008 remains largely in place today. Decisions about which courses are accepted are made by the Assistant Dean Director of the First-Year Experience office

as well as the Signature Course Advisory Committee (SCAC), faculty from all over the university, to ensure every course is of the highest quality and meets all required elements.

When the first Signature Courses were offered in Fall 2008, there were 137 unique Signature Courses and 4,480 seats available. Capacity has grown each year until reaching a steady state of approximately 220 Signature Courses and over 11,000 seats in aAcademic yYear 2018-2019. As capacity has grown, so too has demand; since Academic Year 2010-2011, all Signature Course seats are always filled prior to the add/drop period, with an average yield of over 95 percent of all Signature Course seats filled at the semester's official start.

Professors who regularly teach courses that are part of the general education core have long been on the frontline of working with beginning students (Upcraft, et al, 2005). Many of the faculty members who teach a Signature Course consider it their most engaging pedagogical arena. Faculty interest in teaching Signature Courses has grown to such an extent that the program now receives dozens more proposals for courses than can be accepted. The rise in popularity and competitiveness of the proposal process ensure that the highest quality Signature Courses are offered each year.

The content of Signature Courses serves as an instrument for students to acquire indispensable learning tools: interdisciplinary approaches, effective writing, oral communication, information literacy, experiential learning, and campus-wide intellectual conversations. Due to the talent and commitment of the distinguished professors chosen to teach these courses, as well as the Signature Course design, many of the courses also provide opportunities for major and career way-finding, emotional wellness, and even development of social and civic engagement.

The Signature Courses are defined by our "Essential Elements:"

*Interdisciplinary & Contemporary Content*

Students acquire knowledge through symbiotic relationships in interdisciplinary

study. It is an expectation of Signature Course Proposals that prospective SC professors demonstrate interdisciplinary perspectives as they present the content and processes of the course. For example, the “Young People and Drugs” course is taught from a Bio-Psycho-Social-Spiritual perspective exploring the physiological, genetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and existential lenses of the problem and the solution. In addition, all classes will have contemporary content, though it may not be evident from the title. For example, a history professor teaching a course about the Peloponnesian War can use the course’s content to inform students’ understandings of modern-day conflict.

### *Critical Thinking*

As defined by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking (1987), critical thinking is “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.” At its best, it “transcends subject matter divisions” by being interdisciplinary and multifaceted. In addition, critical thinking is often best prompted by real-life, hands on, experiential learning. Therefore, interactive, engaging, and student-driven methods of pedagogy should balance or outweigh traditional lectures.

### *Writing*

SCs give students a solid platform of writing skills that will serve them well in subsequent classes. There are four important points for faculty to keep in mind: Writing is a process that involves planning, drafting, and revising; students need clear expectations, assignments, and grading standards in order to master the clear expectations, assignments, and grading standards; writing skills improve fastest when they are guided by revision-oriented feedback; all writers, including your students, benefit from reading and commenting on one another’s work, especially early in the semester so that learning can be applied to subsequent work.

### *Oral Communication*

Employers increasingly cite effective communication skills as an essential attribute of the graduates they seek to hire. Therefore, direct instruction and practice of oral presentation skills early in a student’s college career provides a solid foundation upon which to build competency in the classroom and beyond

*Information Literacy* Signature Courses help students learn to critically examine valid sources of information. Most first-year students know how to get answers from the internet, but for many the ability to find other types of resources and to process all of the information they find may be a skill that has yet to be honed. Signature Courses ensure that all first-year students receive instruction in basic research and information evaluation skills, otherwise known as information literacy skills, which serve them throughout their time at the university.

### *Gems of the University*

Signature Courses are unique to the culture of the university and purposefully highlight resources unique to this large research campus. The collections, tools, and artifacts at this Research I university can complement and enrich courses, while making tangible connections for students to course content.

### *University Lecture Series*



Designed to create a campus-wide conversation, the University Lecture Series gives first-year students an opportunity to interact with leading members of our faculty—scholars, scientists, and civic leaders who are nationally and internationally renowned.

Faculty are more apt to effectively teach students when teaching in their area of passion and expertise; they can convey how to be effective thinkers and communicators (both through written and oral word), to discern dependable from bogus information, to look at issues from a variety of disciplinary lenses, and to grapple with assignments that actively engage them as partners in their own learning processes. As highlighted by Richard Light's study of Harvard students' perceptions of valuable classes (2001), students noted that the importance creating "powerful assignments," strengthening writing abilities, integrating a peer component (e.g., presentations with and for peers, writing reviews by peers), and emphasizing information literacy, especially how to use evidence, not just cite others' ideas.

Interdisciplinary perspectives and Contemporary Content are necessary ingredients for cultivating relevance and subsequent student resonance and engagement. Light (2001: 88) notes that "the relationship of their academic work to their personal lives" is what critical thinking is really about. Ultimately, when students bring varied perspectives, interpretations, and experiences into the classroom, the resulting discussion is richer. If a truly "safe" environment is created, students will disagree with each other – and maybe even with the professor. The key is being able to "organize academic work in a way that draws students deeply into the ideas, yet simultaneously invites them to make connections between abstract ideas and their own lives" (Light, 2001:113).

Signature Courses are designed to fit the developmental stage of undergraduates. First-year students come to college from high school with varied levels of comprehension, abilities, and resources. While some may have had challenging opportunities to think creatively and from

various perspectives, many others have been “taught to the test.” David Conley (2008) examined the issue of college readiness and noted that many first-year students find that their college courses are fundamentally different from their high school courses. According to the National Research Council, college instructors expect students to “draw inferences, interpret results, analyze conflicting source documents, support arguments with evidence, solve complex problems that have no obvious answer, draw conclusions, offer explanations, conduct research, and generally think deeply about what they are being taught” (Conley, 2008). However, many high school students have been conditioned to be hyper-vigilant toward what the professor wants from them rather than what they can take from or contribute to the course. Signature Courses are designed to teach students how to learn, how to think, and, ultimately, how to accept that not every question or issue has one correct answer (or perhaps any answer at all).

Signature Courses encompass what research shows to be best practices for building foundations for learning and positive college experiences. While methods vary, the best try to create what Bain calls “a natural critical learning environment.” People “learn by confronting intriguing, beautiful, or important problems, authentic tasks that will challenge them to grapple with ideas, rethink their assumptions, and examine their mental models of reality. These are challenging yet supportive conditions in which learners feel sense of control over their education; work collaboratively with others; believe that their work will be considered fairly and honestly, and try, fail, and receive feedback from expert learners in advance of and separate from any summative judgment of their effort” (p. 18).

Today, Signature Courses educate over 11,000 students per year, deliver on the promise to prepare this university’s students for a rapidly changing world, and produce a powerful and profound impact across every pocket of campus in a way no other program has matched. As

William C. Powers, Jr. boldly stated in his Report to the Commission of 125 and the community, “As the world changes, so must we . . . The good news is that we are well poised for change. (This university) has always been an engine for change and innovation. Change and innovation are in our DNA” (Powers, 2011). The effect of the Signature Course program can be viewed through a variety of lenses including an objective and quantitative assessment of “value-added” to the education of our students in key areas.

### Assessment

The Signature Course program is evaluated by a rigorous learning outcomes assessment plan. The School of Undergraduate Studies Assessment Team works in close collaboration with the Dean and the First-Year Experience Office to ensure and document a high-quality learning experience and identify opportunities for continual course improvement. Assessment and First-Year Experience staff implement a range of quantitative and qualitative measures, including a mid-semester survey, alumni survey, assessment of student writing and oral communication skills using common rubrics, TA training evaluations, focus groups, and more. Signature Course assessment data provide extensive evidence of student learning for the many external stakeholders, including the Higher Education Coordinating Board, the State Legislature, and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

### *Individual Course Surveys*

Course instructor surveys are required as a baseline assessment to compare courses across the university by providing a standardized question set for all courses. The survey lists nine prompts about a course and provides a five-point scale for students to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement. Signature Courses review well in all categories. Particularly noteworthy is that since the first Signature Courses were offered in Fall 2008,

Signature Course instructor ratings have consistently exceeded the university average in the overall instructor rating category. Historically, between 75% and 83% of survey respondents rated their Signature Course instructor as “very good” or “excellent,” meaning the instructor received a rating of either 4 or 5 out of 5. Average Course Instructor Survey ratings from Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 saw Overall Course scores of 4.17 and 4.29 and Overall Instructor scores of 4.45 and 4.49, respectively. Simply put, the Signature Course program appears to be fulfilling the key mandate of connecting first-year students with the best faculty the campus has to offer.

In addition to the ten standard questions (nine prompts and one open-ended comment box) on all Course Instructor Surveys, Signature Courses have an additional nine survey prompts to gather information regarding the learning outcomes unique to the Course. Of the many interesting findings from these surveys, since Fall 2010, at least 86% of student survey respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed that their Signature Course challenged them to examine ideas or concepts from different perspectives. This particular learning outcome is a key element of critical thinking. Critical thinking is one of the most important skills required for students in the twenty-first century and our survey results show that students believe their Signature Courses do an extraordinary job in delivering this essential element.

#### *Comprehensive and University-wide Writing Assessment*

The School of Undergraduate Studies Assessment Team conducts a large-scale direct assessment of student writing skills. Beginning in Fall 2010, the assessment team began collecting student papers from Signature Course faculty members. Using a standardized rubric with a three-point scale, writing skills were assessed in four distinct areas: ideas and organization, evidence and support, voice and audience awareness, and mechanics, usage, and documentation. Specifically, students must deliver a clear, focused thesis statement, provide

credible and convincing evidence to substantiate claims, display mastery of topical vocabulary and varied sentence structure, and use correct grammar and mechanics. As of Spring 2014, there have been four assessment cycles and 1,622 unique writing assignments scored and assessed. We are unaware of any similar comprehensive writing assessment spanning a major university. Results from their class are shared with individual instructors so that any specific deficiencies in instruction are addressed.

Importantly, assessment results have shown statistically significant improvement over time, both in individual rubric areas and overall. In the 2010-2011 assessment cycle, 54% of writing assignments scored as meeting or exceeding expectations in at least three of four rubric areas. By 2013-2014, 72% of assignments met this goal. A number of factors likely contribute to this dramatic and gratifying improvement, but it is our belief that delivering quantitative feedback to individual instructors as well as our providing “best practices” advice when appropriate have had a substantial positive impact.

*Longitudinal Surveys: Asking Senior Students to Reflect on Their Signature Courses*

After the Signature Course program passed the five-year mark, the School of Undergraduate Studies Assessment Team conducted a survey of current students who took a Signature Course in academic years 2011-2012 or 2012-2013. Through both quantitative and qualitative means, the survey asked students to reflect back on their Signature Course and its longer-term effects on their college experience. This longitudinal analysis aims to assess whether Signature Course essential elements really do provide students with the skills they need to be successful students and ultimately citizens. Results of this survey corroborate the findings of both survey scores and independent assessments; Signature Courses are a valued, high-quality

program that successfully delivers skills and experiences needed to equip our graduates for rapidly changing world.

Overall, 65% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Course added value to their college experience. Student comments described how the Course added value; two themes clearly emerged in the analysis. In the most frequent theme, students said the Course helped them develop transferable academic skills that were relevant to their field of study and that they used in later coursework. In the second most frequent theme, students reported that they valued the Course because it provided an opportunity to study a subject outside their field of study.

Toward the goal of enhancing engagement in a shared intellectual or cultural experience especially through discussion with other peers in class, the Signature Course Assessment team evaluated student perceptions about interactions with their SC peers. Results from the Fall 2018 (n=2,887, 38% response rate) and Spring 2019 (n=789, 29% response rate) Signature Course Mid-Semester Surveys found that 91% of Fall and 89% of Spring respondents felt that “listening to other students’ ideas was a valuable learning experience”, exceeding target expectations. Results from the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 Signature Course Mid-Semester Surveys found that 87% of Fall and 89% of Spring respondents felt that “other students respect their point of view during class discussions”, meeting target expectations.

With regard to the goal of developing transferable knowledge, skills and abilities, the Signature Course evaluation assessed students’ confidence in developing effective communication skills. Results from the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 Signature Course Mid-Semester Surveys found that 75% of Fall and 78% of Spring respondents reported that their “course is helping them understand what is expected of them as a college-level writer” and found that 69% of Fall and 70% of Spring respondents reported that their “course is helping them

improve their writing.” Results from the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 Signature Course Mid-Semester Surveys found that 63% of Fall and 71% of Spring respondents reported that their “course is helping improve their public speaking skills.”

Regarding the development of applied critical thinking skills by synthesizing course content and relating it to interdisciplinary perspectives, results from the Spring 2019 Signature Course Mid-Semester Surveys found that 84% of Spring respondents reported that their “instructor is helping them draw connections between different fields of study.” Results from the Spring 2019 Signature Course Mid-Semester Surveys found that 91% of Spring respondents reported that their “instructor is challenging them to examine ideas or concepts from different perspectives”, exceeding target expectations. It was an inherent intention that Signature Course students will be able to explain how one of the disciplinary perspectives of the course relates to at least one area of intellectual interest to the individual student, regardless of expected major. Results from the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 Signature Course Mid-Semester Surveys found that 83% of Fall and 86% of Spring respondents reported that their “course is helping them understand at least one academic discipline other than their own.”

With respect to developing effective information literacy skills, the Evaluation team’s investigation from the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 Signature Course Mid-Semester Surveys found that 77% of Fall and 79% of Spring respondents reported that their “course is helping them learn to locate high quality sources of information that are relevant to course content or assignments.”

Signature Course students were also given the chance to appraise the relevance of Signature Course content for use during a student’s academic experience. Mid-Semester Surveys found that 84% of Fall and 82% of Spring respondents reported that their “course is helping them understand what is expected of them academically as a college student.” The

evaluation also found that 82% of Fall and 79% of Spring respondents reported that their “course is helping them learn academic skills that they can apply throughout their college career”

Signature Course Alumni were surveyed, and it has become clear that students increase their awareness of the value of the Signature Course as they proceed in their collegiate experience. Students who were enrolled in a Signature Course during the Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 semesters were surveyed via email from May 5th to June 7th, 2017. Of the 9,792 students that were emailed the survey, a total of 591 were completed, resulting in a 6% response rate. Given the voluntary nature of the survey data, these results may not be fully representative of the target population.

#### Discussion: A Recipe for Success

The Signature Course program is arguably the most successful first-year academic initiative ever launched at any major Research I University. How did this happen, especially considering the difficult economic environment that existed throughout higher education while the program was being launched? The remarkable success of Signature Courses can be attributed to several contributing factors.

Distinguished, long-standing faculty are ultimately an essential ingredient of a successful academic program. Therefore, an important element of Signature Course success must be attributed to the high quality of the faculty involved. Substantial energy and resources continue to be directed at attracting only the best teachers and most accomplished scholars among the faculty. That being said, there are several other critical components that were required to launch and sustain the Signature Course program.

*1) The School of Undergraduate Studies is a Perfect Home:* Signature Courses are part of the core curriculum required for all UT Austin Students, so it is essential that



administration and assessment is housed in an academic unit charged with such a campus-wide education mandate. The steadfast focus of the program is solely on quality of the student experience, while actively encouraging participation by every academic unit on campus.

- 2) *Faculty-Centered Leadership*: The inaugural Dean of the School of Undergraduate Studies aspired to have the Signature Course Program represent the best of the partnerships between administrators, faculty, staff, TAs, and students. Signature Courses are overseen by the Signature Course Advisory Committee, a body of broadly representative faculty, and staff. In this way, faculty, staff and students *from across campus* have true ownership of the program.
- 3) *Strong Financial Support*: University programs are only as successful as their financial support allows. Signature Courses provide significant financial support to departments in direct proportion to their contributions to the program. This model provides financial incentives/resources for departments to participate by efficiently targeting money directly to where it is needed.
- 4) *Reinforcing Mechanisms Improve Quality*: Two mutually reinforcing mechanisms provide constant pressure toward a better student learning experience throughout the program. First, faculty are provided with extensive feedback from the various student surveys. We have found that faculty are more open to positive criticism when approached by the School of Undergraduate Studies compared to their home departments, and they are especially appreciative of the feedback provided by our mid-semester surveys. Faculty have shared with us that they realize our assessments are not evaluative in nature, they are motivated solely by our shared goal of improving the student

experience. The second reinforcing mechanism that serves to improve the program is made possible because all Signature Courses must be proposed and approved each semester they are taught. The reality is that despite good intentions, not all Signature Courses provide an optimum learning experience for first-year students. Because there are now substantially more faculty requesting Signature Courses each semester than are needed to accommodate all 11,000 first-year students, the Signature Course Advisory Committee now turns down the courses with deficient applications as well as those from faculty whose previous Signature Courses were the least well-received by students.

#### The Signature Course “Secret Sauce” is Academic Passion

There is one more ingredient essential to the success of the Signature Course program, the one that might be the most important of all; faculty passion for the subject they are teaching. Signature courses as a group are the most intellectually interesting courses taught at UT Austin. Campus-wide first-year experience courses have failed across the country when they are tied to prescriptive content. As documented in the previous pages, Signature Courses share a well thought out collection of key academic skills and experiences, but there is no required content. Faculty are free to propose any subject matter they wish as vehicles to convey the various Signature Course elements. Given this unique opportunity for creativity in the classroom, faculty have responded by proposing to teach the content they are personally most interested in and therefore passionate about. Viewed through this lens, our extensive Signature Course assessments have verified what all great teachers know: Academic passion is contagious with students. The bottom line, then, is that the most important ingredient explaining the success of the Signature Course program, the true “secret sauce”, quite possibly comes down to passion. Sincere passion for subject matter coming from the university’s best teachers/scholars is certain

to inspire, and inspiration at such an impressionable time in a student's life has a powerful, positive and permanent impact.

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