

# Ten Years of Prelude: A Report on the History of Prelude, its Recent Implementation, and Considerations for Future First-Year Seminars at Calvin College

By Kristy Manion, Prelude Coordinator  
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## Introduction: The History and Purpose of the Prelude Program

For the past fifteen years, Calvin College has recognized the need for a program specifically designed for first-year students. In the mid-1990s, both a growing awareness of curricular gaps here at Calvin<sup>1</sup> and a mounting body of data indicating the value of a first-year seminar for students' success<sup>2</sup> prompted the college to consider how it was meeting the needs of such students.

So in the spring and summer of 1995, a committee called the Functional Team on Improving the First Year for Calvin Students met<sup>3</sup> to "formulate plans for a strengthened first-year program."<sup>4</sup> In April of 1996 this team of Calvin faculty, staff, administrators, and students submitted its recommendations to the Educational Policy Committee (EPC) and to Faculty Senate. The Team both (a) reaffirmed the college's current curricular direction and (b) suggested a platform for changes to the curriculum

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in the Core Curriculum Assessment Project of 1997, of the 33 sophomores selected to write and speak about how a Christian might respond to two important social issues, none could articulate "the Reformed perspective of Calvin College" (qtd. in *An Engagement with God's World: The Core Curriculum of Calvin College*, 1999, 3). The revised Core Curriculum sought to strengthen ways in which Calvin overtly communicated its "central vision" to students in a comprehensive way.

<sup>2</sup> See the April 30, 1996 memo from the Educational Policy Committee to the Faculty Senate on the "First Year at Calvin College—Background and Goals," 4: "One large-scale study...showed that long-term college success appears to correlate very closely with students' overall satisfaction with their first year of college (Noel, Levitz, and Saluri, *Increasing Student Retention* [San Francisco: Joosey-Bass, 1985]). Data collected in another study appear to indicate that institutions with strong first-year programs and effective support structures for new students graduate more satisfied and more competent students (M.L. Upcraft, J. Gardner, *et al.*, *The Freshman Year Experience* [San Francisco: Joosey-Bass, 1990]).

<sup>3</sup> Members of the Functional Team on Improving the First Year for Calvin Students included Emily Alderen, Curt Blankespoor, David Guthrie, Don Hettinga, Tom McWhertor, Claudia Beversluis, Jeannette DeJong, Jan Heerspink, David Hoekema, and Mark Williams.

<sup>4</sup> "First Year at Calvin College—Background and Goals," submitted to the Faculty Senate by the Educational Policy Committee on April 30, 1996, 1.

specifically for first-year students.<sup>5</sup> “In order to engage students more effectively in the pursuit of ‘vigorous liberal arts education that promotes lives of Christian service,’”<sup>6</sup> the committee suggested, the college should adopt the following goals for its students that would “receive particular emphasis in the first year of study.”

- **Goal 1.** Become familiar with the central affirmations of a Reformed Christian confession, understand how these affirmations can inform a world view, and experience learning from this confessional perspective in and outside the classroom.
- **Goal 2.** Involve themselves in the Calvin learning community.
- **Goal 3.** Improve their ability to listen, think, converse, write, argue, and exercise critical judgment.
- **Goal 4.** Increase their self-knowledge and explore the questions, ‘What are my gifts, aptitudes, personal limits, interests, tendencies and temperaments? How will they influence my living and learning?’
- **Goal 5.** Explore and develop greater appreciation for differences in people: their culture, faith, ethnicity, and gender.
- **Goal 6.** Critically examine and assume more responsibility for their moral and religious commitments.
- **Goal 7.** Complete a successful transition to learning and living at Calvin college and assume responsibility for their own education.<sup>7</sup>

These goals were approved by the Faculty Senate in 1996. And when the new core curriculum was approved in 1999, its inclusion of a first-year interim course (later called DCM) that served as an introduction to a Reformed Christian confession and worldview sought to attend particularly to Goal 1 above. At that time the Educational Policy Committee also “referred the issue of first-year programming to the Academic Development Committee [ADC] for specific recommendations.”<sup>8</sup>

So in 2000, the ADC provided guidelines to the EPC to develop a program. The Core Curriculum Committee (CCC) considered these guidelines and, “in cooperation with the Student Life Division...developed a proposal for a Prelude Program...[that] would be linked to the proposed interim gateway course, *Developing a Christian Mind*.”<sup>9</sup> The course proposal included five Prelude Program topics (Responsible Freedom, Cultural Discernment, Cross Cultural Engagement, Wellness, and Vocation)

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<sup>5</sup> “First Year at Calvin College,” 1.

<sup>6</sup> “First Year at Calvin College,” 5, quoting from Calvin's *Expanded Statement of Mission*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> “First Year at Calvin College,” 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> “An Engagement with God’s World: The Core Curriculum of Calvin College,” November 1999 printing, 51.

<sup>9</sup> April 19, 2000 memo from the Educational Policy Committee to Faculty Members and Student Life staff regarding the Proposed First-Year Prelude Program.

designed to address five of the seven goals for strengthening the first-year program at Calvin College. The ADC also recognized the importance of introducing a first-year program in “the fall semester, where experts seem to agree it is most needed.” As an added benefit, “The proposal could model for students a collaboration between the Academic and Student Life divisions which could bridge the gaps between two domains of campus life.”<sup>10</sup>

In April of 2000, the EPC asked Faculty Senate to give “initial...reactions to the proposal for a first-year program.”<sup>11</sup> In addition, a campus-wide Town Hall meeting was held in late April to discuss the proposal.<sup>12</sup> At the May 1, 2000 Faculty Senate Meeting, senators “had the opportunity to give EPC advice on the ...Prelude course proposal.”<sup>13</sup> At the October 2, 2000 Full Faculty Meeting the faculty considered proposals in each category of the new core, and a motion was carried to consider “all courses in a particular category...as a package.”<sup>14</sup> A motion carried to “include the Prelude Program in the Gateway Course,” and “the motion to accept the Gateway Course category carried.”<sup>15</sup> At the Full Faculty Meeting on November 6, 2000, “after a concluding discussion on the floor, the entire Core Course Proposal...was approved, thereby adopting a new Core Curriculum for Calvin College.”<sup>16</sup>

So planning teams composed of student life staff and faculty members went to work, with one team planning the approach for each content area in Prelude. Knowing the importance of teaching students about the Reformed tradition that informed Calvin’s vision, Prelude course content and pedagogy were designed to provide an “integrated introduction to Calvin’s tradition, expectations, and

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<sup>10</sup> These are two rationales from the Academic Development Committee’s memo to the Educational Policy Committee, quoted in the “First Year Prelude Proposal,” page 5. The “First Year Prelude Proposal” is careful to clarify that such a “bridging” of two domains of campus life through the vehicle of the Prelude Program would not mean “confusing the distinctive mandates of the faculty, student life professionals, and the chaplaincy,” but instead would “coordinate their efforts, so that they mutually reinforce each other” (3).

<sup>11</sup> Memo to Faculty Senate from the Educational Policy Committee, RE Core Proposals, April 18, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Memo to Faculty Members and Student Life Staff from the EPC, RE Proposed First-Year Prelude Program, April 19, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Minutes of the Calvin College Faculty Senate Meeting, May 1, 2000, VII.D.1.

<sup>14</sup> Minutes of the Calvin College Full Faculty Meeting, October 2, 2000, VI.C.1. At this time another motion was made to “recommit the Gateway Course and the Prelude Program to the EPC,” but the motion did not pass.

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of the Calvin College Full Faculty Meeting, October 2, 2000, VI.C.1.

<sup>16</sup> Minutes of the Full Faculty Meeting, November 6, 2000, VI.

mission during the critical first semester of [the] college experience....”<sup>17</sup> And the pedagogy, course planners thought, should be participatory. If worldviews are more “caught than taught,” extending a “thoughtful invitation to this Christian community of inquiry”<sup>18</sup> meant involving students in Calvin community life, both inside and outside the classroom. They should attend lectures, films, and concerts and begin practicing the discipline of critical thought in these venues. They should interact—formally and informally—with instructors who were knowledgeable about Calvin and the Reformed tradition, personally compelling, and interested in first year students. They should have a gracious context from which to assess themselves and their place in this particular college. And whether they were Reformed or Pentecostal, mainline evangelical or atheistic, they should have opportunity to begin rethinking and claiming their religious convictions as emerging adults.

In addition, the course could serve to address some needs common to first-year students. It could provide a platform for extended peer connection among students who had experienced orientation together. It could help expand students’ awareness of offices and services available to them as they adjusted to the academic rigor of Calvin, navigated questions about their majors, and sought to make the transition to life away from their familial homes. Further, having a well-assimilated junior or senior student as an Orientation Leader and later as a Prelude teaching assistant provided a living example of a student thriving at Calvin. It provided a reciprocal benefit in that Prelude assistants had opportunity to hone their teaching and leadership skills under the mentoring of an instructor.

Since 2001, Prelude’s purpose has remained constant, though its strategies have undergone annual review and revision based on student and instructor feedback. Today the course addresses Worldview, Cultural Discernment, Responsible Freedom, Justice and Righteousness, and Vocation, and it seeks to do so in an accessible and inviting way within its guidelines as an introductory, one-credit

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<sup>17</sup> “First-Year Prelude Proposal: An Academic Affairs—Student Life Co-Curricular First-Year Introduction to Living and Learning at Calvin College,” 2.

<sup>18</sup> “First-Year Prelude Proposal: An Academic Affairs—Student Life Co-Curricular First-Year Introduction to Living and Learning at Calvin College,” 2.

course.<sup>19</sup> Helpful critiques of the program have led to increased student satisfaction with the course over the years,<sup>20</sup> though the program continues to have areas for improvement.

Student Life desires to offer the best possible introduction to students through the first-year seminar and, after ten years of Prelude, is prepared to rethink the pedagogy and curriculum of such a seminar at the direction of the college. Yet the value of a first-year seminar as a systematic and integrative vehicle for the assimilation of first-year students at Calvin College remains. To maintain a commitment to such a seminar is both consonant with best practices in higher education<sup>21</sup> and with Calvin's own historical self analysis. Toward that end, this report will briefly outline some successes and challenges within the Prelude program over the past ten years; pay special attention to its most recent evaluation in 2010; and conclude with some considerations for the future of a first-year seminar at Calvin.

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<sup>19</sup> Some faculty members have been constructively critical conversation partners as to the intellectual weight and introductory treatment of the material offered, even suggesting that some content areas, particularly Worldview, might be better addressed in the context of a three-credit course within one of the academic disciplines. Readers of this report may notice that Worldview did not appear as a content area on the original course proposal more than ten years ago, so some explanation as to its presence in today's curriculum is in order. Teaching the course revealed a pedagogical difficulty in communicating other course concepts without this basic framework. Yet the concern about oversimplifying (and perhaps inadvertently discouraging serious consideration of) a Reformed worldview is a worthy one. Perhaps students will be best served when caution about this possibility is balanced with the awareness that they need to hear an overt articulation of a Reformed worldview, since in the 1990s many students were not aware that such a guiding vision existed at Calvin. Such a tension is, admittedly, difficult to navigate in practice.

<sup>20</sup> For example, on the assessment item, "This course as a whole was," 76 percent of students said the course was "excellent," "good," or "average" in 2002. This figure went up to 90 percent in 2003, hovered around 75-80 percent in 2004 and 2005, returned to 90 percent range for a couple of years, and increased to a high of 98 percent in 2008. In 2010 the course assessment was changed from "Excellent-Good-Average" designations to "Excellent-Very Good-Good" designations. This year, 77 percent of students said the course was "excellent," "very good," or "good."

<sup>21</sup> Improved retention and academic achievement are among the well-documented positive outcomes. See, for example, Dr. Joe Cuseo (Marymount College) on "The Empirical Case for the Positive Impact of the First-Year Seminar: Research on Student Outcomes." Available at <http://www.uwc.edu/administration/academic-affairs/esfy/cuseo/>.

## A Brief Review of Prelude’s Strengths and Challenges

Prelude has met with good successes and encountered certain challenges during its tenure. Its most noteworthy successes relate to its achievement of course objectives; its ongoing challenges relate to students’ preconceptions about the class and navigating tensions within the course design.

One way to evaluate a program’s success is to judge it in light of its stated purposes. How well has Prelude fulfilled its objectives to “Introduce students to the mission of Calvin College;” “Engage students in the Calvin academic community;” and “Provide students with a community and peer connection”?<sup>22</sup> Student evaluation data over the years strongly suggests that, in students’ minds, Prelude has accomplished what it set out to do:

*On Mission:* 87 percent of Prelude students (2001-2010 nine-year average) said that *This course’s introduction to the central ideas and commitments of Calvin College was excellent* (14.5 percent), very good (47 percent), or average (25.8 percent). This item received its highest marks in 2008 (98 percent in the top three categories) and its lowest marks (76 percent in the top three categories) in 2002 and 2005. The curriculum has advanced in terms of achieving this goal since the program began.

*On Engagement:* Prelude aims to introduce students to the academic enterprise at Calvin in a compelling way. 93 percent of Prelude students (nine-year average) said that *The effectiveness of the instructor’s teaching methods in engaging me with the ideas of this course was excellent* (31 percent), very good (44 percent), or average (18 percent).

While the invitation to the academic enterprise within the classroom ought to be attractive, Prelude has also sought to involve students in learning outside of the classroom. Prelude students are required to attend several campus lectures or other events and submit brief reflections about them. The assignment (called “ETC,” short for Experience Teaches at

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<sup>22</sup> Course objectives excerpted from the Prelude syllabus, 2010. Versions of these three objectives appear in syllabi from the first year (2001) onward.

Calvin) achieves the course objective of engaging a wide swath of students in the Calvin learning community: It seems to encourage reticent students to engage and prompts further reflection for those who would already attend such events.<sup>23</sup> In 2010, nearly one-fifth of the students' free-write comments on aspects of the course that most helped their learning referred to ETCs. It is unusual that a standardized assignment can benefit a spectrum of students in this way, but this assignment does seem to fulfill a goal of promoting campus engagement for a variety of students.

On Peer Connection: 95 percent of Prelude students (again, a nine-year average) said that *Being with the same group of students in both Quest and Prelude was:* excellent (57 percent), very good (26 percent), or average (12 percent). Continuing the peer connection from orientation into the fall semester seems to provide consistency that students appreciate.

Student evaluation data indicates that Prelude has demonstrated the ability to meet its stated objectives.

Another way to evaluate a first-year program's success is to consider the support and effectiveness of its instructors. Prelude has benefited from the teaching support of returning instructors, especially in recent years as the program has become more established and the curriculum has remained relatively consistent from year to year. In 2010, 82 percent (n=42/51) of the instructors had taught Prelude at least once before. Instructors are satisfied with the workload asked of them, and many also seem to appreciate the organization and operation of the program.<sup>24</sup> Some are constructive conversation partners regarding course materials and pedagogy, and over the years instructor insights

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, these representative comments from 2010 Prelude students: "ETCs [Experience Teaches at Calvin] [were the most helpful for me]. I went to LOFT, which I wouldn't have gone to if I didn't have to and loved it." "ETC [was the most helpful to me] – I would have gone anyway, but the response papers really forced one to think more deeply about what I'd absorbed."

<sup>24</sup> On the 2010 Prelude evaluation for instructors, the item "The workload for Prelude instructors/assistants is appropriate for a one-credit class" received a mean response indicating strong agreement (4.1/5.0). Instructors representing 88 percent of the 45 sections responded (n=40).

have yielded a better course design. In addition, most faculty and staff members who teach Prelude are sincerely interested in first-year students, and their students sense it: 81.7 percent of the students in 2010 said that their instructors were excellent (53.5 percent) or very good (28.2 percent); 80 percent said that the enthusiasm the instructor showed for the course content was excellent (47 percent) or very good (33 percent). 87 percent of students said that their instructors helped them learn (37.2 percent strongly agreed and 50 percent agreed with this statement). The interaction of instructors with first year students has been a value and a success of the program.

Alongside these noteworthy successes come some ongoing challenges. One significant challenge is the perception among some students that this introductory, one-credit course is not worth their time or investment. Though perception is difficult to quantify, instructors acknowledge this attitude among students,<sup>25</sup> and some students also refer to it in their written comments.<sup>26</sup> While indeed student satisfaction with the course overall has seen a noteworthy increase from the first year to the present,<sup>27</sup> evaluation scores in this category still yield lower-than-desired results. The lower figures in this category seem discordant with the higher scores the course receives in other categories.

Prelude has also encountered some competing (good) values that can be difficult to resolve satisfactorily. For example—and at risk of stating the obvious—Prelude seeks to provide a significant treatment of content within an introductory, one credit class. Course planners have wrestled with

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<sup>25</sup>On his/her fall 2010 Prelude evaluation, one instructor writes, “A major disappointment [for me] was that even though the class and [I] were generally pleased with each other and the discussions went pretty well, they still do not see value in the class.” Another writes, “My class had heard an overwhelming number of negative comments about the class prior to the beginning session. This was, at times, difficult to overcome.”

<sup>26</sup>When asked to comment on any drawbacks encountered in the course, one student wrote, “Only that due to the mandatory nature of the class, my overall experience of the class, which I would have elected to take, [was] inhibited by those who were displeased by their required attendance and as a result, a certain uncomfortability pervaded the sharing of perspective.” Another student wrote, “It seems like no one likes it or cares about it.”

<sup>27</sup>On the item, “This course as a whole was,” 76 percent of students said the course was “excellent,” “good,” or “average” in 2002. This figure went up to 90 percent in 2003, hovered around 75-80 percent in 2004 and 2005, returned to 90 percent range for a couple of years, and increased to a high of 98 percent in 2008. In 2010 the course assessment was changed from “Excellent-Good-Average” designations to “Excellent-Very Good-Good” designations. This year, 77 percent of students said the course was “excellent,” “very good,” or “good.”

appropriately weighting the assignments and intellectual rigor of the course while also respecting the course's credit hour designation and introductory nature. In Prelude's early years the workload was significantly revised in response to students' perceptions that the course required too much work for one credit.<sup>28</sup> While students today seem to find the workload reasonable,<sup>29</sup> Prelude continues to struggle with the issue of academic weight. Can the course provide a reader and a standardized curriculum that is neither beneath the students' abilities and interests nor above them—and one that is instructive and inviting for students both familiar and unfamiliar with Calvin's commitments (another tension)? Some instructors mention that the course would be better suited as a capstone for senior students and others find the content not relevant to incoming students.<sup>30</sup>

Prelude has faced another tension related to the values of program consistency and individual pedagogical approach. Since Prelude's first season course planners and instructors have navigated the delicate balance of delivering a relatively consistent course experience across all sections (thereby pursuing program objectives) and capitalizing on the interests and strengths of individual instructors. Some instructors have found the curriculum too limiting.<sup>31</sup> Related to this tension is the one between

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<sup>28</sup> Prelude assessments note that the workload was reduced from 2001 to 2002, and the 2003-2005 assessments continue to refer to the issue of "assigning a reasonable workload for a one-credit course without shortchanging the goals of the course" (Jeff Winkle, 2003 Prelude Report, 3).

<sup>29</sup> In 2010, 66 percent of students strongly agreed or agreed that "The intellectual challenge is appropriate given that it is an introductory, one-credit course," and 81 percent of students said that "The amount of effort expected of students" was excellent, very good, or good.

<sup>30</sup> On the 2010 assessment, one instructor writes, "We need to remember that the Prelude students are really high school kids on a college campus. Their thinking is shallow and limited. Along comes Prelude with topics that resemble a senior capstone experience. The students are simply not mature enough to be enthused or think deeply and holistically about them. Their worlds are too small. A plenary session or reading or class discussion does nothing to change that perception, unfortunately. The only solution is several years of a college education. Sorry, but in my opinion Prelude misses the target completely." Another instructor writes, "The content of the course is not engaging students where they are. Let them engage in questions that they are asking."

<sup>31</sup> The Prelude Assessment from 2001 refers to this tension: "From the instructor's perspective, the goal of consistency across sections of the course resulted in a bit too much rigidity in curriculum presentation. There may be ways to preserve the consistency while allowing instructors more freedom to guide and facilitate discussion" (John Witte, 5). This perception still exists today. One 2010 instructor writes, "[It is troubling to me that I, as a professor, am not given the freedom to decide how I will like to evaluate my students' work....While I agree that we all need to be on the same page, I think that mandating pedagogy is not part of higher education. If I teach any other introduction course here at Calvin then I and the other faculty teaching the course are given the freedom to design the course in ways that suit our teaching and their learning."

larger and smaller venues in Prelude. Students have responded to plenary sessions in generally satisfactory but not glowing terms, and some instructors have wished for more classroom time and less plenary time. Plenary content also sometimes receives criticism from instructors.<sup>32</sup> Could Prelude better serve students by having more individual instructor latitude and more classroom time? Perhaps so, but likely not while also maintaining a strong focus on the current course objective of consistent presentation to all incoming students.<sup>33</sup>

Over the past ten years, Prelude's successes lie in its achievement of course objectives and in its creation of a context where first-year students encounter invested instructors. Its chief challenges lie in overcoming students' preconceptions about the course and in navigating a good path when values seem to compete. This review of historical challenges and successes could lead to some considerations for the future of a first-year seminar at Calvin College. But first a more detailed consideration of the most recent Prelude season is in order.

## **2010 Assessment: Methodology**

Prelude has undergone annual assessment since 2001. Assessment data has been collected in the form of student feedback, instructor feedback, and, for the first time this year, Orientation Leader/Prelude Assistant feedback.

### **Student feedback**

On the last day of class, each section of Prelude students completes a paper-and-pencil evaluation for the course. In 2010, the instrument was offered to all 935 Prelude students in 45 sections during the last class session and yielded a 97.7 percent rate of return (n=914). The assessment included:

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<sup>32</sup> A couple of representative instructor comments from 2010 will make the point here:  
"My preference would be for the course to be either instructor or plenary based—not both."  
"I didn't care for the plenaries and the inconsistencies that they brought to the course."  
"I thought the plenaries lacked focus and energy. On multiple occasions I left wondering what the purpose had been. If used I'd like to see the plenaries connect better with the classes to follow."

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps DCM has evaluation data that can speak to the degree to which consistent course objectives can be well served in a course model that does allow for more instructor-specific material and approach.

- *23 quantitative items.* Ten of these were identical to items that appear on all course evaluations at Calvin, and thirteen sought to address specific goals of Prelude;
- *3 short-response qualitative items for all students.* These items asked students to comment on the ways in which a Christian faith perspective shaped the classroom; what aspects of the course most helped their learning; what topics were most valuable to them now, and what topics they would like to see Prelude address; and
- *2 short-response qualitative items for students in one of the “cluster” sections<sup>34</sup>* (i.e., classes drawn from students who all lived in the same residence hall (8 sections) or classes drawn from students who had experienced Wilderness Orientation together (2 sections). Two additional “cluster courses” were offered: a combined fall DCM-Prelude course, and a course whose demographic included only students who had indicated academic interest in the sciences. These students were asked to comment on the benefits and drawbacks of being enrolled in a cluster section.

Student evaluations were scanned in the provost’s office and tabulated by the dean for institutional effectiveness. A summary sheet detailing the quantitative responses was provided for each section, as was a summary sheet for the program overall. Students’ handwritten responses (a total of 3726 individual items) were compiled and typed by the administrative assistant for residence life.

### **Instructor and Orientation Leader/Prelude Assistant feedback**

Prior to 2010, Prelude instructors were encouraged to attend one of multiple fall feedback sessions to discuss their experiences with the Prelude curriculum with other instructors and the Prelude Coordinator. Minutes from these sessions were kept and instructors’ feedback was considered in shaping future Prelude seasons.

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<sup>34</sup> A bit of explanation regarding “cluster-sections” is in order. Since 2008 Prelude has piloted, then expanded, a cohort model in which groups of 22 students who live in the same residence hall study together in Prelude. Proponents of this model suggested that course objectives of student engagement and peer connection would be served well by such a model: student learning would be enhanced in a classroom where students knew one another well, and organic conversations about course content would be more likely to take place outside of class. Student feedback indicates that there are strong benefits and some drawbacks to this model: the majority said they appreciated the consistency that this model offers, though some students wished to have more exposure to first-year students they would not otherwise see. Some students have also referred to discussing course topics outside of class. One resident director has mentioned that students who were enrolled in Prelude together have taken on a strong and positive corporate presence in the residence hall.

In 2009, not many instructors were able to attend one of the feedback sessions.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, in 2010 instructor evaluation was sought through an online tool administered by the Center for Social Research in the hope that more instructors would be able to provide their insights. This mechanism yielded a better return: online feedback was provided from instructors representing 88 percent of the sections offered (n=40 out of 51 instructors for 45 sections of Prelude; note that 6 sections were team-taught in 2010). In this evaluation, instructors were asked to respond to:

- **Seven quantitative items:** These items addressed overall perception of preparedness to teach the course, use of class materials, suitability of the workload for students and instructors, and working with an Orientation Leader/Prelude Assistant.
- **Nine short answer items:** The first five items asked instructors to comment on what they liked about different aspects of the course curriculum and administration, and the sixth asked them to comment on improvements to any/all of the above items. Instructors were then asked to comment on highlights and disappointments of teaching Prelude in 2010. The final item asked them to provide any additional feedback about their experiences in Prelude.

A nearly identical online assessment was also offered to Orientation Leaders/Prelude Assistants.

Prelude assessments have not formally included Orientation Leaders' observations in the past, and it seemed worthwhile to ask upper-level students to provide their insights regarding this course. 86 percent of Orientation Leaders (n=39) completed the assessment.

In a spirit of transparency and collaboration, and with a desire to offer the best introduction possible to Calvin College for its newest students, this report provides a sampling of 2010 assessment data from students, instructors, and orientation leaders who served as teaching assistants.

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<sup>35</sup> In 2009, we received feedback from instructors representing 31 percent of the sections offered (n=14 out of 49 instructors for 45 sections of Prelude). Such feedback came in the form of discussion at these meetings, in conversation with the Prelude Coordinator, or via telephone or e-mail.

## 2010 Assessment: Data

### *Student Qualitative Feedback*

After receiving the raw data and student comments for each fall Prelude section, the Prelude coordinator reviewed it and began comparing the 2010 data to that received in previous years. The coordinator created a report with a course overview and assessment data, including a representative sample of approximately one third of the student comments as well as a summary and sampling of instructor and Orientation Leader comments. This draft report was reviewed by the vice president for student life and her senior leadership team. At that time, the leadership team advised more detailed coding and thematic summarizing of student comments as well as a reorganization of the report.

The Prelude coordinator reviewed the 3726 student comments a second time in three sittings and color-coded them into four separate categories: Exceptional, Positive, Constructive, and Negative, as defined below.

<p><b><i>Exceptional</i></b> N=103, or 2.76%</p>	<p>Speaks superlatively about the course and/or refers appreciatively to personal appropriation of content; e.g., “Prelude covered everything I could have asked for,” or “I just love how my class always brought up much deeper discussion than planned, even on the first day.”</p>
<p><b><i>Positive</i></b> N=2873, or 77.11%</p>	<p>Refers positively to elements of Prelude, e.g., when asked about helpful elements of the class, lists a topic or two: “Vocation was the most helpful topic we covered in Prelude” or “The class readings helped clarify my understanding.”</p>
<p><b><i>Constructive</i></b> N=548, or 17.41%</p>	<p>Provides a comment that could aid course planners in modifying the course in a helpful way. May include both a positive and a negative evaluation in the same response item, name a theme that Prelude might do well to cover in the future when asked to do so, or give an idea for a helpful change in the program whether explicitly requested or not. E.g., “I learned the most from x but didn’t learn much from y,” or “I wish Prelude would cover the beliefs of Christians in other denominations” or “I don’t think that the readings were very helpful.”</p>
<p><b><i>Negative</i></b> N=202, or 5.42%*</p>	<p>Includes an indication of distaste for the course content or methods or expresses a sentiment that suggests that a course objective was not met. E.g., “This class did not have much to offer,” or “This was a waste of my time,” or “No examples as to how this class exhibited a Christian faith perspective come to mind.” As a subset of the “negative” category the Prelude coordinator also distinctly coded students’ references to having already learned Prelude content elsewhere.</p>

\*0.83 percent of the comments in this category included a mention of already being familiar with the material.

A degree of subjectivity is inherent in this type of analysis, but every effort was made to define the categories clearly and keep them in view during the entire coding process. The following sampling of student comments is representative of responses in each category:

<b>Exceptional</b>
<i>"I really, really enjoyed plenaries and Unlearn week."</i>
<i>"My instructor's teaching style was awesome. He had a perfect balance of teaching and discussion."</i>
<i>"Plenaries inspired me to change. Instructor's teaching really helped me understand the readings more..."</i>

<b>Positive</b>
<i>"Readings were very good. They engaged me in important topics."</i>
<i>"Our topics about culture were fascinating."</i>
<i>"The ETCs ["Experience Teaches at Calvin"—requirement of students to attend lectures or other campus events and reflect on them] helped me explore Calvin."</i>
<i>"Although I probably did not read all of the assignments as well as I should have, I found the readings to be surprisingly interesting. I also really liked the class discussions."</i>
<i>"Coming from a Christian high school, I didn't learn anything new; just got a different look on how people see things."</i>
<i>"Discussions were biblically based."</i>
<i>"Student conduct was acceptable. General respect was shown to the teacher. Most students were honest about their perspectives."</i>
<i>"We could actually talk about God. I came from a public school, so being able to talk about God in a classroom setting is a big deal. I guess that isn't very specific. It's not even specific to my Prelude class; it's just how Calvin is. I've appreciated this."</i>
<i>"All topics were useful."</i>

<b>Constructive</b> *This category includes students' suggested topics for a future first-year seminar. These suggestions will be presented in table form below.
<i>"Class discussion and teaching were the most effective [elements of the course]. It was difficult to draw conclusions or critically think based on the readings alone."</i>
<i>"The readings were sometimes interesting, and sometimes not at all helpful. It also took a large chunk of my time that could have been spent on other classes."</i>
<i>"It was a lot of work for one credit. Three papers and two were 4-5 pages."</i>
<i>"I thought some quiz questions should be changed."</i>

<b>Negative:</b>
<i>"Readings should maybe be offered to students. The rest seemed worthless."</i>
<i>"I don't feel I learned anything."</i>
<i>"No[thing helped my learning.] All seemed pointless."</i>
<i>"I don't think Prelude has a value regardless of topics. I don't see a point. It's essentially cramming for the rest of college. But I like Quest."</i>

A review of all 3726 student comments reveals the broad range of student responses to the course. Almost universally students speak positively about the ways in which a Christian perspective shaped the classroom. In one or two cases students struggled to identify an operational Christian perspective in the classroom, and a similar number of students expressed concerns that such a perspective might alienate those who do not share a Christian commitment. On the other hand, in a similar number of cases students who self-identified as a non-Christian wrote appreciatively about the Christian perspective in the classroom.

In response to the item, “What aspects of the course most helped your learning?” most students referred positively to one or more elements of the class. Yet there are no clear “winners” as to the most effective course elements, nor is there clear identification of course elements that could/should be eliminated. It is not unusual to read a response from one student that praises an element of the course, (e.g., “I loved the course readings”), and several comments later within the same section’s evaluation to read another comment that expresses dissatisfaction with the same course element (“The readings were dull.”) In some ways perhaps this range of responses is not all bad: if most students can identify one or more elements of the course approach that were most helpful to them, perhaps the curriculum and pedagogy are broad enough to teach to a variety of learning styles.

In response to the item, “What topics covered in Prelude are most helpful for you now?” most students identified one or more topics. Responses indicating that *all* topics were helpful were roughly equal to responses indicating that *none* of the topics was helpful. As in the previous item, there were not clear outliers in terms of students’ perception of helpful course topics. Many students referred to vocation, cultural discernment, and responsible freedom as useful topics, though justice and worldview were also mentioned to a slightly lesser degree.

Some patterns do emerge when reviewing students' suggestions for topics they wish Prelude would cover. Students wrote in 76 different general topics they would like to see covered in Prelude. Some liberty was taken in categorizing students' responses to group similarly-themed topics. The seven most frequently-mentioned themes are listed here, along with the number of mentions in each category:

<b>Community:</b> friendships, relationships, including God in, how to build, social interaction <sup>36</sup>	40
<b>Academic success</b> at Calvin--course planning, advising, difference btw. HS and college, meet professors	24
<b>Sexuality,</b> sex, love, dating, purity	22
<b>Faith:</b> owning it, cultivating it, living daily with God, genuine, personal	21
<b>College life,</b> adjusting to, thriving in, leaving the nest,	20
<b>Vocation:</b> clarification, trusting God for, faith integration with, more depth on	18
<b>Reformed doctrine</b> (CRC terms, beliefs, Calvinism, John Calvin, theology, doctrinal disagreements, importance of doctrine, heaven and hell)	17

This data suggests that incoming students are most concerned about three things when they enter Calvin: finding a place to belong, making the grade academically, and growing in their faith. Several also mentioned a desire to discuss controversial topics (whether specific items such as evolution, abortion, homosexuality, or controversial topics more generally). Others also wanted to know more about the beliefs of Christians across denominational lines and the beliefs of those who adhere to other world religions. Some also sought guidance about how to live out their faith in a context hostile to Christianity—all topics worthy of consideration in a Calvin education.

### *Student Quantitative Feedback*

Student quantitative feedback coheres well with the results from the qualitative analysis: 77 percent of 2010 Prelude students indicated that the course as a whole was excellent (7.7%), very good

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<sup>36</sup> It is possible that students who mentioned "relationships" had in mind "dating relationships" or "friendships;" unable to know which meaning was intended, I categorized "relationships" under the heading of community.

(25.8%), or good (42.7%), and the qualitative assessment revealed that 77 percent of students' narrative responses were positive. In addition to revealing the assessment's internal consistency, the quantitative results show that, particularly in categories related to instructor evaluation, Prelude compares favorably with other classes at Calvin.<sup>37</sup> Quantitative items compared below were offered on a five-point Likert scale identical to those used for other Calvin courses, where 5 is excellent; 4 is very good; 3 is good; 2 is fair; and 1 is poor:\*

**Quantitative Items Common to All Courses at Calvin College**

<b>Assessment item</b>	<b>Prelude 2010</b>	<b>College Average, FA/10<sup>38</sup></b>	<b>1-Credit course average, FA-10 (HPERDS, FIT)</b>
<i>The effectiveness of the instructor's teaching methods in actively engaging me with the ideas of this course was:</i>	3.80	3.75	3.94
<i>The enthusiasm the instructor showed for the content of this course was:</i>	4.22	4.33	4.23
<i>The clarity of the instructor's interactions with students was:</i>	4.03	3.80	4.11
<i>The helpfulness of the instructor's interactions with students was</i>	4.04	3.99	4.15
<i>The fairness of the instructor's evaluation of student performance was</i>	3.97	3.94	4.14
<i>The promptness of the instructor's oral or written feedback on my academic performance was:</i>	3.86	3.88	4.01
<i>The instructor was:</i>	4.30	4.06	4.21

\*For annual data comparison purposes, it is important to note that the Prelude response scale was changed in 2010 to more closely parallel the one used for evaluations college-wide. The "3" designation was changed from "average" (prior to 2010) to "good" for this year.

<sup>37</sup> Posing some of the same statements and response categories as other Calvin classes do has yielded data that can be interpreted contextually, though it must be acknowledged that there are inherent difficulties with comparing this introductory one-credit class with other courses offered at Calvin. Recognizing the differences both between (a) an introductory first-year seminar that all students take and other classes at Calvin; and (b) incoming students and more seasoned students, data comparisons are offered here for the purpose of providing some context without necessarily drawing conclusions based on direct data comparison.

<sup>38</sup> All college courses are evaluated each semester. The response rate for these assessments was 48.7percent.

While Prelude instructor qualifications are becoming more specific for the future (i.e., must hold a completed master’s degree or better), student assessment suggests that instructors have done an effective job in their classrooms.

One assessment item that appears on both Prelude evaluations and evaluations for other classes at Calvin asks students to evaluate the course overall. This is one category in which Prelude does not compare as favorably to other courses. This disparity may be related to the standardized and introductory nature of a course that 950 incoming students take; it may also reflect the reputational challenges Prelude has faced. It may also be the case that the course content and design need to be refreshed.

<b>Assessment item</b>	<b>Prelude 2010</b>	<b>College Average, FA/10<sup>39</sup></b>	<b>1-credit course average, FA-10 (HPERDS, FIT)</b>	<b>FIT 2009</b>
<i>The course as a whole was</i>	3.14	3.79	3.95	3.01

Interestingly, Prelude students’ mean response on their own investment in the course was a 3.12, just slightly lower than their overall response to the course. It is hard to say whether students’ estimation of the course influences their level of investment in it, or whether their level of investment influences their estimation of the course. One student comment on this theme is noteworthy: “This class is meaningless without thoughtful reflection.” There does appear to be a connection between what students perceive they have gained from the course and their level of investment in it. Yet the “course overall” evaluation figure may be contextualized better in light of the thirteen quantitative items that were specific to the Prelude course.

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<sup>39</sup> All college courses are evaluated each semester. The response rate for these assessments in fall 2010 was 48.7 percent.

**Quantitative Items Specific to Prelude**

The next thirteen statements included in the quantitative assessment were designed to assess Prelude’s effectiveness in its own terms. They did not provide data comparable to feedback gleaned from evaluations of other courses at Calvin but rather sought to determine what students perceived this particular course accomplished. Like the preceding statements, these items also asked students to use a five-point response scale. Here, 5 is Strongly Agree; 4 is Agree; 3 is Neutral; 2 is Disagree; and 1 is Strongly Disagree.

<b>Assessment item</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Assessment item</b>	<b>Average</b>
<i>Shirley Hoogstra’s plenary lecture encouraged me to pursue becoming a curious, gracious person as I study at Calvin.</i>	3.60	<i>Ken Heffner’s lecture helped me understand more about God’s deep care for his creation and our call to love God and his world.</i>	3.50
<i>Reggie Smith’s lecture helped me understand why Christians should make a commitment to justice and righteousness.</i>	4.13	<i>The presentation given by Glenn Triezenberg and the video interviews with members of the Creston neighborhood helped me understand more about responding to God’s call in all areas of our lives.</i>	3.60
<i>As I conclude Prelude, I understand the concept of a Christian worldview better than I did when I started at Calvin.</i>	3.70	<i>As I conclude Prelude, I understand the concept of cultural discernment better than I did when I started at Calvin.</i>	3.73
<i>As I conclude Prelude, I understand the concept of responsible freedom better than I did when I started at Calvin.</i>	3.83	<i>As I conclude Prelude, I understand the concepts of justice and righteousness better than I did when I started at Calvin.</i>	3.77
<i>As I conclude Prelude, I understand the concept of vocation better than I did when I started at Calvin.</i>	3.95	<i>My instructor applied ideas in a way that I could apply to my own life and/or academic interests.</i>	3.99
<i>My instructor’s teaching style kept our class on track.</i>	4.06	<i>My instructor could answer additional questions I had, or could point me to other resources if needed.</i>	4.23
<i>My instructor helped me learn.</i>	4.22	<i>ETC assignments allowed me to participate in several Calvin- or city-wide opportunities. I would have done this even without the assignment.</i>	3.72
<i>Being with my QUEST group throughout Prelude helped me feel more comfortable contributing to class discussion than I might have among strangers.</i>	4.22	<i>Class discussions encouraged me to think critically and express myself in my classroom (whether in small or large groups, or both).</i>	3.88
<i>The intellectual challenge of this course is appropriate given that it is an introductory, one-credit course.</i>	3.73		

This quantitative data continues the pattern of positive student response to their instructors and to the discussion and learning that takes place in their individual classrooms. Students also indicate that they

have gained a better understanding of concepts addressed in Prelude, though these topics certainly need the fuller fleshing-out that comes in the subsequent years of their Calvin experience. Plenary sessions receive a fair response from students on average, and the best student response to plenary sessions comes when a speaker is both accessible and dynamic and the content is horizon-expanding.

In sum, both qualitative and quantitative student feedback reveals that Prelude has areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. The quality of classroom interaction is high, and learning is taking place as students engage new and familiar concepts and begin the practice of reflective dialogue in their early days of college. The course content and presentation may be due to be refreshed in light of students' suggestions and overall response to the course.

### ***Instructor and Prelude Assistant Feedback***

Quantitative and qualitative assessment for instructors and Prelude Assistants sought to assess the degree to which instructors and PAs (1) received adequate programmatic support for their work; (2) implemented the standardized Prelude materials in class; and (3) worked together to provide PAs the opportunity and guidance to help shape and lead some elements of the class. They responded to nearly identical assessment forms and used the same five-point Strongly Disagree-Strongly Agree scale.

Instructor and Prelude Assistant quantitative responses are detailed in the chart below.

<b><i>Assessment Item</i></b>	<b><i>Instructors' average</i></b>	<b><i>Prelude Assistants' average</i></b>
<i>The Prelude training session adequately prepared me to teach/assist.</i>	3.8	3.9
<i>My class engaged the materials provided.</i>	3.9	3.8
<i>I prepared myself adequately to teach/assist my class.</i>	4.3	4.2
<i>The workload for Prelude instructors/assistants is appropriate for a one-credit class.</i>	4.1	4.1
<i>The workload for Prelude students is appropriate for a one-credit class.</i>	3.8	3.9
<i>I met regularly with my Orientation Leader/Prelude Assistant to plan class sessions.</i>	4.3	3.8
<i>My Orientation Leader/Prelude Assistant contributed positively to our class.</i>	4.6	4.3

Such good coherence between instructors and Prelude Assistants' responses on the quantitative items suggest that one strength of Prelude is its consistency for all incoming students: Those working directly with the students report that the prescribed course materials are being used in class and are implemented with good preparation and good cooperation. The program also seems to have advanced over the years in terms of settling on a suitable workload: Instructors and PAs agree that the assignments of the course are appropriate for a one-credit course. Interestingly, instructors respond more positively about the contributions of the Orientation Leaders to their class than the OLs themselves do. Instructors also report more regular meetings with their OLs than the OLs do, and this may be an area for increased communication in the future.

Instructors provide particularly helpful qualitative feedback, since they are the ones in direct contact with the curriculum and with students. When asked about what they appreciated about the 2010 Prelude course, a number of instructors spoke positively about the opportunity to interact with students over meaningful topics.<sup>40</sup> They also referred very positively to this year's redesigned course reader and their students' reactions to the justice plenary, given by Rev. Reggie Smith, during the fifth week of Prelude. Their response to the instructor binder was fair; it seems that Prelude lesson plans, at their best, become a launching pad for instructors to cover the assigned material in their own creative ways. Instructors generally found that the course is organized and changes or additions are well

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<sup>40</sup> A sampling of instructors' positive feedback follows: "The reader was effectively organized with images and weekly assignments, all of which made it easy for students to know what was expected of them and encouraged engagement with some of the pieces. Many of the readings were applicable to the topics at hand and understandable for the students' developmental level..."

"ALL my students were engaged. I had no slackers and the born-and-bred CRCers didn't have the "chip" on their shoulders."

"Personally, the themes, readings, and plenaries were meaningful to me. I really valued the opportunity to think about the themes and find encouragement in this community through the voices of writers and plenary speakers."

"I enjoyed meeting students who might not otherwise have crossed my path and engaging them in discussion. I always enjoy revisiting the readings of Prelude; each year they speak to my own current situation in different ways."

communicated, though some wondered about considering smaller class sizes and rethinking content and approach to make use of “more creative/effective pedagogy.”

Instructors are attuned to the less-than-enthusiastic perception of Prelude among students described in the “Strengths and Challenges” section of this report, and a number of instructors sense that they are paddling against the current.<sup>41</sup> They express diverse viewpoints regarding the Prelude content: some say there is too much content and an insufficient amount of time to discuss it deeply.<sup>42</sup> Some instructors think the topics are developmentally appropriate for students and others find that they are either too elementary or too advanced.<sup>43</sup> Some instructors also refer to their frustrations with a standardized course model and wish for more flexibility in the curriculum and pedagogy.<sup>44</sup> As

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<sup>41</sup> One instructor writes, “Teaching Prelude is a hard job, and I’m not sure how it could be made easier. Students are at a particular place, and it is often difficult to translate philosophies that we know so well, philosophies that really do guide our lives, into a classroom presentation for students who have never thought about it before. As one colleague said in training, students might not even know they have freedom let alone also have a perspective on how to use it responsibly....”

Another says, “A major disappointment was that even though the class and [I] were generally pleased with each other and the discussions went pretty well, they still do not see value in the class.” Another says, “My class had heard an overwhelming number of negative comments about the class prior to the beginning session. This was, at times, difficult to overcome.”

Still another says, “Although I really enjoyed the content and the students...the ‘culture of Prelude’ has systemic challenges in finding a place in the hearts of the students required to take the course.”

<sup>42</sup> A couple of instructor comments will illustrate this theme: “Probably something that you hear a lot is that there is too much content. I felt the crunch....” Another instructor writes, “Classes need to be 90 minutes and there needs to be less content to cover. The students want to go deep, but the time evaporates. The instructor leaves feeling as though he or she over-prepared but was not able to let one reading-based discussion get to a point of depth. The limited classroom time feels very busy.” Another says, “While I like most of the readings, I think there are too many. I’d rather have few readings so that the students have more time to absorb them and so that we don’t have so much material to cover in class.”

<sup>43</sup> The following instructor comments illustrate this range of responses:

“For the Christian school kids, [Prelude] is still too much like high school.”

“We need to remember that the Prelude students are really high school kids on a college campus. Their thinking is shallow and limited. Along comes Prelude with topics that resemble a senior capstone experience. The students are simply not mature enough to be enthused or think deeply and holistically about them....The only solution is several years of a college education.”

“The content of the course is not engaging students where they are. Let them engage in questions that they are asking.”

<sup>44</sup> One instructor writes, “It is troubling to me that I, as a professor, am not given the freedom to decide how I will like to evaluate my students’ work....While I agree that we all need to be on the same page, I think that mandating pedagogy is not part of higher education. If I teach any other introduction course here at Calvin then I and the other faculty teaching the course are given the freedom to design the course in ways that suit our teaching and their learning.” Another instructor writes, “Some flexibility in terms of readings and delivery, and assessment of learning would make my experience as an instructor more valuable.” Another says, “I would like the option of

mentioned in the quantitative data section above, instructors also seem to highlight plenary sessions in their comments. A number of them wonder if plenary sessions could be strengthened or better linked to the classroom components of the course, or if indeed time could be freed up for more in-class learning by reducing or eliminating plenary sessions.<sup>45</sup>

Prelude Assistants' qualitative responses provide both affirmation for the course and suggestions to improve it. Most PAs refer appreciatively to the course, and some find that they have benefited more from the course than they realized as first-year students.<sup>46</sup> Some PAs echo instructors' perceptions that there is not enough class time to discuss course content with sufficient depth.<sup>47</sup>

Others suggest that Prelude should be made somehow more enjoyable for students (perhaps we can call this the Philip Sydney 'delightfulness' quotient) and could be redesigned to bring greater insight to topics with which some students may already be familiar.<sup>48</sup> Some PA comments also echo instructor comments in terms of giving instructors greater curricular flexibility and so to increase their ability to

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including one piece per week as my own supplement to the reader. It would help me own the course and provide me comfortable footing on which to stand, along with the other readings."

<sup>45</sup> One instructor writes, "I thought the plenaries lacked focus and energy. On multiple occasions I left wondering what the purpose had been. If used I'd like to see the plenaries connect better with the classes to follow...."

Another sensed that plenaries brought "inconsistencies" to the course. Another says, "I often felt the plenary sessions got in the way of creating a good learning flow in the classroom. They significantly reduced the amount of time necessary for accomplishing other course goals. Especially in terms of the plenary on vocation, the plenary did not move us forward in terms of thoughtful reflection on the topic..." Another: "I prefer the nights without plenaries. Class always feels very short when we have plenaries." "Rethink the speakers/plenaries and the topics."

<sup>46</sup> One Prelude Assistant writes, "Overall I appreciate the readings. I also think now looking back, I see how what I learned in Prelude does affect my everyday thinking. I think that Prelude gives us the vocabulary to be a student at Calvin effectively. So while students complain it's "pointless" I think we all end up using what we learn a lot more than we realize." Another PA writes, "I feel as though I have gotten more out of Prelude as an assistant than I did as a student. I really like the content of Prelude and think it's a shame more students don't take it more seriously."

<sup>47</sup> One PA says, "I think there is too much material for the allotted amount of class time... Prelude isn't being as effective for students as it could be...because it's being overshadowed by the number of readings/ discussions/ activities/ plenaries without the appropriate accompanying depth." Another PA writes, "Too many readings."

<sup>48</sup> "I think that the Prelude program needs to be changed in some ways. I do not know exactly what would make it more enjoyable and engaging for the students—but there needs to be a change to make it more enjoyable."

"It seems like the content has been the same for a really long time, and the concept could be rethought. Many of my students mentioned that they had heard most of this many times before whether in school, at home, or in church. I think that the topics of each week are good and need to be discussed, but the material could be changed so that there are more takeaways for the students."

own the material and teach it in organic ways.<sup>49</sup> PAs, too, mention plenaries as a place for potential improvement.<sup>50</sup>

Instructor and Prelude Assistant feedback reveals several positive aspects of the course. First, the goal of having a consistent gateway course for incoming students has been met. Instructors value the interaction with first year students and many appreciate the course content and teach it in compelling ways. Prelude Assistants are indeed having opportunity to play a supporting and creative role in the classroom, serving as a link from students' orientation days to their first semester courses. Course content has received nuanced reviews, with some clearly useful offerings and strategies and others that could be reconsidered. Students, instructors, and assistants value creativity, flexibility, and depth in a first-year seminar; there may be ways in which these values can find their way into the implementation of a first-year seminar to a greater degree in the future if the value of course consistency is determined to be less central in 2011 than it was in 2001.

## Conclusion

The preceding data shows that Prelude is a complex program that has achieved the course objectives set out for it, and it has done so to good effect. A 77 percent approval rating (i.e., the percentage of students who say the course overall is excellent, very good, or good in 2010) is not as high as one might like, but neither is it indicative of a failed project. Thorough annual review and program oversight have sought to attend to students' and instructors' criticisms and improve course offerings in ways that aligned with the purpose and nature of the course.

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<sup>49</sup>"Perhaps ...make the plenaries a bit shorter, to continue to encourage professors to make the guide their own and do their own spin on the teachings (this is what my professors did and it was much more authentic and I think the students got a lot more out of it)."

Some of the plenaries were not as impactful as they could have been. I think the instructors need more "Cool/Creative" ways of teaching the lectures so it doesn't always turn into a discussion. Some professors have time to think of those things, some do not. So if they could have more guided resources - that would be great. For example, the UP video clip and others for the one week were super helpful!

<sup>50</sup> "I think that the content of both the plenaries and the reader could be improved." "I would make the plenaries a bit more interactive." "Some of the plenaries were not as impactful as they could have been."

In the past, the standardized course model of Prelude has lacked sprightliness but has achieved the goal of delivering a gateway course to all incoming students—the well-adjusted and the struggling alike. If consistency in reaching all students with identical content and similar methodology is no longer a primary objective for a first-year seminar at Calvin, alternative models for content and delivery can readily be considered.

The current first-year experience is slated to be reviewed by the Calvin NCA accreditation team. In anticipation of the three-year plan to be proposed by that team, an interim first-year seminar based on the Prelude model could operate with the following considerations:

- 1) Modify Prelude content and approach with a team of two faculty members and two veteran Prelude instructors, building upon this report and the best insights gleaned from those who attended the First-Year Experience Conference in February in Atlanta, GA.<sup>51</sup>
- 2) Consider having 75 percent of incoming students continue with the resulting modified Prelude model, and enrolling 25 percent of students in first-year seminar courses designed upon some of the best insights from the FYE conference.
- 3) Continue with the “cluster sections” of Prelude that have existed in the past (hall- and wilderness orientation-based sections, combined DCM/Prelude, and science-interest) and consider other faculty variations.
- 4) Address faculty concerns about covering Worldview content in Prelude by exchanging that topic for the originally-proposed Wellness topic, allowing Worldview to receive a more comprehensive treatment within discipline-specific courses.
- 5) Consider integrating students’ most-commonly requested content areas (community, academic success, sexuality, faith, adjusting to college life, and vocation) into the curriculum.

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<sup>51</sup> Attendees include Claudia Beversluis, Cheryl Brandsen, Julie Voskuil, John Britton, John Witte, and Shirley Hoogstra.

- 6) Communicate well about Prelude to the wider college community by making this ten-year report available to interested community members.

In the sea of first-year, first-semester classes, a first-year seminar is one haven where college faculty and qualified administrators can provide a place for intentional self-reflection in light of the student's transition to college: Who am I? What is this place? Do I belong here? Will I make the grade? How can I grow in faith? A sustained and intentional focus on such issues for first-year students has been valuable to the college in the past and should continue to be so into the future.