



WHITMAN COLLEGE

Letter for Prospective Students in Encounters

2014 - 2015

Dear Incoming Encounters Student,

Whitman College accepted your application to join our learning community because of your academic strengths. In anticipation of your arrival this August, we wish to clarify our expectations regarding the required first-year common course, “Encounters: Transformations.” While we know that you are already aware of the unique nature of this course as one of Whitman’s signature programs and likely visited an Encounters class, we want to highlight its rigorous academic nature. Encounters intends to provide you with the tools and opportunity to transition from being a high school student to a college student capable of addressing increased analytical complexity. A text-based course, the Encounters program emphasizes close reading, critical discussion, and the grounded presentation of arguments—both yours and the texts’—organized around various themes; it is neither an informally modeled ‘book group’ nor an English class but the occasion to learn and practice the skills required for excellence in scholarship as they will extend throughout the four-years of your Whitman education.

- 1) Encounters is hard – it was designed that way. What was “good” in high school may very well fall below the Whitman-level expectations that include attention to analytical complexity, nuanced grounding in textual evidence, and the taking of intellectual risks. Be prepared for your professor to challenge you with pointed feedback about the quality of your thesis statement, the depth of your textual support, and your effective communication of an academic voice. Intellectual growth requires a willingness to accept criticism intended to bring your academic skill-set up to a college level standard.
- 2) Classes are discussion based. In addition to emphasizing analytical writing, Encounters is based on the sharing and exploring of texts in dialogue with your peers. Critical analysis, by its very nature, requires the advancing of multiple positions as the context for becoming explicit about your own position. As such, the Encounters classroom is intended to model the kind of dialogue that is the intellectual and ethical standard for our community; in many Encounters sections you cannot receive an “A” in the course without consistent and high-quality participation.
- 3) Encounters emphasizes the skills and strategies used across the academic disciplines represented on our campus. Some students do not feel that Encounters applies to them because of their anticipated academic trajectory. However, all of Whitman’s majors emphasize the intellectual struggle, discipline, and independence necessary to develop something worthwhile to say, say it cogently and persuasively, back it up with evidence, and demonstrate an awareness of implications. We encourage you to take up the invitation to practice these skills and strategies in Encounters; you will be richly repaid in your academic preparation for classes within your major and are likely to discover a love of books, disagreement, and ambiguity as worthwhile learning opportunities in themselves.