THE CLASS
The New Student Seminar is a required course for all new students enrolled in the Steinhardt School. The seminar is your orientation to the university and our school and will introduce you to the nature of higher education and your program of study. Using the new student reading as your guide, you will explore your role as a member of our diverse and global academic community. This year we will be looking at how the technological revolution has shaped our lives and continues to shape our futures.

THE BOOK
Set in the not-too-distant future, *The Circle* tells the story of Mae Holland who lands a job at the world’s largest Internet company. The novel chronicles the inner workings of a fictional Silicon Valley conglomerate. Equal parts horror and comedy, *The Circle* documents the threats to democracy and privacy implicit in contemporary internet culture and our complicity in its over-sharing economy.

LITERARY TRADITION
*The Circle* is modeled after George Orwell’s *1984*, a dystopian novel about the life under the totalitarian regime of the all-seeing Big Brother. In 1984, accepting the government’s doublethink was key to survival and the edicts to be internalized were these: “War is Peace,” “Freedom is Slavery,” and “Ignorance is Strength.” The characters in *The Circle* have a lot more fun, and learn that the riches of life will come to them if they embrace these beliefs: “All That Happens Must Be Known,” “Secrets are Lies,” Sharing is Caring,” “Privacy is Theft.”

THE THEME
Our Computers, Ourselves
The digital era has introduced us to possibilities our ancestors would never have imagined, but it has also presented us with unprecedented questions about our connection to each other. This year, we will be talking about our relationship to our computers and devices and how they impact the social fabric of our lives.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. HISTORY
When the Steinhardt School was founded 125 years ago as the School of Pedagogy, the country was in the midst of a second industrial revolution and the world was being transformed by the steam engine, electricity, and innovations in the field of communications. We are now in the midst of a digital revolution, which has vastly transformed the world and how we live, allowing us greater opportunities for collaboration and connection. What do you think is the greatest invention from the past and what do you think is the greatest innovation that you have seen during your lifetime? What is one technology that you could not live without? Why?

2. A SENSE OF COMMUNITY
As new students at the Steinhardt School, you are learning your roles and responsibilities in our diverse, global community. Working at the Circle, Mae Holland conformed to her community’s model of good citizenship by dedicating her life to the campus and wearing a SeeChange camera to record her every move. How do we decide what the rules are for our citizenship in any organization? Would it have been possible for Mae to succeed in the Circle as a rebel non-conformist? Explain.

3. PRIVACY
At NYU, we use the computer to enhance our teaching and learning, to communicate with our professors, and, on the most basic level, to write our term papers. How would you feel if your academic world were as transparent as Mae’s world at the Circle? Would there be a benefit to all your records, photos, videos and online communication being made public? How would your daily life be affected if all that happened to you on and off-campus were known by NYU’s administration, faculty, and students?
4. SOCIAL CONNECTION
An age-old question that we ask of our relationships on social media is: “Is this a real connection?” In The Circle, Mae seems to enjoy the superficiality of her relationships online and seeks out quantity over quality.

How has your thinking about virtual relationships evolved overtime? Do you feel that social media has enhanced or detracted from your relationships in the real world? What kind of friend can you be with someone you have never met in person?

5. VICARIOUS LIVING
Mercer offers the reader a counterpoint to Mae’s fanatical acceptance of the Circle’s core values. Where Mae’s new life is organized around external validation, Mercer is more introspective and prefers to live a life free of social media. Do you agree with Mercer’s assessment of Mae’s life as sedentary and disconnected? Or is he being harsh when he tells her that she is leaving behind no evidence that she has lived and that she thinks she is actually living a fascinating life.

6. A LIFESTYLE CHOICE
Many of Mae’s choices in the novel are guided by her desire for the lifestyle promised on the Circle’s campus. What are Mae’s career ambitions? How do these ambitions compare to Mercer’s ambitions? How do you think her upbringing in Colorado and her job at the utility company influence her character? What special talents does Mae bring to her job at the Circle?

7. UNPLUGGING
Frequently, when her relationships on campus become stressful, Mae retreats into her customer satisfaction job to communicate with clients. She is also a very active social media user, who gets excited by “smiles.” What are some of your favorite websites and apps and what do you get out of using them? If you feel you are truly tethered to a particular device, could you imagine unplugging for a day? What would you do with your time?

8. ANALOG LIVING
Many artists find a happy medium using analog and digital technologies to create their work. Though the book has been replaced by the electronic reader and the notebook by the MacBook, we are still a culture that values the tactile. Are there places in your life untouched by technology? Are there ways that analog technology is better in your field than some of the recent digital advances? How has technology made your field of interest better and how has it made it worse?

9. THE PHONE AND THE CAMERA
It could be argued that no device has contributed as much to democracy as the phone camera. By sharing video, we are able to see into the lives of people across the globe. Some of these images and videos have been used in court cases, and we know from recent news stories that living proof can do much to further the cause of civil rights. In The Circle, Mae films her parents having sex and is also filmed by her boyfriend (much to her dismay). Where do you stand on the issue of consent when filming or photographing people and events?

10. A DATA-DRIVEN LIFE
In The Circle, Annie suffers a breakdown when she learns that a new invention has identified her respectable American family as slaveholders and that a video of her parents watching a homeless man drown has been released into the cloud. At the heart of The Circle, is a dedication to collecting data and using that data to influence every avenue of life. Is there a difference between having your daily heart rate stored on the cloud and having your medical records stored electronically? How does sharing data make the characters in The Circle more free? How does it imprison them?

11. GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY
Wikipedia tells us that Edward Snowden has been called “a hero, a whistleblower, a dissident, a patriot, and a traitor” for leaking classified information and that “his disclosures have fueled debates over mass surveillance, government secrecy, and the balance between national security and information privacy.” The Circle raises all these issues in an entertaining, satirical novel. What is Eggers saying about our relationship to privacy? Do you think we are moving toward Eggers’ vision of a world where the private is public?

12. ANOTHER ENDING
Write a fan fiction story about Mae’s life after the book ends. What is her life like 5 years out; 10 years out; and when she is an elderly person? What is she like when she has children? Does she eventually run for president? How do her values change over time? Does she do great things?