



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Education Programs application guidelines at www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/EnduringQuestions.html for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Education Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: NEH Enduring Questions Course on “What Sustains Liberty?”

Institution: Montclair State University

Project Director: Brian Smith

Grant Program: Enduring Questions

Liberty is an elusive concept. When Thomas Jefferson proclaimed our natural right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," many scholars would argue that Americans shared a common sense of what their liberty entailed, why it mattered, and how they might defend it. Despite the changes since the American Revolution, our nation retains its commitment to this ideal, despite the way scholars, politicians, and citizens all debate the meaning of the term. Meanwhile, American college students dogmatically accept the importance of liberty, and yet think little about what it means beyond some vague sense of being free to do as they please. If educators wish to improve civic life, liberty remains one of the most important concepts about which they must generate critical thought. This poses difficulties because any discussion of the idea within the context of one discipline always highlights some issues and removes other elements from consideration. Yet, any inquiry into liberty demands some starting point. I propose a course that narrows the scope to a more specific question: what sustains liberty?

By framing a class around this issue, I hope to stimulate discussions that grapple with varying accounts of the preconditions, origin, preservation, and future of liberty. We live under a government dedicated to liberty, and I think a course that enlivens the students' appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of our own political order will serve any student well in these troubled times. By forcing students to examine their own assumptions in discussion with their peers, class provides a model for civility that I believe any self-governing society must retain. Through engaging in conversation about texts that force them to think deeply, students will hone their critical powers and ability to express themselves—the defining skills of a liberal education.

I propose to accomplish these ends by assigning a set of readings spanning traditional disciplinary boundaries and genres. I believe this course would perform an important service to the students at Montclair State University (MSU), but that it also poses some important

challenges—as well as opportunities for growth. Enrolled at a mid-sized and largely commuter school with a high percentage of transfer students, minorities, and non-traditional students, MSU's students rarely arrive with much exposure to demanding texts. Most students work at least part-time, and come from schools that did not adequately prepare them for the independent and critical reading primary source oriented humanities courses demand. These deficiencies make it important for professors to expose MSU students to difficult, but intellectually charming readings and set high standards. Without them, students all too often fail to learn much.

Courses focusing on permanent questions stimulate students' minds in a way few other experiences can, and "What Sustains Liberty?" would fill a vital need at MSU. Even then, fostering intellectual community remains difficult at a commuter campus like MSU. I plan to supplement the seminar's sense of intellectual community with catered evening gatherings to watch two films that bear directly on the issue of sustaining liberty (*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Conspiracy*), paired with a discussion after each viewing. I also plan to take advantage of the Shakespeare Theater Company of New Jersey's rich offerings and take the students to a performance once each semester. Events such as these add greatly to the sense of camaraderie and intellectual engagement in any class.

The first section of the course will introduce the problem of sustaining liberty in a context that will appear familiar and alien to the students: the democracy of Ancient Athens. Pairing Aristophanes' plays *Wasps* and *Clouds* with three of Plato's early dialogues, we will focus on the varied ways obligation to one's polity and its civic culture affect liberty. *Wasps*, *Euthypro*, and the *Apology* depict contrasting images of public piety and participation in politics, and vividly illustrate some of the possible tensions between the wishes of the many in direct democracy and the importance of the individual. In their own way, *Crito* and the *Clouds* present the potentially

dangerous consequences of following the truth wherever it leads. Plato and Aristophanes implicitly debate whether a commitment to truth and philosophy is important for liberty, or whether instead we should trust the community's good judgment. This discussion of key concepts that recur throughout the course will set the stage for later themes.

The second section of the course turns to the issue of how free societies come into being and the manner in which these conditions determine the strength of their liberty. I plan to begin with William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. The story graphically depicts the challenges of any founding. I will focus our discussion on the seemingly absolute freedom that any such moment of origin poses. The story presents a fascinating contrast with two other accounts of political origins and republican liberty: Niccolò Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* and John Locke's *Second Treatise*. Each presents what might be called a "realistic" vision of human nature akin to that Golding suggests, and both assert the necessity of government as a means of protecting liberty. But where Machiavelli seeks the safety of his republic in a citizenry possessed with martial excellence and willing to sacrifice their very souls for the state, Locke's ideal emphasizes the importance of citizens recognizing and defending their natural rights against the encroachment of government power. Through reading excerpts of the *Discourses* and all of the *Second Treatise*, students will see different ways we can value and support liberty.

I plan to end this section of the course with a look at the American founding. Through a reading of the Declaration of Independence, a classic sermon by Nathaniel Emmons on the dignity of man, James Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments," and the U.S. Constitution, the students will turn their attention explicitly to our own political order to examine what our two most important founding documents suggest about the maintenance of liberty, and also discuss the role religion plays in our politics. Madison's

argument in the remonstrance for disestablishment seems to accord well with the Declaration's ambiguity about religion in relation to sustaining liberty; a staunch Calvinist and patriot, Emmons makes very specific claims common to many theologians about the nature of liberty and how faith and reason together keep it alive. By introducing the particular dilemmas of American liberty, these conversations will pave the way for our next section on equality.

The third part of the class investigates the relationship between equality and the maintenance of liberty. I will open this discussion with the issue of race and slavery. Using a selection of essays by Frederick Douglass, including "What is the Slave to the Fourth of July?" and "The Future of the Colored Race," and W.E.B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk*, we will return to the subject of how we acquire liberty and defend it, this time focusing on the peculiar difficulties inequality poses. Douglass and Du Bois advocate different approaches to achieving equality and liberty, and their concerns for the future of African-Americans pose questions we should ponder: Does formally equal legal status matter if a culture legitimizes discrimination? Should we compel free people to treat one another well without undermining their liberty?

The next four texts the class will confront present direct answers to these questions, this time with more pressing focus on issues of material equality. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto* present two of the most compelling statements of radical egalitarianism and its relationship to securing and maintaining liberty. Rousseau emphasizes natural man's absolute liberty and individualism, and mourns the damage civilization does to our characters without providing a means of escape; Marx and Engels' vision of humanity as a collective whose liberty and enjoyment of life cannot be secured except through recapturing the right relationship between labor and leisure for the whole society. Each of these works poses a severe challenge to previous authors, and I plan to

use them to reflect on the road the class has taken through the subject of maintaining liberty.

A reading of Alexis de Tocqueville and Kurt Vonnegut will allow the class to ponder the relationship between the quest for equality and the struggle to maintain liberty. Through reading excerpts primarily from *Democracy in America*, the students will weigh the merits of Tocqueville's influential analysis of democracy's future in America and abroad. Emphasizing the longings of the democratic soul – particularly its taste for liberty and passion for equality – students will inquire into the habits that Tocqueville suggests might keep excessive leveling in check. Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" provides a fictional counterpoint that reinforces Tocqueville's chilling prophecy of what despotism democratic people have to fear. Vonnegut's provocative, darkly comic vision of an America beset by the egalitarian regulations of a Handicapper General whose mission to establish absolute fairness in conditions neatly sketches the potential destructiveness of extreme egalitarianism.

In the final section of the course, we will turn to the question of maintaining liberty in the future. I will begin with Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Science*, which contends the advance of technology and knowledge undermine the moral life of community. This stark assessment of the *losses* of the modern world should serve as a backdrop to two visions of the future: Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. Le Guin's "ambiguous utopia" presents allegorical representations of our world and its struggle with liberty, as well as an imperfect anarchist order where private property and political authority do not formally exist. Heinlein sets his own semi-utopian society on Earth's moon, and weaves an account of a revolution to defend an order dedicated to rugged individualism and property rights. Each novel focuses on a future struggle to create and defend liberty in conditions that nonetheless still confront the enduring questions of human life.

I would teach the class as a biweekly seminar across a fourteen week-long semester. Reading loads will vary from week-to-week, but would involve a minimum of forty pages a meeting, and when the class reads fiction, a maximum of eighty per class. The course will be offered once through the university honors program as a general education course, and a second time as an elective. Both versions will be open to students from any major. To facilitate student preparation for our discussions, I will provide a handful of essential questions for each session, and the students would be responsible for submitting a one-page written response to one of these prompts at each meeting. A few short analytic essays and a final paper that engages with several of the course texts would complete the written component of the course.

My preparation to teach this course would begin in June 2011. I would acquire and begin reading the works listed in the bibliography over that summer (and will purchase additional copies for the university library), and prepare the syllabus in Fall 2011 to teach the first course in Spring 2012. Early in Fall 2011, I would consult with a graphic designer on campus, print flyers and posters, and advertise the course across the university. While teaching the first course, I would evaluate the effectiveness through student evaluations, and an in-class observation by a colleague. I would revise the syllabus in Summer and Fall of 2012 and advertise the class again before the second offering in Spring of 2013.

I am a specialist in political philosophy with additional interests in international affairs, political economy, and foreign policy; because of these varied pursuits, my scholarly work and teaching tends to be interdisciplinary. While I have considerable experience with teaching works in philosophy and politics, I have not had much opportunity to integrate great literature into my offerings. Given my passion for discussing great ideas and enduring questions, "What Sustains Liberty?" is a natural next step in my development as a teacher.

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Aristophanes, *Wasps* and *Clouds*

Constitution of the United States

Frederick Douglass, "What is the Slave to the Fourth of July?"; "Why Should A Colored Man Enlist?"; "What Shall Be Done with the Slaves if Emancipated?"; "What Are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?"; and "The Future of the Colored Race"

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Nathaniel Emmons, "The Dignity of Man"

William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*

Robert Heinlein, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*

Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*

Ursula LeGuin, *The Dispossessed*

John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses on Livy* (excerpts)

James Madison, "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments"

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

Plato, *Euthypro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (excerpts)

Kurt Vonnegut, "Harrison Bergeron"