



## **Narrative Section of a Successful Proposal**

The attached document contains the 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 proposal may be crafted. Every successful proposal is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the program guidelines at [www.neh.gov/grants/education/enduring-questions](http://www.neh.gov/grants/education/enduring-questions) for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Education Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

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 Is the Good Life and How Do I Live It?"

**Institution:** Middlebury College

**Project Director:** Patricia Zupan, Brett Millier, Deborah Evans, and Jonathan Miller-Lane

**Grant Program:** Enduring Questions

*Middlebury College NEH Enduring Questions Course Proposal Narrative*

**WHAT IS THE GOOD LIFE AND HOW DO I LIVE IT?**

**Introduction** Faculty and staff at Middlebury College have begun a new initiative that focuses attention on the academic experience of sophomores to ensure that they receive appropriate support when selecting majors and setting a course of study for the second half of their undergraduate education. A semester long (12 week), full-credit course—centered on the question, “What is the good life and how do I live it?”—is designed to support this broader institutional initiative. The funding that we are requesting will enable us to bring faculty together who rarely have the opportunity to collaborate in course development, provide support for events that reinforce the academic goals of the course, and ensure that the sophomore initiative is grounded in rigorous intellectual work. Our goal is to provide a unique intellectual space for students to engage a question that Aristotle explored over two millennia ago in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and that Eva Brann (1979) has argued, in *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, remains the central inquiry of a liberal arts education.

**Intellectual Rationale and Teaching Value** There is currently no place in our academic curriculum where students are able to “pull back the lens” and critique the very assumptions of the education they are experiencing. Small, residential, liberal arts colleges such as Middlebury offer students an array of courses and extra-curricular activities from which they may choose—or not choose—to fill their days. The assumption is that students will make their way through the thicket of choices in a manner that integrates and reflects the type of critical thinking that they are developing in individual courses. However, as academic faculty who share particular responsibilities related to residential student life, it has become increasingly clear to us that while some students make choices in a reflective manner, many others are instead inclined to collect the courses required for their respective majors, and engage in college-endorsed, extra-curricular

activities, without pausing to ask why they are choosing this activity and not that one.

Furthermore, students are barraged 24/7 with emails, tweets, and text messages that place a premium on quick reactions rather than slower reflection, thus exacerbating the tendency to keep mindlessly churning away.

Yet, how can we fault our students for not taking a more thoughtful, integrated approach to their lives at our residential college if we do not provide the intellectual space in which they might consider how to do this? If the process of integrating academic and non-academic life lies at the heart of why it is worth being at a residential liberal arts college, as opposed to staying at home and taking courses online, why are we as faculty not creating the academic spaces where students can examine the nature of that integration? We believe that by critically examining the assumptions that have structured the education they are being offered and asking students to explore what it means, and how to live a ‘good life,’ we might create a course in which students can think holistically about the choices they are making. To be clear, this is not an effort in social engineering. We want to create a course that encourages students and faculty to live more thoughtfully and make choices more deliberately in college, and in life. We welcome students who might argue that the very question, “What is the good life and how do I live it?” is naïve and narcissistic.

The sophomore year is an ideal time for such a course. By then, students are familiar with college life, but have not yet made some important academic decisions: In what field should I major? What do I want to learn at this institution? During the first year of college, students are generally focused on mastering the location of dining halls and the college’s academic expectations. By junior year, students have chosen a major and many are enrolled in programs abroad. Seniors are focused on their theses, and while an opportunity to think back and reflect

on one's experience could be enormously useful, we believe that this course would be most helpful to sophomores who can still act on what we hope would be their more informed understanding of the context in which their education is taking place.

**Envisioned Course Design** Given that this elective course is being designed within the context of a larger institutional initiative around the sophomore year, enrollment will be limited to sophomores during the grant period. Classes will meet for 3.5 hours a week, in seminar format and in distinct sections of 14-16 students. Course readings will draw from a variety of genres and cultures and reflect the standards of a reading-intensive course at Middlebury. Assignments will include written essays and significant opportunities for public speaking. Students will be asked to present short, oral presentations in response to readings as the catalyst for a class discussion. They will also be asked to facilitate class discussion with carefully selected passages and thoughtful questions to engage their peers. With the support of grant funds, we plan on organizing four events each semester in which separately taught sections of the course would come together: Two invited speakers (prominent scholars such as Professor (b) (6) and Professor (b) (6) ) and two film showings such as *Iris* (the biography of Iris Murdoch) and *The Best of Youth* (an Italian film exploring the challenges of choice over the course of a life). A facilitated discussion will follow each event. At the conclusion of the course, students will be asked to offer their responses to the course question in both a written essay and a public presentation open to the larger college community and available online.

We envision that the course will be organized into four units. Unit One (two weeks) will introduce students to the contested nature of the idea of a liberal arts education. By engaging essays by Eva Brann, John Dewey, Robert Maynard Hutchins, Gloria Ladsen-Billings, and Michael Oakeshott students will be exposed to both a vigorous defense and biting critiques of

this enterprise. In Unit Two (four weeks) students will read a selection of “Eastern” and “Western” authors who have offered particular responses to the question, “What is the good life?” We begin with chapter ten of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* as a foundational treatment of the question. We will then read, “The Sermon on the Mount,” and excerpts from the Torah, the Book of Job, the *Qur’an*, the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Ayurveda*, and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Our intent is to introduce a range of responses from different cultural traditions. In this unit, students will also read Voltaire’s *Candide*, excerpts from Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as well as excerpts from the writings of Max Weber and Rousseau to examine how an individual’s relationship to the community affects the ability to live a good life. What choices does an individual really have given our individual circumstances?

In Unit Three (three weeks), we will examine our enduring question through different disciplinary lenses. The geographer, Robert Fishman, for example, might introduce the question of scale: What is the good life for a community? Suburbs that were once thought to be an innovative solution to individual and community happiness are now blamed for fostering isolation and an over-reliance on the automobile that, in turn, has led to unhealthy lifestyles. The architect Yi-Fu Tuan might suggest that our question cannot be answered without attending to the structures that we create and the materials we use to build them. Neuroscience research suggests that human beings are hardwired to be social beings and members of communities: Should I even be asking how I can live a good life, if I have not first ensured that you can do so too? Through this introduction to the kinds of questions that different disciplines ask, we hope that sophomores will gain a better understanding of what the liberal arts are and, thereby, be better able to link their own questions to the discipline that best informs their inquiry.

In the final unit of the course (three weeks), students will read from biographies and autobiographies of individuals who have consciously sought to live an examined life. For example: Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*; *My Life by Isadora Duncan*; *My Experiments With Truth* by Mahatma Gandhi; *Ethics for a New Millennium*, by the Dalai Lama; *The Scientist as Rebel* by Freeman Dyson; *Madam Curie: An Autobiography*; bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. What can we learn from those who have come before us about how to live our own lives more thoughtfully? Or, are such insights from the past so limited to a particular time and place that we must treat them solely as the rich stories they are and seek no further counsel from them? In addition, students will engage online columns and blogs such as those published on the *New York Times* website, in which the relationship between education and living the good life is explored; online forums on the meaning and purpose of a liberal arts education facilitated by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*; online transcripts from conferences such as the one that took place at [Lafayette College on the future of the Liberal Arts in April 2012](#); and [Elizabeth Coleman's talk in February 2009](#), at a TED conference, where she vigorously defended the need for a liberal arts education. Our goal is for students to engage these contemporary debates from a deepened understanding as a result of their newfound familiarity with a rich variety of thinkers. By spending time together in small, intense intellectual communities at our residential college, we also seek to prepare students to thoughtfully engage the ever-growing online community in which we all live. Finally, to assess the effectiveness of this initiative, we will incorporate longitudinal assessments that explore the impact of the course on student decision-making.

**Course Preparation & Timeline**

The faculty members developing this course come from both the Humanities and Social Sciences, have been or are currently Faculty Heads of a residential 'Commons,' and collectively represent over 70 years of teaching experience at

Middlebury College: Patricia Zupan, the Charles A. Dana Professor of Italian; Brett Millier, the Reginald Cook Professor of American Literature; Deborah Evans, Visiting Assistant Professor of American Studies; and Jonathan Miller-Lane, Associate Professor of Education. During the three-year grant period, we expect to offer the course a minimum of twice each semester. Each of the four faculty members listed above will teach it at least two times during that period.

### **Plan of Work**

- 2012-2013 academic year: Monthly reading seminars among the planning group.
- May 1, 2013: Grant period begins.
- Summer 2013: Intensive syllabus development.
- 2013-2014 Academic year: Initial course offering.
- Summer 2014: Follow-up assessment. We consider these meetings after the first year to be critical: Do student papers, oral presentations, formal course evaluations (college required) and informal discussions provide evidence that the course helped sophomores to make more thoughtful academic decisions? Was text selection effective or does feedback suggest that replacements are in order? The grant support we are seeking will provide the time and resources to not only develop the first course offering, but to also reflect and revise as appropriate in subsequent years.
- 2014-2015 Academic year: Second year of course offering.
- June 2015: Review of curriculum and follow-up assessment of the course impact on student decision-making.
- September 2015: Begin third year of course offering.
- May 2016: End of grant period and ongoing development of course. Does the evidence suggest keeping the course limited to sophomores or opening it to others?

### **Core Reading List**

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- Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*. New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1985.
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- Weber, M.. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. 1904-1905. P. Baehr et. al., trans and ed. New York: Penguin, 2002.
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- Iris*. Dir. Richard Eyre. Perf. Judi Dench, Kate Winslet, and Jim Broadbent. Miramax, 2001.
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- Gandhi*, Dir. Richard Attenborough. Perf. Ben Kingsley, John Gielgud, and Candace Bergen. Ind., 1982.
- Malcolm X*. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Denzel Washington, Angela Bassett, and Delroy Lindo. Ind, 1992.
- I'm Not There*. Dir. Todd Haynes. Perf. Christian Bale, Cate Blanchette, Marcus Carl Franklin, Richard Gere, Heath Ledger, and Ben Whishaw. Ind., 2007.

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