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 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 Suffering
Institution: American University
Project Director: Paul K. Wapner
Grant Program: Enduring Questions
Intellectual Rationale and Teaching Value

Everybody suffers. The amount and depth may differ and individuals may experience it in unique and ultimately personal ways, but suffering is an inescapable part of being human. Almost every endeavor—from medicine, commerce, and politics to poetry, dance, and music—reflects upon and devotes some effort to relieving pain and sorrow, and philosophers, theologians, and artists have long pondered suffering’s place in human life. The impulse to avoid suffering stands at the center of most moral systems and relieving suffering often provides an overall interpretation of human purpose.

Despite or arguably because of its centrality to human life, suffering remains a mystery. Why is there so much pain and misery in the world? Is there a purpose to such affliction? How do we relate to our own pain and that of others? In short, what is suffering? The proposed course will invite students to read and observe some of the most thoughtful responses to this persistent enigma.

The course will inject a humanistic element into the School of International Service (SIS). SIS prides itself on its interdisciplinary character. Lawyers, economists, geographers, and even architects teach alongside sociologists and political scientists to understand global affairs. Missing from its ranks, however, are humanities scholars. This weakens the school’s efforts since it leaves out the cultural aspect of global problems. Too concerned with understanding structures of power or conditions of social life, SIS scholars neglect the various meanings people have attached to political, social, and economic hardship. Ideally, the proposed course will help my colleagues and I recognize that suffering is not a homogenized occurrence generic to war, poverty, environmental degradation, and injustice that needs simply to be eradicated or ameliorated but a deep,
rich, variegated cultural experience central to being human and fundamental to shaping personal and collective life.

The course will explore how thinkers throughout the ages and in different cultural settings make sense of suffering. Specifically, it will study attitudes toward affliction. Some thinkers, for instance, see hardship as a fruitless experience to be avoided when possible and simply endured when not. To them, suffering has no compensatory purpose; if anything, it robs life of vitality and possibility. Others see redemption in suffering insofar as it instills sympathy and compassion for others and enlarges one’s appreciation for joy. From this perspective, suffering invites virtue and instills life-enhancing sensitivities. Still others see pain and sorrow as states to be investigated and ultimately transcended. By developing insight into the causes of suffering people can overcome it or at least live richer lives in the process of trying to do so. (There are, of course, other views, and I will be working to identify them during the grant period.)

Educating myself to teach about attitudes toward hardship will stretch me intellectually. My current work focuses on climate suffering. It examines the lived experience of those on the frontlines of climate change. Already the most vulnerable are experiencing the adversities of climate intensification and we know that very soon all societies will face climate-related calamities. I want to understand how people feel, explain, and envision living through the distress of climate change.

There are two parts to my research. First, I want to know about the nature of suffering itself. What does humanity make of this persistent, universal phenomenon? My aim in asking this question is to develop a backdrop against which to interpret the specifics of climate hardship. Climate change represents a unique challenge that delivers
pain in distinctive forms. But the quality of the pain—how it registers on the human body and psyche—remains perennial. What wisdom can the ages offer to humanity as it confronts this unique historical moment of collective suffering?

Second, I want to examine if the uniqueness of climate hardship sheds light on humanity’s understandings of suffering itself. Pain may register on the body and psyche in recurrent ways but how people make sense of the pain changes under different contexts and in light of different sources of affliction. Does climate change generate novel types of anguish that might reflect back on humanity’s general understandings of suffering? Does climate change teach us anything new about the human experience of suffering?

In asking this latter question, one risks trivializing the enduring preoccupation with human affliction. After all, that thinkers have long pondered the meaning of suffering suggests that historical events are mere instances of a broader, perennial phenomenon; they may add complexion but not substance to humanity’s overall understanding. However, incidents have always provided additional layers of meaning to suffering—as specific wars, famines, and floods have called on thinkers to probe more deeply the significance of human affliction. Moreover, in the case of climate change, there is reason to believe that new dimensions and understandings of human suffering may surface. After all, the world has never faced an ecosystem-altering, planetary-wide threat brought about by a single species. Might the magnitude and challenge to our identity as a species cast new insight into human suffering?

I will grow most intellectually as I situate myself at the interface between the perennial wisdom on suffering and the distinctive expression of climate hardship. I am a social scientist by training and thus lack facility in humanistic forms of inquiry. And yet,
as I investigate climate suffering, I am drawn deeper into the way people actually feel, reflect, and explain it. I would like to train myself in the humanistic literature of suffering to find my bearings.

**Envisioned Course Design**

Students come to the School of International Service (SIS) to study global issues. Most are normatively driven—attracted to the “service” component of the school—and want to make a difference in the world. They seek to advance, for instance, human rights, peace, humane governance, international development, and sustainability. Behind each of these endeavors rests the impulse to relieve suffering. Ironically, SIS offers no course that reflects directly on the object of students’ normative concerns.

I will teach the course as a 17-19 person freshman seminar that meets once per week for 14 weeks. The small class size will ensure sustained conversation and offering the course to freshman will help orient students’ studies early in their college career. I will assign approximately 80-120 pages per week, depending on the difficulty of the text, with the intention that students will read carefully and thoroughly rather than skim.

Instruction will use a combination of mini-lectures and facilitated discussion. I will open each session with a poem or other short contemplative exercises to draw attention to the topic of the day, and then frame the discussion. This will include providing background and thematic purpose.

Over the past few years, I have incorporated a number of experiential practices into my teaching that allow students to relate to material in a personal way. These include journaling, meditation, student-to-student dialogue, outdoor excursions, and community engagement. During the grant period, I will work to identify which of these would be
most appropriate for the course. Given the topic of suffering, it should be clear that I will use these practices not psychotherapeutically but simply to create opportunities for students to relate meaningfully to material.

I will evaluate students based on a combination of essay writing, non-print media presentations, and short projects. Projects will be exercises that invite students to encounter texts and objects in creative ways. This may include, for instance, visiting the National Gallery of Art to consider a single painting multiple times and writing about the experience of uncovering multiple layers of meaning; observing a protest in Washington and articulating the suffering that seeks remedy or attention; viewing the outside of a hospital or cemetery and composing poetry or drawing to sense the quality of pain associated with such places.

Presently, I envision consulting two types of literature to shape the course. First, I want to find timeless treatments on suffering—works that have moved readers throughout the ages and ask deep enough questions so students can appreciate the depth and centrality of suffering in the human experience. Second, I want to explore more contemporary texts that draw on philosophical, psychological, medical, and literary narratives to explain suffering. These will provide a vocabulary for analyzing attitudes toward affliction. In addition to texts, I will also examine works of visual art and architecture that evoke rather than explain a sense of misery and pain. I will use all of these to dig deeply into humanity’s long interrogation of suffering and broaden student sensitivities to its insights.

An approximate timeline for the course preparation and instruction over the life of the grant includes: 1) preparation and planning to start as of May 2015; this will include a
review of readings and creation of a syllabus; 2) implementation and instruction of the first freshman seminar course [Fall 2015]; 3) modification and adjustment [Summer 2016]; 4) implementation and instruction of the second freshman seminar course [Fall 2016]; 5) dissemination of the course as a model at select conferences [Winter/Spring 2017]. Ideally, the course will become a permanent part of the SIS curriculum.

Dissemination

The topic of suffering is so central to my current work that I will instantly translate the fruits of the course into my scholarly pursuits and professional engagements. For instance, for the next few summers, I will apply insights from the course to a week-long workshop I teach for professors titled, “Contemplative Environmental Studies: Pedagogy for Self and Planet,” at the Lama Foundation. The workshop explores how to teach at this time of environmental intensification, with a specific focus on addressing the sadness, pain, and lamentation that accompany engagement with environmental issues.

Additionally, I will share what I’ve learned from teaching about suffering at two conferences. For the International Studies Association (ISA) annual meeting, I will convene a panel focused on suffering in International Relations. The panel will examine how scholars studying various global issues understand suffering in their work. For the annual Whidbey Institute conference on “Sustainability and Reflective and Contemplative Practice,” I will propose a session that explores climate hardship in light of humanity’s enduring preoccupation with suffering.

I feel exceptionally ripe to develop a course of suffering. Doing so will take me into fundamentally new waters, catapult my teaching and research, and enhance SIS and the discipline of Environmental Studies.
Tentative Course Readings
(I will assign more than these six titles.)


2. Tentative Art Works

Bruegel, Pieter: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*

Kahlo, Frida: *The Little Dear* and *The Broken Column*

Munch, Edvard: *The Scream of Nature* (“The Scream”)

Picasso, Pablo: *Guernica*

Saint-Gaudens, Augustus: *Adams Memorial*

Scarpa, Carlo: *Brion Cemetery*
Preparation Readings