

Political Science 390
Political Science Capstone
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SYLLABUS

The capstone course is designed to provide a summation of the undergraduate experience. Its goal is to reflect on the various forms of knowledge within the Liberal Studies program that constitute a broadly based liberal arts education. At the same time, as a course arranged by departments, it is designed to reflect upon those arenas of knowledge from the perspective of particular disciplines understood broadly. Moreover, the course is meant to be a bridge from the undergraduate experience to the challenges of life after the university by embracing forms of experience and thought that will ease the transition to those challenges.

The focus of this course will be on how individuals learn to implement their intellectual, political and moral worldviews, and the role that college education in the major and in liberal studies has and has not, should and should not have, played as one factor among many in this process. We will begin with the perspective that this worldview is the product of one's life experience, traditions, and education. We will in this course try to locate the dynamic of that process of implementation both in the assignments for the course, the films that we will explore in terms of the choices made by its characters, and in the lives of each class member. One goal will be to locate and explore those key moments, periods and crossroads in which the possibility and necessity of choice becomes a critical concern, and to think about how individuals mobilize their previous lives, resources and dreams to shape their own path. For those coming of age, the journey is often seen as an awakening from embeddedness and perhaps naiveté toward the effort to achieve self-direction, understanding and the clarification and achievement of one's life goals.

In spending much of the course primarily on the works of others, a great deal of effort will be spent on examining the particularities of individual journeys we encounter, in order to help each of the class members to locate what is individual, specific and perhaps unique about such processes and thus perhaps about their own process. To this end, we will spend a significant amount of time on the role of early experience. Many students come in believing their early life has little to do with their 'ideas' or 'choice.' A significant part of this course will explore this very connection. We will also focus upon the period after childhood comprising the years of late adolescence and young adulthood, which often forms a transitional period between the seemingly apolitical years of childhood and the mature years in which one both arrives at and can live in accordance with one's deepest political and intellectual priorities. The years of youth and of college are often tumultuous ones because they require that the individual take over the responsibility for this transition and to effect a bridge between the given values of one's childhood and the priorities that one will live out thereafter. In a sense, the transition from college is one part of this larger coming of age and a

critical time to also open questions about the kinds of choices that lie ahead. The culmination of the course will be the consideration of choices that members of the class have faced and are facing, how these choices can be framed in terms of one's intellectual, political, psychological and social values, and the way that journey fits into the larger political tapestry of one's own times.

In this larger sense, the course will be about politics, but not in the way that it has been typically defined in your courses. In fact, one of the tasks of the course will be to explore the many forms that politics and the political take in the constitution of an individual life. In order to focus upon the personal dimension from which the larger issues arise, we will consider a range of individual journeys in movies, and use these as a springboard for later projects in which member of the class will be asked to develop a prototype or working set of hypotheses (not final designs!) for their own journey as defined above. The works we will consider will examine the kinds of choices individuals have made as they mature over the course of their lives.

This course is in every way meant to be an exploration. There are no right answers, and a very high tolerance for ambiguity and curiosity are essential. You will each have to come up with the set of understandings that have organized, continue to organize, and may likely organize your attitude toward your own life project and the society in which you will pursue it.

Mechanics: As a culminating senior seminar, this course will be entirely a discussion class. The specific themes have not been framed in advance, but will emerge out of class discussion and the experience of its members. I proceed in the course by means of the Socratic method, which involves a continual process of questions and responses, followed by more questions and responses on a continuing basis. There are no right answers in this discussion. It is meant to be a forum for the participation of each class member, and for the questioning of assumptions and the clarification of ideas. I do not offer my own clarification at the end of class, but continue the process where we left off in the next class. Not only is there no right answer expected by participants, but there are often many right answers depending on the experiences, backgrounds and values of each participant.

That means that much of our work in class is tentative in nature, provisional hypotheses that can be added to and altered as the course proceeds. This course as a result requires a tolerance for ambiguity about your own lives as well, for leaving issues linger and working them out in discussion, reflection, paper writing and life experience. Members of the seminar are expected to participate throughout in the conversations and in the framing of the questions to be considered. My hope is that members of the class take over the discussion and direction of the course. At the same time, I have outlined here a set of conditions for the course.

PROVISOS:

If these conditions sound relatively do-able and not too onerous to you, this

course will not be a difficult one. If, on the other hand, you begin immediately thinking of what corners might be cut, I would suggest rethinking your enrollment.

To this end, I offer the following:

- I will specifically work to ensure the participation of each member, and a continued reticence to engage in the collective process will result in failure in the class.
- Because the class meets for three hour plus blocks, more than one unexcused absence will result in a **failing grade** in the course.
- Proposals and drafts are expected at the classes I will indicate in advance, and the failure to turn them in will result in an absence for the class.
- The class will begin at the scheduled time or shortly thereafter.**
Members of the class will not be permitted to straggle in during the course. A **five minute** leeway will be provided, after which members of the class will be marked absent for that class.
- Finally (for now), the class will cover a range of subjects that are intended to broaden the meaning of the political in our lives. If one is uncomfortable with this larger focus, please consult with me about the feasibility of your engagement in the course. I want to make this clear up front, so that this does not intrude at a later point in the course.
Students will not be asked to divulge private matters that lie beyond issues related to one's political and intellectual growth -- and yet the subject is life choices and the way college has impacted or failed to impact on that process in your life.

Assignments:

The requirements for the course in addition to an active role in class discussion will be a series of written works.

All course members must write a brief interpretive provocation or insight or compelling question or concern raised by the movie at the end of each class to be turned in immediately.

At the end of those classes at which a written reflection is to be due the following week in class, I will offer a **provocation** that tries to open up some of the deeper issues in the movie we have just seen. These provocations will differ in their focus each time, but they are meant to engage with a variety of issues in the movie, in the lives of the characters, and in the relation of the movie to your own journey.

You can always, and are encouraged to, develop your own themes, either in some

relation you want to focus on in relation to the provocation or by generating a reflection of your own to write about. There is no need to warn me in advance that you are working through your own themes and perspectives – if you note this at the beginning of your reflection, that will be fine. But one thing to emphasize: the goal of these writings is to engage with the moral, value, meaning, and action struggles and choices of the character or characters and with their efforts, whether or not sufficient or well considered to resolve them at the junctures these have emerged in their lives, and how their choices shape their lives and personal (and collective) narratives. Also, an effort should be made after the interpretive framework is developed in the written work to connect the material at hand to previous material in the course.

THERE ARE NEVER TO BE PLOT SUMMARIES OR GENERAL DESCRIPTIONS IN THESE MINI ESSAYS (NO FACTS and under no conditions anything even resembling a five paragraph essay) – THEY MUST BE WHOLLY REFLECTIVE EXPLORATIONS OF THEMES, CONFLICTS, CHOICES, DIRECTIONS TAKEN AND RESOLUTIONS WHERE APPLICABLE.

These reflections are DUE at the class they are being discussed (and never afterward). If a paper describes the facts of the film beyond the degree necessary to develop the interpretation, argument, set of claims, fantasies, imaginings, realizations, and the like, the paper will be returned, and a paper on a different theme will have to be developed.

An important part of the work in the course will be the development by each participant of their own narrative. These will be worked through in a series of drafts and submitted to me for comments (which you are free to consider or not as you see fit) until they are sufficiently well developed.

Finally, there will be a short essay synthesizing course themes due along with the final written version of your autobiographical essay at the end of the term. The precise details of this essay will be worked out in class discussions. In order to assist in the preparation of the final project, I am asking that an initial proposal be turned in at a time to be determined followed by revised drafts and then the final project. For the initial draft, members of the class should reflect on a crucial moment of decision in which your political, moral and / or intellectual values were under scrutiny, pressure or need for clarification from some set of events, experiences or feelings emerging of your own, and how you both conceptualized the challenge and the process by which you worked toward its resolution or clarification (we will discuss this in detail in class).

Regarding the grading, this presentation, the assignments, and class participation will all be given the greatest possible weight. I expect students to have different strengths and to work at improving areas where extra effort is needed.

Texts: The movies will be available in the class and at the Reserve desk of the library.

Course Schedule:

Class #1: *Limitless*

Class #2: *Groundhog Day*

Class #3: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

Class #4: *Butterfly* (many with this title; this is a Spanish film about the Spanish War)

Class #5: *A Price Above Rubies*

Class #6: *Tamasha*

Class #7: *Cry Freedom*

Class #8: *Waking the Dead*

Class #9: *Dear Zindagi*

Class #10: *Born on the Fourth of July*

Class #11: TBD