Syllabus for Honors 351:

American Dreams Past and Present, Lost and Found

Instructor: Kenneth W. Stikkers, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy and Africana Studies
Spring Semester 2016; Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:00 a.m.-12:15 p.m.

Description

“The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

--James Truslow Adams, The Epic of America (1931)

“[W]e shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”

John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630)

“[W]e are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free; as he ought to be ….”

--Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer (1782)

“If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful;--what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outtrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? … Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices?

“Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your hearts that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the Seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering, that always comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that—but, nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America.”

--W. E. B. Du Bois, 1926 speech in Chicago

“I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed:
‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

“I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and
justice.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

“I have a dream today!

“I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" -- one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

“I have a dream today!

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; ‘and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.’”

--Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963)

“It seems we living the American dream
But the people highest up got the lowest self-esteem
The prettiest people do the ugliest things
For the road to riches and diamond rings”


“I know people want to talk about the American Dream, but my dream is a world dream. It's a world in which everyone's main goal would be to help each other.”


The term “American dream” was coined by historian James Truslow Adams, in his 1931 The Epic of America, to describe what he saw as a distinctly American outlook on life, and since then the notion of an American dream has had a powerful impact on the American mind. Due to recent shifts in the United States economy, though, especially the growing concentration of wealth in fewer hands, many believe that the American dream is over. What has that dream meant to generations of Americans? What has the promise of a “better and richer” life meant? What has been the dream’s significance in and impact on United States history? Was it only a myth to begin with? Was it essentially a racist and sexist dream, only for white males? What role have women played in this dream? What has it meant to Native, African, Latino, and Asian Americans? What, if anything, might it mean for Americans in the twenty-first century? Has the American dream been a healthy one for American society?

In particular, the seminar will a) identify the historical origins of the American dream; b) critically examine the various meanings of “the American dream” throughout United States history, from Puritanism to the present-day; c) consider some of the skepticisms and criticisms of that dream; d) consider especially what “the American dream” has meant to women and Native, African, Latino, and Asian Americans; and e) conclude by considering in what ways, if any, “the American dream” might be rethought in order for it to continue to hold meaning for the future.

The course will be conducted as a seminar, and as such it will require students to participate regularly in discussion of the texts and issues under consideration.

The course provides a rare opportunity for SIUC Honors students to study one of the most important guiding themes in American history from an interdisciplinary perspective, including history, literature, sociology, and philosophy, and it draws from the instructor’s broad and interdisciplinary scholarly expertise in philosophy, American studies, economics, and Africana studies. Moreover, the theme is an
especially timely one, in light of current economic realities, which have cast the future of the American dream into doubt.

Learning Objectives
As a result of this course students will:
   a) understand the historical origins of “the American dream”;
   b) better understand the significance and some of the various meanings of “the American dream” throughout United States history, from Puritanism through the present day;
   c) critically examine the extent to which that dream has become real for Americans and to what extent it has remained an elusive myth;
   d) understand better what “the American dream” has meant especially for Native, African, Latino, and Asian Americans—to what extent has that dream included and to what extent has it excluded them?—
   e) articulate their own understanding of the American dream and what role, if any, it might play in their own and the United States’ future.

Requirements
In order to achieve the above objectives, students must meet the following requirements.

1. Reading. Students are to read carefully and critically and to discuss regularly, knowledgeably, and thoughtfully the assigned readings. Most of the readings will be available electronically, but students must purchase the following text, which is available in the University Bookstore:

The following texts are available on-line but are recommended for purchase and available in the Bookstore:
   Horatio Alger, Ragged Dick, and
   Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman.

2. Attendance and Discussion. This course will be conducted as a seminar, and thus every student is expected to attend class regularly, to come to class with issues from the assigned readings that s/he wishes to explore, and to participate regularly in class discussion. Students will be evaluated on a) the regularity of their participation, b) how well they demonstrate that they have prepared properly for class by reading and reflecting upon the reading assignments, c) how deeply they have thought about the issues before the class, and d) the clarity with which they express themselves orally. Students unable to attend regularly should withdraw from the course. There are no excused absences: each student is allowed two absences, for whatever reasons, and each absence thereafter will carry a penalty. Students can make up their absences, however, by submitting a three-page essay for each missed class, critically discussing—not merely summarizing—the assigned reading for that class.

3. Miscellaneous On-line Writing Assignments. There will be several writing assignments, to be completed or submitted on-line, designed to facilitate understanding and discussion of course material.

4. Final Essay. Each student will submit, by the end of the final examination week, an eight-to-ten-page paper presenting his or her own reflections on the history and future of the American dream. What has it meant to Americans in the past? In what ways and to what extent has it been a positive force in United States history? In what ways and to what extent has it been a negative force? In what ways, if any, might it have positive meaning for the future of the United States? This essay will demonstrate how deeply and critically the student has engaged the issues and assigned readings of the course. Additional details for this assignment will be forthcoming.

Evaluation. Final grades will be based upon the following: attendance and participation, 1/3; miscellaneous on-line writing assignments, 1/3; and final paper, 1/3.

Contacting the Instructor
Office hours: Because the instructor is recovering from surgery and will be undergoing physical therapy, he is unable to establish regular office hours for the semester but will try to post his hours of availability on a week-to-week basis. Students are encouraged to meet with him outside of class and to make appointments for doing so.

Office: Faner 3022
Telephone: 536-6641
E-mail: <kstikker@siu.edu>
Mailbox: inside the main office of the Department of Philosophy, Faner 3065

**Tentative Calendar** (subject to change). Students are expected to keep themselves informed of assignment due dates without reminders from the instructor and to bring to class the texts under discussion. Therefore, students must either print out the electronically available readings or bring their tablets of laptop computers to class.

I. Introduction: The American Dream Today

Week 1
1 Tues., Jan. 19 -

2 Thurs., Jan. 21 - Origins of “the American Dream”
Reading: James Truslow Adams, “Epilogue,” *The Epic of America* (1931), electronic reserve
On-line writing exercise due.

Week 2
3 Tues., Jan. 26 -

II. History of the Dream
4 Thurs., Jan 28 - Dreaming of Christian Community: “A City Upon a Hill”

Week 3
5 Tues., Feb. 2 - A “City upon a Hill”

6 Thurs., Feb. 4 - Dreaming of Freedom: Hector St. John de Crevecoeur
Week 4
7 Tues., Feb. 9 - Dreaming of Moral Perfection: Benjamin Franklin

8 Thurs., Feb. 11 - Dreaming of Material Success: Horatio Alger

Week 5
9 Tues., Feb. 16 -
Reading: Alger, *Ragged Dick*, Chs. 15-26
10 Thurs., Feb. 18 - John Dos Passos
Reading: Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, selections to be determined

Week 6
11 Tues., Feb. 23 - Dream Turned Nightmare: Arthur Miller
Reading: Miller, *Death of a Salesman*
12 Thurs., Feb. 25 - Miller, continued

III. Is the American Dream Sexist and Racist? Has It Been for White Males Only?

Week 7
13 Tues., Mar. 1 - Women’s Role in the American Dream: Women as Objects of Conspicuous Consumption
Reading: Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (selection to be determined)
14 Thurs., Mar. 3 - Women and the American Dream in Popular Media

Week 8
15 Tues., Mar. 8 - Native American Nightmares
Reading: David Stannard, *American Holocaust*, selections (electronic reserve)
16 Thurs., Mar. 10 - Dreaming of Apples

Mar. 15 & 17 - No classes. Spring Break.

Week 9
17 Tues., Mar. 22 - African Americans and the American Dream
18 Thurs., Mar. 24 - W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin
Reading: Du Bois, to be determined

Week 10
19 Tues., Mar. 29 - Martin Luther King, Jr.’s American Dream
Reading: King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and “I Have a Dream”
20 Thurs., Mar. 31 - Hispanic Americans and the American Dream
Reading: to be determined

Week 11
21 Tues., Apr. 5 -
Reading: to be determined

22 Thurs., Apr. 7 - Asian Americans and the American Dream—“The Model Minorities”
Reading: to be determined

IV. Whither the American Dream?

Week 12
23 Tues., Apr. 12 -
Reading: Putnam, Ch. 1

24 Thurs., Apr. 14 -
Reading: Putnam, Ch. 2

Week 13
25 Tues., Apr. 19 -
Reading: Putnam, Ch. 3

26 Thurs., Apr. 21 -
Reading: Putnam, Ch. 4

Week 14
27 Tues., Apr. 26 -
Reading: Putnam, Ch. 5

28 Thurs., Apr. 28 -
Reading: Putnam, Ch. 6

Week 15
29 Tues., May 3 -

30 Thurs., May 5 -

Thurs., May 12, 4:00 p.m. – Final essays due.