AMERICAN DREAMS
First Year Seminar 025
MW 12:30-1:45pm, Meredith 234

Professor Stacey Treat
Office: 119 Howard Hall
Office Hours: Monday & Wednesday 2:00pm-5:00pm and by appointment
Email: stacey.treat@drake.edu (best form of communication)

Course Description

What exactly is “The American Dream?” We all have a basic sense of what this means, though our individual ideas about it may differ in various ways. Largely, Americans tend to think of it as the idea that every American citizen has the possibility and opportunity to fulfill the promise laid out in our Declaration of Independence that

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The fundamental promise of American democracy, for our Founding Fathers, included the idea that every citizen should have equal access to the rights and liberties established in the Constitution. In essence, we should ALL enter social life on equal footing, and through hard work and moral/ethical ingenuity, ANY ONE of us can achieve success and happiness. The constitution of a new form of government that is of the people, by the people, and for the people, was a novel “experiment” in the Western world of the 18th and 19th centuries. One can argue that is continues to be so.

If we stop to consider what some of the words and ideas in the Declaration statement meant at the time they were written, however, we find that these rights and opportunities did not apply to all persons found on our shores. Many Americans have historically struggled to attain the true promise of this fundamental American promise, and the struggle continues to this day. So we return to the basic question this course seeks to explore: What exactly IS “The American Dream,” and is it really attainable by all Americans?

In order to try to answer this question, we need to expand our notion of what it is various individuals and groups “dream” to achieve in relation to the fairly vague ideas of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” For example, what counts as a “life?” What types of “lives” are considered most worthwhile, appropriate, socially sanctioned and deserving of privileged status? What, exactly, is “liberty,” and is it the same thing as “freedom?” In what important ways do the ideas of “liberty” and “freedom” differ? What is meant by the phrase “the pursuit of happiness?” What constitutes “happiness?” How is it related to “success” and
“livelihood?” And how does “equality” figure into all of this promise of a new American citizenry?

As we proceed through the course, we will learn how complicated these ideas and questions truly are in real-life application, and especially in terms of historical accuracy. Throughout our journey, we will add new terms and ideals to the mix, many of which will continue to challenge our abilities to reconcile some fundamental contradictions found in the promise that ALL Americans may achieve the so-called “American Dream.” Some of these contradictions involve the tension between the rights of the individual and the needs of the community; the duties of citizenship and the freedoms of consumerism; the preference of the majority and the protections of the minority; the morality derived from religion and the ethics of secular humanity; the power of the government, the corporation, or the military and the civil liberties of the individual citizen, consumer, and immigrant.

Many more tensions will be uncovered along the way as well, to be sure. One thing will become evident early on: there is no one, all-encompassing “American Dream” outside of a mythical vague ideal for human achievement. There are, in fact, myriad “American Dreams” of various shapes, colors, contours, degrees, magnitudes, and manifestations. Which ones, however, are held in the highest regard and to the highest standard, and why? How did this privileging come about, and where does it stand today? Are we, as a society, a citizenry, and a culture, living up the esteemed values of the American promise? What values, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and achievements constitute our American Dreams today?

We begin this course by revisiting a fundamental and deeply influential text published in 1831 by a French nobleman visiting the United States of America. Alexis de Tocqueville noted many facets of American life, detailing the forms and structures of our government, how we understand and practice a new form of democracy, and the social and cultural lives and experiences of Americans across the country. He also noted what he saw as a dangerous threat to American democracy centered on the problem of the “Three Races” in America – the white Europeans, The Native Americans, and the African slaves, eerily foreshadowing the American Civil War that erupted 30 years after his visit. The tensions Tocqueville observes in American character and society continue to haunt our cultural life today.

To further investigate some of the ethical, political, economic, and cultural tensions still alive today in the US surrounding race, socio-economic class, gender, and other “identity markers,” we will turn to Rebecca Skloot’s 2010 book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* that tells the story of an African-American woman who died of cervical cancer in 1951, yet whose cancerous cells (taken without her consent) continue to leave a remarkable legacy in the lives of all of us around the globe. As we read this text, we will continue to consider some of
Tocqueville’s key insights concerning American character and society to discern how our attitudes and values have remained consistent or perhaps have changed in some unforeseen and (perhaps) unintended and problematic ways.

Throughout our semester together, we will continually question the nature of “privilege,” and take account of our own various forms of privileges bestowed upon us (in many ways) by “birthright,” or how it is we came to be American citizens, and the sorts of privileges we enjoy (or not) based on our individual and collective experiences. This will require a great deal of self-reflection and critical thought on our own personal “worlds,” and an acknowledgement that our individual experiences in life are caught up in a much larger, broader, historical, cultural, and economic background of American life that we have inherited from generations before us, and which continue to define, shape, and influence our lives today.

Required Texts

· Additional readings, primarily articles, may also be assigned, as well as films clips and out-of-class screenings TBD in advance.

Formal Class Policies

1. **General Attendance:** Students are expected to attend all class meetings. Participation in class discussions are central features of this course. If you encounter some unusual personal circumstance that may require an extended absence (i.e. pneumonia, complex medical treatment, etc.) consult with me about your situation.
2. **Student Responsibilities:** You are responsible for class material presented when you are absent, staying informed and keeping up with class assignments. Consult your classmates for notes and discussion of material you missed. I will not supply you with notes from class. If you have questions please see me after you have consulted a classmate.
3. **Late assignments:** receive a 20% per day late deduction (not class period.)
4. **Laptops:** No laptops in class please. There are way too many temptations.
5. **Cellular Phones:** During the course of the class, cellular phones will be put away or turned off. There is NO text messaging, gaming, web surfing, or emailing allowed in class. I will collect yours from you until the end of class.
6. **Eating in class:** I do not mind if you eat or drink in class; however, choose your food wisely. Do not be distracting (i.e. odor, sound
preparation) and clean up after yourself.

7. **Final note:** No syllabus can account for all possible situations. Whatever the circumstances, the applicable standard is that participants in this class are expected to conduct themselves as adults, accepting responsibility for themselves and their work, and demonstrating respect for themselves and other people involved in the class.

Course Procedures
This course is a seminar, which means that the class periods are devoted to discussion of selected texts. The purpose of discussion is to understand the topic of inquiry while improving our skills at reading, writing, and oral argument. In order to have a good seminar, we will need to read carefully, voice our questions, observations, and opinions in class, engage one another in argument, and review, reread, or continue talking together after class as prompted by the discussion. When you come to class, I expect you to be ready to discuss the readings scheduled for that day, even if only to identify your lack of understanding. You are more likely to be prepared to contribute to the discussion if you take notes while reading that identify key questions or other points for analysis. To help stimulate substantive engagement with the readings and with each other, you will be required to post your reactions to the text on Blackboard and will each work with a partner to lead class discussion of the readings at least once during the semester.

Assignments
The formal course work includes the Blackboard posts, discussions and four papers, all focused on the assigned readings. For each of the papers, you also will participate in a peer review process to improve your writing. As listed on the schedule, you will share drafts of your papers with two others in the class, while receiving two papers in return. All drafts will be returned with peer comments by the following class period. I will not grade these early drafts, but I will give you credit for having exchanged a complete draft (you will lose these points if you fail to participate in the peer review process). In addition to peer reviews, your final paper will have a draft that is graded by me and will be presented to the class as an oral academic research report.

Blackboard Posts: After each reading assignment, you will be required to post on Blackboard. You should choose **ONE** of the following types of posts:

1. Two questions you have in response to the reading (attempting to clarify something you didn't understand, asking how a concept might be applied, inquiring about the relationship between passages or ideas)
2. Two comments with your own reactions to, interpretations of, or ideas about specific passages (please quote them)
3. One connection that you noticed between the reading for our class and something from Professor Sanders' course (from readings, lectures or discussions).

Questions, comments and connections should be titled thematically to help
others identify the topic and build a thread around a common theme. Wherever possible, you should place your posts under relevant threads and/or respond to previous postings on that topic. Every student is expected to read all posts before each class. In order to earn credit, posts must appear before 10:00 p.m. the evening before a discussion.

**Discussion Facilitation:** Each member of the class will work with another member to lead our class discussion once, using the Blackboard posts as prompts. When it is your turn to facilitate discussion, you and your partner should print out the posts from the reading and type an outline of the questions, comments or topics you plan to use to get discussion rolling and keep it on track. You should prepare quotes from the reading and from the posts, but remember that your job is to get the class talking to each other, not to do a presentation for them. You should prepare questions, but let them give you their own answers and interact with each other.

**Papers:** Writing is a means for focusing, testing, and extending one's thinking about a subject, and for engaging with an audience for those and other purposes. In each of your papers for this course, you should strive to make a contribution to our understanding of the course texts and topics.

Understanding a subject includes knowledge of those texts that provide significant accounts of the subject, familiarity with informed commentary on those texts, consideration of alternative interpretations of any important assertion, and application to one's experience in the world. It is important that we can see these disciplines at work in your writing. You should provide specific references to the course texts, attend to other discussions of their meaning, craft arguments on behalf of your claims, and demonstrate understanding of actual features of our social world. Feel welcome to bring in other texts and experiences as long as they are introduced adequately; a succinct description of their content and significance should do (e.g., don't assume that I am familiar with your favorite music or that I can see why Beloved is important). In any case, your papers should reflect careful reading of your texts, thoughtful participation in our class discussions, and clear and systematic exposition of your ideas.

Each paper should have a title suggesting your basic problem, idea, or theme. You also should follow an appropriate pattern of development. You might write a conventional essay that identifies a problem, proposes a thesis toward the resolution of that problem, offers a series of arguments in support of that thesis, and concludes by addressing the question of action. You might write a more narrative account that follows a character through a series of actions leading to a crisis and resolution (e.g., you as you are trying to understand Tocqueville while going about your day). You might write a systematic textual commentary that works through a text, paragraph by paragraph or line by line, to develop an interpretation of the whole. You might identify a dramatic event (e.g., a popular trial or a family quarrel) and analyze that event using concepts.
discussed in the course. You might write a series of aphorisms that provoke a radical break with conventional wisdom and a new program of inquiry. However you proceed, the essay should be your best effort to argue about and understand some important idea regarding the character of American life.

**Paper formatting should include:**
- No title page; please single-space your name, the date, assignment name/number, and FYS 025 in the upper left hand corner, leave a single blank line and then start the body of your paper;
- one-inch margins all around;
- Double-spaced;
- Page numbers in the upper right corner;
- 12-point professional font (Times New Roman is preferred).
- Use parenthetical citations following APA or MLA style, if referring to texts from outside the course, and a corresponding Works Cited or Reference page;
- “Finish” your paper by **stapling the paper**; special folders, etc. are unnecessary;
- E-mailed and faxed written assignments, outlines, and papers **will not** be accepted.

I shall distribute more detailed guidelines as each assignment approaches. We also will identify in our class discussions more specific initiatives that you might follow to complete the assignment. In addition, tutorial help is available from the Writing Workshop; information is available at [http://www.multimedia.drake.edu/english/workshop.html](http://www.multimedia.drake.edu/english/workshop.html)

**Grading:** The distribution of grades will roughly follow this pattern, although seminars often tend to weigh progress, effort and participation more heavily when determining final grades.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First paper</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second paper</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third paper</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth paper</td>
<td>250</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Presentation</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion Facilitation</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>BB Posts and Participation</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1000</td>
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**These are the ways I view particular grades:**

**D** When I assign a “D,” I intend to communicate that the minimum standards for the assignment have not been met, and also that *significant deficiencies* exist.

**C** When I assign a “C,” I intend to communicate that the *basic expectations*
of the assignment have been met; this is not a “bad” grade, nor a “punitive” grade, and it is one that I frequently assign. It is a grade that, theoretically, most work should receive. You have simply done what I have asked of you on any given assignment.

B When I assign a “B,” I intend to communicate that the quality of work is distinctly above that which the assignment required. A grade of “B” does not indicate a deficiency—it means “above average,” that is, “more than sufficient, even for a major in the discipline.” You have done a bit more than asked on any given assignment.

A I assign an “A” to work that I consider innovative, creative, intellectually rigorous, and demanding. “A” work typically integrates your reading and almost always goes well beyond (but still includes) the basic requirements of the assignment.

Finally, please note—I do not give you a grade, you earn a grade!!!

Incompletes: I will grant an incomplete only under very stringent conditions, and most likely, never.

A Note on Plagiarism
Plagiarism means submitting someone else’s work as if it were your own. Plagiarizing is one of the worst things that you can do in academic life and it will be treated accordingly.
You may not:
· hand in a paper that was written, in whole or in part, by someone else
· borrow directly from another writer without giving credit to the writer
· borrow directly from another writer, even if you do give credit, by just changing a few words or some of the phrasing

The results of plagiarism will be, at the least, a 0 on the assignment (far worse, you should notice than just getting a failing grade which, unlike a plagiarized paper, can be revised and resubmitted). More likely, it will mean failing the class. Possibly, it could mean expulsion from the University.

Before you cheat, you should think about what it means. Handing in a paper you have not written or copying from someone else on a test violates the basic principle of education—because you cannot learn anything or give the teacher any indication of your own (and possibly the class’) understanding if the work is not yours. Plagiarizing violates a trust between you and your professor—students should not tolerate professors who do not teach and professors cannot tolerate students who refuse to learn. Plagiarizing and cheating are not just abstractions that do not hurt anyone; they are an attempt to gain an advantage over fellow students, many of whom are your friends. And it cheapens your accomplishment—even if you do not get caught, you will still know that your degree was not achieved by your own effort
I do not expect plagiarism but if I have reason to believe it has occurred I will follow the University's policy for prosecution. If you have questions about academic honesty, you might consult:

- http://www.drake.edu/dc/plagiarism2.html,
- http://www.drake.edu/artsci/econ/study/dishonest.html, or
- http://www.drake.edu/artsci/PolSci/PolSci_Home_Page.html#Honesty
- And you always can ask me for guidance.

**Additional Features of the Course**

This course is part of a learning community. As members of the community, you have rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Distinctive features of this community include:

- **Dedicated Teaching Assistants:** Second-year students **Beth McNab** and **Jacob Hession** will be assisting all students in the course with discussion facilitation, presentation skills, and writing skills. Beth and Jacob took FYS 025 in the Fall of 2013 and can offer important insights about your first-year experience based on their own. Utilize Beth and Jacob as peer mentors as much as possible, as they can guide you first-hand through the special learning experience of FYS 025.

- **Linked courses:** This seminar is joined with Professor Sander's course on the American Political System. As you see opportunities to more closely coordinate the work in the seminar with your Politics course, you should bring them to the attention of both classes.

- **Money:** The community has $500 to spend in a manner that facilitates interaction and inquiry. Options you might consider include a film series, a party, bringing in guest speakers, hosting a forum with another FYS seminar, etc.

- **Course design:** The community has the opportunity to redesign elements of the course. The professors retain final power of decision in accord with their institutional responsibility for the course, but some of the syllabus is negotiable.

- **Common living space:** Many of you share a dorm floor. This concentration of a course in a living space may provide a number of options for extending or shaping the academic work.

**Tentative Course Schedule**

(Note: the schedule may be subject to change in the event of extenuating circumstances such as university cancellations, power outages affecting the university, need for schedule adaptation, etc.) In the event that the university cancels classes due to snow, severe weather, or other factors, students should assume that the assignments due on the day of the canceled class are due on the next class meeting. Adjustments may be made throughout the semester.)

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Readings and Assignments</th>
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**Week 1**
M Aug 25:  Introduction
W Aug 27:  Skloot, pgs. xiii – 9, Chapters 1 – 2

**Week 2**
M Sept 1:  LABOR DAY – class not held
W Sept 3:  Tocqueville, First Book: Chapters I-V (p. 3-28)
First Book: Chapter VIII - XI (p. 33-52)
Philosophy of Ideas, the Perfectibility of Man, Science, Art
Due: Draft Paper #1

**Week 3**
M Sept 8:  Skloot, Chapters 3 – 8
W Sept 10:  Paper Presentations
Due: Paper #1

**Week 4**
M Sept 15:  Tocqueville, Second Book: Chapters I-VII (p. 94-120)
Individualism
W Sept 17:  Tocqueville, Second Book: Chapter VIII-XI (p. 121-142)
POSIRU & Physical Gratification (Materialism)

**Week 5**
M Sept 22:  Tocqueville, Second Book: Chapters XVIII – XX (152-161)
Labor, Industry, Capitalism
W Sept 24:  Tocqueville, Third Book: Chapter VIII-XVI (p. 192-227)
Family, Gender Structures, Manners

**Week 6**
M Sept 29:  Tocqueville, “The Three Races That Inhabit the US” - 1
Due: Draft Paper #2

**Week 7**
M Oct 6:  Skloot, Chapters 9 – 15
W Oct 8:  Paper Presentations
Due: Paper # 2

**Week 8**
M Oct 13:  FALL BREAK
W Oct 15:  Class Town Meeting (led by TAs)

**Week 9**
M Oct 20:  Skloot, Chapters 16 – 19
W Oct 22:  Skloot, Chapters 20 – 22

**Week 10**
M Oct 27:  Skloot, Chapters 23 – 26
W Oct 29: Skloot, Chapters 27 – 30
Due: Draft Paper #3

Week 11
M Nov 3: Skloot, Chapters 31 – 36
W Nov 5: Paper Presentations
Due: Paper #3

Week 12
M Nov 10: Skloot, Chapters 37, 38, and pgs. 311 - 328
W Nov 12: Film & Discussion

Week 13
M Nov 17: Film & Discussion
W Nov 19: In-class film

Week 14
M Nov 24: Final Paper Workshop
W Nov 26: THANKSGIVING

Week 15
M Dec 2: Final Paper Presentations
W Dec 4: Final Paper Presentations

Week 16
TBD: Final Paper Presentations
Due: Paper #4