SEMINAR: THE AMERICAN DREAM

The American Dream is one of the most popular phrases in recent history. What precisely do we mean by the American Dream? What are its defining features? It's a term that's often used broadly and has meant different things to different people. We live in a country made up of dreams. Scores of individuals, ranging from politicians, business leaders, academicians, and news commentators to folks in various walks of life refer to it. To some people the term connotes freedom, equality, opportunity, free enterprise, upward mobility, owning a home, good job, fame, or financial success, among others. It has been used in different settings. For example, when the Cincinnati Reds won the National League Central Division in 2010, I recall an article in the Cincinnati Enquirer entitled in bold letters: GREAT AMERICAN DREAM COMES TRUE.

There are a number of academically reputable books and articles that make reference to the American Dream. The first known scholar to use the term was Walter Lippmann in his book, Drift and Mastery, published in 1914. He used the term only once. An intellectual and political commentator, Lippmann pointed out that the American Dream “may be summed up . . . in the statement that the undisciplined man is the salt of the earth.” In that statement he affirmed his “belief in the virtues of the spontaneous [and] enterprising" individual. Like many critics at the turn of the twentieth century, who identified a number of economic and social injustices in the community, Lippmann hoped America could be restored so that “each man could again be left to his own will,” that each individual would be able to
affirm his individuality as much as possible. Concerned over the many problems that ordinary people faced, Lippmann argued that creating “a minimum standard of life below which no human being can fall is the most elementary duty of [our] democratic state.” He thought as did Herbert Croly in his 1909 book *The Promise of American Life*, a book the Republican President Teddy Roosevelt very much admired, that Americans “can no longer treat life as something that has trickled down to us. We have to deal with it deliberately, devise its social organization.” Both Lippmann and Croly underscored the need to enact reforms in society in order to realize the promise of American life, to remain true to America’s ideals.

Though Lippmann first used the term, it has long been acknowledged that the Pulitzer Prize writer and historian, James Truslow Adams, popularized it in his 1931 book, *The Epic of America*. He used it over thirty times. Though the phrase American Dream did not become part of the American vernacular until then, the concept -- Adams argued -- began “to take form in the hearts of men” in the early 1600s in the colonial settlements of Jamestown, Plymouth, and Boston. He maintained that the American Dream was a vital force from the start. “The economic motive,” he wrote, "was unquestionably powerful, often dominant, in the minds of those who [left Europe and] took part in the great migration" to America. It has been well documented that most European immigrants in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries fled from persecution or hard social and economic conditions in their homeland. But "mixed" with the economic motive, Adams argued, was "the hope of a better and a freer life, a life in which a man might think as he would and develop as he willed." Consistently throughout *The Epic of America* he argued that the Dream arose “from the depths of the common mass" of people.

We are living at a time in our history where we are experiencing a revolution in time and space relationships as well as seeing the digitization, virtualization, and automation of more and more things. The new technologies have thrust a new scale of life upon us. Some say the American Dream has staying power. If so, how will it fare in our new setting? In looking at the past and the present we should not want to romanticize the Dream at the expense of not discussing real and divisive issues. Individuals committed to the concept of the American Dream should
want to face real issues in order to make it possible for as many individuals as possible to go after their dreams.

**GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:**

The purpose of the course is to think historically about the major trends and patterns in American History as they relate to the American Dream.

Participants in the course should seek to:

1. understand the development of institutions, ideas, and values, that have shaped and continue to shape the American Dream;
2. understand the process of assembling information from the past and give meaning to it; and
3. understand processes of change and arguments about cause and effect.

Participants in the course should also demonstrate a depth of understanding through the development of analytic and critical skills. You should be able to:

1. think historically so that you can make connections;
2. make written and verbal arguments in a critical and persuasive manner; and
3. seek valid conclusions based on appropriate sources of information.

**ACADEMIC HONESTY**

The pursuit of truth demands high standards of personal honesty. Academic life requires a trust based upon integrity of the written and spoken word. Accordingly, violations of certain standards of ethical behavior will not be tolerated at Xavier University. These include theft, cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized assistance in assignments and tests, unauthorized copying of computer software, the falsification of results and material submitted in reports or admission and registration documents and the falsification of any academic record including letters of recommendations.

All work submitted for academic evaluation must be the student's own. Certainly, the activities of other scholars will influence all students.
However, the direct and unattributed use of another's efforts is prohibited as is the use of any work untruthfully submitted as one's own.

Penalties for violations of the policy may include one or more of the following: a zero for that assignment or test, an "F" in the course, and expulsion from the University. The dean of the college in which the student is enrolled is to be informed in writing of all such incidents, though the teacher has full authority to assign the grade for the assignment, test, or course.

EVALUATION

1. Write three short essays (approximately 1,000 words, three to four pages each) on each of the following sections in the course: The Founding Fathers' Ideals; Romanticism and Slavery; and Individualism, Equality, and the Gilded Age. In each essay comment on (a) the author's intent, (b) the key question that the author is addressing, (c) the most important information to support the author's arguments, and (d) the main conclusion. In each essay you should share your personal thoughts and opinion on the arguments presented in the readings. The first essay is due September 10; the second, September 26; and the third October 17. (Each essay is worth 10%)

2. You are to write a seminar paper, which should be approximately 3,500 pages, roughly 12 to 15 pages. The main focus of the paper should be on How Fares the American Dream? In light of your understanding of the concept of the American Dream in the shaping of our nation, what have been, and what are, issues and challenges related to the Dream? You should make use of the assigned readings, class discussions, and outside reading in the development of your paper. You should consult at least three outside readings (books or articles). The seminar paper is due November 26. (25%)

3. The presentation of seminar paper is worth 10%.

4. Your participation in class discussions of readings will be worth 15%.

5. Final examination is worth 20%.
SYLLABUS

August 27  Introduction

August 29 - September 3, 5  The Puritan and Enlightenment Experiences
Cullen, *The American Dream*, Introduction and Chapter 1;

September 10, 12, 17, 19, 24  The Founding Fathers' Ideals
Cullen, Chapter 2; Schlesinger, "What Then is the American, This New Man?"; Pierson, "The M-Factor in American History"; Meacham, "Free to be Happy," *Time*, July 8, 2013;
E-Reserves: Selection from Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, in Hollinger, Vol. 1; Declaration of Independence in Puritan Vision; *Federalist Papers*, No. 1; Darrin McMahon, "Liberalism and Its Discontents" in *Happiness*; Crevecoeur, "Letters from an American Farmer."

September 26, October 1, 3, 10  Romanticism and Slavery
Cullen, Chapter 3;
Douglass, "Contradictions in American Civilization"; Hofstadter, "On the Unpopularity of Intellect"; Selections from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and "American Scholar"; Excerpts from Harriet Martineau and Graf von Hubner's writings;
E-Reserves: Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" in Blight, *Narrative*, Lincoln, "Address Before the Wisconsin State Agricultural

October 15
Identify seminar paper topic and potential sources. To be submitted on October 17th.

October 17, 22, 24, 29, 31
Individualism, Equality, and the Gilded Age
Cullen, Chapters 4 & 5;
Excerpts from Henry George's writings;

November 5, 7, 19
Politics and the American Dream
E-Reserves: Kimmage, "The Politics of the American Dream" in Hanson, American Dream; White, "The Presidency and the Making of the American Dream" in Hanson, American Dream; Selective U.S. Presidents' Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses.

November 12, 14, 19
Wealth and Income Inequality
Freeland, "History and Why It Matters" and "Conclusion" from Plutocrats;
E-Reserves: Johnson, "The Wealth Gap and the American Dream"; Johnson, "Inequality and Ideology"; Hanson, "Whose Dreams: Gender and the American Dream" in Hanson, American Dream.
November 21, 26
Where does the Dream go from here?
Cullen, "Extending the Dream";
E-Reserves: Hanson, "Conclusion: The American Dream: Where are We?" in Hanson, American Dream.

November 26
Seminar paper is due.

December 3, 5, 10, 12
Presentations and Discussion of Seminar Papers

December 19
Final Examination, Thursday, 10:30-12:20 pm.