

## **LIBERAL STUDIES 4980 Dr. Daniel Kolak Winter Session 2016**

### **General Information**

**THIS IS A PASS/FAIL COURSE.**

This course focuses on communication skills for engaging in civic life. You will be required to complete the four following **Projects**:

- A) **Advocacy Letter**
- B) **Letter to a Legislator**
- C) **Letter to a Business**
- D) **Interview with a local service organization member & thank you or feedback letter**

The requirements for all these are spelled out in detail in this syllabus. ***It is your responsibility to know this syllabus in detail, and to ask questions if there is anything that is not clear to you.***

**Your first Assignment is due at 11:59 PM on Saturday, 12/26.** Please submit a description of what you plan to do for all 4 projects. Read further to find out about what the projects should be like. Your description should be detailed enough for me to have a clear idea of what you plan to do. You should spend at least a few sentences talking about each Project. I expect your best spelling and grammar. You can change your mind about your Project topics based on my feedback, or in case your interests change later, but I want you to submit a list now so you start planning. Assignment 1 is worth 10% of your grade.

**You will need to get started early on planning Project D to get it done on time. You have to conduct an interview for Project D, so don't wait to plan this until the last minute.**

Except for Assignment 1, the rest of your work will be on **Projects**.

Each **Project** consists of two **Assignments** and three **Discussion Tasks**.

You will turn in **All Assignments** by clicking "Assignments" in the upper-left-hand area of the screen and then clicking on the link for the Assignment you're turning in.

You will complete **Discussion Tasks** by clicking "Discussion Board" in the left-hand area of the screen and then posting on your own personal discussion board or your classmates' discussion boards.

**You may not submit your Assignments, or attach files to your Personal Discussion Board, in ".docx" format, since too many people cannot open that format. Instead, please use ".doc" format. See the "Saving your files as .doc instead of .docx" section below for information about how to do this.**

It is your responsibility to keep copies of your work. I do not expect the WPUNJ computers to crash and destroy work that you have submitted, but if they do, I will ask you to resubmit all the assignments you've already submitted.

To find out what you are supposed to write about in your Assignments and Discussion Tasks, read the sections that appear below after the Schedule.

Your grades on individual assignments will appear in the "Grade Center" as soon as I input them.

### **Plagiarism**

I will not tolerate plagiarism. If you copy text that somebody else wrote, you must cite it, or you will fail the class. You can just insert the citation into the body of the letter you're working on.

### **Late Work**

**I will not accept late work without a good reason that you can document**

See the "**Deadline Schedule and Grading Weights**" section below for more information about deadlines.

Please note that if somebody fails to post their drafts on time, you will therefore be unable to complete your Discussion Tasks that require comments, therefore **your grade will not suffer, unless you have contributed to a breakdown of communication** by repeated failures to post on time in the past.

### **Course Schedule and Grading Weights**

**THIS IS A PASS/FAIL COURSE.**

The % of your grade determined by each class work item appears immediately after the due date on the schedule of deadlines below. **All assignments and discussion tasks are due at 11:59 PM on the date listed beside them.**

#### **First Assignment**

Saturday, 12/26 (10%): **Assignment 1:** submit Assignment 1 to me **through the blackboard link.**

#### **Advocacy Letter**

Sun 12/27 (3%) **Discussion Task 1:** *Attach a full-length draft* of your Advocacy Letter to a post on your Personal Discussion Board. **This post goes on your own Personal Discussion Board.**

Mon 12/28 (3%) **Discussion Task 2:** Read the Advocacy Letter draft postings of all your classmates, and post a comment of at least 150 words on the Personal Discussion Board of each of your classmates. You can ask questions, share your agreement or disagreement with their views, suggest sources they might look at, or related topics they might consider. **These posts go on the Personal Discussion Boards of your classmates.**

Tu 12/29 (8%) **Assignment 2:** submit your Advocacy Letter to me **through the blackboard link.**

Wed 12/30 (8%) **Assignment 3:** revise your Advocacy Letter based on my comments and send it, preferably by email. Cc me by email if you send an email, and email me an attached digital copy if you mail a letter by post. See above for more information.

### **Letter to a Legislator**

Th 12/31 (3%) **Discussion Task 3:** *Attach a full-length draft* of your Letter to a Legislator to a post on your Personal Discussion Board. **This post goes on your own Personal Discussion Board.**

Fri 1/01 (3%) **Discussion Task 4:** Read the Letter to a Legislator postings of all your classmates, and post a comment of at least 150 words on the Personal Discussion Board of each of your classmates. **These posts go on the Personal Discussion Boards of your classmates.**

Sat 1/02 (8%) **Assignment 4:** submit your Letter to a Legislator to me **through the blackboard link.**

Sun 1/03 (8%) **Assignment 5:** revise your Letter to a Legislator based on my comments and send it, preferably by email. Cc me by email if you send an email, and email me an attached digital copy if you mail a letter by post. See above for more information.

### **Letter to a Business**

Mon 1/04 (3%) **Discussion Task 5:** *Attach a full-length draft* of your Letter to a Business to a post on your Personal Discussion Board. **This post goes on your own Personal Discussion Board.**

Tu 1/05 (3%) **Discussion Task 6:** Read the Letter to a Business postings of all your classmates, and post a comment of at least 150 words on the Personal Discussion Board of each of your classmates. You can ask questions, share your agreement or disagreement with their views, suggest sources they might look at, or related topics they might consider. **These posts go on the Personal Discussion Boards of your classmates.**

Wed 1/06 (8%) **Assignment 6:** submit your Letter to a Business to me **through the blackboard link.**

Th 1/07 (8%) **Assignment 7:** revise your Letter to a Business based on my comments and send it, preferably by email. Cc me by email if you send an email, and email me an attached digital copy if you mail a letter by post. See above for more information.

### **Interview with a local service organization member & thank you letter or feedback letter**

Fri 1/08 (3%) **Discussion Task 7:** *Attach a full-length draft* of your Interview Notes + Letter to a post on your Personal Discussion Board. **This post goes on your own Personal Discussion Board.**

Sat 1/09 (3%) **Discussion Task 8:** Read the Interview Notes + Letter postings of all your classmates, and post a comment of at least 150 words on the Personal Discussion Board of each of your classmates. You can ask questions, share your agreement or disagreement with their views, suggest sources they might look at, or related topics they might consider. **These posts go on the Personal Discussion Boards of your classmates.**

Sun 1/10 (8%) **Assignment 8:** submit your Interview Notes + Letter to me **through the blackboard link.**

Mon 1/11(9%) **Assignment 9:** revise your Interview Notes + Letter based on my comments and send the letter, preferably by email. Cc me by email if you send an email, and email me an attached digital copy if you mail a letter by post. See above for more information.

### **Saving your files as .doc instead of .docx**

.docx is the standard file type for the newest version of Microsoft Word, but people who don't have this version can't open them. What you want to do is to save files that you want to share with your classmates as ".doc" files instead of ".docx". This is easy to do. Open your file, and then go to the menu you use to save, but use the "save as" function instead of "save", and then click "Word 97-2003 document". This will give you a .doc file which you can attach to posts and then be confident that everyone will be able to open them.

### **Getting Help with the Blackboard Software**

I hope that all of the Blackboard functions you need to use for this class will be self-explanatory.

If you are having trouble with the software, please click on the tab on the top of the screen that reads "Bb Support: Students" and follow the instructions that appear there.

### **Asking me questions about Assignments, Deadlines, Expectations, Etc.**

Please **do not email me general questions about the class.** It is important for me to be able to share answers to general questions about the class with all students, and email isn't a good approach for that.

**Instead, please post questions for me on the general Discussion Board,** which you can access by clicking "Discussions" on the left side of the screen, and then posting in the "General Questions About the Class" forum. (This is different from the Personal Discussion Boards. Personal discussion boards are for class work only, not for general questions about the class.)

**You may email me directly whenever you have an individual question** about your research project, or if you need an extension on a deadline for a legitimate reason.

### **Discussion tasks**

You will complete **Discussion Tasks** by clicking on your own Personal Discussion Board or the Personal Discussion Boards of your classmates. Depending on which Discussion Board Task you are working on, your job will be to

(a) attach Assignments to posts on your Personal Discussion Board so your classmates can read them, or

(b) write feedback on your classmates' Assignments on the Personal Discussion Board of the classmate you are helping.

(c) reply on your Personal Discussion Board to comments that your classmates have posted on your Personal Discussion Board.

You need to actively discuss the projects of all of your classmates, and respond to their comments by taking them into account on your own projects. Please try to get involved critically with the details of their project. It's a friendly, supportive thing to say that you think their topics are important and interesting. But that's not enough. You can be friendly and supportive and still go deeper into the details of their projects; learning to think and write critically about your own work and the work of others is an important skill. Exchanging projects with your classmates is a way to get to know them and their interests, and to learn something new about the topics they are researching, but also how to reflect, criticize, help, and act professionally in a critical setting. Please see the syllabus for minimum length requirements.

On Discussion Tasks, I grade only on whether you write enough. You have to be relevant, helpful, and civil, but beyond that all you have to do is participate and write enough, and you'll get full credit on these grades.

Please offer constructive criticism as part of your discussion, and remember to be respectful and polite, since 5% of your grade depends upon being a civil class member. I don't grade the quality of what you write in Discussion Board Tasks, only your participation—but you have to take the discussion seriously and write relevant and helpful comments to earn the participation credit.

When working with **Discussion Boards**, you may need to click "**Collect**" to read everything. Some items sometimes cannot be read on the default display.

## **Projects**

### **General Information for all the Projects, and Factors in Grading**

**All 4 projects have the same basic structure.** First, you write a draft, and then share it with your classmates in the first discussion task of the project. Next, in the second discussion task of the project, you write comments on your classmates' drafts. After that, in the third discussion task of the project, you reflect critically on the comments your classmates have given you. The next phase is the first Assignment of the project, when you submit a revised draft to me, and I give you a grade and some feedback. Finally, in the second Assignment of the project, you send a final draft of the assignment out to the recipient (for example a legislator or a business, depending on the Project) and you also send me a copy, and I give you another grade at that point, depending on the quality of your final draft.

**Your grade for the Discussion Tasks** is based just on completing the tasks as described in the **Schedule** above. I do not grade the content of what you write, so long as it is relevant and you provide constructive feedback. See the **Discussion Tasks** section above for more information. **Late Discussion Tasks are not accepted—you will receive a 0 for late Discussion Tasks. However, if your classmates fail to post drafts on time, and you are therefore unable to complete your Discussion Tasks that require**

**comments, your grade will not suffer, unless you have contributed to a breakdown in group communication by failing to post on time previously. There is additional information about late work earlier in the syllabus.** Each Discussion Task is worth 2% of your grade.

**Your grade for the Assignments** is based on grammar, spelling, organization, demonstrated understanding of the issue you are writing about, and clarity of explanation and argument. It is also based on completing the Assignments as described in the **Schedule** section above, and as described in the specific **Projects** information below. It is also based on appropriateness of tone. Even when you are writing about issues that you are passionate about, you should always address the people to whom you are writing in a polite way and avoid rudeness. But also you should NOT sugar coat your critical assessment of their writing. Correct any grammar and syntax errors, as well as factual errors. You can be strongly critical if you are writing to complain about something, but you can be strongly critical and still polite. When you are writing your thank-you letter in Project D, I would appreciate it if you were not critical, because you may be writing to a volunteer rather than someone who is paid to work on the issue you're discussing, and I don't want our class work to undermine the volunteer spirit. You will not be graded on whether you incorporate your classmates' feedback into your assignments. I encourage you to learn from others' feedback and use it if it is helpful, but it is not a requirement of the class that you use it. **See the Late Work section above for information about late Assignments. See the Schedule section for information about the percentage of your grade determined by each Assignment.**

I assume that all students have general familiarity with the basic format of business letters. The following websites have some tips and examples:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/653/01/>

<http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu/reading-writing/on-line/b-letter.html>

<http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/BusinessLetter.html>

Since many of you will prefer to write emails instead of posted letters, some of the formatting traditions of business letters become less important. For example, you don't need to worry about the postal address of the person to whom you're writing, or the date, since the postal address doesn't matter and the email program automatically dates the message. But the rest of the conventions of business letter writing still matter. You should have multiple separate paragraphs, and you should make a polite and clear argument for whatever you are trying to persuade your reader to do.

### **A. Advocacy Letter**

This project requires you to identify an advocacy group which works on issues you care about, and participate in a letter-writing campaign that they are conducting. A letter-writing campaign is where a group asks people to write to businesses or legislators to change policies. For example, the Planetary Society (a space exploration advocacy group) might ask people who believe in space exploration to write to legislators and ask them to restore funding to NASA.

You can choose based on your interests, values, and/or politics. For example, you could participate in a letter-writing campaign with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the National Rifle Association, Greenpeace, or the Southern Poverty Law Center. These are just examples. **A great source of inspirational issues is available on the New York Times op/ed page every day. I strongly encourage you to read through those. They are available online or in the library or anywhere newspapers are**

**sold!** You can pick anything you want, within reason. Here are some links to letter-writing campaign webpages for these organizations. (You may be able to hold down the "Control" button and click on the links to go directly to the webpages. If that doesn't work, then cut-and-paste them into your browser window.) But I encourage you to find your own. You will get a better grade if you demonstrate initiative and independent research into the issues that address.

<https://secure3.convio.net/gpeace/site/Advocacy?cmd=display&page=UserAction&id=1097&src=GPnav>

<http://www.planetary.org/get-involved/be-a-space-advocate/>

<http://www.nraila.org/get-involved-locally/grassroots/write-your-reps.aspx>

<https://secure.peta.org/site/Advocacy?cmd=display&page=UserAction&id=4469>

**Please note that websites like these sometimes include pre-written text, and you cannot use this pre-written text in this class. If you do you will fail the class for plagiarism. You need to learn enough about the issues to write a letter in your own words.**

You also need to find the email address or postal address for the person or people you are contacting, so that you can send it to them directly. You cannot use an advocacy website's automated mailing function to submit the letter.

**The letter for this Project must be at least 500 words long.** It should be a miniature essay that demonstrates your very best writing skills. It should explain the issue you are discussing clearly enough for me to understand it even if I don't already know about it. If this means that you need to write more than 500 words to explain it, then you have to write more than 500 words. It's up to you to write enough to explain it clearly. But no matter how simple and clear your issue is, you have to write at least 500 words.

### **B. Letter to a Legislator**

In this Project, you choose an issue that interests you and write a letter to a Legislator about it, requesting that they pass laws to address your issue. You can write to state legislators or national legislators. You can also write to local officials, for example, a member of your Township Council or your Mayor. Congressmen, Senators, or even the President are not out of the question but you are far more likely to make an impact starting at a lower level! It can be any issue that you care about, within reason. You have to use your general knowledge of the kinds of issues legislators can legislate about, and you also have to think about whether the issue you want to address is a local, state, or national issue. If you want to ask for sidewalk repairs in your neighborhood, then you need to write to someone on the town council or your mayor. If you want to send somebody a letter arguing that NJ high schools shouldn't spend so much energy preparing students for standardized tests, then you need to write to a state legislator. If you want to ask someone to support the new federal Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, then you should write to an NJ senator or congressperson who represents NJ in the U.S. Congress. If you want to take the NSA to task about its spying on its fellow citizens, or to address the President's use of drones, or torture of prisoners, or whatever, then you have to figure out where and to whom to address your letter! **Again you would be wise to read up on any issue starting with the New York Times or your local newspaper's op/ed page and then tracking down the sources as well as doing background research. Anything you do for this project must not be satire or flippant in tone but a serious attempt by a citizen (you) to engage civically and in a civilized manner by your legislator or representative, most of whom take their jobs very seriously and so should you.**

If you want to write to a state legislator, but you're not sure who works for your local area, go to this webpage:

<http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/members/legsearch.asp>

**The letter for this Project must be at least 500 words long.** It should be a miniature essay that demonstrates your very best writing skills. It should explain the issue you are discussing clearly enough for me to understand it even if I don't already know about it. If this means that you need to write more than 500 words to explain it, then you have to write more than 500 words. It's up to you to write enough to explain it clearly. But no matter how simple and clear your issue is, you have to write at least 500 words.

**NOTE: If you do use the New York Times or local paper op/ed page as a source of inspiration for any of your work, please post a link on your Personal Discussion Board to that op/ed piece so we can all read it too.**

### **C. Letter to a Business**

In this Project, you choose an issue that is relevant to a particular business, and write a letter to the company addressing it. It can be personal—perhaps you bought an item which broke or failed to work properly, and you want to write to the company asking for a replacement even though you lost the warranty paperwork, because you think the product was so badly designed that you think it's fair to ask for a replacement even though you don't have the warranty paperwork. Or perhaps you have a more general ethical concern about a company—perhaps they test cosmetics by smearing them into the eyes of rabbits to see if they cause inflammation, and you want to protest that this is too cruel. Or perhaps you want to write to a company which has voluntarily reduced its greenhouse gas emissions and thank it for being a good corporate citizen. **Here again I strongly advise you to start with reading some relevant New York Times op/ed piece! That is the best way to ensure that your issue is interesting, relevant, and not simply some silly pet peeve.**

Part of your job is to identify a relevant person or office at the company to whom you can send your letter.

**The letter for this Project must be at least 500 words long.** It should be a miniature essay that demonstrates your very best writing skills. It should explain the issue you are discussing clearly enough for me to understand it even if I don't already know about it. If this means that you need to write more than 500 words to explain it, then you have to write more than 500 words. It's up to you to write enough to explain it clearly. But no matter how simple and clear your issue is, you have to write at least 500 words.

### **D. Interview with a local service organization member & thank you or feedback letter**

This project is different than the previous projects—in this one, you have to interview someone at a local service organization and find out about how their organization works. You can interview them over the phone or in person, but I recommend in person, because you're more likely to find somebody patient enough to have a thorough conversation with you if you put in the effort to show up. For example, you could ask them questions about what their mission is, how they go about fulfilling it, what kinds of volunteer opportunities they have, and/or how they get their funding to do their work. Please write up what you learn from the interview in the form of an essay, and also write a thank-you note to the person you interviewed, with some remarks about what you learned about their organization.

Some examples of appropriate organizations are: the Red Cross, the ASPCA, and organizations that support and run homeless shelters.

Here are some websites which may give you ideas:

<http://www.bergenvolunteers.org/default.aspx>

<http://evasvillage.org/>

**The notes for this Project must be at least 300 words long, and your thank-you letter must be at least 150 words long.** The notes should explain what you learned clearly enough for me to understand it even if I don't already know about it. They should be a miniature essay that demonstrates your very best writing skills. The thank-you note must be clear, polite, and written with your best grammar and organization. When you post your draft to your Personal Discussion Board in Discussion Task 7, please include the notes and the letter together as a single document. Please do the same when you submit Assignment 8. In Assignment 9, you can submit just the letter.

### **Grading Scale**

All the assignments will be graded on a 100-point scale, as follows:

92.5-100=A

90-92.5=A-

87.5-90=B+

82.5-87.5=B

80-82.5=B-

77.5-80=C+

72.5-77.5=C

70-72.5=C-

and so on. Please note that it is rare for me to give a grade higher than 95.

If you are right on the border, for example, 92.5, I will bump you up to A rather than down to A- as long as you have demonstrated civility in your online actions with other students.

Why grades if this is pass-fail? So that you and I both know and keep track of how well you are doing!

### **FINAL NOTE:**

This class is short: three weeks! This means you have work to do every day. But it is also fun, rewarding, and different. I strongly encourage you to be involved in an authentic manner so that you learn from this experience how to become a more civically and critically engaged citizen.