Understanding Ourselves: Aesthetics, Values, and Authority
In Modern American Culture

“Read whole books, not just snippets out of anthologies and textbooks. Provide a rich experience about the big questions in life...Literacy and a love for books is the single most important element in a first-rate education.”

-Benno Schmidt Jr., former president of Yale University

Course emphasis:

This course will use a variety of materials to explore the themes of Aesthetics, Values, and Authority in modern American culture. The course materials include four books, four films, and other assignments that we will analyze as we attempt to determine how the three themes evolve over time. Moreover, these course materials will provide the basis for our discussions of how different ideas affect our culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Course materials:

I. The Old Country, the New World

1) Shakespeare, *The Tempest.*
2) *Shakespeare in Love* (film).

II. The American Ideal: Endless Possibilities, Infinite Self-Improvement (?)

1) Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (autobiography)
2) *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (film).

III. The American Pastime and the American Character

2) *Pride of the Yankees* (film).

IV. Modern American Pop Culture: The Best of Times, the Worst of Times?

2) Jerry Springer (episode).
Classroom policy:

Because of the importance of classroom discussion in the Honors College, timely attendance is absolutely mandatory in this course. The Honors College requires a serious commitment from each student, so I expect you to keep up with your reading and to be in class every day at 9:30 a.m. without fail. In order to emphasize the importance of classroom work and discussion, your final grade will be lowered by a full grade for every two absences (and this time I really mean it).

Class work and grading:

In keeping with the Honors College emphasis on research, the bulk of your grade will be based on two, 8-10-page research papers, on any two of the four study areas. As a result, you will be able to decide when you will do the majority this semester’s written work.

The grading scale will be as follows:

1) Research paper I: 45%.
2) Research paper II: 45%.
3) Other assignments: 10%.

Grading policy:

As Honors College students, I expect that you will prepare well-written, convincing papers on the material we cover in class. You will be graded principally on 1) the content of the report, 2) how closely you stick to the topic and lead to a persuasive conclusion, and 3) the way that you support your ideas, especially with direct references to the readings. In addition, an “A” paper will also be presented in a professional fashion in accordance with the guidelines of the Modern Language Association.

Finally, in order to help you develop your writing and research skills, I will return both papers with comments and suggestions, and then allow you to resubmit a revised version. Your final grade can go up by an entire letter grade, for example from B- to A-, but it will never go down.