Please note that the reading list in this seminar proposal is more detailed that the First-Year Seminar Committee expects in proposals.

Name: Erik Craft

Department: Economics

Proposed Semester: Spring 2011 First Year Seminar (two sections)

Chair Approval Pending

Title: From the Gold Standard to Civil Rights: American Economic History and Literature

Description of Course: Students will study five important topics in American history from an economic perspective while reading an associated classic American novel. Our subjects will include: Late Nineteenth Century Monetary Policy, Immigration, Technology and Regulation, the Great Depression, and Discrimination and Civil Rights.

Briefly describe how the course will seek to achieve the five goals of the First Year Experience:

1. Expand students understanding of the world (e.g. state how the course will challenge students either to think about important questions and issues they may not have thought about before, or think about them in ways they have not thought about them).

Students in this seminar will investigate important topics in American economic history from two perspectives: economic theory and data on the one hand and American literature on the other hand. One overarching question will be what relative contributions each can make in understanding the past and the present. Is The Wizard of Oz really a story about the gold standard? Are the representations of economic outcomes for immigrants in My Antonia and The Jungle accurate? How should we interpret the causes and responses during a crisis like the Great Depression? Does all discrimination arise from misinformation or animus? Can government policy improve minorities’ outcomes? Or does it only mirror social changes that have already occurred?

2. Enhance their ability to read and think critically (e.g. a preliminary list of books and articles for the course and exercises or pedagogical methods that will be used to improve critical reading and thinking).

Introduction


Monetary Policy in the Late Nineteenth Century

L. Frank Baum, The Wizard of Oz.
Immigration
An additional reading.
Willa Cather, *My Antonia*

Modern Business, Technology, and the Emergence of Regulation

The Great Depression and the New Deal
John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*

Stereotypes, Discrimination, and Civil Rights
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man?*
3. Enhance students’ ability to communicate effectively in writing, speech, and other appropriate forms (e.g. describe the type and number of writing assignments students will complete, the opportunities students will have to develop their writing skills, the kinds of questions they will address, the ways in which they will be asked to communicate their ideas, and the type of feedback students will receive).

Students will write two five-page papers and one ten-page paper. Students will use data from the *Historical Statistics of the United States* to enlighten their understanding of the economy that is the background for the one of the novels we discuss in our seminar. I shall grade initial versions of one short paper and the long paper and provide comments for revisions. A student colleague in the class will also read the first draft of the longer paper and provide comments. Each student will meet with a writing fellow before providing his colleague and me with the first draft of this paper.

While I shall often lecture when presenting research by economic historians, I shall lead discussions when we review selections from American literature. I might assign a group of students to lead the discussion for each text.

4. Develop fundamentals of information fluency and library research. Make time on your syllabus for students to complete the required library workshop outside of class and at least one additional library-related assignment for the class. Indicate any additional ways in which students will make use of library resources.

As noted above, students will use data from the *Historical Statistics of the United States* or another source in a long paper to illuminate the economic situation pertaining to a classic work in American literature. Earlier in the course, I shall assign students the task of finding basic historical economic data from the *Historical Statistics of the United States*.

5. Provide the opportunity for students to work closely with a faculty mentor (e.g. Indicate specific efforts you will make to interact with each student, learn more about each student’s interests and abilities, and provide appropriate guidance for their intellectual growth.)

I shall meet at least once with each student as they seek to identify economic data that illuminate our understanding of the novel under study. I shall seek to be the advisor for a subset of my seminar enrollees.

6. Briefly state your background for teaching this course:

I have taught American Economic History as both low level and high level electives in the Department of Economics. I taught a variation on the above course three years ago that included more economics and only selections of some of the proposed literature.