

Syllabus version 1.1 (January 8, 2015)
NCLC 355: CONSCIOUSNESS, MEANING, AND LIFE-PURPOSE

Spring 2015

Tuesdays, 1:30 to 4:10 pm Innovation Hall, room 208

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 10:30 to Noon, and by appointment

Consciousness is one of the greatest human mysteries. It includes our capacity for awareness at multiple levels, plus it provides a way for developing self-identity and meaning. This course examines scientific evidence about states of consciousness. It provides opportunities for experiences and reflections about the personal impact of states of consciousness on how we find meaningful direction for using our strengths and talents in the world.

A special topic of focus in the course is the nature of human happiness. Included in the course are the theory and practice of mindfulness and meditation; finding meaning in dreams; and, traditions of vision-questing about personal meaning and life purpose.

LEARNING COMMUNITY OBJECTIVES:

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the essential themes and issues in the study of human consciousness, making use of insights that integrate theory, research, and practical experience.
- Practice methods for the exploration of consciousness which one finds personally meaningful – among which may be mindfulness practices, dream interpretation methods, visualization for stress management, creative expression, etc.
- Identify the central dimensions of meaningfulness, and articulate a personal sense of what makes life meaningful.
- Describe key strengths and personal assets that might have a role to play in the expression of one's statement of life purpose.
- Write clearly about your own experiences with some form of non-ordinary consciousness (e.g., a dream, a meditation experience, an experience of altered time, etc.)

COURSE RESOURCES AND TEXTS:

I have asked the Mason Bookstore to stock two titles. They will likely have new and used copies. The books are also available from online used booksellers. You will need to buy these two books:

1. Levoy, Gregg (1997). *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life*. New York: Harmony Books.
2. Pearson, Carol (1991) *Awakening the Heroes Within*. San Francisco: HarperCollins.

We will also use as primary texts two books that are available online at no charge. The first is available in its entirety as an e-book accessible as a Mason online library resource. The second is available in part through books.google.com The portion of the Baumeister book that we will study will be included in what is freely available. Nevertheless, you might want to consider getting a used copy of one or both books from an online used book service IF you find that you learn better from a hardcopy book rather than an e-book.

3. Thagard, Paul (2010) *The Brain and the Meaning of Life*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
4. Baumeister, Roy (1991). *Meanings of Life*. New York: Guilford Press.

Plus, a selection of articles and book segments available 1) at designated web pages on-line, or 2) posted on our course web site via Blackboard

THE COURSE WEB SITE

We will be using the Blackboard space allocated to us and accessible via MyMasonPortal.gmu.edu. **Please note that there are some things to do online before you show up for the first day of class on January 20.**

INSTRUCTOR BIO

Mark Thurston, Ph.D. is director of educational programs at George Mason University's Center for the Advancement of Well-Being (formerly the Center for Consciousness and Transformation). Dr. Thurston has been a part of the Center staff since its founding in January, 2009. He previously served as coordinator and advisor for Mason's undergraduate minor in Consciousness and Transformation, and he teaches required and elective courses for the minor. He has also served as an affiliate faculty member of Mason's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (S-CAR) where he has taught the course "Conflict Transformation from the Inside Out." With an academic background in psychology, Dr. Thurston worked for 35 years in adult education related to consciousness, holistic health, and personal transformation. He is author of numerous books related to personal spirituality, dream psychology, meditation, and the transformation of consciousness.

COMPETENCIES FOR THIS LEARNING COMMUNITY

Using active and collaborative learning strategies and reflective practice, we shall address several of the eight NCC competency areas. Most prominent among the learning community competencies are:

- Communication: We will depend significantly on effective classroom oral discussions to shape our evolving understanding of consciousness and its role with meaning and life purpose. Equally important to this course is effective writing. Issues of consciousness are often challenging to write about because they require a synthesis of inner, subjective experience alongside objective, critical analysis.
- Well-being: One central component to well-being is a clear, personal sense of meaning in life. In this course we will explore many theories and models about how one goes about finding meaning, and each student will have the opportunity to enhance personal well-being by making strides in this direction.
- Critical thinking: This course emphasizes the importance of comparative studies about the nature of human consciousness and methods for finding meaning in life. Students will have frequent opportunities to employ critical analysis to the materials we will be studying.

E-MAIL AND WEB-BASED COMMUNICATIONS

As faculty, we are allowed to communicate with you only via your GMU e-mail account. This is a means of protecting your privacy and academic confidentiality. If you wish to automatically forward mail from your GMU mail account to another account (e.g., cox, aol, yahoo, gmail, etc.) see the Mason Online Student Technology Guide

CLASS MEETING DAYS

We will be meeting Tuesday throughout the semester. Please recognize that classroom attendance is a priority – both because of the way in which classroom activities will constitute a very significant amount of the learning for this course, and because your final grade is largely impacted by participation points. (See below.)

GRADING -- 500 possible points

LEARNING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION 25% of course grade = 125 points

This is a large portion of how you will be graded for the course. You and your fellow students benefit from your active participation in this learning community. My intention is to create a classroom environment in which discussion feels both safe and respected.

It is very important that you make an effort to attend all scheduled classes and participate in class discussions and activities. Because the class meets only once a week, missing a class means losing out on a significant part of the overall course.

Plenary discussions, small group discussions, in-class writing, formal and informal collaboration with peers, and hands-on creative projects will all contribute to the assessment of your class participation. For the 14 class sessions, you have the opportunity to earn 7 points per session by showing up for the full time period and being fully involved. (7 points times 14 sessions = 98 points) The other 27 points for learning community participation are not tied to frequency of attendance. These points are earned based on excellence in quality of sharing during check-in times, participation in pairs or small group work, insightfulness of sharing during full class discussions of reading assignments, videos, etc.

NOTE ABOUT MISSING CLASS: Please email the instructor (mthursto@gmu.edu) in advance if you are going to miss class. If you don't attend class, then you have not earned any of the 7 possible points for that week's session. However, if your absence is due to illness or an excused absence due to unavoidable circumstances (such as inter-collegiate sports competition representing Mason), then you can negotiate with the instructor how you could make up **some**

or all of those learning community participation points. Such a make-up must be done within 13 days of the missed class. It is the student's responsibility to initiate contact with the instructor about such make-up work.

ACADEMIC ESSAYS and REFLECTIVE ESSAYS

35% of course grade = 175 points

Major elements of the New Century College curriculum and pedagogy are writing and reflective practice. This ability to deepen or strengthen our learning through critical thinking, analysis, and reflection is an important writing skill that requires practice. There are several essay-writing assignments in this course, one of which will involve peer-feedback on your first draft. (Note: the peer-feedback you provide to a fellow student is part of your "Learning Community Participation" grade.) There is considerable attention in this course to writing about experiences with consciousness, in large part because of the importance of learning how to communicate a synthesis of inner, subjective experience alongside objective, critical thinking.

IN-CLASS QUIZZES (2) 20% of course grade = 100 points

Two times during the semester there will be a short-answer, objective quiz covering the content of material recently assigned for reading, listening, or viewing. Most of the questions will be multiple-choice, but there may also be some free response questions, as well. It will NOT be open book or open notes. Such a quiz will be announced in-class the week before the quiz takes place, with a general description of what materials it will cover and the distribution of a study guide. You will bring a Scantron for each quiz.

PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

7% of the course grade – 35 points

Some of our class interaction will make use of an online platform for sharing ideas and support of each other's learning. Social support is one factor we want to explore in regard to influences that enhance meaning and well-being. With that in mind, each student will be part of a small group that will interact throughout the semester – in the classroom and online. You and the other members of your group will create and contribute to theme-based discussions. It will be a record of your experiences with consciousness exploration, clarification of values and meaning, well-being practices, and your support and encouragement of each other. Some of the 35 points for online discussions will also be linked to questions that require postings to a Blog that is shared by the entire class.

PERSONAL WELL-BEING PRACTICES

8% of the course grade – 40 points

Each student will make a commitment to a set of well-being practices of his or her own choosing. The goal is to build those practices into your life-style throughout the semester, keeping a weekly log of your experiences with these practices you have chosen. The log will be kept in the form of a weekly journal entry in a private space on Blackboard, accessible only to the student and the instructor. There will be an option at mid-semester to revise the list of well-being practices. Grading will be done at the end of the semester, but the student should keep his or her journal up-to-date, with weekly submissions of journal entries that record the completion of the chosen well-being practices, along with reflections on the effects experienced. Each "week" will start on a Monday and end on a Sunday. The first week of application will start on Monday, February 2. Each student should submit to the instructor by the end of the day on Friday, January 30, an annotated list of three or four well-being practices that will be applied in the weeks to follow.

ONE-ON-ONE DISCUSSION PERIOD WITH THE INSTRUCTOR – 25 points

5% of the course grade

Each student will have an office-hours discussion with the instructor to explore ideas and

principles from the course and how they have applicability to the student's life. There will be ample time slots made available, and students will sign-up for an appointment time. For these sessions, the instructor will include days and time periods that are not part of his regular office hours.

FINAL GRADE ASSIGNMENTS WILL FOLLOW THIS FORMULA:

A+	(490-500 points)
A	(460-489)
A-	(450-459)
B+	(440-449)
B	(410-439)
B-	(400-409)
C+	(390-399)
C	(360-389)
C-	(350-359)
D	(300-349)
F	less than 300 points
IN	see below

IMPORTANT NOTE IN REGARD TO “INCOMPLETE” GRADE. In most cases a grade of “IN” or “incomplete” is not available. Work that does not get submitted will earn no points, and that will be reflected in the point tabulation by the instructor after the last class session of the semester. **Please do not move through the semester with an expectation that you can simply “take an incomplete” if you cannot get everything done by the end of the semester.** A grade of incomplete is possible in cases of illness or other severe circumstances, but only if you have stayed in communication with the instructor and have negotiated an extension on specific assignments.

ACADEMIC POLICIES AND INFORMATION

NCC COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY

New Century College is an *intentionally* inclusive community that celebrates diversity and strives to have faculty, staff, and students who reflect the diversity of our plural society. We do not discriminate on the basis of race, class, linguistic background, religion, gender identity, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, or physical ability.

LEARNING DIFFERENCES

If you have a learning or physical difference that may affect your academic work, you will need to furnish appropriate documentation to the Disability Resource Center. If you qualify for accommodation, the DRC staff will give you a form detailing appropriate accommodations for your instructor.

In addition to providing your professor with the appropriate form, please take the initiative to discuss accommodation with him at the beginning of the semester and as needed during the term. Because of the range of learning differences, faculty members need to learn from you the most effective ways to assist you. If you have contacted the Disability Resource Center and are waiting to hear from a counselor, please tell your instructor.

POLICY FOR LATE AND MISSING ASSIGNMENTS

You are responsible for completing assignments on time. This includes assigned postings on the course web site. Essays are due on the dates listed on rubric and must be submitted electronically via Blackboard. **Late assignments CAN be marked down DAILY as much as 10% of the possible points for that assignment.** Unless arrangements are made otherwise with the instructor, no assignments will be accepted more than one week after the original due date.

FORMAT FOR ASSIGNMENTS AND QUIZZES

For the quizzes, you will need to bring a Scantron form, which is available from the campus bookstore or a vending machine in the Johnson Center.

For all written assignments in the course (i.e., essays and journaling), word processing files are to be saved as a “doc,” or “docx” or “rtf” file and submitted electronically to the instructor via Blackboard. Please do not submit in any other file format, such as “wps” files. **The file name should BEGIN WITH your own last name – for example, Smith-happiness-essay.docx**

Please use an 11- or 12-point standard font, and one-inch margins. Either single or double spacing is fine. All papers should include a title, your name and course number. Accurate spelling, clarity, and correct use of grammar and punctuation are expected and their absence can negatively affect your grade.

Each writing assignment will have specific guidelines in regard to whether or not you need to include references or citations. You are responsible for keeping a copy of all major papers you hand in, and it is suggested that you make both an electronic and a paper copy for your records.

ATTENDANCE AND IN-CLASS POLICIES

This course is a New Century College “learning community” and classroom attendance and participation is vital to your learning and your grade. You are expected to be present (both body *and* mind) at all classes and actively participate in discussion and other activities. This includes not only speaking, but also listening carefully to others’ opinions and experiences with an open mind. You do not need to adopt another’s viewpoint, but you do need to extend to them the courtesy of trying to hear what they have to say. The more you can, through your comments and in-class writing, show that you have carefully read the assigned material, the higher your participation grade will be.

Please plan to have computers, cell phones, Blackberries, iPhones, etc. turned off during class. We will be taking breaks, and you can check for messages then. You will not need to have a laptop computer in class. This is a course about consciousness, and we are going to be using each class session to explore what it means to be present to each other in the learning community.

Much of the value you will receive from this course will come from your reactions to course materials and your interactions with your fellow students. Although there will be classroom lectures and video presentations, the class will be built around **your** reading, thinking, questioning, and exploration of course materials. As already mentioned in this syllabus, your attendance and participation is extremely important to the class and your learning process. You are expected to read assigned materials on time, to think critically about the readings, and to arrive on time to class, prepared to discuss and work with the topics.

ACADEMIC HONESTY AND COLLABORATION

The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. According to the University catalog, plagiarism includes the following:

- Presenting as one's own the words, the work, or the opinions of someone else without proper acknowledgment.
- Borrowing the sequence of ideas, the arrangement of material, or the pattern of thought of someone else without proper acknowledgment.

Be particularly careful to credit work through citations or appropriate means of attribution. In addition to direct quotations, you must also provide an in-text citation and an entry in your list of works cited for paraphrases and summaries of opinions or factual information not formerly known to the writer. If you decide to use another person's ideas you must either quote the idea verbatim or completely rephrase the ideas in your own words and voice. Even when you paraphrase information, you still must cite the original source of the information. Please give credit where credit is due, even in our class discussions. For example, if you have had an interesting conversation about a text or your learning with a friend, family, or group member, then acknowledge their contribution to your learning.

Each essay writing assignment will have a specific rubric that includes directions regarding the audience you are writing for, as well as the way you will handle references to sources. If the rubric indicates that an essay is an academic paper, then use Modern Language Association (MLA) or the American Psychological Association (APA) formatting for your in-text citations and lists of works cited.

Assignments for this particular course are designed to be undertaken independently. **You may discuss your ideas with others and confer with peers or the Writing Center staff on drafts of the work** (e.g., getting feedback and critique on clarity, spelling and grammar); however, it is not appropriate to give your paper to someone else to revise. You are responsible for making certain that there is no question that the work you hand in is your own. If your name appears on an assignment, the instructor expects that you have done the work yourself. **Remember to carefully read the University's Honor Policy. It is your responsibility to understand it and abide by its provisions.**

STUDENT LEARNING RESOURCES

WRITING RESOURCES

Writing is an important component of this learning community and represents one facet of effective communication. You may wish to use the Writing Center to assist you with an assignment. Tutors at the Writing Center can help you brainstorm, structure, and revise your written work. The Writing Center has multiple locations on campus. See <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu> or call 703-993-1200.

DISABILITY RESOURCE CENTER

The staff members of the DRC assist students with learning differences or any other conditions that may impact academic performance. DRC is located in SUB I, Room 2500; 703-993-2474; <http://ods.gmu.edu/>

COUNSELING SERVICES

Professional counselors provide individual and group sessions for personal development and assistance with a range of emotional and relational issues. Counseling Services are located in SUB I, Room 3129; 703-993-2380; <http://caps.gmu.edu/> Also, the Learning Services Program (703-993-2999) offers academic skill-building workshops as well as a tutor referral service.