

# Global leaders: Defining ethical and international studies curricula at Kings Point

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## Abstract

Humanities programs at maritime-focused institutions face a variety of challenges in interpreting their missions and in connecting to the technical curriculums. At the United States Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, the Humanities Department is responsible for helping students develop communication skills, critical thinking skills, and for providing students an outlet to explore their own non-maritime intellectual development. On top of developing these skills, the Humanities Department has a responsibility to support larger institutional and industry goals. This raises the question: exactly what kinds of competencies, beyond technical ability, must students have? Or, in other words, what kinds of classes must a Humanities Department offer in an effort to train an effective and successful contemporary merchant marine officer?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions by examining and defining the non-technical skills required for young merchant marine officers. Using Kings Point as a case study, we will examine our humanities curriculum and explain the strengths and weaknesses of our approach. The paper will also explore how some members of the Department of Humanities have begun the process of planning for curricular reform by emphasizing the development of “Global Leadership” skills. We will examine how this might form the core of two course tracks, one in ethics and leadership and the other in international studies to serve the needs of young merchant marine officers.

Throughout this paper we will argue that excellence in maritime education requires certain knowledge and skills that can be developed in a focused humanities curriculum. This humanities curriculum plays an integral role in graduating students capable of becoming effective leaders within the industry.

## 1 The department

At Kings Point the terminology “Humanities Department” is somewhat misleading. Currently and historically, the department has only offered English/Literature and History on a regular basis. There are eight full-time tenured or tenure-track professors, four in History and three in English/Literature. One member of the faculty who is trained in Comparative

Literature teaches both History and Literature courses. The department expects to hire an additional Historian to replace a member of the faculty who retired in 2008. The department relies on a series of Adjunct Professors in both disciplines; some have taught at Kings Point for many years. The Director of the Ethics and Leadership program also teaches in the department. As funding permits, the department hires adjuncts to teach French and Spanish as electives.

## **2 The curriculum**

Students at Kings Point currently must pass six courses offered by Humanities Department, each of which is three credits. Of these, two are on the English/Literature side of the department and three are on the history side. All members of the department teach the final course, Topics in History and Literature. Students have limited opportunities to take elective courses either in History, English/Literature, and Foreign Languages.

The Director of the Ethics and Leadership program, working in coordination with the Humanities department, offers a required one-credit freshman course in Ethics. Upperclassmen may also enroll in the Ethics and Leadership Program (ELP), which requires limited additional coursework and “practicum” requirements involving the fulfillment of leadership responsibilities in the Regiment of Midshipmen and the completion of leadership-related internships with the maritime industry, government, or the armed forces.

There is no choice offered to students for their required humanities courses, with the exception, sometimes, of the Topics in History and Literature course. All students must take a defined sequence, English 1, English 2, The History of Seapower, Modern World History, Modern American History, and the Topics in History and Literature course. Although the courses are technically the same and faculty teaching different sections are supposed to coordinate their goals, faculty retain the freedom to tailor some of these courses to their own interests and pedagogical strengths.

The English 1 course, Composition and Literature is a survey and review of English composition and research writing, as well as an introduction to literature, textual analysis, and interpretation. Instructors focus on helping students develop basic principles and techniques of good writing (unity, organization and coherence, development and language), and to understanding research and documentation techniques. As a literature class, students are introduced to great works of literature and aided by instructors in developing an understanding and appreciation of their intellectual power, artistry, and language. In discussions of literature, students develop critical thinking and analytic skills through textual/literary interpretation in the study of great writing, both expository and literary. Each instructor is free to interpret the term “great works of literature” in their own ways. In the past, instructors have focused on Ancient Greek epic poetry, Shakespeare, Nineteenth Century British authors, or popular and contemporary writers.

The English 2 course, Literature and Composition covers similar ground, though where English 1 is primarily a writing class with some literary analysis, this course is mostly a literature class with some work on composition. Instructors attempt to introduce students to techniques of close reading and they draw readings from a variety of literary genres (fiction, poetry, drama) and from a diversity of cultural and historical contexts. Instructors focus on writing about literature, focusing on how students respond to works of literature and how their responses change during subsequent readings. Here again instructors are free to choose material they believe best suits the goal of the class and/or that students will find appealing. Faculty here too mine often taught and generally accessible authors, but branch out into genres that students are unlikely to have previously encountered. Some faculty have also brought some film study into this class, examining differences and similarities in the concept of authorship in non-textual media.

The History of Seapower course is dedicated to introducing students to the history of the industry and tradition they have opted to join. Instructors focus on theoretical approaches to understanding mercantile and naval power and to the connections between the maritime history and the larger dynamics of U.S. history. Students learn about the role of mariners in war and how maritime technology impacted U.S. power. Students get an introduction to the central features of historical vessels and the lives of seamen in previous eras. The course is perhaps the most focused of all courses in the department because instructors do not have as much latitude in selecting material or in developing arguments. In part because the course is connected to a Department of the Navy requirement for Kings Point students, instructors do not have the latitude to extensively consider seapower on a global (or at least non-western) scale, or to focus on pre-Colonial era issues.

The Modern World History course focuses on exploring global political, economic, and intellectual interactions. Instructors are free to interpret the concept of “Modern” in their own way. Thus, some instructors begin the course as early as the Enlightenment and others start at the beginning of the twentieth century. Themes and topics considered include, but are not limited to, the age of revolution, the enlightenment, industrialization, the new imperialism, the rise of fascism, the rise of communism, the evolution of liberal democracy, the emergence of nationalism, the breakdown of colonial systems, the evolution of neocolonialism, the persistence of underdevelopment, the meanings of globalization, the causes and effects of international migration, and the repeated scourge of genocide, World War I, the international great depression, World War II, the Cold War, and the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Instructors discuss historical change and interactions between a series of regions (Western Europe, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent, South East Asia, East Asia, and Latin America), though given the overall structure of the course, instructors usually opt to focus on the connections between only two or three of these areas.

The US since 1945 course, also referred to as Modern American History traces the evolution of society within the United States from the end of the Second World War to the present. During the semester, students examine a series of key cultural and social changes that occurred during this period and, when appropriate, they assess the political, economic, demographic, ideological, and international contexts for those changes. Themes and topics include, but are not limited to, the impact of the Cold War on society and politics, the evolution of the media and consumer culture, the struggles for racial equality and movements to promote rights for other marginalized groups (Women, Native Americans, Homosexuals, Latinos, and the Poor), urbanization and migration, and conflicts over the role of the state. Instructors may focus on the turmoil associated with the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the more recent threats of terrorism. Over the course of the semester, students assess the relative successes and failures of national leaders, both inside and outside of government, in promoting the general welfare of the American people.

Topics in History and Literature is a track encompassing courses on a variety of topics. Historically, the goal has been to offer an advanced, or perhaps mid-level, class that examines the social, economic, political structures, and religious and cultural foundations of non-Western societies. Students in the classes are supposed to gain perspectives on contemporary developments non-Western areas and the distinct historical evolution of other cultures. Because of the expertise of the faculty, the department has traditionally offered courses in Latin American and East Asian history. Recently, the department has moved away from the idea that a Topics in History and Literature class must exclusively be about non-Western cultures. In the past few years faculty have taught classes in areas of expertise, these have included Shakespeare, espionage novels, maritime archeology, and philosophy through film. These courses are taught less frequently than the Latin America and East Asia ones. Students are not guaranteed that they will have a choice in what Topics course they take, but in practice the department attempts to give students an opportunity to choose between two options on a first-come first-served basis.

All freshmen are required to take a one credit course in ethics titled Ethics Primer. This class is taught by the Director of Ethics and Character Development and by adjuncts, although currently the Humanities department head also teaches one section per semester. The course provides an introduction to individual ethical reasoning. The course may be said to form a background for Naval Science 402, Naval Leadership and Ethics, which is a two-credit class containing more of theory and application to leadership roles. As upperclassmen, midshipmen are also given the option of enrolling in the Ethics and Leadership Program (ELP). Midshipmen in this program are required to fulfill leadership positions in the Regiment of Midshipmen, to assist in the training of new midshipmen during summer indoctrination, and/or to seek out internships that have a strong leadership component. On the academic side, they must maintain a 2.5 QPA, and take approved program courses amounting to six

credits. Most midshipmen enrolled in the program take three one-credit seminars in their sophomore and junior years and an approved elective or Topics class in the senior year. The seminars offered thus far include Business Ethics, The Holocaust, Ethical Issues in Shipping, and the Profession of Arms in the Eighteenth Century. These are taken as overload courses, sometimes after the normal academic day. ELP-approved three-credit classes include Ethics and Literature, The Literature of the Sea, Public Speaking, and War and the Military Profession. Students may also arrange with individual professors and the Director of Ethics to do independent studies that fulfill some of the required credits. Thirty graduates of the class of 2008 received certificates and a note on their transcripts for completing all requirements for the ELP.

All students have the opportunity to take a number of electives. All departments offer electives in the same class period and students can choose between Humanities courses or offerings in Math and Science or the professional departments (Engineering and Maritime Transportation). Engineering students generally must take “required electives” in Engineering, meaning they may never have the opportunity to take elective classes in Humanities. Maritime Engineering students must take electives in their major department, but usually have the option to take at least two Humanities electives. Competition for Humanities is difficult because some of the Maritime Engineering courses, like Fast Boat Rescue for example, can lead to certifications that can improve job opportunities. Usually the department offers two to four electives each academic year. Recently the department has offered electives in Spanish, French, Modern Poetry, and American Government.

### **3 Strengths and weaknesses of the current approach**

The great strength of the curriculum is that all students graduate only after being introduced to a basic series of ideas that students intending to function at a basic level in American society should know. Students have the opportunity to improve writing skills and textual analysis skills. They learn about basic contours of maritime, global, and national histories and develop their historical interpretive skills. In the Topics course, students have the opportunity to see what advanced classes are like in more traditional colleges and universities and, hopefully, have the opportunity to hone some of their intellectual skills through a deep analysis of a relatively small and new issues.

The curriculum has a series of weaknesses. These include the lack of student directed learning, lack of depth in offerings, and a limited or somewhat tenuous connection to larger institutional or professional goals.

**Lack of Student Direction:** One of the Kings Point mottos is that our students get to “Chart Their Own Course,” yet such is not the case in the Humanities curriculum. Students get very little, or no choice in their course options. Students who might find African history interesting, or hope to learn about the role of women, ethnic groups, or certain authors have no opportunity

to pursue these interests. Instead students must take classes that they may, or may not, find engaging.

**Lack of Depth:** Five of the six classes might be considered introduction level surveys. The History of Seapower course, though focusing on a fairly narrow theme is taught to freshman students as a broad survey. The second English/Literature class, does build upon the first class, but is also essentially a survey as well. Only the Topics course makes any pretense to being an upper level course. However, because students often have little or no background in the subject matter the courses are often taught as surveys. Kings Point students have little opportunity to develop expertise, pursue independent intellectual questions, or to learn about central debates with academic fields. The problem here is that students do not have the opportunity to grapple with complexity. In survey courses questions have answers; in upper-level courses students usually are able to discover the multifaceted nature of societal development. They can become, in short, more sophisticated thinkers.

**Lack of Connection to Institutional and Professional Goals:** The department operates in a unique space as both a supporter of institutional maritime goals and as the only department where students get what might be considered their liberal arts education. No other department has a responsibility for promoting abstract and intellectual thought. At the same time, the department must recognize that our students are unique and that we are preparing them for careers in the maritime industry. As currently constructed, the curriculum is not effective in ensuring that graduates are educated in a broad senses as well as they are prepared to meet the technical demands of their professions.

## **4 Curricular reform**

Two factors make the time ripe for curricular reform and new thinking about how to improve the Humanities curriculum. First, the Academic Dean has placed a premium on outcomes assessment processes. This process asks instructors to evaluate their courses and to determine how they are meeting their goals and what kinds of changes might help them meet goals in the future. This paper, and indeed faculty understandings of the larger curriculum suggest that a larger outcomes assessment curricular process is necessary.

Secondly, and as importantly, the institution has begun a baselining process; determining exactly what courses are necessary to fulfill Congressional, Accreditation, Coast Guard, and STCW requirements. Because of this process, professional departments will be forced to review, restructure, and re-sequence their courses. It only makes sense that the Humanities Department use this opportunity to review, restructure, and resequence its courses as well. It is worth noting that the baselining process should have little impact on the overall size of the Humanities Department. The institution's accreditation body, the Middle States Association of Colleges and Universities requires that all schools, to offer a Bachelor Degree, must have general education courses. These courses should,

to Middle States, have a connection to overall degree programs and major fields of study.

## **5 The ethical goal**

As an antidote to some of the acknowledged weaknesses noted above, the authors of this paper suggest developing a “track” of humanities courses in ethics and leadership. One way to think about satisfying Humanities Department mandates is by understanding what graduates will be doing with their Kings Point graduation. Our students are being trained to serve as officers on merchant vessels. All must apply for a reserve commission in a branch of the United States Armed Forces, and if offered that commission accept it. Secondly, our students can fulfill their graduation commitments through service as an active duty officer in the armed forces.

As officers, our students will have technical responsibilities, but also must be effective leaders capable of motivating individuals. Through the Regimental Program, which includes the Honor system and instruction in Academy Core Values, Kings Point rightly expends considerable efforts to ensure that graduates are at least competent leaders and that they are committed to high ethical standards in their lives and work. These efforts support the Academy mission of producing “officers and leaders of honor and integrity” to serve in the armed forces and merchant marine. The ethical and leadership challenges placed on Kings Point graduates have always been high, given the nature of the work that they do in the service of vital national strategic and economic interests.

These demands have increased over the past several years as Kings Point graduates have faced a world characterized by war and terrorism, environmental change, and a global economy that combines plenty and scarcity in a way that seems almost inevitably destabilizing. The individuals who will meet these challenges must not only be well-trained or imbued with orderly and honorable habits of behavior. They must be thoughtful people who have been prepared to handle complex and even conflicting demands and obligations. This is not just a matter of knowledge, but of imagination and empathy, which the Humanities, that are in effect a vicarious but conscientious engagement with the lives of others, can (properly taught) be able to cultivate. The ideal of the officer and leader has always been that he or she is a learned person in addition to having professional competence or expertise, and it would seem that this need is even greater in our own time.

## **6 The international studies goal**

A second way to think serving students needs is to think about the kinds of environments they will be working in. The maritime industry is, by definition, highly globalized and Kings Point students of every major will be working with professionals of many different nations. Our students taking the military option

certainly will be entering an internationalized profession. As an antidote to some of the acknowledged weaknesses noted above, the authors of this paper also suggest a “track” of humanities courses in international studies.

Kings Point does have some internationally focused classes in the Maritime Transportation department, including International Business. In their law classes and economics classes, students are introduced to international trade concepts that are important in helping them navigate foreign commercial practice. These courses, in addition to the Modern World and Topics course come from a recognition, we hope to build upon, that the maritime industry is grounded in international commerce.

Kings Point must do a better job of making our students citizens of the world. We are fortunate that our students serve as cadets aboard merchant vessels for a full academic year and, collectively, visit every major international port as well as dozens of minor ones. These students return to campus with fantastic experiences that fuel their interest to know more about foreign cultures. Many students choose the maritime industry in large part because of their interest in seeing the world and in connecting with foreign cultures. Unfortunately, because many students have little opportunity to travel beyond port areas or beyond tourist zones, some preconceived notions are often reinforced. In addition, while many Kings Point students do come from multicultural backgrounds, we also pull a disproportionate share of our students from areas without much ethnic or racial diversity. As a result, students sometime have difficulty understanding how others understand the world. This problem must be rectified in order to best serve the students and the industry.

Secondly, the need for an International Studies track comes from a recognition that it would also help students understand and approach the major problems of the world today. Just as with the Ethical Goal, Kings Point graduates have faced a world characterized by war and terrorism, inequality and environmental degradation. To approach these problems effectively requires a grounding in their complex and transnational logic.

## **7 Minors vs. tracks**

A track of courses, as defined here, would mean that all six of the humanities courses would focus on one of the two areas suggested above. Courses would not all need to be completely dedicated to either Ethics and Leadership or International Studies, but these issues would be addressed within them. Ideally, students would have the opportunity to choose between the two tracks early in their Academy careers.

A second option, not mutually exclusive with the track idea, is to use the tracks as a base for a minor program of study that would include additional coursework. In the Ethics and Leadership area the ELP program could serve as a nucleus for this minor. In the International Studies area the minor could build



upon the Modern World course and currently offered Topics classes in East Asian or Latin American History.

## **8 Conclusion**

The authors believe that our proposal would go a long way towards alleviating all three of the weaknesses of lack of student direction, lack of depth, and insufficient connection to institutional goals. Students would be given greater discretion in pursuing their own education. They would have the opportunity to pursue these studies in a more scholarly and thoughtful fashion. Finally, the Humanities department would be able to demonstrate the importance of a humanities education for future officers and international mariners. Humanities instructors at Kings Point have long felt that the general educations of their students were being neglected in favor of the technical aspects of the curriculum. Others, Deck and Engineering faculty especially, have questioned the relevance of the Humanities in the training of maritime officers. Both sides have had a point. We believe that our proposal addresses both concerns, and the needs of the institution and industry, in a way that has great promise for Kings Point and the maritime profession.