Requirements for an A&S Social Justice Course

1. SJ courses should introduce students to one or more social justice concerns and help them to develop critical & analytical tools to recognize, understand, & respond to institutional and structural injustices found in economic, political, cultural, or ecclesial systems.

To preface and foreground my explanation of how and why this course fulfills the social justice requirement, I would like to provide the committee with a brief summary of each of the five books that constitute the required reading for this class. I chose the following texts because they all offer first-person, coming of age narratives that I believe our students can easily identify with in some ways while being challenged in others. The texts are as follows:

*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison: The narrator, a college-educated African-American protagonist who identifies himself only as an “Invisible Man,” journeys from the South to the North in the 1930s-1940s. Along this journey, he faces the harsh realities of racism, both in its overt, violent forms, and in its more subtle, indirect practices. He must come to terms with the fact that his blackness is, in the mid-century United States, understood as a sign of inferiority (social, intellectual, political, etc.), as an invitation to embody stereotypes (such as the “darkie,” the “threatening, violent black man,” etc.), or as a commodity (i.e. being asked to speak on behalf of all black people).

*The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath: Esther Greenwood, the white, middle-class college-age narrator of this novel, lives in the 1950s U.S. and struggles against the limited and often contradictory roles that are offered as possibilities to young women such as herself. She feels as though these roles do not present her with the opportunity to be a whole, complex person; rather, she is asked to choose between the path of the sacrificing housewife/mother or that of single, lonely career woman. As a result of her confusion over her place in the world, she suffers a mental breakdown and spends a good portion of the novel in a mental institution, where she slowly learns how to reintegrate into society in a way that is healthy for her, as well as full of possibility as a female.

*Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk: A novel about masculinity, manhood, and violence, *Fight Club* presents readers with a narrator who, like Esther, struggles with mental health issues; his issues, however, stem from his belief that the corporate world in which he lives emasculates him as well as disconnects him from feeling anything at all, both emotionally and physically. Like *Invisible Man*, *Fight Club* features an unnamed narrator whose alter ego, Tyler Durden, encourages him to explore what it means to act, feel and live in a highly commodified, late 20th-century United States.
**Fun Home by Alison Bechel:** Bechdel, a graphic novelist, presents readers with the story of both her and her father’s life—lives that intersect not only because of the obvious familial tie they share, but also because of the hidden secret they have in common: their homosexuality. As Alison grows into young adulthood, she comes to understand both her own sexual identity as a lesbian and her father’s long-suppressed identity as a gay man who married, had children, and tried to live a conventional life in his small home town. *Fun Home* shares similarities with all the previous novels, insofar as it addresses the demands of social standards and mores; the feeling of social invisibility; and the attempt to balance one’s individual needs with the needs of the larger community.

**The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie:** Our fifth protagonist, a high school age boy named Junior who hails from the Wellpinit Indian Reservation, struggles to find his place in the world—especially once he transfer to the all-white Reardan High School in order to get a better education than the one offered on the reservation. Junior must forge his identity not only in the face of racism (like Invisible Man) but also in the face of extreme poverty, of which he is greatly ashamed. Junior’s coming of age thus entails a journey toward accepting the parts of himself that are deemed “ugly” by mainstream society and by attempting to integrate both the white world in which he spends his days and the Indian world in which he has been raised.

As the summaries of these texts suggest, the social justice concerns addressed in this course are numerous. They include, but are not limited to, the following: the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow laws; internalized racism and homophobia; gender inequality in the workplace and in the home, both in the past (specifically, the 1930s-1950s) and the present; the social construction of masculinity; and the psychological and material effects of poverty.

The critical and analytical tools we employ to understand these topics are *discussion* and *synthesis*. Specifically, I consistently ask students to consider how these social justice issues manifest themselves in the characters’ lives, posing questions such as the following: How do Jim Crow laws impact the formation of the Invisible Man’s identity? How do the social expectations vis-à-vis white women and sexuality in the 1950s negatively affect Esther’s sense of self? What role does commodification play in forming the narrator’s identity in *Fight Club*? How and where do we see evidence of internalized homophobia in *Fun Home*? And what is the relationship between poverty and racial identity in *The Absolutely True Diary*? In addition to questions such as these, I also ask student to reflect upon the relationships or connections between characters—for example, how one character’s experience of social invisibility due to his race is similar to another character’s experience of social invisibility due to her gender. Finally, I ask students to think about how one type of oppression (e.g., racism) can manifest itself in different ways based on different racial identities (i.e. racism against African Americans does not necessarily take the same form as racism against Native Americans).

2. **The content of SJ courses should focus on the experience of difference, either in our own contemporary culture or in global cultures of the present or past, particularly those differences (like race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation) that have served as a basis for discrimination, oppression, or other forms of injustice.**
Since its inception, this course has focused on the topic of identity as a way to get students to think about how different aspects of our identity—namely, gender (*The Bell Jar, Fight Club, Fun Home*), race (*Invisible Man, Incredibly True Diary*), socioeconomic class (*Invisible Man, The Bell Jar, Incredibly True Diary*), sexuality (all texts, especially *Fun Home*) and region (*Invisible Man, Incredibly True Diary*)—profoundly shape our experience with, and access to, opportunity, justice, and privilege. Students learn that these differences have served as a basis for injustice in two concrete ways. First, simply by reading the books, they are exposed to narratives in which social injustice is a major theme. As my summaries suggest, the forms of social injustice they read about vary widely: to be sure, the experience of being a black man in the era of Jim Crow is radically different from the experience of being a white man in corporate America, and I am careful to point out the way that injustice varies by degrees. At the same time, all of the texts introduce students to oppression in its various forms, as well as the extremely harmful impact of oppression on the process of identity formation.

Of course, the experience of reading about social justice in and of itself does not guarantee that the student will learn about social justice, much less truly understand it. Thus, there must be a second way in which students process the social justice issues presented in the texts, and that is through discussion—discussion that privileges the topic of equality and inequality. As I hope my response to #1 above made clear, my class does exactly this: it requires students to see these texts not only from a literary perspective (which is of course extremely important) but also from a “real-life” perspective, one that asks them to think about how the pressing social issues and injustices raised in the texts still exist today.

3. **The focus of SJ courses should be on contemporary social justice issues and should identify practices & structures that discriminate against, marginalize, or oppress certain groups, as well as those that violate human rights, impede the full development of persons or communities, and/or frustrate the authentic and equal participation of any group in economic, political, cultural or ecclesial structures.**

The above description is, in essence, one of the major outcomes of my course. Specifically, I am interested in exposing students to how individuals are propelled toward, or prevented from, developing themselves as whole people. The question that the narrator of *Invisible Man* poses at the end of the novel—“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”—is in many ways the defining question of my course: it asks students to think about how they participate in the perpetuation of injustice; how they themselves experience injustice; and what can be done to prevent injustice in the present and future. Our discussion of these issues vis-à-vis each individual text is grounded in a background/historical lecture that I provide for each of the books. That is, I stress to the students that a fuller understanding of the novels cannot occur with an understanding of the historical, cultural, and political forces that are at work in each of the character’s lives. While some novels require much more contextualization than others (e.g., the background lectures on *Invisible Man* and *The Bell Jar* are far more detailed because these two novels take place at least over a half a century ago, rather than the recent past of the last three books on the list), all of the novels demand that students grasp at least a rudimentary knowledge of how race, class,
gender, and sexuality have been social constructed and yet how, despite their social
construction, they have had material consequences for both fictional and real people.

4. SJ courses should help students grasp the causes, consequences and cures of various
forms of social injustice and help students develop habits of critical thinking and
personal reflection on social justice issues. Social justice courses may also include the
presentation of alternatives that enable us to imagine and work for justice.

In terms of how the course “will help students grasp the causes, consequences and cures of
injustice,” I feel as though my previous descriptions of course content answer this question.
At the very least, what I’ve described herein suggests how students grasp the causes and
consequences of social injustice. What remains to be explained is how they grasp the cures
of it. Of course, this is the hardest part of the question, if not the hardest part of teaching a
social justice class: coming up with solutions. And yet, this is what we do in my course—
again, primarily through asking questions about the characters’ lives post-novel. That is, I
ask students to consider what the characters’ lives might look like well after the actual end of
the text—what choices the characters might have made, whether those were the right choices,
and what a “right choice” actually looks like. So, for example, when we finish *Invisible
Man*—which ends with the suggestion that the narrator will emerge from the underground
apartment in which he is living and once again engage with society and its ills—we are left
with the question: is the narrator’s choice thus far—the choice to remove himself from
society—the right one? Is it ethical? Is it practical? What *should* he do, given the enormous
forces of racism that he has faced in the course of his short life? What about those of us who
continue to face those forces—what *should* we do? Finally, what about those of us who are
privileged enough that we have never had to face those forces—what *should* we do? I never
provide students with answers, because I believe that they must seek those answers
themselves, but I do believe that in creating a space to ask these questions, I have set them on
a path that can potentially lead them to creating social change themselves.

Finally, I conclude this course with a take-home final exam that asks them to reflect
specifically on the issues related to identity. Here is the question to which they must respond:

> In my description of this course on the syllabus, I noted that we would “explore a
range of modern and contemporary texts that center on the search of identity: the
quest to understand who we are, who we have been and could be, and what forces –
familial, political, cultural, social, historical – shape or even control the formation of
our identity.” Based on what you’ve learned from reading these texts, which of these
aforementioned forces do you think shapes us most profoundly?

By concluding with this question, I invite students not only to reflect on the entire course but
also to consider how the formation of self is *always* influenced by forces beyond ourselves,
*always* at once individual and communal, autonomous and conditional, active and passive—
and thus is *always* a matter of justice and injustice alike.