To Prospective Teachers of the Democracy Course:

Let me thank you in advance for joining us in this grand experiment in undergraduate education. The new general education program promises to revolutionize our University’s approach to liberal arts learning. In line with the objectives of the new program, we have developed the “Democracy in Troubled Times” course to focus on stimulating student participation through active learning, developing critical thinking skills, and achieving a commitment to social justice through the teaching of core values.

The course is designed touch down on critical moments in the history of democracy, when something about the nature of democracy has been revealed, or when something taken for granted about democracy has been called into question. The American Civil War would be an example of such a moment. Consider the famous appraisal offered by Lincoln at Gettysburg: “Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” The successive challenges put to democratic government and the democracy way of life in the Twentieth Century by European fascism, Soviet and Chinese communism, and in the Twenty-First Century by Islamic fundamentalism, suggest that the testing is by no means over. We want our students to appreciate the trials that democracy has gone through and the trials that await democracy, not simply in America or in the Western World, but across the globe.

To supply guidance and to give depth to our course, we have chosen to employ both a textbook and a core text. The textbook, Bernard Crick’s A Very Brief Introduction to Democracy, provides a comprehensive, historical overview of democracy as a social and political movement. It is inexpensive, short, and relatively well written. We can expect that it will be read and understood. The core text, Tocqueville’s Democracy in American, on the other hand, is one of the major works of political philosophy. It is rather long, intricately reasoned, and extraordinarily influential work of genius. We do not expect nor require that our students read Democracy in America extensively or master its argument. We can only hope to introduce our students to the joys of reading Tocqueville by dipping here and there into the text for illumination and illustration.

Look to the syllabus for the course and you will see that we encourage student-centered learning. We insist that our students prepare for each class session. We ask that they do independent Internet research and circulate the result, view and respond to assigned video clips, read and summarize selected online sources or textbook material, and come equipped to share their discoveries and reflections with their classmates. Your task as an instructor will be that of a discussion moderator and activities coordinator, not primarily that of a lecturer.

Look again the syllabus and you will note an emphasis on teaching process over content. For example, asking students to scour the web for information and to share it with each other is a familiar process for a generation that has grown up using Facebook, one that we can appropriate and put to scholarly use by teaching them how to evaluate web content for authority and accuracy. This is the kind of learning that we can perfect and transfer to other courses. Asking our students to compose position papers builds the kind of skills that contribute to lifelong learning. In teaching them to identify a problem, place it in
historical context, consider alternative solutions, weigh those solutions in light of relevant criteria, and then choose among them bringing to bear significant values, we are providing instruction in critical thinking and responsible decision-making.

To help you with this task, we are in the process of developing a series of instructional modules which provide a contextual briefing, pose essential questions, suggest discussion questions, and provide a wealth of student activities from among which to choose.

We find ourselves in this boat together. We do not sail forth believing that the voyage will pass smoothly without worrisome incident. We do believe, however, that Saint Leo University, though far flung in its operations, functions as one academic institution and that we are as ready to assist as we are prepared to receive advice and assistance from all who choose to become engaged in this exciting undertaking. Let us build community!

Sincerely,

Hudson Reynolds, Ph.D., and Marco Rimanelli, Ph.D.