“Books that speak like God speak with too much authority to entertain us. Those that speak like good men hold us by their human charm; we grow by finding ourselves in them. They teach us to know ourselves better by recognizing ourselves in others.”

Thomas Merton

*Thoughts in Solitude*

*Columbia College 1938 MA 1939*
COURSE GOALS AND METHODOLOGY

*Leadership through Fiction* uses narrative fiction: novels, film scripts and visual dramas (film and television), complimented by selections of non-fiction, as the foundation of the course. Each narrative will serve as a lens to better understand and develop your leadership skills. Insights from the readings, viewing assignments, class discussions and weekly exercises will be captured in your Learning Journal, a unique, personal means of reflecting on your development as a leader. You will also build your insights into a leadership message about what you stand for as a leader, based on what is important to you as an individual and what you will offer as a leader to those who choose to follow you. This process, a critical step in many of the executive education programs at CBS is called a Leadership Credo. Your goal will be to use the insights of LTF to better understand and identify to others who you are as a leader. The course will offer you numerous opportunities to learn both from world-renowned novels and films, but also from your colleagues in class. This course is structured to help you clarify the leadership style that is authentic to you, comfortable for you, natural to your personality and aligned with your core beliefs.

This course will develop your effectiveness at leadership, both in the workplace and your personal life. As a business leader, your vision and goals will continually intersext with challenge and conflict, presenting you with difficult decisions, forcing you to react in hazy, unclear and complicated environments. We call this hazy, unclear, complicated environment the *white-water world*. This was the metaphorical description of CBS Professor Ralph Biggadike, a term aimed at capturing the challenge in leadership where access to data and training in specific functional excellence will be necessary, but not sufficient to achieve success; where leadership requires extracting productive decisions from team- members, while managing ones’ self to maximize opportunities and avoid risks in periods of undetermined context and increasing pressure. In the *white-water world* the rapids are a fast-paced, overwhelming and murky river where submerged rocks wait, as you attempt to navigate successfully past the danger. Moving forward in your careers, you will inevitably face situations where you will operate in a *white-water world*, where success depends on guiding yourself and your organizations through complex and, unclear, challenges. In these situations, the wrong choices will have a serious impact on your future, as well as the future of your team: direct reports, colleagues, senior leaders and organization. In *Leadership through Fiction*, your primary instrument for preparing to manage the unpredictable and dangerous challenges in your future will be through reading and reflecting on narrative fiction, drawing out insights and lessons based on the struggles of the fictional characters, using the combined insights and experience of your classmates, combined with exercises in skill-development to prepare you for successful leadership when faced with the unpredictable.

*Leadership through Fiction* will require you to analyze and evaluate the choices of the characters that operate in each of the assigned narratives, with the intent of identifying precise moments where the characters make successful choices, as well as identify alternatives to questionable decisions, ineffective behavior and negative results. You will work to articulate what could have contributed to the characters achieving their long-term strategic goals...what were they doing right? What could they have done more effectively under pressure? What was available to them that they didn’t choose or understand how to access? Most importantly, what can you as a leader do when faced with comparable challenges in the future?
The course is founded on the belief that a combination of empathy, critical analysis and creative introspection, complimented by class experience leveraged through discussion, offers us a chance to experience the fictional narratives in a cognitive, emotional and visceral way, learning from the journey of each character, and applying that learning in our own journey in order to benefit from the combined class insights and avoid costly mistakes, preparing ourselves to achieve our goals.

The teaching methodology will require you to prepare for each class by thoughtfully completing the assigned readings and viewing the required films, responding to short (roughly 150 word) focus questions via CANVAS. In class, we will discuss the narratives, focusing on a core theme or themes and linking these themes with skill development relevant to leadership in a business environment.

All the narratives assigned will be works written originally in English. The novels will range from roughly 200 to 350 pages in length. The novels have been selected for their “readability” and, while they require a commitment in time and concentration, our expectation is that you will find the process insightful, energizing and very often, entertaining. Each work will be unique in prose style, narrative structure, and thematic intent.

The novels are not explicitly placed in traditional business environments, although the characters are very often involved in pursuing goals related to their given professions. All of the assigned texts include dramatic conflict, presenting the reader with characters yearning for specific achievements or pursuing goals they perceive as critical to their happiness, fulfillment and professional success. The narratives, whether written or visual, often involve characters making mistakes. The world of each of these stories is often not pretty or perfect, but rather flawed, dangerous, confusing...and yet, at times, uplifting, aspirational and spiritual. The narratives were selected to represent questions and challenges of actual life that many of us have and will face.

In the narratives chosen for this course, many of the characters make difficult decisions under pressure. It is exactly in this territory of pressured decision-making that career-making and career-ending events will occur. Consider each narrative as a lens to help you sharpen your view of yourself as a leader: what are your strengths and what are the areas in need of further development?

**COURSE FORMAT**

You will be asked to participate actively in class discussions and exercises. I expect each student to contribute ideas in our search for clarity on what the narratives can teach us. Class-time will be a balance of individual reflection, group discussion and interactive work on applicable leadership skills.

For example: one assignment will be Budd Schulberg’s classic novel, published in 1941, about Hollywood, titled *What Makes Sammy Run?* This novel follows an ambitious young man, Sammy Glick, from New York’s Lower East Side. Through the eyes of a colleague, first in the newspaper business and then as a screenwriter and producer of feature films, we will follow Sammy as he climbs the professional ladder. Sammy will make a number of decisions, as do the other characters in the novel. We will discuss these decisions, while focusing on the theme of *ambition*, working to
gain clarity on how we will define and pursue ambition in our own professions, as well as the impact of ambition on our personal lives.

After discussing the novel, we will build on our insights from the reading by practicing the skill of peer-to-peer coaching; a form of executive coaching, this is an opportunity available to help one develop one’s skill regarding self-knowledge and clarity of action; it is also a skill one can offer or provide to help others gain similar knowledge and perspective on taking action. In other words, the traditional model of a professional coach working with an executive can be adjusted to fit situations where peers coach each other, serving to help the coachee work his and her way to key solutions.

**COURSE NORMS AND ASSIGNMENTS**

This course has originally run in 2013 and 2014 in twelve-week and ten-week (summer) formats. In 2015, the course will be delivered in a new adjusted block-week format.

**Focus Questions:** This is a course that requires the participation of each student in class discussion, as well as individual and group exercises. You are expected to complete the weekly reading and respond to each focus question(s) via email. This will be 30% of the final grade. You will receive a rating of +2, +1 or 0 based on your weekly response to the focus question. My T.A. will provide you with the guidelines on submitting the answers to the focus questions. (The deadlines will be announced in advance.) I don’t expect you to achieve a pre-ordained answer, but rather to read the work with curiosity and search for interesting ideas as you answer the questions; with a focus on understanding the work and preparing for the week’s classes. This course is about gaining the ability to operate effectively when the answers are not black or white, thus your responses to the focus questions should be honest attempts to think introspectively, as well as articulate your thoughts on the subject with clarity and search for relevant insights. A +1 grade means you have successfully accomplished the task and have offered an answer that is clear, interesting and relevant. A +2 will show a particularly unique, insightful or elegant answer. (We don’t expect you to reach for +2, but answer with succinct introspective honesty; a +1 means task accomplished.) A 0 will be the result of failing to answer the question or answering in such a banal manner that your effort is suspect. If you put thought into the answers and work with honest reflection, curiosity and integrity, you will do well at this part of the LTF process.

**Class Participation & Attendance:** You are also expected to contribute in class and support the overall learning of yourself and your classmates through positive, encouraging and honest class participation...and regular attendance. This will constitute 40% of your final grade. Again, this is not about achieving the perfect, approved response, but rather contributing with the class on reflection and searching for insights that will help you down the road. Your success at class participation will be positively impacted by thoughtfully completing the required readings. Similar with the prompt assignments, if you bring a curious, engaged attitude to class, your contribution to your learning and the overall learning of the class will strong and noticeable over the length of the course. Disengagement and disinterest doesn’t work in this class. There is no space for “free riders”. However, whether you consider yourself an extrovert or an introvert, you will find opportunities to enjoy and learn in the LTF class process. The class will encourage extroverts to work at developing their reflective side; and the class will encourage introverts to build skill in communicating their beliefs to others. Both groups succeed in this course if they bring honesty, curiosity and enthusiasm to each class session.
**Learning Journal:** We will ask you to keep a journal through the ten weeks of the course. The expectation is that you will work on this journal during class, in particular on questions that will be provided during class time; also you will be encouraged to capture other related reflections outside of class in the journal. Your journal will be a unique and personal instrument for your individual leadership development. With the assistance of my T.A., we will review these journals mid-way through the course, giving you the +3 +2 +1 0 rating on your efforts at capturing the learning. (Again, trust your instincts and engage with creating a journal that will be an on-going resource for you post-program; more words on the page are not the ideal; in fact, distilling the learning into useful notes, phrases, concepts and action-steps that relate to your development is the goal.) At the end of the course, we will review the journals one final time. We will not scour your journal to critique the ideas presented, but rather review each journal to gain a sense of your effort and commitment to make each session applicable to your own leadership development.)

Reflection is critical because this is the time where you work within your own individual experience to take the learning from the class and abstract, summarize and translate the ideas into a distilled, personalized format that is useful to you going forward. You will be encouraged to capture the ideas in whatever way is relevant and useful for you. We are all unique individuals and the journal should reflect your specific approach to engaging with the ideas of the course and capturing the learning. The Learning Journal will be the final 30% of your grade. You will be provided with guidelines to create an action-plan on how you will go forward with the insights from the course.

**Final Grade:** Focus Questions: 30%; Class Participation/Attendance: 40%; Learning Journal: 30%

**COURSE OVERVIEW**

The following is the basic structure of the course through 12 sessions as previously offered. These 12 sessions will be combined and adapted to fit the five-day block-week format offered in Spring 2015. Certain novels will be replaced by films to offer students a chance to pick up the core lessons of the narratives in an abbreviated time-frame. The films will be complimented by selected readings.

**Session #1**
Non-Fiction Narrative (read in full)
Session Title: Your Freedom
Theme: Player versus Victim
Required Reading: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*
Exercise: “Writing Your Hero’s Journey”

**Session #2**
Film (selections from novel)
Session Title: Your Decision-Making
Theme: Creating Options
Required Reading: *Revolutionary Road* written by Richard Yates
Exercise: “Flip the Script on Options & Good Luck”
Session #3  
(TBD)  
Session Title: Your Actions  
Theme: Managing the Risk of Derailment  
Required Reading: How to Be Good written by Nick Hornby  
Exercise: “Identifying Your Crucible”

Session #4  
Session Title: Your Learning & Communications Preferences  
Theme: Maximizing the Ability to Communicate and Learn  
Required Reading: None – Complete Pre-Session Questionnaire  
Exercise: “HBDI Diagnostic”

Session #5  
Novel  
Session Title: Your Ambition  
Theme: Leading Your Ambition  
Required Reading: What Makes Sammy Run? written by Budd Schulberg, Jr.  
Exercise: “Coaching Ambition”

Session #6  
Film (selections from novel)  
Session Title: Your External Environment  
Theme: Mastering Context  
Required Reading: Devil in a Blue Dress written by Walter Mosley  
Exercise: “Improving Contextual Intelligence”

Session #7  
Theater Play (to be read)  
Session Title: Your History  
Theme: Our Past Experiences as Leadership Resource  
Required Reading: True West written by Sam Shepard  
Exercise: “Lifeline Workshop”

Session #8  
Session Title: Your Performance  
Theme: Leading Yourself and Others  
Required Viewing: Self-Selected Viewing of Narrative Fiction in Film or Television  
Exercise: “The Visual Fiction Project” & “Leadership Styles”

Session #9  
Film (selections from novel)  
Session Title: Your Adventure Across Cultures  
Theme: Adventures & Resilience  
Required Reading: Little Big Man written by Thomas Berger  
Exercise: “Building Clarity on Purpose and Resilience”
Session #10
Film (selections from novel)
Session Title: Your Community
Theme: Leading Under Pressure
Required Reading: *The Descendants* written by Kaui Hart Hemmings
Exercise: “Leadership Values”

Session #11
HBR Reading
Session Title: Your Authentic Leadership
Theme: Defining Purpose
Required Reading: *Moments of Greatness* HBR Reading
Exercise: “Leadership Credo Presentations”

Session #12
Novel (read in full)
Session Title: Your Followers
Theme: Delivering on Your Values
Required Reading: *When the Killing is Done* written by T.C. Boyle
Exercise: “Training Mission Reflection”

*NOTE: This syllabus is subject to change, depending on the requirements of delivering the material and possible adjustments to the content and presentations over the course of the class.*

END OF SYLLABUS: Spring Term 2015, Bruce Craven