

*Designing and Teaching High Impact Culminating Core Curriculum Seminars Centered on Vastly Contentious Topics*

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**Abstract**

This paper will engage the listener in the design and subsequent teaching of senior capstones based on global and contentious topics. At Mount St. Joseph University (MSJU), a liberal arts institution, the Core Capstone is a culminating interdisciplinary course with a three-fold purpose: (1) to facilitate substantial new learning about a complex global problem; (2) to encourage integration of knowledge, skills, and values from the entire liberal arts and sciences Core Curriculum, including experiential learning, to address that problem; and (3) to strengthen concern and action for the common good as habits of mind. The theme of the core curriculum is “The Common Good”. The course development methodology is centered on the core curriculum learning outcomes and performance indicators. All course assessments are designed to evaluate the achievement of above learning outcomes. The paper will share the content modules of two senior capstones: CORE 472: Immigration: Achievements and Perils at the Core of Our Nation, and CORE 435: I Plead the 2nd! Examining the Role of Gun Violence in the 21st Century. Core 472 examines US immigration from a personal, historical, political, socio-economical, and psychological perspective. Core 435 examines gun violence from the perspectives of history, public health, public policy and discourse, economics, psychology, rhetorical analysis and crime prevention. Both courses are global in scope and their topics have become highly politicized in the United States.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary, Capstone, Current

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## **Introduction**

In 2012 Mount St. Joseph University revised its Liberal Arts Core Curriculum with a permeating theme: The *Common Good*, first established in the freshmen seminar *Common Ground*, then thread through a multitude of different core curriculum classes, culminating in a core capstone.

At Mount St. Joseph University (MSJU) the *Core Capstone* is a *culminating interdisciplinary course with a three-fold purpose: (1) to facilitate substantial new learning about a complex global problem; (2) to encourage integration of knowledge, skills, and values from the entire liberal arts and sciences Core Curriculum, including experiential learning, to address that problem; and (3) to strengthen concern and action for the common good as habits of mind.* (Mount St. Joseph University 2021 Catalogue)

As a first generation immigrant to this country this writer is very familiar with the long, difficult process of obtaining permanent residence status and later US citizenship. Having lived through the lengthy process raised the interest in US immigration policy study from its beginnings to the current, and led to the development of:

### **Core 472: Immigration: Achievements and Perils at the Core of Our Nation**

Since this course is taught in the accelerated format, students are required to complete a pre-assignment, ready to be presented during the first class period.

They have to choose a person who immigrated to the United States, research his/ her life and discuss his/her contribution to society. This could include their own family background or that of another important person in their life

The intent of the pre-assignment is to focus on the positive effects of immigration, in other words to set a tone of positivity from the very start. No matter where students go to receive their news, news on immigration in today's world undoubtable will have negative inundations.

Mount St. Joseph University is located in Cincinnati, OH, one of the largest German settlements in the United States and many of the attending students come from the Greater Cincinnati area. The German influence on Cincinnati culture is undeniable to this day. Thus it was feasible to begin the first module of the course by exploring German immigration to Cincinnati and study the contributions of German immigrants to the culture and Common Good.

Students learned about the three waves of German settlement and the reasons behind it. German settlers imported their love for clubs and societies; Cultural institutions such as the May Festival, the oldest choral festival in the US and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra were founded by German immigrants. At the same time, German settlers in Cincinnati formed the first trade unions in the nation. Trade unions worked for social justice such as the eight hour work day, public transportation, public education, etc.

German language instruction became part of the public school curriculum in Cincinnati. German Americans published two daily newspapers in the German language. Students were surprised to

learn that one could live in Cincinnati without ever having to speak English. German architecture is clearly identifiable among many public buildings, tenant homes, former beer gardens, and churches in the greater Cincinnati area. One cannot deny the tremendous influence German settlers have had on Cincinnati.

The topic of the second module is the treatment of immigrants in time of fear. Students studied what happened to German immigrants during and after World War I; the internment of Japanese-Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II; the treatment of immigrants after 9/11 and beyond.

When WW I broke out in 1914, Cincinnati's German immigrants were deeply involved with local politics, namely the Prohibition. Cincinnati had more breweries, beer gardens, and pubs than any other city in the nation, and most were run by and employed German immigrants. In July 1915 Judge John Schwaab made the following statement: "the drink question is forced upon us by the same Hypocritical Puritans as over there are endeavoring to exterminate the German nation." (Tolzmann, p. 110.) This statement makes abundantly clear the deep cultural and political divide that existed between Anglican Americans and German Americans in Cincinnati at the beginning of the war. Students learned that German-Americans were politically active and outspoken; they did not support the democratic President Woodrow Wilson. This would lead to severe consequences after the United States entered WW I. Nativism dominated the political landscape in Cincinnati. Preachers expressed their point of view from the pulpit: "there are not enough telegraph posts in Cincinnati to hang all the Herman Huns that should be hanged." "I would rather kiss a pig than shake hands with a Hun." (Tolzmann, p.135) Students were surprised by this language, but were drawing connections to 9/11 and beyond. German language instruction was prohibited and on April 9th, 1918, Cincinnati City Council passed an ordinance to anglicize family, business, and street names. After the war German-Americans left Over the Rhine, settled in west side suburbs, and purposely did not pass the German language on to the next generation.

To understand what happened to Japanese Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor, students read Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Devine*. In this short novel Otsuka expertly describes the physical and emotional experiences of an interned Japanese American family from the perspectives of the parents, the daughter, and the son. It begins with the mother's reading of the evacuation notice, her stoic acceptance of what needs to be done, her killing the family pets, and preparing the children for the trip ahead. It ends with the family's reunification after three years of internment, the father a broken man, not able to leave the house, the mother forced to clean other people's homes and washing laundry, because there were no opportunities for Japanese women, and the children wishing they were Chinese and once again accepted by their former school friends.

Additionally, students watched the PBS documentary *Time of Fear*, which includes original TV footage from 1942 and beyond. It provides rare commentary from interned Japanese Americans, who were children at the time. Now adults, their memory of the emotional impact of internment and the changes it brought to family life, are as vivid as if it had happened yesterday. Students are introduced to the Japanese concept of acceptance *Shikata ga nai*, it cannot be helped, and have an opportunity to see how Japanese Americans tried to achieve the best outcome from an

extremely difficult situation. The documentary clearly articulates the differences between Issei and Nisei, the first and second generation of Japanese Americans and the pressures placed on each due to the internment. Japanese American family life will be forever changed after 1945.

Further group discussions relates the treatment German Americans and Japanese Americans to immigration events that happened after 9/11 and in the present. Students are asked to choose articles they find relevant, summarize the content, and present it to the class as basis for discussion.

Module three's topic is immigration and the economy, the importance of push and pull. When do we allow immigration from certain parts of the world, when do we enact laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and why? What is the immigrant's contribution to the Common Good past and present? Students study a brief history of immigration laws in the United States and identify the fairness or unfairness of the same. In *The Devolution of US Immigration Policy: An Examination of the History and Future of Immigration Policy* Jeremiah Jagers identifies four areas of immigration: "This article critically reviews four widely accepted eras of U.S. immigration policy (open door, regulation, restriction, liberalization). These eras are based on federal efforts to regulate and control immigration since the American Revolution until the twenty-first century. In addition to identifying salient historical, legislative, political, and social forces shaping immigration policy in each era, considerable attention is given to changes over the past decade. Modern realities have shaped what the authors propose as a new era of immigration policy (devolution), based on the significant social and legislative ramifications in the United States since September 11, 2001." (Jagers, p.1) Students are asked to consider what future immigration policy might look like.

Module four covers immigration and political implications in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century; the booming business of immigrant detention. Students are asked to ponder possible solutions for the current immigrant problems based on what they have read and believe might help correct the problem in the future. The basis for this module is the book *Killing the American Dream: How Anti-Immigration Extremists Are Destroying the American Dream*, by Pilar Marrero. While written in 2012, the book still is very relevant in 2021. Marrero's analysis of why federal immigration reform attempts have failed since Ronald Reagan in 1986 and the consequences thereof is superb. Marrero explains the failure of the 1986 federal attempt at immigration reform, namely Reagan's Amnesty Law as follows: "The Amnesty Law legalized and integrated a million people into American society, but it failed to create long term mechanisms for hiring foreign workers in the industries that would most need them according to fluctuations in the economy...As long as there is no simple, effective immigration system with sufficient numbers of work visas in place, no amnesty, no matter how broad, and no border wall will block the flow of 'illegal' immigrants if the country continues to hold out its most precious treasure: a job, and a chance to succeed." (Marrero, p.17)

In order to expand student's perspectives they are asked to study the last federal attempt at immigration reform, Bill Clinton's immigration law of 1996. "The immigration law of 1996 was the most stringent legislation of its kind in modern US history. It reduced judicial review, deportations and detentions were increased, the options for asylum seekers were restricted, and it

required citizens who sponsor immigrants to prove they could support them if need be.” (Marrero, p.33)

Students study the effects of 9/11 and the radicalization of anti-immigrant laws that followed; they learn that immigration policy was re-defined and became a question of national security; they become aware of the nativism/hate movement towards immigrants that followed 9/11 and is still apparent today.

With no federal move towards immigration reform, individual states take immigration law into their own hands. Students study the effect and consequences of SB 1070, also known as the Arizona Law, and HB 56, the Alabama Law. Both laws require police officers to check the immigration status of anyone at a routine stop. Local police have direct connections to ICE, the Immigration and Custom Enforcement, and if police find an undocumented person, ICE will ask the local department to hold that person until s/he can be moved to a detention facility. The documentary *Lost in Detention* examines President Obama’s tough immigration enforcement and helps students understand the consequences of mass deportation, particularly on the families and children of deportees. Originally initiated to remove undocumented men and women who had committed a felony, ICE is now expected to deport 400,000 human beings per year, in order to not see the organization’s budget cut. Students also learn the conditions in those detention centers; many are run by private prison management companies. They are overcrowded, with very limited space for deportees, who might have been shipped to the facility from a different state, without knowledge of the family back home.

It is essential to understand why people might enter the US without the proper vetting and paper work to begin with, particularly young children, who come to this country by themselves. The HBO documentary *Which Way Home* plays an important role in that leaning experience. It follows the travels of several boys and young men from South America and Mexico, who try to reach the US by jumping on freight trains. The film explicitly highlights the dangers of riding the trains, escaping the gangs who want to rob/kill the migrants, and the few people who try to help them along the way with what little food or water they might be able to spare. Additionally, the documentary illustrates the extreme poverty and horrendous living conditions these youngsters are fleeing from. For the most part students are aware of what poverty looks like in the US, but most have never been exposed to the kind of poverty that exists in some Latin nations.

Lastly, students study the history and subsequent failure of the Dream Act, discussed in *Killing the American Dream* and brought to life in the documentary *The Dream Is Now*. What should be done with the young undocumented immigrants who were brought to this country by their parents as children? They did not have voice in the decision making process and most do not remember the country they were born in. They have been through the public school education in the United States, they feel more American than Latin. Would it not be to the American advantage to legalize them and allow them to become successful members of the workforce, paying their fair share of taxes and contributing to social programs, such as Medicare, and Social Security? Students investigate DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and learn that President Obama’s executive action allowed children who entered the country before the age of 16 and before June 2007 to receive a two year work permit and exemption from deportation. Students also realize the enormosity of the problem and in their final paper try to come up

with measures of reform that make sense to them. These have included the following: issue more working visas; expedite the immigration process; use ankle bracelets or other technology instead of detention while immigrants wait for their court date; work with private companies to create jobs in afflicted countries; make the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) permanent.

### **CORE 435: I Plead the Second! Examining the Role of Gun Violence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In preparation for the Naturalization Exam, the author studied American history and civics, including the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. These studies furthered an interest in the Second Amendment, particularly as related to gun violence and gun laws in the United States compared to other nations. Thus the idea of CORE 435: I Plead the Second! Examining the Role of Gun Violence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was born.

During the first class period students watch the 2015 National Geographic documentary *Guns in America* and are asked to identify any issues they feel are problematic. The discussion that follows quickly generates a list of issues that will be studied more in depth throughout the course: the danger of semi-automatic weapons with large magazines; the differences between federal and state gun laws, which can vary greatly depending on geographic location and individual state gun culture; the militarization of police as it relates to weaponry in response to the weapons found in use on the streets. The documentary presents statistics and realistic footage about gun use in homicides, suicides, accidental deaths, and mass shootings. Students question the ways guns are sold at gun shows, the interpretation of “stand your ground laws” and “red flag laws”. The documentary also introduces them to the ways the NRA lobbies and messages to its members. In short, the documentary serves as an excellent starting point, raising the issues for research and discussion in a methodical, un-emotional, and realistic fashion, without a partisan agenda.

The next module introduces students to the history of the Second Amendment.

*A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of the free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed,*

Students learn that according to the historian and legal scholar Patrick J. Charles the Founding Father’s understanding of the Second Amendment was the people’s contribution to the communal greater good through the militia, not individuals acting alone. In fact it was not until the 2008 Second Amendment case *District of Columbia v. Heller* when the Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia interpreted the language of the Second Amendment to mean that it is the individual’s right to bear arms, unconnected to a militia.

In his book *The Politics of Gun Control*, Robert J. Spitzer offers the following explanation for the use of militias: “Settlers found it necessary to band together to provide for mutual defense from foreign armies and hostile Native Americans. The reliance on part time militias, instead of a regular professional standing army, was based on two facts of life. First, the emerging American nation did not possess the manpower or resources to raise, finance, supply, or maintain a large professional army. Second, Americans shared a profound distrust of standing armies.”

(Spitzer, p.35) Students learn that militias, while easily assembled, never had the success of today's national forces due to lack of training and discipline.

Students in the classroom represent the enormous cultural divide of the country as a whole when it comes to gun safety versus the ability to carry guns without the interference from the government. Gabor provides a logical argument that most people can agree with. "The truth is that no right is absolute. Even the freedom of speech, protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, has its limits. We cannot make death threats against others, incite people to overthrow the government violently, pass on national secrets to agents from other countries, make false statements that defame others, or disseminate materials deemed to be obscene. Municipalities even limit the noise we can make, especially at night." (Gabor, p.264) Students are challenged to think about ways on how to find a balance between gun safety, and restraining gun violence while still supporting the Second Amendment.

In the next module students examine the role and power of the National Rifle Association (NRA). It was not until the 1920s that the NRA got involved in firearms legislation and political advocacy. In 1931 "Roosevelt called for a special session of the New York Legislature to strengthen the Sullivan Law. Roosevelt proposed an amendment that would effectively ban machine guns, turn over pistol permit authority from the state to local law enforcements, require pistol permit applicants to succumb to photographing and fingerprinting, and limit pistol permits approvals to a period of no more than a year." (Charles, p.198) The amendment became law. The NRA immediately expressed its condemnation, declaring it a violation of the Second Amendment. Student reactions to the Sullivan law usually include astonishment at the strictness of the law when compared to legislation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to explain the incredible marketing drive and recruitment techniques employed by the NRA, but students learn about these in their readings and by watching the 2015 Frontline documentary *Gunned Down: The Power of the NRA*.

The film begins in Tucson, AZ with the gunning down of Gabrielle Gifford, 33 bullets fired, 19 victims, and six dead. President Obama is advised to take gun control off the table due to the great political cost. The NRA at the time was the most feared lobbying group in DC. The film continues with the gruesome mass shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO: 188 rounds of ammunition, a bomb in the cafeteria, 13 dead, 23 wounded. Two teenagers had acquired their weapons at a gun show where background checks were not required. The NRAs tactic to install fear in people by stating that the government will take away their guns worked. After every mass shooting gun sales soar and the membership in the NRA rises.

The documentary continues with the attack on the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown in 2011. The attacker used a Bushmaster semi-automatic. It took six minutes, 154 rounds to kill twenty children and six adults. The country was devastated and many people demanded change in gun legislation. Background checks at gun shows were considered. 91% of people in the US supported this. Wayne LaPierre, the chief executive of the NRA insisted that toughness was needed. He suggested that more rather than less guns should be deployed for protection and that teachers should be armed as well. Using the old playbook to install fear in the population, the new proposed bill failed; it came up short by 5 votes in the Senate.

Next, students study how guns may be used lawfully and what the consequences of such laws may be. Students are introduced to the Stand Your Ground laws, initiated in Florida in 2005, now adopted by 33 states.

Students watch footage and read about the Trayvon Martin case from February 26, 2012 at the Retreat at Twin Lakes in Sanford, Florida. There had been numerous burglaries, thefts, and other crimes reported in the community since 2011. As a result the community created a neighborhood watch program and selected George Zimmerman, a resident, as program coordinator.

On the night above, Trayvon was visiting his father at Twin Lakes. He was wearing a hoodie to protect from the rain and was just coming back from a community store when he was noticed by George Zimmerman, out on patrol and armed. Zimmerman decided to pursue Martin, who was unarmed. It is not clear what started an altercation between the two, but Zimmerman shot and killed Martin, claiming it was self-defense. “The Martin case illustrates that homicide can be the tragic result of a combination of fear, racial stereotypes, the presence of firearms, and an aggressive style of policing. (Gabor, p.136) Gabor offers an approach for the prevention of violence. He cites Joseph Vince, the Director of the Criminal Justice Program at Mount St. Mary’s University, who was asked to prepare a report for the National Gun Victims Action Council. Vince and his associates found that for a citizen to carry and, perhaps, use a firearm for protection in a stressful situation, training should include mental preparation, knowledge of the law, as well as expertise, skill and recertification to maintain the permit.” (Gabor, p.141)

William Briggs, author of *How America Got Its Guns*, offers a comparison of guns and cars. He asks the following questions: “Why not register all firearms and license firearm users? Why not levy special taxes on firearms? How about a tax on ammunition without which firearms would be useless? What about accident and liability insurance? And if safety regulations can staunch the epidemic of automobile deaths, why not try analogous laws to reduce the toll of gun violence?” (Brigs, p.184) Currently, only Hawaii, the District of Columbia, Illinois, New York, and Massachusetts require a license with periodic renewal and a proficiency test.

To complete the module and gain an international perspective on gun laws, students are asked to write a paper entitled *Gun Culture around the World*. They are asked to compare and contrast the gun culture of developed and developing nations. The basis for the paper is a New York Times article from March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 entitled: *How to Buy a Gun in 15 Countries*. Students are amazed at the results of their research. Many make mention of the fact that in Germany police are allowed to enter one’s private residence unannounced to assure that the home owner’s guns are stored safely in a gun safe.

In module five students study the effects of gun use for unlawful purposes such as homicide, suicide, unintentional deaths, and mass shootings. Additionally, they are introduced to what role physicians might play in preventing violence.

Gabor argues that unintentional deaths and injuries do not get the attention they deserve. People associate gun deaths with robberies, murders, and other crimes. He states: “Unintentional firearm deaths and injuries can take many forms. Children can shoot themselves, siblings, or friends believing a gun is a toy or is not loaded. Hunters can mistakenly believe that another hunter is



game. A gun that is dropped may discharge. Another scenario underscores the tragedies that can occur when firearms are kept at home for self-protection and individuals display errors in judgement.” (Gabor, p.103) He continues with an example from Cincinnati, OH, published in the Washington post. “A Cincinnati father shot and killed his 14 year old son when the police said he mistook the teen for an intruder. Police told the Associated Press that the man thought his son had gone to school Tuesday morning, but the teen went back home. The man heard noise in the basement, grabbed his gun and went to check it out. Then police said, he got spooked and shot his son, string him in the neck.” (The Washington Post)

This example hits home with students and discussion evolves around the storage of guns, training in gun safety, and better education.

To complete the module, students study the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in detail. Two powerful speeches by one of the surviving students, Emma Gonzales on February 17<sup>th</sup> and March 24<sup>th</sup> of the same year, speak for themselves. They initiated the March for Our Lives movement, which is vastly documented on YouTube. The capstone students clearly relate to these high school students as is evidenced in the lively discussions that follow.

Next, students explore the business of guns. Most firearm companies are privately owned and not publically traded. The industry is highly secretive and it is not known how many guns are manufactured in the US or are imported annually. Additionally, in the 1970s Congress forbade the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to regulate firearms and ammunition. Students react with surprise to this fact, fully aware that consumer products such as toys and even a hairdresser are regulated to protect consumers. “In addition, due to The Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, a law signed by President George W. Bush in 2005, gun manufacturers are protected from liability and cannot be sued when their products are used to commit acts of violence.” (Gabor, p.195)

Students learn that gun shows are not only highly popular and profitable, they are also dangerously unregulated. To purchase a gun at a gun show, one only has to give one’s address and age, no background check is required, and often the sellers are not licensed. This allows felons who are legally prohibited from owning guns, to buy and sell weapons. Additionally, “straw purchasers”, people with a clean record, can go ahead and purchase firearms for those who would be ineligible or disqualified to do so. Walking through a gun show, it is apparent that the gun industry continuously pursues the extension of the weapons’ market by cultivating new customers. One can find firearms specifically marketed to women as a means of protection. These weapons might be smaller or come in “feminine” colors. An additional marketing idea is to tap into the next generation, namely develop and sell firearms for children to be used in shooting competitions. New evolving marketing strategies being currently pursued center around America’s racial and ethnic minorities. It appears that this market has been largely untapped and shows tremendous potential.

Additionally, students learn about the strong connections between the firearm industry and the NRA. Undoubtedly, the NRA until recently has been the most formidable and successful political lobby group for gun rights in Washington. This is clearly to the firearms industry’s

advantage, and has resulted in large financial contributions to the NRA. A few NRA board members are executives of gun manufacturers. For example, Pete Brownell, owner of a firearms accessories company by the same name, is one of the NRA's board members.

Through readings, class discussions, audio and visual media, and research, students have been exposed to a multitude of materials from as broad of a perspective as possible as related to firearms. They are now being challenged to come up with possible steps to help solve the nation's gun violence problem. The resulting papers vary, depending on personal background, family history with firearms, or geographic location. However, most students agree that gun training is important for responsible gun use and storage. A wait period will assure that the purchase of a firearm is not based on an emotional outburst. Most students would like to see background checks for everyone purchasing a weapon, this would apply to gun shows as well. Some students would like to see a psychological test as part of the background check. Others mention universally mandatory gun storage laws and wish to see the renewal of the automatic weapons ban. Students agree that extra-large ammunition magazines should not be for sale to the general public, but possibly available at gun ranges. Some want to see a national licensing system for gun buyers and a national registry for all guns. These are just some of the proposed steps to gain control over the systemic gun violence in the country.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, both of the discussed senior capstones have the potential to provoke and intensify the country's bipartisan division in the classroom. The selection and presentation of course materials thus is of utter importance. These materials have to speak for themselves without instructor input. Students need to know that their opinions are valuable as long as they can be supported by peer-reviewed facts. Equally important is the positive and engaging attitude of and presentation by the instructor. Student evaluations have shown that the learners leave the course with extended knowledge of the subject matter and new ideas they can share with family and friends.

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