

August 10, 2016

Re: Senior Seminar

Dear Parents/Guardians of BFUHS students enrolled in Senior Seminar:

Senior Seminar is a challenging course designed for seniors to enhance their critical-thinking skills and knowledge of controversial topics in society. This semester-long course has an intense focus on five (5) specific topics that aren't covered as in-depth in other Social Studies courses. Topics are focused on current events and controversial issues, including:

- Capital Punishment (aka. the death penalty)
- Abortion
- LGBT rights (same-sex marriage and/or transgender rights)
- Marijuana legalization (medical and recreational)
- Gun control

The reason that these topics have been chosen is because they are issues that are currently being discussed and debated not only in Vermont and the United States, but throughout the world by legislators, judges, doctors, religious leaders, and the media. All issues have seen major changes recently as a result of new legislation, court decisions, and increased public interest. These are complex topics that seniors in high school have the maturity, critical thinking skills, and educational background to handle in an appropriate and academic manner.

An important skill that students learn in Social Studies courses is to critically look at both sides of an issue and be able to understand why there are different sides to controversial issues, and this course attempts to do this.

It is imperative that students coming into this course have an open-mind and are willing to listen to and respect different points of view and perspectives. I stress this on the first day of class and it is an important part of our course. You do not have to agree with someone's opinion on an issue, but they are entitled to that opinion and you need to listen to and respect that opinion.

It is important to note that the purpose of this course, and the topics chosen, is not to push forward a certain agenda, ideology, or philosophy. There are facts on these issues, especially in terms of what the law and the courts have said, and there are opinions, driven by a person's upbringing, experiences, and political views and religious beliefs. The course is designed for students to learn about the history, law, and differing views on these issues, not for the teacher to inform the students what is right or wrong. The goal is

for students to be able to form an educated opinion, debate these topics intelligently, and respect others' points of view. This is how I approach each of the topics and each discussion we have in class.

Some of these topics can be very emotional and personal to students, and therefore students will always have the option to "pass" and not share their opinions or take part in a debate or discussion. Students will not be deducted participation points for this as there will be many opportunities to accumulate participation points during the class. Students may also leave the class at any time during a discussion or debate if they are feeling uncomfortable.

Additionally, students are asked not to share personal stories on these topics about themselves, their families, or their friends during class.

Due to the nature of these topics, I aim to have all of the content and materials that I use in class available on my website at <http://mrdivis.yolasite.com/>. I will be fully transparent about what sources I use, where I get news articles from, and the reason I choose certain materials.

Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns about the course, the content, or the materials we will be using. A syllabus and film permission slip will be sent home with your student on the first day of class to have you sign and return. Please read these carefully and go over them with your son/daughter.

Additionally, students will have the opportunity to take Senior Seminar as a Level 4 Honors course as well as a Dual Enrollment course through the Community College of Vermont (CCV). These are optional opportunities for students that I wanted to make you aware of. I will be sending home information on both of these opportunities in the first week of class. Please contact me if you have any questions about these opportunities.

Thank you,

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Department Chair

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