

Why College?

Your Education and the Good Life

COLLEGE 101
AUTUMN 2024

Course description

You're about to embark on an amazing journey: a college education. But what is the purpose of this journey? Why go to college?

Some argue that the purpose of college is to train you for a career. Others claim that college is no longer necessary — that you can launch the next big startup and change the world without a degree. Peter Thiel offers students like you \$100,000 to “skip or stop out of college” because “knowledge that is acquired under compulsion obtains no hold on the mind.”¹ Why read Plato if you're a STEM major, after all? Why think about primate health if you're in the arts?

In the face of such critiques, this class makes a case for an expansive education that trains your mind to engage with a variety of subjects and skills. The philosophy behind this model has traditionally been called “liberal education” (from the Latin word for freedom, *libertas*). Together we will explore the history, practice, and rationales for a liberal education by putting canonical texts in conversation with more recent works. We will consider the relevance of liberal education to all areas of study, from STEM to the arts, and its relations to future careers. And we will examine the central place that the idea of “the good life” has historically enjoyed in theories of liberal education. You will be prompted to examine your own life, to question how and why you make decisions, and to argue for your views while respecting those of others. Maybe you will conclude that a liberal education is no longer relevant in the twenty-first century, but we hope that you will do so armed with a thorough understanding of what it has been and what it can be.

In the end, college is not only about what you will do in life, but also about what kind of person you will be. So: what kind of person do you want to be? What kind of life will you live? Join us as we explore what others have said about these questions and prepare to answer them for yourself.

Continuing the conversation

Please come see me at one of my regularly scheduled times (or make an appointment) to chat about the readings, ask questions, or just say hi! Normal “office hours” (as they are called in college) are “open door,” meaning that you can join a conversation with other students, too. If you want to speak with me privately, just let me know in advance.

¹ Plato (whom, by the way, we'll be reading in this class).

Learning goals

In this course, students will:

- Understand the rationale of a university curriculum based on the idea of liberal education
 - Appreciate the differences between liberal and vocational educational mindsets
 - Dispel misconceptions about college education and professional success
- Engage in a shared, campus-wide conversation about what a Stanford education should be
- Learn how to read at a college level, notably by:
 - recognizing different genres and how they share knowledge differently
 - identifying central arguments/passages in a text and how they relate to one another
 - distinguishing between an author's ideas and those they are discussing/criticizing
- Advance their writing skills, notably by:
 - using writing to better understand, connect, and interpret readings
- Practice actively listening to others
- Practice respectful disagreement

Ways of Thinking, Ways of Doing

This COLLEGE course satisfies the following WAYS requirement areas:

- Aesthetic and Interpretive Inquiry (A-II)

Schedule

In addition to our two 80-minute sessions per week, please note that there are **three required in-person evening events**:

- Screening of the film "Leland: A Stanford Story" | Tues., Sept. 24, 6:30-7:15pm, Memorial Auditorium
- A Conversation with Andre Agassi | Tues., Oct. 15 at 6:30pm, Memorial Auditorium
- The Fall 2024 Stanford TAPS production of Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*
Six performance dates: November 8 - 9 (Fri - Sat); November 13 - 16 (Wed - Sat)
Your instructor will let you know which date your class will be attending.

Workload

[University policy](#) is for each credit unit to correspond to 3 hours of combined in- and out-of-class work per week. This 3-unit class is therefore meant to have 9 hours per week of combined in- and out-of-class work. With 3 hours of class per week, you should expect 2-3 hours of out-of-class preparation per session.

Course expectations

1. This course is designed to help you make the transition from high school to college. In particular, it prepares you to **enjoy** your college experience, and to engage with your peers and instructors on a meaningful level.
2. This class also differs from other classes, in that it provides a forum for you to reflect on YOUR education. We will use ideas from other thinkers and from each other as food for thought. But the real focus of this course is YOU!
3. For this to be successful, we expect you to **come to class prepared**. This means reading all the materials, watching the videos, and completing the written assignments BEFORE class. It also means **participating** in your discussion section.

Attendance policy

Given the discussion goals of this class, regular in-person attendance is a major expectation. We expect you to attend every session, except in cases of illness or other emergencies. Participation in class takes many forms and varies across sections, but requires more than just showing up and sitting silently. Late arrivals or disruptive behavior during class will be considered in evaluating attendance and participation.

If you will miss class for any reason, reach out to your instructor, in advance when possible. Two absences can be made-up for full credit. If you miss 4 or more sessions over the quarter, insufficient attendance may make it impossible to get credit for the course.

Overlapping classes and regular conflicts are not allowed. If you expect to miss 4 classes due to scheduled activities, please contact collegereq@stanford.edu to change to a section where you can fully attend. If you expect to miss multiple classes, usually because you are engaged in university-sponsored activities such as athletic competition, please share your schedule for the quarter with your instructor within the first week of class to develop an overall plan for the quarter, or contact the program at collegereq@stanford.edu to try to change to a section where you can be more fully present.

Course materials

Most of the **reading** assignments can be accessed through this syllabus, either as links or PDFs. There are five books that you will need to acquire:

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* | ISBN-10: 0553213369 [or [link](#) or [online library copy](#)]

Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* | ISBN-10: 1644450712 [or [library copy](#)]

Andre Agassi, *Open* | Provided to you as part of the [Three Books program](#) (check your NSO packet)

Tara Westover, *Educated* | ISBN-10: 0399590528 [or [library copy](#)]

Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters* (trans. Paul Schmidt) | ISBN-10: 1559360550 [or [online library copy](#)]

Grading

1. This course uses a novel form of assessment known as “**contract grading**.” It emphasizes establishing clear and transparent criteria for course outcomes and grades. The “contract” here is quite simple: in exchange for doing what is expected of you as a student (as expressed through the syllabus, course assignments, and rubrics), your instructor will give you full points. You will not be judged or evaluated by your instructor beyond an assessment of whether you put in **the conscientious effort required for the assignment (including participation) and met the expectations as articulated in the rubrics attached to each assignment**. In other words, if you complete all your assignments in a satisfactory fashion (effort + rubric expectations) and meet the other expectations for the class, you will receive an A.
2. We have chosen this method of assessment to **shift your focus towards learning** and away from grades. The goal of this class is to guide you through an examination of your ideas about the purposes of education. We want you to try on different perspectives, take intellectual risks, and ideally grow as an individual. Worrying about your grade, in this context, is both a distraction and counterproductive.
3. The **point system** for each assignment or task is simple. If you complete an assignment in a manner that demonstrates conscientious effort, you will receive full points. If you did not complete it as described, you receive half points, with an option to resubmit. Finally, you do not receive any points if the assignment is incomplete or demonstrates a lack of effort.
4. While you will not receive a letter grade per assignment, you will still receive **feedback** from your instructor. The feedback is focused on your learning and is meant to help you improve your skills of discussion, reading, writing, and critical thinking. Our hope is that this feedback will be more substantial and meaningful than a grade, which often takes the place of comments.
5. A significant part of the evaluation for this requirement is based on **participation**, which includes attendance; being prepared (reading carefully before you come to class); listening; expressing your ideas and building upon others’ ideas; staying focused (this means not doing other homework, checking snapchat, etc.) We will assess participation for every class period and you will receive regular feedback from your instructor on your participation (just as you do for written assignments).
6. Both major writing assignments are required for successful completion of this course.
7. At the end of the quarter, you will still get a letter grade as you would with a traditional grading system. Final letter grades will be calculated as follows:

A	95–100 points
A–	90–94 points
B+	87–89 points
B	83–86 points
B–	80–82 points

C+	77–79 points
C	73–76 points
C–	70–72 points
D+	67–69 points
D	63–66 points
D–	60–62 points
F	0–59 points

Assignments and grading breakdown

- Participation (includes reading what is assigned before class; paying attention, engaging with other students, and proper use of electronics): **30%**
- Seminar preparation: **30%**
 - At the end of the first week, you will write a short reflective essay on why you are here, what kind of person your education has made you so far, and what kind of person you hope to be in four years (approx. 400 words).
 - For 9 prescribed sessions of the course, you will be asked to complete a short exercise in advance of our class meeting. Details from your instructor forthcoming.
 - At the end of the quarter, you will look back on your initial reflective essay, and comment on anything that has changed (approx. 400 words).
- Midterm paper: **20% (10% for draft + 10% for final)**
 - For your midterm paper, stage a conversation between yourself and one of the authors we’ve read in class. The conversation should not be a Q&A, but an exchange. Share your opinions about their ideas, and then imagine what their response might be. Approx. 1,200 words. **You must submit a draft for feedback.**
- Final paper: **20% (10% for draft + 10% for final)**
 - For your final assignment, we would like you to share your own opinions and thoughts about the theme from the course in a reflective essay. Approx. 2,000 words. **You must submit a draft for feedback.**

The Honor Code

The Stanford Honor Code was composed by students in 1921 (updated in 2023), and expresses the university’s expectations for academic integrity. Please read it [here](#). Together with the [Fundamental Standard](#), these documents lay out the rights and responsibilities of Stanford students, in particular with regard to their academic behavior. Some key points:

- Students cannot submit the same written work for different classes.
- Plagiarism (copying passages from other people’s work without attribution) is forbidden.
- Having someone else complete an assignment for you is forbidden.
- The use of or consultation with [generative AI](#) will be treated analogously to assistance from another person.

Classroom norms

COLLEGE courses encourage the exchange of ideas in a rigorous and respectful way. Each classroom will be different but all will adhere to the Fundamental Standard of 1898 (interpreted in 2023 as), “Students are expected to uphold the integrity of the university as a community of scholars in which free speech is available to all and intellectual honesty is demanded of all.” At Stanford free speech and inclusion are not [mutually exclusive](#), in fact, they support each other. In our classroom we aim to build a “community of scholars” grounded in trust and organized around collaborative learning and the advancement of knowledge.

Learning resources

In addition to in-class assistance, Stanford’s academic resources include:

- [Subject Tutoring](#)
- [Tutoring for student athletes](#)
- [Academic Skills Coaching](#)
- [Hume Center for Writing and Speaking](#)
- [Library Resources for Undergrads](#)

Access and accommodations

Stanford is committed to providing equal educational opportunities for disabled students. Disabled students are a valued and essential part of the Stanford community. We welcome you to our class.

If you experience disability, please register with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate your needs, support appropriate and reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Academic Accommodation Letter for faculty. To get started, or to re-initiate services, please visit oae.stanford.edu.

If you already have an Academic Accommodation Letter, we invite you to share your letter with us. Academic Accommodation Letters should be shared at the earliest possible opportunity so we may partner with you and OAE to identify any barriers to access and inclusion that might be encountered in your experience of this course.

Course privacy statement

As noted in the University’s [recording and broadcasting courses policy](#), students may not audio or video record class meetings without permission from the instructor (and guest speakers, when applicable). If the instructor grants permission or if the teaching team posts videos themselves, students may keep recordings only for personal use and may not post recordings on the Internet, or otherwise distribute them. These policies protect the privacy rights of instructors and students, and

the intellectual property and other rights of the university. Students who need lectures recorded for the purposes of an academic accommodation should contact the [Office of Accessible Education](#).

Course schedule

Week 1 What is liberal education? How is it different from a vocational or instrumental education?

Session 1 Video: Prof. [Dan Edelstein](#), An Introduction to the Idea of Liberal Education [[link](#)]

Prof. [Caroline Hoxby](#) lecture disputing the link between vocationally oriented majors and income (33:09-42:00, though feel free to watch the entire lecture) [[link](#)]

Reading: Booker T. Washington, “The Atlanta Exposition Address” [[PDF](#)]

W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” in *The Souls of Black Folk* [book] [[PDF](#) or [link](#) or [library copy](#)]

Screening of the film “Leland: A Stanford Story”

Tuesday, September 24, 6:30-7:15pm

Memorial Auditorium

Session 2 Reading: W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of the Wings of Atalanta,” “Of the Training of Black Men,” in *The Souls of Black Folk* [book] [[PDF](#) or [link](#) or [library copy](#)]

Video: Prof. [Lanier Anderson](#), An Introduction to W. E. B. Du Bois [[link](#)]

Friday, September 27 at 5pm: Initial short reflective essay due

Week 2 Is education revolutionary?

Session 1 Reading: Liza Featherstone, “Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* at Fifty” [[link](#)]

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Ch. 2 [[PDF](#)]

Plato, *Republic*, “Allegory of the Cave” 514a-520a [[PDF](#)]

Session 2 Reading: Rabindranath Tagore, “The Problem of Education” and “The Unity of Education” in *Towards Universal Man* (1961) [[PDF](#)]

Rokeya Hossain, “Sultana’s Dream” (1905) [[link](#)]

Video: Prof. [Kathryn Gin Lum](#), An Introduction to Rabindranath Tagore [[link](#)]

Week 3 What are the ethical and social costs of education?

Session 1 Reading: Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Ch. 1-6 [book]

Video: A conversation between Prof. [Kathryn Gin Lum](#) and Prof. [Ato Quayson](#) on *Nervous Conditions* [[link](#)]

Session 2 Reading: Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Ch. 7-end [book]

OPTIONAL: Interview with Dangarembga [[link](#)]

Week 4 Why education requires life-long discipline and practice

Session 1 Reading: Andre Agassi, *Open* (2009), The End, Ch. 1-6, 11-12, The Beginning, Acknowledgements [book]

A Conversation with Andre Agassi
Tuesday, October 15 at 6:30pm
Memorial Auditorium

Session 2 Reading: Edward Slingerland, *Trying Not To Try* (2014), Intro and Ch. 1 [[PDF](#)]

Analects of Confucius passages [[PDF](#)]

Oct. 18 (Friday) at 5pm: REQUIRED draft of midterm paper due

Week 5 How education requires multiple perspectives and routes to wisdom

Session 1 Reading: Zadie Smith, “Some Notes on Attunement” [[PDF](#)]

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, sec. 334 [[PDF](#)]

Video: Joni Mitchell, “Blue” [[link](#)]

Video: Janet Jackson, “Got 'Til It's Gone” [[link](#)]

Session 2 Reading: Charles Darwin, Selections from *On the Origin of Species* (1859) [[PDF](#)]

Simple Darwinism Summary [[PDF](#)]

Robin Kimmerer, “Asters and Goldenrods,” and “The Three Sisters,” from *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2015) [[PDF](#)]

Robin Kimmerer, “Returning the Gift” [[PDF](#)]

Week 6 Education as the process of learning to think for yourself

Session 1 Reading: Tara Westover, *Educated: A Memoir* (2018), Prologue, Ch. 1-2, 5, 12-16, 17, 20, 22-24, 27-29.

Session 2 Reading: “How AI Chatbots like ChatGPT or Bard Work – Visual Explainer” [[link](#)]

Ted Chiang, “Chat GPT is a Blurry JPEG of the Web,” *The New Yorker*, February 9, 2023 [[PDF](#)]

John McPhee, “Draft No. 4,” *The New Yorker*, April 29, 2013 [[PDF](#)]

Week 7 How doing nothing can be educational– is self-cultivation enough?

Session 1 NO CLASS (Democracy Day)

Session 2 Reading: Jenny Odell, “How to do nothing” [[link](#)]

D. T. Suzuki, selections from “Satori, or Enlightenment” [[PDF](#)]

D. T. Suzuki’s translation of The Ten Oxherding Pictures [[link](#)]

Video: Does liberal education require detachment? A conversation between Prof. [Kathryn Gin Lum](#) and Prof. [Michaela Mross](#) [[link](#)]

Nov. 8 (Friday) at 5pm: Final version of midterm paper due

Week 8 How education requires knowledge of the self and the world

Session 1 Reading: Epicurus, “Excerpts from the Life of Epicurus,” “Letter to Menoeceus,” and “Leading Doctrines” in *The Art of Happiness* (pp. 81-90, 155-172, 173-179) [\[PDF\]](#)

Video: Prof. [Dan Edelstein](#), An Introduction to Epicurus [\[link\]](#)

OPTIONAL: A Conversation with Tsitsi Dangarembga
Monday, November 11 at 5pm
Stanford Alumni Association | 326 Galvez Street

Session 2 NO CLASS MEETING

Reading: Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters* (1901) (trans. Madeleine George) [\[PDF\]](#)

In lieu of a class meeting, you will attend the play with your class. Attendance is mandatory.

[Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* | FALL 2024 MAIN STAGE](#)
[Nov. 8 - 9 \(Fri - Sat\); Nov. 13 - 16 \(Wed - Sat\)](#)
[8:00pm Curtain \(Two hours and 45 minutes including one 10-minute intermission\)](#)
[Pigott Theater](#)

Week 9 How education relates to well-being, Or how to avoid stress and be happy

Session 1 First half of class reserved for discussing *Three Sisters*.

Reading: Seneca, “On the Shortness of Life” sections 1-3, 14, 15 [\[link\]](#)

Session 2 Reading: Robert M. Sapolsky, Ch. 17, “The View from the Bottom,” in *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* (1994) [\[PDF\]](#)

Video: Prof. Robert Sapolsky, “Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers: Stress and Health” (watch through 1:01:25) [\[link\]](#)

[Nov. 22 \(Friday\) at 5pm: REQUIRED draft of final paper due](#)

[THANKSGIVING BREAK: Nov. 25 \(Monday\) to Nov. 29 \(Friday\)](#)

Week 10 Embracing your educational path

Session 1 Instructor's Choice

Session 2 Video: David Foster Wallace, "This is Water" (2005) [[link](#)]

Dec. 6 (Friday) at 5pm: Second short reflective essay due

Dec. 12 (Thursday) at 5pm: Final version of final paper due