Title and Course Description:

“Shut Up! Book Banning in America”: In this course we will read books that have been banned in the United States, some because of obscene language or sexual content, others because of political or religious issues that they raise. Since the texts we will read are all significant works in their own right, we will practice the critical approaches associated with the study of literature, but we will also examine the many ways in which they challenge cultural and social norms. And, of course, we will address such questions as: Why do people ban books? What criteria do they typically use? Does censorship contradict our notions of free speech? How do authors respond to censorship?

Topics:

Elements of fiction—point of view, characterization, symbols, theme
Intersections between social attitudes and literature
Expectations that readers have of literature/How sensibilities affect our responses to texts
Conflicts between censorship and freedom of speech
History of publishing in the U.S. with a focus on the history of the works we discuss
Why and how books are banned
How publishers, school districts, and others respond to book banning
Critical thinking skills and logical argumentation

Reading Material:

The readings will include primary texts and secondary sources and will provide plenty of opportunities to learn how to read actively and thoughtfully. Class discussion will focus on content as well as on thesis development, organization, tone, and other rhetorical devices in the material.

Primary texts will form the core reading material. The current debate surrounding the modified version of *Huck Finn* being published this spring by Professor Alan Gribben, for example, beautifully illuminates all facets of book banning. The Blume and Cormier narratives are written for adolescents and will provide particularly useful examples of how attacks are leveled against material written for younger audiences.

In addition to the primary works, students will be assigned a variety of secondary sources that address definitions of censorship, the history of censorship, censorship and the courts, and rationales for defending books. Research projects will ensure that students be exposed to commentary on the individual works we read as well as on the larger issue of book banning.
The narratives I intend to assign include the following:

Judy Blume, *Forever*
Robert Cormier, *The Chocolate War*
Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*
D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*
Harper Lee, *To Kill A Mockingbird*
Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*
John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

**Writing Assignments:**

I will regularly assign short, low-stakes written responses to the primary works—some in class and some out of class. These writing tasks will normally ask students to address literary topics such as characterization, point of view, symbols, and theme as a way of encouraging close reading of the material.

Students will also practice summary writing throughout the semester as they read secondary sources.

Longer, multiple draft essays will require that students employ research and documentation skills as they compose arguments that demonstrate attention to the elements of good writing: thesis development, paragraph unity and coherence, effective sentence structures and mechanics.

Topics for some essays will be generated by the primary sources, and others will be based on the larger issue of censorship. Below are some sample topics:

- Since one important goal of the course is to examine the connections between a work of literature and the community standards that can lead to its restriction, at least one assignment will call upon students to address the history of, the reasons for, and the responses to a banned work.

- In our discussion of *Huck Finn*, I will ask students to summarize and evaluate editorial responses to the new Gribben text and then to craft their own commentary in which they demonstrate an understanding of what they have read and an appreciation of the complexity of the debate.

- Working with one of the assigned narratives banned for political or religious reasons, students will choose a passage and explain why it is central the theme and/or to our understanding of the work and why it has generated controversy. Analysis of the passage will address the rhetorical considerations as well as the social issues that stir the debate.
**Oral Communication:**

In addition to participating in general class discussion, students will be asked to prepare oral responses to specific questions on assigned readings. For example, when discussing primary texts, I will hand out a list of questions relating to the plot, characters, settings, language, and social environment and ask each student to take the lead in responding to one of the questions. Small group work that calls for more complex analysis of material and reporting to the class as a whole will also be a regular part of course.

An important feature of the course will be a collaborative project. Teams of students will research an assigned topic and present their findings to the class. Examples of these topics include: changing attitudes toward the Cormier and Blume texts in the classroom or responses to a text based on geography or political divisions. I will make some recommendations for and place some restrictions on these topics, but my hope is that the teams will formulate their own subjects based on the readings and on their interests.

**Liberal Arts:**

Intersections among disciplines will be a key component of this course. We cannot talk about the literary works without setting them within a framework, so we will naturally discuss history, popular culture, politics, and the law.

As we address the many allusions in the works, students will certainly need to recognize a whole range of connections. Allusion hunting in narratives nicely reinforces the need to read broadly and carefully. And I will use this activity to give students another opportunity to practice research and oral communication skills.

In addition to defining the Liberal Arts and Sciences, discussing how it differs from other types of education, and asking students to think about its value in the modern world, I will assign a few short articles about a liberal education, some from popular and some from scholarly sources, for student responses. Material such as this will provide a good chance to practice summary writing skills as well.

**Albright Academic Experience:**

I am certain that I will be able to make use of at least a couple of appropriate Experience Events over the course of the semester. Events related to the social or political scene in the United States could dovetail nicely with the content of the class.

I also intend to work with our Library to put together an event during Banned Books week, and included among the writing requirements for the course is a description and evaluation of one Experience Event that students attend individually.
**Research and Information Literacy:**

Students will practice research skills—narrowing and developing a topic, finding appropriate sources, creating a thesis, organizing ideas, incorporating outside sources smoothly, and accurately documenting sources—when working on one high stakes writing assignment.

The class will meet in the Library at least once during the course for a general introduction by one of the librarians and at least one more time for specialized instructions related to a research project.

Since I have found that incorporating a visit to the Career Development Center into my First Year Seminars is truly worthwhile, students will also need to visit the library to complete a project related to resume building. My goal is to get them to think ahead about writing successful applications for jobs or graduate programs and about pursuing internship programs and research projects in the meantime.

**Library and Resource Needs:**

The course will require assistance from a librarian as I put together a packet of short materials, and Rob LeBlanc has agreed to collaborate with me on one or more activities involving the class during Banned Book week.

I will not need special equipment or a particular kind of classroom.

The course will be part of my regular teaching load.