**The Heart of Social Science**

**\*\*\***Thanks to Carl Herman, social science teacher at La Canada High School in La Canada, California, for sharing the original assignment on which this is based.

Dear Students,

This letter expresses what it means to study social science. Hopefully you read it carefully, enjoy the assignment outlined at the end, and come to class in the fall eager to begin or continue your journey in the social science department at Central Academy.

**Why study social science? What’s in it for me?** Social science is literally the art and science of being with people. When we love our lives, it is a direct function of how well we understand and empathize with others. The study of political science and the other social sciences can teach us important lessons on how people related to each other in the past and how they relate to each other today.

When we study the social sciences, we can develop the skills that lead to a fulfilling and loving relationship with our parents, great friendships through good times and bad, and communication that connects and enlightens, bringing out the best in ourselves and inspiring those around us. When we are successful in being with people, we are empowered to discover and develop our full self-expression.

The study of social science also teaches us how to improve our communities and broader society. We can master the critical thinking skills that help us to distinguish independently verifiable fact from political spin, make well-reasoned arguments, resolve conflicts, solve personal and social problems, and engage in civil conversations that reflect our respect for diverse viewpoints.

I want you to take active roles as citizens and to work for change in a democratic society. I also want you to develop a keen sense of ethics and care deeply about the quality of life in your community and world. I want you to see the connection between ideas and behavior, between the values and ideals that people hold and the ethical consequences of those beliefs. After all, the tragedies and triumphs of human societies have resulted from choices made by individuals.

**What tools do I need to be successful in relating to others?** The primary tool in this quest is the experience and expression of virtue. Some elements of virtue are unique to each person, but some are shared by humans across time and space; by studying the social sciences, we learn to recognize and cherish these similarities and differences. While you are individually unique, you can work with others to accomplish goals that are impossible to achieve through individual effort alone. The development of virtues such as strength, love, creative intelligence, beauty/harmony, and love of knowledge will lead to personal happiness and a fulfilling life; by expressing these virtues, you can make the world a better place.

Social science classes help you develop the academic tools necessary to accomplish the goals laid out above. These tools include:

* **Historical investigation:** If you don’t know the background of a social process or phenomenon, you’ll act in ignorance. This applies equally to maintaining a friendship and crafting political policy. Understanding the past helps you shape the future intelligently.
* **Research:** Do this effectively or act in ignorance. It’s that simple.
* **Speaking up and/or taking action for what you find important:** You’ll either go beyond fear to speak and act for what’s important in your life or live in regret. The good news is that if you learn to overcome fear, you can erase many mistakes from the past and improve the present and future.
* **Writing powerfully in your own voice:** Writing is a form of reflective speech and allows for thoughts to crystalize; this helps you say what you really want to say. Learning to speak and write effectively will make you more successful in your career and as a citizen.

Consider this: who you are *being* at any given moment, including in class, is your statement to the world of who you are and where you are heading. Every moment represents a chance to express your highest virtues, on your terms.

What does it mean to develop a strong sense of virtue? Does that mean that life can become brighter for you? That all so-called “problems” are actually opportunities? That you have the power to take charge of your life? *You live the answers to these questions everywhere at all times*.

I suggest that you invest the time and attention required to be satisfied with and proud of your learning; hopefully you recognize that this means more than just trying for an “A.” Therefore, I encourage you to go beyond the limits of the AP Comparative Government and Politics curriculum in thinking about social science. Your assignment this summer is to further develop your skills as a burgeoning social scientist by carrying out and reflecting on a project. The guidelines for this project are minimal: have fun, and in your reflection, explain how your project made you a better social scientist and a more virtuous and empathetic person. Here are some possibilities:

* Address a family policy that you see as unfair and persuade other family members to consider your point of view.
* Address a problem in your community.
* Develop a conflict-resolution plan to end a dispute at the interpersonal, local, national, or global level.
* Research a social science topic you’re curious or passionate about. This can include reading, interviewing a grandparent, watching and reflecting on documentaries, going to a museum, etc.

Honestly, the possibilities are almost endless. If you have an idea for a project you’re not sure about, feel free to e-mail me at shawn.voshell@dmschools.org to get some feedback.

You might be asking yourself, “How do I know I’m a better social scientist? What does my project have to do with empathy and virtue? What *are* empathy and virtue, anyway?” You’ll probably be more confident in completing this project if you also respond to the following prompts:

1. Define “society.”
2. Define “social science.”
3. Discuss the value in studying social science as an individual and citizen.
4. Define “virtue.” Discuss a virtue that attracts you to other people or that you want to further develop in yourself.
5. Define “empathy.” Discuss a time when your ability to empathize with someone led to a more meaningful relationship or a time when your failure to empathize with someone created problems.
6. Define “politics” and “political science.” Discuss a time when you applied political skills or knowledge to more effectively take action or a time when your ignorance of politics thwarted your efforts to accomplish a goal.
7. Define “research.” Discuss a situation in which you have been or are currently engaged in research because of a desire to better understand an aspect of society or the world.
8. Discuss a time when you spoke-up and/or took action and felt proud of yourself. Explain how you overcame any fear to do so.

Please be ready to turn in your responses to these prompts, along with a summary of and reflection on your project, on the first day of class.

Have a great summer!

Peace,

Mr. Voshell