CONTENT & GOALS: The basic idea behind UN1001 is that students in each section explore a central and basically unanswered question from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The focus in the class is on the nature of both "knowledge" and "inquiry." In other words, how knowledge is arrived at in any given discipline, and how inquiry is conducted. The disciplinary perspectives we will explore this semester are primarily those of psychology, anthropology, comparative religion, and literature.

Some of you may have studied Classical Mythology in high school. It is important for you to understand that the focus of this class is NOT on Classical Mythology, though that subject will constitute part of our inquiry. We will be using the term "myth" in a broader, more inclusive sense. Classical Mythology is only one manifestation of a universal human urge to make sense of the world through stories, stories which in turn reveal patterns, or "archetypes," rooted deeply in the human psyche. We will explore some central mythic patterns, and their expression or embodiment in rituals. We will try to see how such myths and rituals continue to permeate our culture, and also to what extent the pressures of modernity and technology may have altered, even perhaps corrupted the purposes and expressions of myths.

The three main goals of my section of UN1001 are 1) some solid preparation for further academic study stressing the development of written, oral, and visual literacies, 2) insight into the ways in which mythic patterns and rituals have traditionally served as the foundation of societies and cultures, and 3) self-knowledge, that is, some insight into how your life has been affected by such patterns and rituals, how your culture and your own "story" are shaped by these forces. I'm particularly interested in this third goal, and much of the work in the class will reflect that interest. Though career/vocational goals now tend to dominate a student's college work, the broader point of a true university education has always been at least to begin the lifelong project of figuring out who you are, what you value, and why. In addition, one of the central goals of a general or liberal education is to introduce students to what 19th century poet and critic Matthew Arnold referred to as "the best that has been thought and been said in the world." We won't cover all of that territory, but, as the above reading list should indicate, we will read together and explore some powerful and culture-shaping material and begin the very important work of self-discovery. A notion central to this class and to my reasons for being a teacher is the famous assertion by Socrates: "The unexamined life is not worth living." The emphasis this term will be less on academic content per se, more on how that content intersects with each of your lives and is shaped by personal experience.
ASSIGNMENTS: As I noted above, development in written, oral, and visual literacies is a primary aim of UN1001. You will be expected to read quite a bit, and at times the readings may seem difficult, though I have tried in most cases to pick texts that are aimed at a general audience. You will also write throughout the semester, and in a variety of forms. Part of this writing will be a sequenced set of writing assignments, which I will explain more about as we go—probably three major pieces of work over the course of the term, culminating in some kind of formal, researched project. The other main writing assignment will be a response journal which you will keep throughout the semester and which you will use for in-class as well as out-of-class work. I will give you more specific instructions for this journal below, but basically it is an ongoing assignment designed to promote learning rather than reporting final positions and achieved knowledge in proper academic format. This journal will amount to roughly 50% of your final grade, so take it seriously and get comfortable with it as quickly as possible.

You will also be assigned a series of group projects that will lead to structured class presentations. There will be at least three or four of these, and I will assign them as the term progresses. (See more under APPROACH below).

I will not give grades on individual assignments along the way. Instead, you will submit a portfolio of your work at the end of the term consisting of all your written work, including preliminary notes and drafts as well as final versions, your journal, and any other written material. You will be graded on the basis of this portfolio. I will give you written and oral feedback on your work, and we will conference at least twice one-on-one during the term. You should always feel free to stop by during my office hours or make an appointment if you want to discuss your grade. I realize that the portfolio approach can cause anxiety, so I will do all I can to let you know how you are doing although your final grade will be based heavily on the quality of the final portfolio.

APPROACH: This class will have very little in the way of formal lectures, and whatever lecturing that does occur will be fairly brief and spontaneous. The focus in this class is on discussion and collaborative exploration. You will work in groups throughout the term, and you will have some group projects that will culminate in oral presentations to the class. I will also stress question-posing as central to our day-to-day work. In other words, we will focus on active inquiry and mutual exploration rather than passive memorizing and regurgitation of facts. I recognize that college life is still relatively new to you and probably intimidating, at least at this moment, and this particular class may puzzle you. But I will ask for your participation and encourage it in every way that I can. I am interested in each of your “voices” and want to hear them. Silence in class is attractive to many students, especially when everything seems a bit unfamiliar and a great deal is coming at you with incredible speed in all of your classes and in your new social environment. The size of this class was designed to promote exchange of views and ideas, so help me achieve that end by “voicing” yourself in class as well as in your written work. Sam Keen, a well-known philosopher and mythologist, says that we must tell our own stories or risk having them told for us by others. I prefer the former. When other people presume to tell your story for you, they take control of it. Voice: your willingness to tell your own story in your own words. So most of our class sessions will involve talk and writing; therefore, make sure you bring your journal to class every day as we will use it regularly to initiate, refocus, or conclude our discussions. From time to time, we will also have some classes devoted to videos/films or to group presentations.

READINGS: Because my teaching style is to a good degree “existential” and because in most cases I will be reading assignments right along with you, I am providing no specific calendar of reading assignments; instead, I will assign the readings in class as we go from day
to day. As a rule, you must complete all reading prior to the class for which it is assigned, and with a significant degree of attention, including marginal notes and questions. You will need to read carefully and as slowly as necessary to begin to construct some kind of provisional meaning from each of the assignments. You may need to read selections more than once. If you miss a class session, you are responsible for finding out what the next day’s reading assignment is. Get to know others in the class who can give you a reliable summary of what went on in class during the day you missed.

RESPONSE JOURNAL: Each Friday, beginning this week, you will have a typed journal entry to turn in. Each entry should be at least three or four hundred words, and it should be written with the understanding that the writing is primarily for learning rather than for reporting or summarizing. I will give you a handout on the traits of such writing in the next day or so. Until that time, think about your first journal entry as an opportunity to raise questions about the reading you have been doing, shape understanding, explore, and make personal connections. I will look at these entries very quickly over the weekend, and return them with little comment and w/o a grade. You are to keep all of them in a three-ring binder which you will submit at the end of the term. The final weekly entry will be a retrospective response in which you will have a chance to review the learning experience during the semester in UN1001. More on the retrospective once we approach the end of the term. It is crucial that you meet the deadline established for each of the entries. Entries submitted later than Friday will not be accepted unless you have made arrangements in advance with me. You will also write regularly in the journal during class, so make sure you bring it with you. Also make sure you have plenty of 3-ring lined paper for the in-class work. Remember: This journal assignment constitutes a major part of your final grade, so it is obviously crucial that you take the journal seriously and do the work on time.

ATTENDANCE: You will be allowed two unexcused absences w/o penalty. Each unexcused miss beyond that will cost you 1/2 of a letter grade. It’s important for you to be in class regularly and prepared to write about and discuss the day’s assignment. If you find yourself having trouble for any reason making it to class or doing the work, let me know so we can talk about your problems. Call or e-mail me or stop by my office.

FINAL GRADE: As I indicated earlier, I will give no individual grades on assignments. Your final grade will be based on the quality of your portfolio, your class participation, attendance, and performance in your group and on oral projects. You will have a chance at the end of the semester to give me your input on the grade you think you deserve. I will listen carefully and weigh what you have to say, but I will make the final decision in the fairest manner possible.

NOTE: MTU’s Affirmative Action Officer has asked that all faculty include the following statement on each course syllabus:

MTU complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disability Act of 1990 (ADÁ). If you have a disability and need a reasonable accommodation for equal access to education or services at MTU, please call Dr. Gloria Melton, Dean of Students, (2212). For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, department head, or the Affirmative Action Office (3310).