Sociology comes with a basic assumption: our individual biographies are intertwined with the history we share with other human beings. Many of our problems are not only personal, but social, collective problems that go beyond any one life. Take unemployment. In a society where one person is out of work, unemployment could be treated as a personal trouble and explained in terms of that person’s situation or character. But when millions are out of work, unemployment is a public issue, and developing solutions means intervening in the political and economic institutions of society as a whole. Global warming, racism, war, economic recession, poverty and homelessness, the rapid growth of prisons - these are problems affecting the lives of millions of individuals. But to look for solutions in the local setting of any one is to miss the woods for the trees: they are problems to do with the way countless local settings are organized into the larger structure of social and historical life.

In section one of the course, we’ll read C.Wright Mills arguing that the promise of sociology lies in learning to see (or imagine) these larger connections. We’ll also read Arlie Hochschild, who’s biographical writing provides a model for articulating the way intimate experience is shaped by the push and pull of a broader society. Learning about Mills and Hochschild together is intended to get you thinking about how you can use sociology to better understand your own life.

Further developing a sociological perspective means ‘positioning’ ourselves within society, and recognizing how our chances in life are shared by other people in similar circumstances. In section two, we’ll explore three of the most important lines of difference studied by sociologists: race, class and gender. These structure social life, and where we stand in relation to these structures has an important influence on our lives and development. Arlie Hochschild, for example, describes how her challenges starting an academic career were not just about individual decisions and choices, but about the way universities make demands on aspiring academics suited largely to men with family support – rather than women with dependent children. That is, her intimate experience was shaped in important ways by institutional forces outside her control that pushed differently on men and women.

In section three, we’ll learn about five social transformations remaking everyday life in America. This will be an opportunity to use your sociological imagination – and the tools developed in the first two sections - to situate your own biography in relation to these historical changes. What impact have they had on your life? On your family and community? How is this influenced by your position within American society? How might it be different, for example, for men as opposed to women? Rich and poor? I hope that thinking through these connections will be a rewarding reminder of everything learned in the course.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE CORE

Introductory sociology touches on central elements of the Boston College core:
Exploring the interplay between individuals and society raises a series of **perennial questions**. The issue of individual versus social responsibility (“structure versus agency” in the language of sociology), will arise again and again. Is success in life mainly about working hard and making good decisions? Or the way society holds out opportunities to some people and not others? Are individuals, or institutions, primarily responsible for issues like unemployment, crime and inequality?

The course is guided by an **historical perspective** and underlying sense of movement and change, encouraging you to think about how things came to be the way they are, how they are different from the past, and how they might be changed in the future. Issues of **cultural diversity** will be important to the recurring themes of inequality and difference. The course will make clear that patterns of experience emerge along lines of race, class and gender – particularly in unequal access to power and resources – and emphasize that social forces act differently on people depending on their position in society.

The materials covered draw on a range of different **methodologies**, from large-scale quantitative studies to in-depth explorations of a single life. This introduces the diverse ways that scholars attempt to understand complex social problems. The main course assessment is **writing-based**, challenging you to express the ideas learned in the course as a polished piece of writing.

Unlike disciplines like astronomy or chemistry, the material for sociology is things people already know well from everyday life. Yet we do not often pause to think about the deeper meaning of these things – the way everyday settings are shaped by forces beyond, or the connection between our private experiences and the fate of others in similar circumstances. I hope the course will provide a space for this sort of reflection: raising questions about values and things taken-for-granted, informing your **personal philosophy**, and getting you thinking about the actions that will most help bring about the world you want to live in.

**GRADING**

The final grades for the class will be determined as follows:

(1) Reading Quizzes 25 percent

A key expectation of the course is that you come to each Tuesday’s class having finished the assigned readings for the week. In line with this, there will be 5 or 6 quizzes distributed throughout the semester testing your knowledge of the week’s readings. You will not know in advance when there will be quizzes (or not). These will be easy tests so long as you have completed the readings. But to know the answers, you will need to come to class each Tuesday having done the reading.

(2) Section One Paper 20 percent

(3) Midterm Test 20 percent

(4) Final Paper 35 percent

**ELECTRONIC DEVICES IN CLASS**

There will be no laptops or other electronic devices (computer, iPad, iPhone, etc.) allowed during the class period. I know people like to use these for note taking, but on the whole, these devices
tend to be more of a distraction than a learning aid. If you have a special reason why you need to use a computer to take notes, please schedule a meeting to discuss with me during office hours.

SECTION ONE

An Introduction to the Sociological Imagination

Week One: The Sociological Imagination, January 13 and 15

Week Two: Life at the Intersection of Biography and History, January 20 and 22

Week Three: The Discipline of Sociology, January 27 and 29

*First Paper Due in class January 29*

SECTION TWO

Social Position: Race, Class and Gender

Week Four: The Social Construction of Race, February 3 and 5

Optional


Week Five: The Social Reality of Race: Racism without Racists, February 10 and 12

Weeks Six: Class Divisions and Power, February 17 and 19

Week Seven: Class and Childhood – Growing up Different, February 24 and 26

Spring Break: March 3 and 5 (no class or reading)

Week Eight: The Social Construction of Gender, March 10 and 12

Week Nine: Becoming Men and Women, March 17 and 19

Midterm Exam in class on March 19

SECTION THREE
Social Transformations Remaking Everyday Life in America

Week Ten: The Rise of Consumer Society, March 24 and 26

Week Eleven: When Works Disappears, March 31

No class April 2 because of Easter Break

Week Twelve: Gender after the Women’s Movement, April 7 and 9

Week Thirteen: The Race to Incarcerate, April 14 and 16

Week Fourteen: Rising Inequality, April 21 and 23

Week Fifteen: Wrapping Up and Final Papers, April 28 and 30
Final Paper Due in Class on April 30th