First-Year Topic Seminar Course Descriptions  
Fall 2020

UNCS2245.01  Role of Law in Society  
Joseph Burns (Provost’s Office) Monday, 4:30-5:45 pm  
Law is arguably the defining structure of Judeo-Christian civilization, but it assumes some specific things about human nature and may mean different things in different cultures. In this seminar specific characteristics of western law will be explored in relation to cultural values, class structure, political systems and religious ideas. The social processes of creating, enforcing and adjudicating “law” will be examined from different perspectives with the intent of raising, though not necessarily resolving, intellectual questions about “a system of law, not men”. Should law define ideal behavior or just unacceptable behavior? Should it symbolize cultural values? Does it favor certain groups or individuals? Should all people be considered equal before the law? Is punishment, particularly capital punishment, effective? Are juries of “peers” the best way to determine guilt? Could international law be a possible mechanism for bringing global peace?  
The seminar is not meant to examine the details of the American legal system, but rather to explore questions about the intellectual and cultural structure of the idea of “Law”. This course is taught on the Newton Campus.

UNCS2245.02  How to do Things with Words: Loaded Language and the History of English  
Robert Stanton (English) Monday, 3:00-4:15 pm  
This seminar will help you to understand and use language more effectively by examining the hidden history behind the words we use. English words come from many languages: Primitive Germanic, Latin, Old Norse, French, Italian, Spanish, Irish, Yiddish, and many others. The force and effectiveness of every word we speak or write depends on where it came from and how it has been used in the past. Each week, we will look at a current piece of English text such as a newspaper editorial, a presidential speech, a standup comedian’s monologue, or an influential website, and discuss it on the level of its words and how they work.

UNCS2245.03  Imagining the Impossible  
Joseph Nugent (English) Tuesday, 4:30-5:45 pm  
Technology’s not just for geeks! In this one-credit Cornerstone course we’ll explore tomorrow’s world – today. The course offers you a friendly and exciting introduction to the ways that technology is changing your life – and your new campus. (And by explaining Canvas and BC’s own in-house technology, this course will ease your transition through the weeks ahead.) Explore everything from the delights of social media to the Oculus Rift to the uses of a drone. Along the way, this course will offer a supportive experience where you’ll get to know other students and faculty, thus building confidence and direction. The course is designed to pique your interest in the world around you, and the technology that’s changing it. Release your inner nerd!

UNCS2245.04  “These are a Few of My Favorite (Economic) Things”  
Tracy Regan (Economics) Wednesday, 3:00-4:15 pm  
This course stands in contrast to the notion that economics is a “dismal science” and instead introduces students to a variety of fun topics, in my opinion, that economists research. Papers and topics range from the design of the QWERTY keyboard, to beauty and the labor market/classroom, to the social impact of 16 and Pregnant with others in between. Students are expected to read the academic articles, at their level of comprehension, before class and to arrive ready and willing to participate in a lively discussion with their peers on the assigned topic.

UNCS2245.05  Exchange  
Can Erbil (Economics) Thursday, 4:30-5:45 pm  
This seminar explores the concept of “exchange” and the different types of exchange encountered in daily life and throughout history. We discuss the similarities and differences of each “exchange”. Every week, one student will lead the discussion on a topic of his/her choice beginning with a brief presentation. Topics include the exchange of gifts in different cultures, the stock exchange, exchange in a relationship, game theory and games of exchange, and many others. The presentation will be the catalyst for class debate. Participants are expected to actively engage and participate in the seminar.

UNCS2245.06  “Food, Glorious Food”  
Karen Miller (History) Thursday, 4:30-5:45 pm  
Almost all college students have a particular food they associate with “home,” a meal they associate with holidays and special occasions, rules about what they will or will not eat, and apprehensions, perhaps, about whether and how University dining commons can adequately fulfill their dining desires. This seminar offers students the opportunity to share and explore their own cultural
traditions, to place those traditions in a larger context of historical narratives of food migrations, taboos, and adaptations. Seminar students will also go behind the scenes of the Dining Commons on Upper and Newton campuses in order to understand the various components Dining Services considers as it plans, prepares, and addresses the diverse food demands of Boston College.

UNCS2245.07  Self Interest: a history  
Penelope Ismay (History) Monday, 3:00-4:15 pm

The entire edifice of economic theory is based on the idea that self-interest is a fundamental human motivation. The idea has become so commonplace, in fact, that it has escaped the narrow bounds of economic theory and now informs the way we think about how to approach nearly every problem of modern life, from higher education to climate change. Yet, however “natural” self-interest might seem to us now, it was not always this way. In this seminar, we will explore the history of self-interest from its unlikely origins as an alternative to perpetual war in medieval Europe to its triumph in the tumultuous time of industrialization in Britain.

UNCS2245.08  Exploring the World of Dance  
Sun Ho Kim (Theatre) Monday, 3:00-4:15 pm

Dance is a universal body language and reflects the human experience and condition. Dance exists in every culture, and we all dance at various times in our lives, but what’s really going on in the world of contemporary dance, and what kinds of dances are out there? In this seminar we will explore the fascinating and diverse world of dance through readings, video presentations, discussions and excursions to actual dance performances to broaden our understanding of dance and learn how we can enjoy and appreciate dance in different ways.

UNCS22450.09  Engaging Difference & Justice at Boston College  
Brian Gareau (Sociology) Monday, 5-6:15 pm

In this seminar, we will explore the meaning of the Engaging Difference & Justice core requirement, its connection to BC’s mission, and the part that students must play to make it a success. What does it mean to “engage” issues around difference and justice at Boston College? This course will challenge students to envision societies in which all can flourish in freedom, integrity, and fullness of life through the mutual respect their members show to one another in their interactions and relationships.

UNCS22450.10  The Freshman International Experience  
Adrienne Nussbaum (International Student & Scholars) Tuesday, 4:30-5:45 pm

Coming to Boston College and to the U.S. to study as an international student can be both an exciting and challenging time for freshmen. This achievement is perhaps the fulfillment of a dream that you and your family have had for many years and so there are many high expectations for success. All freshmen go through significant adjustments their first year, however international students also must acclimate to a different educational system, as well as many cultural differences that may impact both your academic and social life without the support of family and close friends nearby. This goal of this seminar is to help international freshmen better adjust to B.C. and the U.S. It will cover cross-cultural topics such as how values and communications styles can vary across countries, and practical skills for managing expectations and adjustment. It will also include guest speakers from throughout the University who will introduce you to the many resources available to freshman international students to help you succeed both in and out of the classroom. This section is open only to International Students and requires department permission.

UNCS22450.11  The Freshman International Experience  
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UNCS2245.12  Music and . . .  
Jeremiah McGrann (Music) Tuesday, 3:00-4:15 pm

Of themselves the simple physical vibrations of music have no meaning, but somehow people have ascribed the most important values to the experience of music: its importance in cognitive development, its ability to shape and influence society or simply to process
human experience. Through a series of readings and a wide range of musical examples—classical, traditional, popular—we will explore what a musical composition is and what people have thought about music and its effects with a focus on its role in society and in shaping the person. Participants will be asked to explore the place of music within their own life and to possibly encounter music styles they don’t immediately understand.

**UNCS22450.13 Human Rights and the Humanities**
James Smith (English) Tuesday, 1:30-2:45 pm

Boston College espouses a "world view that calls us to learn, to search for truth, and to live in service to other." In this one-credit Freshman Topic Seminar we will explore opportunities for further study at Boston college that engages with Human Rights across the humanities. We will read Human Rights: A very short introduction as an anchor text to inform our discussions. We will engage with Mary Robinson's Climate Justice: Hope, resilience, and the fight for a sustainable future and Bryan Stevenson's Just Mercy: A story of justice and redemption, and attend lectures by both speakers as part of the fall Lowell Humanities Series. And, we will read fiction, memoir, and film to consider the role of the imagination, testimony, and oral history in effecting truth-telling and social change. Along the way, this course will offer a supportive experience where you will get to know your peers and the instructor while building your confidence and plotting possible directions for moving forward at BC.

**UNCS22450.14 Am I My Brother's (or Sister's) Keeper?**
Social Insurance in the United States
Joseph Quinn (Economics) Tuesday, 4:30-5:45 pm

This course will introduce students to the concepts of social insurance and social assistance, with emphasis on three major programs in the U.S.: Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. These are also the main three components of what some call the Entitlement Crisis. We will look at the goals, accomplishments and challenges of these three programs and at proposals for reform.

**UNCS2245.15 A College Student's Guide to the Science of Memory**
Elizabeth Kensinger (Psychology) Wednesday, 1:00-2:15 pm

How are memories formed, stored, and retrieved? When do these processes lead to forgetting, and why? Can we – as individuals, or as a society – forget information that we don’t want to remember? Can we improve our ability to hold onto memories that we want to retain? In this seminar, we will delve into these questions, using the study of memory from psychological and neuroscience perspectives as our guide. This seminar is designed to foster scientific thinking and to enhance each student’s communication and critical thinking skills, all while discussing a topic (how memory works) of high relevance to college students.

**UNCS2245.16 War in the Western World**
Devin Pendas (History) Tuesday, 1:30-2:45 pm

"You can’t say that civilizations don’t advance,” Will Rogers once said, “for in every war they kill you in a new way” (New York Times, Dec. 23, 1929). War is — tragically — perhaps one of the most universal of human experiences. Yet at the same time, it is deeply historical. Every war is different and not just in the obvious sense that each war involves different combatants and different winners and losers but also in the sense that the experience and meaning of war itself changes over time. This seminar will focus on the history of war in the Western world from ancient times to the present, asking in particular how war has changed over time. We will look at both the way war was understood (what it was felt to be and why it was thought to be justified) and how it was experienced (how men, and increasingly women, killed and died).

**UNCS2245.17 Seeing is Not Believing: Propaganda in the 21ST Century**
Thomas Kaplan-Maxfield (English) Monday, 1:00-2:15 pm

This course will focus on the ways in which we live in a world filled with various forms of propaganda, from advertising to political campaigns, all of which contain presuppositions and assumed premises that greatly affect how we think. At a certain level, all thinking is a belief system based on particular assumptions, but this class will examine, via readings and films, many ways in which forms of propaganda operate in our society to produce specific and sometimes extreme forms of belief.

Subjects that will be considered include the corporation, the official story of 9/11, and the NSA.

For example, the Iraq invasion was the first time in our country’s history that the military built and used a media center to control what was shown and how. Reporters were “embedded” in military units as a way of controlling reporting on the invasion. Pictures of flag-draped caskets of American war dead returning home were forbidden, unlike during the Vietnam conflict in which they were regularly shown.

**UNCS2245.18 Theatre: Onstage and Off**
Patricia Riggin (Theatre) Monday, 4:30- 5:45 pm

Theatre’s roots are deeply embedded in the art of storytelling, and in our digital age with its abbreviated means of communication, the power of the story, the full story, remains a rich resource for exploring our shared humanity and as a means of individual discovery. By attending theatre in Boston and on campus, we will encounter people, places, and ideas that will delight and provoke; in a fun and supportive atmosphere, the class will enjoy acting exercises that develop your self-expression, creativity, and ability to live in the moment. Our seminar will be a place to play, de-stress, and connect with others.

UNCS2245.19 Advising the President: Macroeconomic Policy & the Control of Economic Advisers
Robert Murphy (Economics) Wednesday, 3:00-4:15 pm

This seminar will explore macroeconomic policy in the US over the past half century using as a primary historical source the annual reports of the Council of Economic Advisers to the President of the United States. We will assess the policy agenda of various White House administrations, with particular focus on the response to economic crises and problems. In addition, we will discuss the institutional arrangements of policy advising, including the Employment and Growth Act of 1946 and its subsequent amendments, as well as the interaction of White House administrations with the Federal Reserve.

UNCS2245.20 Monsters and the Monstrous
Jason Cavallari (University Fellowships) Monday, 4:30-5:45 pm

Vampires. Werewolves. Witches. From dragons to mad serial killers, history is full of the weird, the dark, and the scary. Every society learns to fear someone or something in order to protect us from the unfamiliar, the impermissible, or the Other. Knowing what scares us, however, also tells us more about ourselves, our desires, and that which we cannot tolerate. This course uses monsters and the idea of the monstrous to introduce students to the study of history through experience with historical sources, pop culture sources, and in conversation with historical scholarship on things that go bump in the night.

UNCS2245.21 First Gen Students: Using Our Strengths to Succeed in College
Dacia Gentilie (Learning to Learn Program) Tuesday, 1:30-2:45 pm

Arriving on campus for the first weeks and months of college can be both a thrilling and daunting time. Questions race through our heads: What are the rules, spoken and unspoken? What are the best classes to take? Should I let anyone know that I have questions? What will they think of me, if I don’t understand everything? These questions often have a different impact on first generation college students, who are trailblazers for themselves and their families. First gen students often carry themselves and all of the hopes and dreams of their friends and families into their college experience, without the benefit of advice from those who have struggled with the academic and social demands of the world of the university.

This seminar will be a place for first gen students to explore their new lives as college students, while embracing their past and pursuing their dreams for the future.

UNCS2245.22 Global Food for Political Thought
Paul Christensen (Political Science) Tuesday, 3:00-4:15 pm

To the extent that “we are what we eat,” we are all members of a global food chain that stretches from our backyards to small towns in West Africa and ocean-going factory ships in Asia—and beyond. But how much do we really know about what we eat, or what we might call the political economy of the global food system? In this seminar, Global Food for Political Thought, we will explore a series of questions about the political economy of what we eat, for example: why are avocados an environmental and social problem in Mexico? What does our love of chocolate have to do with water shortages, gender inequality, and child labor in Nigeria and the Ivory Coast? Why do small and medium sized farms struggle to survive in the United States? What does our demand for “cheap food” have to do with immigration and human trafficking? How much does politics play a role in determining of what counts as “organic”? We will explore these questions and others with the help of local farmers and others in the food business with the goal of better understanding the impact of what and how we consume.

UNCS2245.23 Justice, Law, and the Common Good
Greg Kalscheur, SJ (Dean, Morrissey College of Arts & Sciences) Monday 4-5:15 pm

In this seminar we will explore the distinctive vision of the person, of the relationship between the person and society, and of the requirements of the good or just society that flow out of the Catholic social thought tradition. This tradition includes a distinctive way of thinking about the nature and purpose of law and the relationship between law and morality. We will also try to think in a sustained way about justice: what do we mean when we use the word justice, what does justice require, how might we understand justice as a virtue rather than as an abstract idea, what is the relationship between legal justice and social justice, between a biblical understanding of justice and philosophical or legal understandings of justice? A Boston College education strives to prepare students for meaningful lives oriented toward service of the common good -- how might we understand what service of the common good asks of us?
UNCS2245.24  Seeking to Understand Innovation and Creativity
Charles Hoffman (Biology) Thursday 1:30-2:45 pm

Make no mistake about it, I do not have the answers, but in this seminar we will explore the characteristics of people deemed exceptionally creative and innovative. We will look into the lives of people recognized this year by MIT’s 35 Innovators Under 35 and recent MacArthur Genius Fellows, including people working in a wide range of disciplines. We will also look at puzzles or brainteasers to develop our own skills.

UNCS2245.25  Maps of the Modern World
Elizabeth Shlala (Core Curriculum) Monday, 4:30-5:45

Where in the world are you? This seminar is a one-credit boot camp in historical geography. In our class, we will eradicate geographical ignorance while positioning ourselves in the world. The seminar will not only enhance your basic working knowledge of the map(s) of the modern world, but it will also give you the historical and political context for territorial conflicts around the globe. You are guaranteed to never look at a map as one-dimensional ever again!