First-Year Topic Seminar Descriptions
Fall 2021

UNCS2245.01 Law & Society
Joe Burns (Provost’s Office), Monday 4:30pm - 5:45pm

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 12:00pm - 1:15pm

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), Thursday 1:30pm - 2:45pm

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 3:00pm - 4:15pm
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 Inclusive Prosperity**  
Can Erbil (Economics), Wednesday 12:00pm - 1:15pm

As the "Economics for Inclusive Prosperity” platform states “...*We live in an age of astonishing inequality. Income and wealth disparities between the rich and the poor in the United States have risen to heights not seen since the gilded age in the early part of the 20th century. Technological changes and globalization have fueled great wealth accumulation among those able to take advantage of them, but have left large segments of the population behind.*”

This seminar explores the concept of “inclusive prosperity” and investigates the roots of increasing inequality in the US, as well as across the globe. We will discuss several policy briefs from the EfIP platform and other brand new research and data-driven analysis. Whenever we can, we will try to brainstorm on policy recommendations. Every week one student will lead the discussion on a topic of their choice beginning with a brief presentation. Topics will need to be connected to concepts of economic inequality, racial and gender inequality, opportunity inequality, equity and economic justice, economic growth, economic development, poverty and distributional justice - all leading to the same goal of inclusive prosperity. Students are encouraged to draw connections to the topic of their choice and their own personal experiences. The presentation will be the catalyst for class further debate. All students are expected to actively engage and participate in this seminar. As an added bonus, we will focus on how to prepare and make an effective presentation and some of the basics of public speech.

**UNCS2245.06 Food, Glorious Food**  
Karen Miller (History), Thursday 4:30pm - 5:45pm

This seminar offers the opportunity to explore various ways in which food is implicated in our lives and histories. Whether it is the food that reminds you of home or a dish you always have for significant family gatherings, or food as a reflection of identity or heritage, almost all college students have particular food they associate with “home”. They have rules about what they will/will not eat, and apprehension about whether Dining Services can adequately address their culinary, cultural, or lifestyle choices over the course of the semester. They might ask why campus food costs so much, why a university’s dining commons do not outsource to popular food franchises. Where do these dining dollars go at the end of the academic year- and why?

To find answers and insights to our food questions, we will examine the various ways in which cultural, economic, environmental, lifestyle choices, and accessibility issues are engaged to the campus by staff as well as by student organizations. We will also examine issues connected to food including social justice, food deserts and scarcity, institutional food providers, future food, and food as a hobby, as a job, and as part of a social justice movement.

**UNCS2245.07 Self Interest: a History**  
Penny Ismay (History), Monday 3:00pm - 4:15pm
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), M 3:00pm - 4:15pm

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.

**UNCS2245.09 Using Economics to Challenge Intuition**  
Geoff Sanzenbacher (Economics), Thursday 12:00 - 1:15 pm

Could a good growing season actually decrease farmers’ revenue? Could an increase in the minimum wage somehow increase employment? And, could a policy designed to make it harder to discriminate against one group actually make discrimination more likely? This course will discuss how economics can predict things that run counter to intuition, with a special eye on issues related to inequality.

**UNCS2245.10 The Freshman International Student Experience (International Students ONLY)**  
Adrienne Nussbaum (Office of International Students & Scholars), Tuesday 4:30pm - 5:45pm

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.

**UNCS2245.11 The Freshman International Student Experience (International Students ONLY)**  
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UNCS2245.12 America Through the Musical
Jeremiah McGrann (Music), Tuesday 3:00pm - 4:15pm

In this seminar we’ll be looking at both stage and movie musicals to see how America presents itself and why. Issues include patriotism, protest, gender empowerment, the representation of ethnicity, and the nature of love. Works include *Cabaret, South Pacific, Company, Hamilton* and less known world from the African-American stage such as *Shuffle Along* and *Ain’t Misbehavin*. The course incorporates related genres such as dance/ballet and opera. Who are we and how do we present ourselves on the musical stage and why?

UNCS2245.13 Human Right and the Humanities
James Smith (English), Tuesday 1:30pm - 2:45pm

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.

UNCS2245.14 Am I My Brother’s (or Sister’s) Keeper? Social Insurance in America
Joseph Quinn (Economics), Tuesday 4:30pm - 5:45pm

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 1:00pm - 2:15pm

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 1:30pm - 2:45pm

“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), Tuesday 12:00pm - 1:15pm

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 4:30pm - 5:45pm

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  **The Gig Economy**  
Matt Rutledge (Economics), Wednesday 4:30pm - 5:45pm
The gig economy is exploding – and it’s more than just Uber, DoorDash, and Instacart. Other forms of nontraditional employment, such as independent contracting and temping, also seem to be on the rise. As this sector has grown, so have the concerns about what the future of work might entail. Are we seeing the death of “your grandfather’s job” – predictable tasks, done on-site, with a steady salary and health and retirement benefits? Who will gain from these shifts, and who does this leave at risk? Students will read economic studies on the effects of nontraditional employment, think deeply about the role of employment in both our household finances and our identities, and participate in active discussions about what we hope to get out of work.

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

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 Gentilella (Learning to Learn Program), Tuesday 1:30pm - 2:45pm

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.

UNCS2245.23 Justice, Law, and the Common Good  
Greg Kalscheur, SJ (Dean, Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences), Monday 4:00pm - 5:15pm

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  
Charlie Hoffman (Biology), Thursday 1:30pm - 2:45pm
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 4:30pm - 5:45pm

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!