About the School of Arts and Sciences Signature Courses

Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences Signature Courses are foundational courses covering engaging topics of grand intellectual sweep and enduring importance. They are designed and taught by our renowned scholars and scientists who are not only recognized for their specialized research but are also eloquent and demanding award-winning teachers.

Each course is made up of a combination of capacious lectures by faculty and small discussion sections led by graduate students from our nationally ranked graduate programs. They establish a common basis for intellectual exchange and define us as the School of Arts and Sciences community of students and scholars working together.

This year’s courses on the next page!  
sas.rutgers.edu/signature-courses
Wars, Wayfarers, and the Wall: A History of the U.S.-Mexican Border

Professor Camilla Townsend, History
01:506:260 (3 credits)
Core: CCO, HST

The U.S.-Mexican border is a potent political symbol. Today, Americans are deeply divided in their assumptions about it. But it has not always been this way. Where did such strength of feeling come from? And what should we do about it? This course examines changing American understandings of our border with Mexico.

In the early 1800s, the Southwest, including most of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas, was Mexican territory. Many Americans wanted to move the U.S. border south and take this area from Mexico. Once that happened after the Mexican American War, American conceptions of what our border meant underwent significant change: where once people had wanted to cross the line and move onward, they now began to imagine the line as something to be defended. Yet in the first half of the twentieth century, the U.S. government worked hard to encourage the migration northward of many thousands of needed workers. It was only in the second half of the century that the government’s goal shifted to stopping the migrations that had been started. How and why did popular conceptions in North America change? Were these feelings related to changes in government policy?

Inequality
Professor Colin Campbell
Economics
01:220:120 (4 credits)
Core: CCO, SCL

What accounts for the striking increase of economic inequality over the past four decades in the United States? Does it have parallels in earlier times or in other advanced countries? Has political inequality increased too? Do Americans care about growing inequality? Should they? What might we do to reduce inequality?

After an initial look at how we measure economic inequality, we examine the evidence of its increase and set it in international context. We then embark on a tour of some leading economic hypotheses for the rise in inequality, ranging from immigration and globalization to superstars and winner-take-all markets. Only part of our answer can be found here, for as Edward Tufte has observed, "economic life vibrates with the rhythm of politics." The economy’s performance varies systematically with which political party is in power. We look into why this surprising pattern persists and how it raises income inequality. We also explore differences between rich and poor in voting power and political voice and participation—and the making of public policy. Our path toward answering these questions touches on many disciplines in the arts and sciences, including anthropology, economics, history, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology.

Heroism
Professor Wendy Swartz
Asian Languages and Cultures
01:098:255 (4 credits)
Core: CCO, AHp

What makes ordinary people do extraordinary things? What defines a hero or heroine, and are they defined differently? What roles do culture and history play in these definitions? How do fictional and historical heroes and heroines compare? What turns rebels, agitators, iconoclasts, or even fools into heroes?

This course examines heroism across cultures, time, and gender. Shrines and monuments, epics and songs, paintings and films extol heroic figures—real, idealized, or legendary. What can heroes or heroines tell us about a culture? What motivates someone to sacrifice for a community, country, or humanity? We explore the cultural conditioning, ethical reasoning, and moral compass of great heroes and heroines in history and literature, from Greek epic heroes to Chinese assassin-retainers, women warriors to samurais, Shakespearean tragic heroes to the real-life Game of Thrones in medieval Europe, civil rights leaders to women’s rights crusaders, and comic superheroes to modern day heroes.

Extinction
Professors Rob Scott and David Hughes
Anthropology
01:070:111 (4 credits)
Core: CCD or CCO; NS

Do you worry about nuclear annihilation? Does the possibility of bioterrorism scare you? Are you dismayed by growing political violence and ongoing cultural genocides such as the Rohingya crisis? Are you concerned about habitat destruction, catastrophic climate change, widespread famine, or newly drug-resistant diseases? Ever wonder what it means to be a species that can imagine its own demise, understand its role in the demise of another, or contemplate the end of all life?

Extinction takes a multiperspective, interdisciplinary approach to understanding extinction as a biological and cultural process, and probes the meaning and significance of such processes for humans around the globe in the 21st century.