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!
Human Nature and Human Diversity  
Professor Stephen Stich, Philosophy  
Cognitive Science  
01:730/185:253 (4 credits)  
Core: CCD, CCO, and AHO

In an era of globalization everybody talks about diversity, but how much do you actually know about human nature and human diversity?

Why is there so much diversity in sex and gender, race, diet, morality and norms, political views, religious beliefs, cognition, perceptions, and emotions? Is this just human nature? Are there any universals in human nature? What explanations are offered by evolutionary psychology; environmental variability and cultural materialism; gene-culture co-evolution and the tribal instincts hypothesis; and social construction theories? Does cognitive and perceptual diversity raise impenetrable barriers among people?

How should we react to human diversity and the moral controversies that specific diversities generate? Should we respond from a position of moral objectivity, cultural relativism, or moral skepticism? What is the role of reason, emotion, and intuition in moral judgment?

Data 101  
Professor Tomasz Imieliński  
Computer Science  
01:198:142 and 01:960:142 (4 credits)  
Core: CCO; QQ or QR

"Big Data," algorithms, and statistics are everywhere today. How do you tell good data from bad? Misinformation from useful analysis? And who owns the information about our lives and decisions?

Data 101 will help you improve your data literacy and develop a healthy skepticism about empirical claims presented in the popular media. We will explore examples of erroneous, rushed, and ad hoc conclusions based on so-called “big data,” and you will get hands-on experience analyzing and using data to make persuasive arguments. You will also learn to make more informed decisions about what you find and share online. Along the way, you will learn fundamental concepts in statistics and probability and acquire basic programming skills that will benefit you in your future coursework and beyond.

Cities  
Professor D. Asher Ghertner  
Geography  
01:450:250 (4 Credits)  
Core: CCD, SCL

The 21st century is an urban century. More than half of the world’s population now lives in cities. The United Nations estimates that net global population growth henceforth will take place entirely in cities, meaning the rural population has reached its historical maximum. Cities also now dominate the economic output of most nations and have become the most dynamic sources of ideas, opportunities, and dreams. Yet, cities are also where inequality is most visible making them contested territories where different classes and interest groups jostle for space and influence.

This course examines what makes cities contradictory spaces of work, residence, and play that at once enable the release of creative energies, aspirations, and economies yet simultaneously restrict, control, and confine. It does so by using cities to explore the most pressing social concerns of our times: from the urbanization of terrorism and security; to the enduring effects of housing segregation in the US and abroad; to the impacts of global climate change on human settlement patterns; to the causes and consequences of suburbanization and gentrification.

Sea Change: The Rise and Fall of Sea Level and the Jersey Shore  
Professor Kenneth Miller  
Earth and Planetary Sciences  
01:460:110 (3 credits)  
Core: CCO, NS

What do woolly mammoths and the Jersey Shore have in common? How long until your dorm room has an ocean view? Why is sea level rising? Is it our fault? Can we stop it? Should we? What are the economic, ethical, and political realities of dealing with rising sea level? Viewing modern sea-level and climate change through a 100-million-year geological perspective, in this course you will reconstruct sea-level
changes using different geological methods and try to predict the future, the impact on the Jersey Shore, and our options to fight back.

Designed not just for the environmentally conscious but also for skeptics and those simply curious about where we have been and where we are going, this course employs basic science concepts and helps nonspecialists build the scientific literacy needed to confront the economic, ethical, and political challenges of sea change in the 21st century. Leave your preconceived notions behind!

The Arts of Power: Ritual, Myth, and Propaganda from the Age of Augustus to the World of Wikileaks
Professor Alastair Bellany, History
01:510:245 (4 Credits)
Core: HST, SCL

Power. How is it constructed and exercised? What legitimates the use of power and what makes for effective acts of resistance and revolution? What do the conceptual tools of historians, anthropologists, literary critics, and art historians reveal about the cultural construction of political power? What light do the complex experiences of the past throw on our turbulent present and future?

From the cult of the Roman emperor to the sacral kingship of the middle ages; from Renaissance courts to revolutionary cities; from the propaganda image of the totalitarian leader to the tabloid celebrity of the modern princess; from the imperial colony to the surveillance state and wikileaks, myths, rituals, and the arts have created and sustained (and, at times, resisted) many different forms of political authority.

The Arts of Power explores how religious beliefs and legends, art and movies, revolutionary hymns and street posters, dissident rock bands and poets, public executions and political advertisements, and coronations and festivals shape and legitimate, or de-legitimate, the exercise of power in the world around us.

Religions Now: 21st Century Controversies
Professors Tia Kolbaba and Joseph Williams
Religion
01:840:105 (4 credits)
Core: CCD, AHo

Everywhere you look, religions—and religious controversies—are shaping our world. A powerful source of beliefs, moral claims, and cultural practices, religions profoundly influence our contemporary world.

For some, religion is held up as the key solution to various social ills such as poverty and racial tension. For others, religion is a major part of the problem. Religion generates critiques of inequality and capitalism while others invoke it to celebrate the free market and individual wealth. And, religious concerns shape views on policy issues as diverse as same-sex marriage, climate change, and government-sponsored healthcare. From challenges to evolution to debates on stem-cell research, religions juxtapose faith and modern science. Religions likewise factor prominently in various military conflicts around the globe and in the long-running debates over the proper relationship between religion and the state.

Religions Now focuses on how religions, both as belief systems and socio-cultural systems, are interwoven in today’s challenges. How are religions, themselves, changing in response to contemporary events and developments? How can the academic study of religions help us assess and make sense of religion’s role in 21st century societies?