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
Data 101
Professor Tomasz Imielinski or Samaneh Gholizadeh Hamidi, Computer Science
01:198:142 (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.

The Color of Health: How Does Inequality Get Under the Skin?
Professor Dawne Mouzon, Sociology
01:920:115 (4 credits)
Core: CCD

Non-Hispanic White people in the United States have a life expectancy at birth that is six years longer than non-Hispanic Black Americans, an inequity that has further worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet many other health paradoxes exist, such as the longer life expectancy of both Asian and Hispanic/Latino Americans relative to non-Hispanic Whites, and the better health status of immigrants in the United States compared to their U.S.-born counterparts. What are the best explanations for these expected and unexpected patterns in health? Although we often think of inequality as the result of individual choices and values, this course examines the nature of racial/ethnic structural inequalities in the United States and how these inequalities often manifest into poor health outcomes among people of color. Students will develop a sociological imagination in order to understand how social and health inequalities based on race, ethnicity, and immigration status are very much a function of structural inequalities. They will use this sociological imagination to challenge typical assumptions regarding the nature of social and health inequality through the investigation of a wide range of intersecting social, historical, and environmental factors.

Data and American Society: From Almanacs to Algorithms
Professor Jamie Pietruska, History
01:512:237 (3 credits)
Core: CCO, HST

What, if anything, is new about “Big Data” in the 21st century? How is data made, rather than simply “found” in specific social contexts? How has data enabled advances in science, technology, and medicine—while also expanding government and corporate capacity for surveillance and control in American society? How has data been used to perpetuate inequality but also to resist it?

This course examines the “datafication” of American society: how and why data became central to government, business, and daily life in the United States from the 19th century to the present day. From early American almanacs to 21st-century algorithms, data has been produced, managed, and used by public and private institutions as well as individuals to calculate, control, and predict myriad aspects of society. This course will uncover the surprising histories of census data and identity documents, credit scores and economic indicators, SAT scores and opinion polls, digital databases and data visualizations, weather forecasting and climate modeling, and baseball statistics and biometric data—and their implications for today’s debates over security, privacy, democracy, and inequality in the age of “Big Data.”

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 time 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 will examine the evidence of its increase and set it in international context. We will then embark on a tour of some leading economic hypotheses for the rise in inequality, ranging from immigration and globalization to superstar and winner-take-all markets. We will also explore differences between rich and poor in voting power and political voice and participation—and whether these differences matter in the extent to which average citizens or elites get their way in the making of public policy.

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 intertwined 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?