Honors Colloquia

Colloquia are open to first-year Honors Program students only. Registration for colloquia courses will take place on **November 17th at 7:00 a.m.**

A 3.00 GPA after the fall semester is required to keep enrollment in an Honors colloquium.

HONR 290-080
**From Gilgamesh to Godzilla – We are the Storytelling Animal**
Steve Tague

We stream four seasons of Grey’s Anatomy in one weekend, binge on Luther, watch repeats of The Wire, jones like an addict for the next season of House of Cards. “What is wrong with you,” your parents ask (while they secretly do the same thing)? Next time they ask, tell them, “I am rehearsing for life.” This is what Johnathan Gottschall thinks. If that doesn’t satisfy say, “I am seeking a kind of Jungian balance in my life.” This is what Christopher Booker believes is at the bottom of our insatiable appetite for stories. There is no question that our appetite for stories seems without limit, the evidence is overwhelming, but the rather hot topic of why, as it burns up the evolutionary biology, psychology and neuroscience journals, will be the subject of this class. In this class we will use many of the forms of narrative that we consume: movies, TV, song lyrics and poetry, novels and plays. We will be reading “The Storytelling Animal” by Gottschall and many articles and columns from the NY Times and the Wall Street Journal about who we are as a culture in this country, particularly in art and entertainment. The student will be asked to write four papers. One of the papers will explore which of the “seven basic plots” is most attractive to them and why. In a second paper, students will be asked to write about something that bothers them in our culture. A third will be about the story of the student and the final paper about who we are as a culture, now, in the US. All four papers will be in the form or style of personal essay, writing mostly in the first person, transecting, as Emily Fox Gordon has written, “the past, slicing through it first from one angle, then from another, until—though it can never be captured—some fugitive truth has been definitively cornered.”

HONR 290-081
**Reading Crucial Texts**
Lawrence Duggan

Learning to read texts accurately and dispassionately is one of the most critical skills which any educated person should cultivate and constantly refine. We will therefore spend the semester reading closely, discussing, and writing about provocative selections from four central, meaty texts: the Bible, Aristotle's *Politics*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, and the Quran. We will look closely at what these texts (and different translations of those works) say and do not say about creation, women, slavery, politicians, and sacred war, and reflect upon our knee-jerk reactions to certain passages and what our reactions teach us about ourselves and our cultural conditioning.

HONR 290-082
**Dangerous Texts**
Laura Helton

When is literature considered so dangerous it gets banned, burned, censored, or spied upon? This class explores that question through four case studies in American history and material culture: the fury caused by David Walker’s 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, a radical manifesto against slavery that was smuggled into the South by black seamen; the banning of Walt Whitman’s 1855 poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, deemed too “shocking” by publishers and vice squads alike; the FBI’s surveillance of African American writers in the 1960s, including James Baldwin; and the fight waged by LGBTQ authors for the right to send their magazines through the mail. In this course, you will read banned texts, study the material life of literary objects, learn how authors used underground networks to transmit their works, critically read FBI files, and develop your own project to explore what it means to outlaw literature.
HONR 290-083
Gods, Heroes, and Superheroes

Alan Fox

We will examine religion and myth by looking at its most modern expression in the Superhero genre. Superheroes are a modern form of mythology, in that religious motifs are prominent in the characters, situations, and ideas presented in these stories. For instance, in the case of Superman, this includes the fact that Superman’s Kryptonian family name, El, is the Hebrew word for any divine being, and he is the only son of a father from a distant planet sent to save humankind, discovered by locals like Moses in his basket of reeds. It is characteristic of the archetypal and mythic nature of comics that characters like Superman and Batman can be reinvented in so many different ways and still retain their power and influence. We will read works by Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell about myth and archetype, and movies, graphic novels, and novels including American Gods, Kingdom Come, the Dark Knight Returns, the Ultimates, and Watchmen, among others. Students will write several response papers, two extended essays with rewrites, and a final research paper on the topic of the student’s choosing. Class participation will also be emphasized.

HONR 290-085
Making Shakespeare

Matt Kinservik

Today you can buy Shakespeare finger puppets and Shakespearean insult mugs. You can read a choose-your-own-adventure Hamlet and watch Shakespeare’s plays reimagined in works like 10 Things I Hate about You and The Lion King. You can even see the Bard’s plays performed in a reconstructed Globe Theatre, complete with the only thatched roof in modern-day London. But how did Shakespeare become Shakespeare? How did this man transform from a working actor and playwright to the “be-all and the end-all” (to quote the man himself) of the English literary tradition? And what can Shakespeare-mania, or “Bardolatry,” teach us about the ways that we construct a literary canon? To answer these questions, we will study Shakespeare’s changing reputation over the centuries. Beginning with the late 17th century, when Samuel Pepys declared that Romeo and Juliet was the “worst [play] that ever I heard in my life,” we will study the ways that writers “improved” Shakespeare by adding more music, dancing, and (occasionally) flying witches. As we study these textual adaptations, we will also work to reconstruct their performance histories, allowing us to imagine what these plays would have been like to witness. We will move through the 18th century, which saw the publication of new editions of Shakespeare’s plays and first biographies, as well as memorable performances by celebrity actors like David Garrick. During this period, Arthur Murphy declared that Shakespeare had become a “kind of established religion in poetry.” Over the course of the semester, students will write papers and make oral presentations, analyzing texts and other material objects that memorialize the playwright. The course will also include collaborative assignments in which students design and present digital artifacts that explore Shakespeare’s many afterlives.

HONR 291-080
Landmark Supreme Court Cases

Phillip Mink

The U.S. Supreme Court revolutionized life in the 20th Century, and that will likely continue in the 21st. The Court opened the last century by sanctioning state-sponsored segregation in Plessy v. Ferguson. Five decades later the Court changed course in Brown v. Board of Education, and as a result the Civil Rights Movement gained enough strength to pass the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. The Court ruled in 1973 that women have a constitutional right to an abortion, igniting a firestorm that continues to this day. The Court created another firestorm in 2015 by ruling that same-sex marriage is also protected by the Constitution. This course will analyze how the Court decides these divisive issues. How, for instance, do the nation’s political currents influence the court? Has the Court changed society, or has it created unresolvable controversies by deciding issues that would have been best addressed by state legislatures and Congress? Does the Constitution have an inherent meaning, or does its meaning evolve with society’s changing attitudes? In exploring these topics, we will read court cases, media commentary, and essays by the Supreme Court Justices. We will also watch films and documentaries that capture the best and worst of our legal system. Finally, this course will focus intently on writing with clarity and concision, the essential elements of legal writing.

HONR 291-081
Failure

Megan Killian

What does it mean to fail? How do we handle failure when it occurs? Can we design for the inevitable failure, or should we aim to prevent it? In this colloquium, we will discuss several engineering, medical, and economic crises, placing special emphasis on what defined these events as failures (or not failures). Case studies of engineering, medical, and economic failures will be examined throughout the duration of this course, with special emphasis on the ethical and societal implications of these events. For example, the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion in 1986 tragically resulted in the death of all seven crewmembers.
on board; in addition, this accident led to an overhaul of the Space Shuttle program, a much-needed discussion regarding the ethics of engineering decision-making, and demand from the public sector on agency transparency. In this course, we will discuss how failure can be discovered, predicted, mitigated, and— in some cases— ignored, and what impact these actions have on society. Additionally, we will address what it means to define failure, how to handle and address failure, and how to design for or against failure. This course will utilize excerpts from popular texts, such as The Big Short by Michael Lewis and Voices from Chernobyl by Svetlana Alexievich, as well as interview transcripts, magazine articles, accident reports, podcasts, documentary footage, and filmography.

HONR 291-082
Gender and Sexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome
Marcaline Boyd
This course will examine the representation of gender and sexuality in ancient Greece and Rome. Since the lives of women are often neglected in more traditional ancient civilization courses, this course devotes a good deal of attention to the lives and representations of women in Greece and Rome. We shall also consider the lives of men and more generally how concepts of masculinity and femininity shaped Greek and Roman mythology, literature, artwork, and daily life. We will investigate a wide range of texts, including tragedy, comedy, poetry, philosophy, legal documents, and medical treatises, as well as material culture (e.g. classical sculpture and architecture, images on pots, and wall paintings). This course will also explore gender through the prism of a variety of cultural and social processes: myth, art, legal systems, prostitution, homosexuality, religion, politics, medicine, and family. Throughout this course, we will focus on how gender figures as a central motif in ancient Greece and Rome, and gain, it is hoped, a fuller understanding of the role that gender plays in our own society.

HONR 291-083
Impact of Sports on Race, Culture and Society
Ron Whittington
This course will focus on moments in history from the 1800s to the present where sports played a major role in forming attitudes and shaping cultures. We will discuss points in time where the very mention of a sports figure could insight a riot, cause youth to spend enormous sums of money to purchase the latest styles or brand names, or lead a government to bid and host Olympic events that will ultimately bankrupt the economy. We will also discuss the impact of sports in the quest for human rights, asking questions related to equality of gender as well as race. An atmosphere of respect will be present at all times, even when there are different points of view presented. Readings include: From Jack Johnson to LeBron James by Chris Lamb, Nebraska Press. Additional articles, books and films related to class discussion topic will be assigned as needed.

HONR 292-080
The Global Energy Revolution: Fossil Fuels to Fracking to Renewables
John Madsen
In this colloquium, we will explore the on-going global energy revolution involving the transition from fossil fuels (coal, oil and natural gas) to unconventional sources of oil and natural gas via fracking to clean, renewable energy sources. Through a series of problem-based learning investigations, we will examine the geologic setting, exploration and recovery, and human use of fossil-fuels and the various types of renewable energy sources including hydropower, solar, wind, and biomass. In addition, we will discuss how the energy revolution impacts global politics. Activities to be completed during this seminar will include three group written reports, PowerPoint and poster presentations, two individual essays focused on current global energy issues, and an individual research report on a topic of interest derived from participation in the course. Readings will include the text book “Energy, Environment, and Climate” by Richard Wolfson and selected materials from energy- and geological-related reports and texts.

HONR 292-081
Portrait of a Pariah
Matthew Weinert
Community is often defined in the positive terms of commonality of dispositions, interests, values, and purposes. Yet there is a dark side to community formation: the Otherizing of a people. Thus, while this course examines, broadly, the relationships between human groups and their natural, constructed, and aesthetic environments; the social and cultural institutions (e.g., family, state, religion) that govern such relationships; and the ethical foundations, conventions, and norms that organize life on local and global scales, we do so through an unusual optic: the pariah. Pariahs are not simply outcasts. Rather, the pariah is one who develops an intense personal sense of honor and pride in the very identity that social, political, and religious institutions have deployed in sinister ways to ridicule, persecute, exclude, expel, and even, in extreme cases, exterminate pariahs. The point is to understand why societies create pariahs, and how pariahs learn to cope with their status. Both, in the end, teach us valuable lessons about identity and the construction of socio-political life. In the past, we considered systematic assaults on women branded as witches and the combating of piracy, both of which played important roles in the formation of the early
modern state; illegitimate sexualities (homosexuality, inter-racial marriage/relationships) in Cuba and the United States; Jews in 18th and 19th century Europe; Uganda’s expulsion of Asians in 1972; widows in India; Japanese-American concentration/internment camps during WWII; the stigmatization of returning Japanese soldiers to a defeated nation at the end of WWII; and Australia's forced abduction and assimilation of aboriginal children. Please note that cases are subject to change.

HONR 292-082
True Crime
Eric Rise
In this colloquium, we will explore Americans’ enduring fascination with crime by examining non-fiction crime narratives from the last three centuries. We will consider these stories as cultural artifacts that can help us understand the changing conceptions of crime and its relation to race, class, gender, politics, and morality. We will also look at “true crime” as a genre with conventions of storytelling and characterization. Our sources will include the last words of executed criminals in colonial America; journalistic accounts of frontier outlaws, gangsters, and serial killers; true crime classics such as In Cold Blood and Helter Skelter; films including Goodfellas and Capturing the Friedmans; TV programs (e.g. COPS and Making a Murderer); and podcasts such as Serial. Writing assignments will include short analytical and creative essays, and a longer research paper on a crime of your choosing. (Caution: Some assignments contain graphic portrayals of heinous crimes.)

HONR 292-083
Grand Challenges for Innovation and Society
Sujata Bhatia
As a society, we must not confuse technological advancement with moral progress. If we fail to do so, then we are in danger of becoming “tools of our tools,” in the words of Henry David Thoreau. Since the ultimate goal of technology is to improve the quality of life for all, we must be cognizant of not only the technical feasibility of our designs, but also the social impact on humanity, as well as the environmental impact on our shared planet. Technology structures our communication, transportation, education, health care, and economy. Technology drives the distribution of food, water, energy, and shelter. Technology shapes the way we work, the way we are born, the way we die, and the relationships we form in between. Novel technologies can assuredly bring societal benefits, yet these technologies can also exaggerate societal disparities, leave out underserved communities, create moral and legal dilemmas, and remove human agency. The National Academy of Engineering convened a panel of leading scientists, engineers, and policymakers to identify the most important challenges for engineers in the 21st century. The 14 challenges, known as the Grand Challenges for Engineering, are grouped into four categories – energy & environmental sustainability, health, security, and joy of living. However, the Grand Challenges have not fully addressed the philosophical and moral dimensions of novel innovations. In this course, students will examine each of the Grand Challenges for Engineering from a critical and multidisciplinary perspective. Students will discuss the moral, ethical, social and cultural dimensions of the engineering innovations, as well as the technical and economic feasibility of engineering designs. Students will discuss strategies for designing technology to support a diverse and growing global population, thereby bridging the technical-social divide. Readings will include articles on emerging technology from Wired, Scientific American, and The New Yorker; excerpts from science fiction such as Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? by Philip K. Dick; and policy reports from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. Students will write papers and make oral presentations, in which they will propose modifications to the Grand Challenges. Diverse students with a variety of interests and backgrounds outside of engineering would benefit from this course, including (but not limited to) sociology, economics, philosophy, science, history, business, education, and public policy.