

Liberal Arts Seminar

Diversity and Difference – *Jill Gatlin*

“Diversity” has become a buzzword for universities, communities, artists, businesses, and politicians, but what does it really mean? This seminar explores diversity and human difference as subjects of both celebration and controversy, through the study of personal experiences and observations as well as literary, popular, and scholarly writings. We will examine how we—as individuals, community members, and citizens of different nations—experience and define human difference and diversity on a daily basis. Looking at how race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, religion, (dis)ability, and other differences shape people’s lives, we’ll consider both destructive and constructive uses of the idea of difference.

Cultural Studies: Consumption and Waste in America – *Jill Gatlin*

This seminar examines habits of consuming and discarding at the individual, community, corporate, and national levels to think about the concept of “culture.” We may be accustomed to thinking of “culture” as the opposite of “trash”—yet nearly everything we consume becomes or produces waste. Looking at fiction, essays, poetry, visual art, advertisements, architecture, and waste itself, we will question how throwaways, garbage, and waste—labels for not only what we throw in the trashcan but also groups of people, art, or even landscapes—define culture. In addition to short written responses, students will develop a unique argument regarding an object or phenomenon of “waste” of their choosing, using skills of detailed observation, close analysis, and interpretive questioning.

Family Dramas – *Patrick Keppel*

This seminar explores the tension between the individual and the family by examining plays and films in which this tension is the central focus. The impulse toward creating a coherent, even impenetrable, family unit is by necessity strong, yet in practice that unit is relentlessly challenged from within by problems of hierarchy, power, individuality, and communication, and challenged from without by past family patterns, social obligations, or financial pressures. Drama and film are useful art forms to study these family conflicts because of the way they provide a provocative glimpse behind the walls that hide such tensions from the world. Seminar participants will also examine the complex concept of the family from the point of view of contemporary Family Systems Theory (Bowen) and Structural Family Therapy (Minuchin).

Complexities in Repairing the Environment – *Matthew Duveneck*

Solutions to environmental problems raise scientific, economic, and ethical questions about whether and how humans should interact with their environment. Through readings, reflection, and discussion, and through the use of several case studies, we will explore the merits of both mitigation and adaptation strategies to problems arising due to climate change, wildlife-human conflicts, wetland degradation, air pollution, and invasive species. For example, we'll discuss mitigation strategies to reduce the magnitude of climate change itself, such as recovery of methane from landfills, but we'll also explore adaptation techniques that focus on limiting the impacts of climate change, such as using alternative crops suited for a changing climate. Although mitigating a problem may theoretically provide the best solution, the process is often expensive and rarely ameliorates an environmental problem completely. Students in this seminar will gain an appreciation for the complexity and challenges of the decisions we make that affect the natural world.

Boston and New England Conservatory: The Cultural Life of an American City – *James Klein*

For almost four hundred years, Boston has been at the heart of America's cultural life: its educational resources and economic vitality, its commitment to the arts, and its unique politics have made it one of the nation's – and the world's – great cities. Over the course of its own history, the Conservatory has made itself a part of that life, so we will examine the interplay of small school and great city as a way of better understanding the rich tradition of Boston: the transformation of land and people, of society and politics, but most of all in the cultural institutions and ideals that have so shaped our own contemporary environment. We will explore the Conservatory and the city of Boston through critical readings, discussion, guest lectures, and site visits, in hopes of better understanding the urban world in which we work and live.

Idea of Rights – *James Klein*

The question of rights is one of the most important political and personal issues today. But to understand our rights, we need to consider not only what rights are – and who has them – but also their origins, character, and purpose. Students in this seminar will read, analyze, and discuss historical documents defining rights, contemporary essays proposing (or recognizing) new rights, and legal evaluations of what rights we do (and do not) have.

Reason and Faith in the Western Tradition – *Jacob Vance*

What is faith? How does belief relate to but differ from rational knowledge? This seminar

examines how thinkers from Antiquity to the Enlightenment have defined reason and faith, and how they have attempted to either harmonize rational philosophy with theology or separate them. By studying the role of rational investigation in searching for the truths of faith, students will develop a rich understanding of Western philosophical and theological writings. They will learn to analyze, discuss, and write about philosophical texts from different historical periods in light of the tension between reason and faith. Readings may include excerpts from: Plato, Aristotle, Saint Paul, Plotinus, Saint Augustine, Saint Anselm, Aquinas, *Descartes*, *Pascal*, *Locke*, Hume, and Rousseau (selections).

Happiness -- *Jacob Vance*

This seminar offers a survey of philosophical theories of what constitutes human happiness. The seminar will cover philosophical texts from the ancient and late antique traditions (Aristotle, Epicurus, Seneca, Augustine), the early modern period (Hobbes, Butler, Hume, Bentham, Kant), and the modern period (Schopenhauer, Mill, Nietzsche, Sartre). It will also include a number of readings by contemporary authors on the subject of happiness. In addition to covering foundational historical and contemporary writings on happiness from the Western philosophical tradition, the seminar will focus on developing college-level skills in critical reading, thinking, writing and speaking through the study of philosophical perspectives on happiness.