

First-Year Topic Seminar Course Descriptions

Fall 2025

UNCS2245.01 Eat This, Not That...No Wait. The Biology of Nutrition and Health.

Lynn DiBenedetto (Biology), Monday 12:00 pm – 1:15 pm

How is your diet different from your nutrition? Does it matter? Are your food choices influenced by history, family, government, and culture? This seminar course will survey several of these questions and leave lots of time to explore other avenues, such as health, nutrients, and the science of nutrition. We will base much of this course around the book, *In Defense of Food* by Michael Pullen and supplement with other materials.

UNCS2245.02 Using Economics to Challenge Intuition

Geoff Sanzenbacher (Economics), Tuesday 1:30 pm - 2:45 pm

Could a good growing season actually *decrease* farmers' revenue? Could an increase in the minimum wage somehow *increase* employment? And, could a policy designed to make it harder to discriminate against one group actually make discrimination more likely? This course will discuss how economics can predict things that run counter to intuition, with a special eye on issues related to inequality.

UNCS2245.04 The Freshman International Student Experience

Adrienne Nussbaum (Office of International Students & Scholars), Tuesday, 10:30 am - 11:45 am

Coming to Boston College and to the U.S. to study as an international student can be both an exciting and challenging time for freshmen. This achievement is perhaps the fulfillment of a dream that you and your family have had for many years, and so there are many high expectations for success. All freshmen go through significant adjustments in their first year, however, international students also must acclimate to a different educational system, as well as many cultural differences that may impact both their academic and social life without the support of family and close friends nearby. The goal of this seminar is to help international freshmen better adjust to B.C. and the U.S. It will cover cross-cultural topics such as how values and communication styles can vary across countries, and practical skills for managing expectations and adjustment. It will also include guest speakers from throughout the University who will introduce you to the many resources available to freshman international students that will help you succeed both in and out of the classroom. This section is open only to International Students and requires department permission.

UNCS2245.05 Inclusive Prosperity

Can Erbil (Economics), Wednesday 12:00 pm - 1:15 pm

As the "Economics for Inclusive Prosperity" platform states, "...*We live in an age of astonishing inequality. Income and wealth disparities between the rich and the poor in the United States have risen to heights not seen since the Gilded Age in the early part of the 20th century. Technological changes and globalization have fueled great wealth accumulation among those able to take advantage of them, but have left large segments of the population behind.*"

This seminar explores the concept of “inclusive prosperity” and investigates the roots of increasing inequality in the US, as well as across the globe. We will discuss several policy briefs from the EflP platform and other brand-new research and data-driven analysis. Whenever we can, we will try to brainstorm on policy recommendations. Every week, one student will lead the discussion on a topic of their choice, beginning with a brief presentation. Topics will need to be connected to concepts of economic inequality, racial and gender inequality, opportunity inequality, equity and economic justice, economic growth, economic development, poverty, and distributional justice - all leading to the same goal of inclusive prosperity. Students are encouraged to draw connections to the topic of their choice and their own experiences. The presentation will be the catalyst for further class debate. All students are expected to actively engage and participate in this seminar. As a bonus, we will focus on how to prepare and make an effective presentation and some of the basics of public speech.

UNCS2245.06 Are we here just to play sports? Exploring how the Division I college sports system impacts the student-athlete experience

Deborah Hogan (Social Work), Thursday 4:30 pm - 5:45 pm

The transfer portal. NIL. Revenue sharing. Unionization. This first-year topic seminar for student-athletes examines the recent trends in college athletics that challenge the academic mission of institutions at the highest level of college sports in America. Using case studies and empirical research, we will explore how the commercialized college sports system impacts the student-athlete experience, including mental health, academic success, identity development, career development, and sense of belonging. Students will learn strategies that have helped former student-athletes develop holistically off the field while maintaining their athletic commitments. Students will also be encouraged to develop research questions and future areas to explore in the student-athlete experience.

UNCS2245.08 Imagining the Impossible

Joseph Nugent (English), Tuesday 4:30 pm - 5:45 pm

Technology’s not just for geeks! In this one-credit Cornerstone course, we’ll explore tomorrow’s world – today. The course offers you a friendly and exciting introduction to the ways that technology is changing your life – and your new campus. (And by explaining Canvas and BC’s in-house technology, this course will ease your transition through the weeks ahead.) Explore everything from the delights of social media to the Oculus Rift to the uses of a drone. Along the way, this course will offer a supportive experience where you’ll get to know other students and faculty, thus building confidence and direction. The course is designed to pique your interest in the world around you, and the technology that’s changing it. Release your inner nerd!

UNCS2245.09 Living & Learning Justice

Deanna Danforth (Univ. Core), Tuesday, 4:30 pm - 5:45 pm

What does it mean to live in a way that is just? How do we enact those values in our campus community and beyond? In this one-credit seminar, we will explore the meaning of justice in our own lives and think about how our actions can help others realize their visions of justice as well, ultimately creating a society

in which everyone can flourish. As we reflect on how we can act in the service of the common good, we will get to know the resources that Boston College provides to support us in this mission. We will center our conversations on one common book during the semester but continue them throughout the year in the Justice and the Common Good LLC and in advising. **This section is open only to students enrolled in the Justice & The Common Good Living Learning Community (JCGLLC)*

UNCS2245.10 The Freshman International Student Experience

Adrienne Nussbaum (Office of International Students & Scholars), Wednesday, 1:00 pm - 2:15 pm

Coming to Boston College and to the U.S. to study as an international student can be both an exciting and challenging time for freshmen. This achievement is perhaps the fulfillment of a dream that you and your family have had for many years, and so there are many high expectations for success. All freshmen go through significant adjustments in their first year, however, international students also must acclimate to a different educational system, as well as many cultural differences that may impact both your academic and social life without the support of family and close friends nearby. The goal of this seminar is to help international freshmen better adjust to B.C. and the U.S. It will cover cross-cultural topics such as how values and communication styles can vary across countries, and practical skills for managing expectations and adjustment. It will also include guest speakers from throughout the University who will introduce you to the many resources available to freshman international students that will help you succeed both in and out of the classroom. This section is open only to International Students and requires department permission.

UNCS2245.11 Music and...

Jeremiah McGrann (Music), Wednesday, 3:00 pm - 4:15 pm

Of themselves, the simple physical vibrations of music have no meaning, but somehow people have ascribed the most important values to the experience of music: its importance in cognitive development, its ability to shape and influence society, or simply to process human experience. Through a series of readings and a wide range of musical examples—classical, traditional, popular—we will explore what a musical composition is and what people have thought about music and its effects, with a focus on its role in society and in shaping the person. Participants will be asked to explore the place of music within their own lives and to possibly encounter music styles they don't immediately understand.

UNCS2245.12 Engaging Difference & Justice at Boston College

Brian Gareau (Sociology), Wednesday, 4:30 pm - 5:45 pm

In this seminar, we will explore the meaning of the Engaging Difference & Justice core requirement, its connection to BC's mission, and the part that students must play to make it a success. What does it mean to "engage" issues around the difference and justice at BC? This course will challenge students to envision societies in which all can flourish in freedom, integrity, and fullness of life through the mutual respect their members show to one another in their interactions and relationships.

UNCS2245.13 Illusions

Sean MacEvoy (Psychology), Thursday, 12:00 pm - 1:15 pm

We all trust our brains to make sense of the world, but should we? From color and shape to time and even relationships, “what you see” is definitely not always “what you get”. Drawing upon art, neuroscience, and lots of fields in between, we’ll try to unravel the mysteries of visual illusions, uncover the secrets behind cognitive biases, and examine the cultural variations that shape our perception of reality. With a healthy dose of real-world examples and hands-on demonstrations, we’ll explore why our minds play tricks on us...and why maybe that’s not such a bad thing!

UNCS2245.14 These are a Few of My Favorite (Economic) Things!

Tracy Regan (Economics), Wednesday, 3:00 pm - 4:15 pm

This course stands in contrast to the notion that economics is a “dismal science” and instead introduces students to a variety of fun topics, in my opinion, that economists research. Papers and topics range from the design of the QWERTY keyboard, to beauty and the labor market/classroom, to the social impact of 16 and Pregnant, with others in between. Students are expected to read the academic articles, at their level of comprehension, before class and to arrive ready and willing to participate in a lively discussion with their peers on the assigned topic.

UNCS2245.15 Seeing is Not Believing: Propaganda in the 21st Century

Thomas Kaplan Maxfield (English), Monday 3:00 pm - 4:15 pm

This course will focus on the ways in which we live in a world filled with various forms of propaganda, from advertising to political campaigns, all of which contain presuppositions and assumed premises that greatly affect how we think. At a certain level, all thinking is a belief system based on particular assumptions, but this class will examine, via readings and films, many ways in which forms of propaganda operate in our society to produce specific and sometimes extreme forms of belief.

Subjects that will be considered include the corporation, the official story of 9/11, and the NSA. For example, the Iraq invasion was the first time in our country’s history that the military built and used a media center to control what was shown and how. Reporters were “embedded” in military units as a way of controlling reporting on the invasion. Pictures of flag-draped caskets of American war dead returning home were forbidden, unlike during the Vietnam conflict, in which they were regularly shown.

UNCS2245.16 Theatre: Transformation and Social Impact

Patricia Riffin (Theatre), Monday, 4:00 pm - 5:15 pm

Theatre’s roots are deeply embedded in the art of storytelling, and the power of the story, the full story, remains a rich resource for exploring our shared humanity and as a means of individual discovery. As we delve into the art of theatre, our class will encounter plays that not only entertain but also provoke us to contemplate current social issues. The class will attend the theatre in Boston and on campus.

This seminar is also a place to play, de-stress, and connect with others in a fun and supportive atmosphere by using acting exercises and storytelling to develop self-expression and creativity. The class will help guide

you through your first year at Boston College, exploring aspects of your new life on campus: academic, social, and practical.

UNCS2245.18 Monsters and the Monstrous

Jason Cavallari (University Fellowships Office), Monday, 4:30 pm - 5:45 pm

Vampires. Werewolves. Witches. From dragons to mad serial killers, history is full of the weird, the dark, and the scary. Every society learns to fear someone or something in order to protect us from the unfamiliar, the impermissible, or the Other. Knowing what scares us, however, also tells us more about ourselves, our desires, and that which we cannot tolerate. This course uses monsters and the idea of the monstrous to introduce students to the study of history through experience with historical sources, pop culture sources, and in conversation with historical scholarship on things that go bump in the night.

UNCS2245.19 First Gen Students: Using Our Strengths to Succeed in College

Dacia Gentilella (Learning to Learn Program), Tuesday, 1:30 pm - 2:45 pm

Arriving on campus for the first weeks and months of college can be both a thrilling and daunting time. Questions race through our heads: What are the rules, spoken and unspoken? What are the best classes to take? Should I let anyone know that I have questions? What will they think of me if I don't understand everything? These questions often have a different impact on first-generation college students, who are trailblazers for themselves and their families. First-gen students often carry themselves and all of the hopes and dreams of their friends and families into their college experience, without the benefit of advice from those who have struggled with the academic and social demands of the world of the university. This seminar will be a place for first-gen students to explore their new lives as college students, while embracing their past and pursuing their dreams for the future.

UNCS2245.20 Justice, Law, and the Common Good

Greg Kalschauer, SJ (Dean, Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences), Monday, 4:00 pm - 5:15 pm

In this seminar, we will explore the distinctive vision of the person, of the relationship between the person and society, and of the requirements of the good or just society that flow out of the Catholic social thought tradition. This tradition includes a distinctive way of thinking about the nature and purpose of law and the relationship between law and morality. We will also try to think in a sustained way about justice: what do we mean when we use the word justice, what does justice require, how might we understand justice as a virtue rather than as an abstract idea, what is the relationship between legal justice and social justice, between a biblical understanding of justice and philosophical or legal understandings of justice? A Boston College education strives to prepare students for meaningful lives oriented toward service of the common good -- how might we understand what service of the common good asks of us?

UNCS2245.22 Core Conversations In/Justice

Elizabeth Shlala (University Core and History), Tuesday, 4:30 pm - 5:45 pm

"No one is saved alone: either we are all saved as a community or we are not saved." Pope Francis and other leaders across the world call out to us in the midst of grief and human

suffering to leave no one behind. This seminar is a one-credit advising course based on the themes of Justice and the Common Good. In our class, we will tackle difficult topics together as we try to find solutions in our everyday lives on campus. It will set you on a path to know yourself better and to create a community of hope for the future. **This section is open only to students enrolled in the Justice & The Common Good Living Learning Community (JCGLLC)*

UNCS2245.23 Human-Centered Design for the Common Good

Sunanda Bhattacharya (Office of the Provost), Monday, 3:00 - 4:15 pm

Can human-centered design help create a better world? In most real-life situations, community problems are best resolved when the solution is reached through a holistic effort that actively engages all members of the team: real users, key stakeholders, and constituents. This process converts learning from an individual to a social activity and draws on the collective wisdom of those attempting to reach a solution. For example, without this inclusive method, well-intentioned groups often can end up designing solutions that may not function in a cultural context. In this seminar course, we will explore how ‘human-centered design’ as a structured group process that is inclusive, creative, and problem-solving, can have a positive impact on our society and planet. You will see and reflect on inspiring case studies as well as hear from practitioners using design-driven processes, including the practice of ethics and empathy, to ideate and prototype socially impactful solutions.

UNCS2245.25 Seeking to Understand Innovation and Creativity

Charles Hoffman (Biology), Tuesday, 9:00 am - 10:15 am

Make no mistake about it, I do not have the answers, but in this seminar, we will explore the characteristics of people deemed exceptionally creative and innovative. We will look into the lives of people recognized this year by MIT’s 35 Innovators Under 35 and recent MacArthur Genius Fellows, including people working in a wide range of disciplines. We will also look at puzzles or brain teasers to develop our skills.

UNCS2245.26 Am I My Brother’s (or Sister’s) Keeper? Social Insurance in America

Joseph Quinn (Economics), Tuesday, 4:30 pm - 5:45 pm

This course will introduce students to the concepts of social insurance and social assistance, with emphasis on three major programs in the U.S.: Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. These are also the three main components of what some call the Entitlement Crisis. We will look at the goals, accomplishments, and challenges of these programs and at reform proposals.

UNCS2245.27 Big Screen Microeconomics: Economic Principles in Our Favorite Movies

Matt Rutledge (Economics), Wednesday, 4:30 pm - 5:45 pm

Once you start learning about economics, you can’t help but see it everywhere. How many times per day do we weigh costs and benefits, experience diminishing returns, or respond to incentives? These economic principles are universal... so universal that we see characters in our favorite films deal with the

same issues. Each week, we will review a movie, ranging from the classics to recent hits, point out the ways that economic principles influenced the plot and character development, and discuss how the films demonstrate how economics affects our lives every day. Later, you will get the chance to write and present your own examples from movies you love. Whether this is the start of an economics major or minor, or the only econ course you ever take (no prior experience with economic coursework is necessary), you'll enjoy the wide-ranging discussion with your newfound peers... and maybe some popcorn.