

Fall 2026 Honors College Seminars

**Seminar Room” refers to the Honors College Seminar Room (AOK 216M)*

**HONR 200-01: Sense and Consequence (3648) / Tu/Th 4:00pm - 5:15pm,
Location TBA**

Instructors: David Hoffman and Tess McRae (Center for Democracy and Civic Life)

This course will build students’ skills at noticing patterns in their thoughts, interactions, and environments that are often hidden in plain sight. Recognizing these patterns is a way of building agency: the capacity to make choices that produce benefits for ourselves and our communities. Students will engage in personal storytelling; campus excursions; creative reflection activities; collaborative meaning-making; and imaginative work to gain hindsight, foresight, and insight that they can apply to any context or situation.



HONR 200-02: Hello Kitty and *Kawaii* Culture (4845) / Tu/Th 10:00am - 11:15am, Seminar Room

Instructor: Julie Oakes (Honors College)



Did you know that Hello Kitty turned 50 this year? While it may seem that Kitty and her Sanrio pals are ever-present characters in Japan’s *kawaii* (“cute”) cultural landscape, their creation is tightly linked to Japan’s post-war boom that is most often associated with economic powerhouses like Toyota and Sony. This seminar will apply historic, political, and economic reads to modern Japan’s “soft power” culture, tracing its international impact as both “Cool” and “Cute” Japan in the past half century. Other topics for exploration include the broader *kawaii* aesthetic (such as in J-Pop music, manga, fashion, and food) in both domestic and international contexts and a comparison to the more recent *hallyu* (“Korean wave”) phenomenon, which has been on the rise since the 1990s.

HONR 300-01: The Human Brain: Health and Disease (2848) / W 1:00pm - 3:30pm, Seminar Room)

Instructor: Chan Lin (Biology)



Understanding how human brain works is one of the biggest challenges in science today. Through the lens of human diseases, this seminar is designed for students to obtain a general overview of human neuroanatomy, to gain an understanding of some common pathologies of the human nervous system, and to learn from primary literature in the field of neurobiology. This course is designed to be multidisciplinary, utilizing knowledge from fields such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, and the biological fields. During the class sessions, students from different majors will be put into smaller groups to exchange ideas through interactive lectures, hands-on

activities with brain models, and 3D digital databases. At the end of semester, students will give presentations addressing a particular societal issue, utilizing the methodologies explored throughout the seminar.

HONR 300-02: Laughing Out Loud with Intercultural Comedians (3382) / Mo 4:30pm - 7:00pm, Seminar Room

Instructor: Erin Hogan (MLLI)

What do you get when you cross stand-up comedy with humor studies and intercultural communication? This seminar! Throughout the semester, students will actively view numerous stand-up specials, reflecting on both humor strategies deployed and the cultural identities displayed by the performers. In particular, we will watch routines from some of today's most notable comedians such as Ali Wong, Yvonne Orji, Atsuko Okatsuna, Trevor Noah, John Leguizamo, and Wanda Sykes, after which we will discuss questions like what made you laugh? What made you uncomfortable? What made you think? How do your cultural values relate to the stand-ups? In addition to weekly journal reflections and joke deconstruction assignments, the students will analyze one comedian's body of work as their capstone assignment. (Feeling brave? Students can alternatively write and perform their own work for the class!)



HONR 300-03: Food, Agriculture, and Society (3522) / Tu 1:00pm - 3:30pm, Seminar Room

Instructor: David Lansing (Economics)



There's no getting around it – you need to eat. But *what* you eat, and *how* you eat, is highly determined by the political, economic, and social context you live in. The modern industrial food system is a miracle of cheap calorie provisioning and can grow more food on less land (using less labor) in ways that were unimaginable 100 years ago. At the same time, we are beset with problems of obesity, malnutrition, toxic soils, polluted waters, and exploited laborers. This course explores the ways that growing and consuming food shapes society, our bodies, and the planet. It also considers the

ways that the political and economic organization of society affects how food is grown, shipped, and eaten. At its core, this seminar's goal is for you to understand these relationships, why they exist, and for you to reflect on what should, and should not, be changed in our modern food system.

HONR 300-04: A World of Waste (3646) / Tu 4:30pm - 7:00pm, Seminar Room

Instructor: Trang Ta (GES)

Waste is everywhere and has numerous effects on human, animal, and environmental health. With growing populations and increasing consumption patterns due to improved standards of living, the volume and variety of waste is of vital global concern. For example, in parts of the developing world such as Brazil, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, entire communities have been erected alongside landfills where the waste material is the very source of livelihoods for these marginalized populations. This seminar will address how various forms of waste—from bio-hazardous to industrial waste—pose risks to human, animal, marine, and microbial life. Drawing on fields such as anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, and discard studies, we will apply an interdisciplinary theoretical approach to understand the complexity of waste production, management, treatment, and reuse. A substantial component of the course is working collaboratively to design and create public information campaigns to educate the UMBC community and the greater public about this issue.



HONR 300-05: Global (Post)-Socialist Cultures (3647) / Tu/Th 11:30am – 12:45pm, Seminar Room

Instructor: Christopher Tong (MLLI)

This seminar examines how socialist and post-socialist states have diverged since the twentieth century by tracing the political, cultural, and social trajectories of contrasting cases



such as the PRC (China), the former U.S.S.R. (Russia), the DPRK (North Korea), and the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany). Rather than treating Communism as a single ideology or historical episode, the course asks a broader interdisciplinary question: what happens to socialist states—and socialist *legacies*—that were derived under radically different political, economic, and international conditions? Students will explore, among other case studies, why China has combined market integration with one-party rule, why North Korea has maintained a centrally planned economy and hereditary socialist regime, and

why East Germany, despite reunification with West Germany, continues to display distinct political and cultural patterns decades after socialism's formal end. The course draws on a diverse set of materials, including historical documents, political theory excerpts, films, propaganda art, memoirs, and contemporary media.

HONR 300-06: Refugee and Migration Law (7346) / Tu/Th 1:00pm - 2:15pm, PUP 354

Instructor: Jeffrey Davis (POLI)

Right now, almost 117 million people are fleeing their homes, driven away by persecution, natural disasters, and wars--more than at any time in history.

The United States government is blocking asylum for nearly all refugees in the country, and its officials are resorting to lethal violence to enforce its anti-immigration policies. This seminar will engage the following questions: What is a refugee? What are the legal and political barriers to protecting refugees in the US? To what extent do international and domestic laws protect those fleeing their home country seeking refuge in another country? How do the legal systems in the United States, Europe, and Latin America control and facilitate asylum and immigration? Also listed as POLI 439.



HONR 300-07: Solving Wicked Problems (4612) / Th 4:30pm - 7:00pm, MP 105
Instructors: Simon Stacey (Honors College) and Bob Carpenter (Economics)



Students in this course will work in teams to learn to solve complex problems. The class adopts a case study model used at the Harvard Business School: every few weeks, teams of students will be presented with a new case study problem, on which they will work together to prepare a paper or presentation that will include a proposed solution to the problem. The case studies will span the disciplines, so all students will acquire knowledge about a range of new topics; however, the main objective of the class is to help students develop the skills to address complex and

unstructured problems like they will encounter in their post-college careers. The final assessment will be a research project focused on improving teamwork skills, and the students will be credited in any publication that may result from the course.