

Department: HRTS/ POLS

Course No: 125

Credits: 3

Title: Introduction to Human Rights

Contact: Jennifer Sterling-Folker

Content Area: CA2-Social Sciences and CA4 Diversity and Multiculturalism

Diversity: CA4 International

Catalog Copy: Introduction to Human Rights. Either semester. Three credits. No prerequisites. Exploration of central human rights institutions; selected human rights themes and political controversies; and key political challenges of contemporary human rights advocacy.

Course Information: a. Briefly describe in 2-3 sentences the course, stating course goals and objectives:

This is an introductory course designed to help the student understand the theoretical foundations, historical underpinnings, basic institutions and political dynamics of the international human rights regime. The course explores key themes and controversies in human rights theory and practice, including: cultural relativism and rights questions; globalization and labor rights; indigenous rights; gender and human rights; and children's rights, among others.

b. Describe the course requirements (Specify exam formats, nature and scope of weekly reading assignments, nature and scope of writing assignments, problem sets, etc.): The course requirements include reading a basic human rights texts, secondary sources, and advocacy materials, where appropriate (on-line and print). Grading will be based upon: two short essays (4 pages each), written in response to questions assigned by the instructor(s); and two in-class examinations (i.e., a midterm and final exam).

c. List the major themes, issues, topics, etc. to be covered: The course covers: 1) the intellectual history of human rights (i.e., basic philosophical underpinnings); 2) human rights law (i.e., relevant United Nations conventions and declarations, regional and national legal instruments); 3) basic institutions; 4) key debates (i.e., cultural relativism; the politicization of human rights); and 5) thematic topics (i.e., gender; children's rights; globalization and rights; indigenous rights; health rights; nongovernmental activism).

Meets Goals of Gen Ed: 2. Acquire intellectual breadth and versatility: The field of human rights is by nature interdisciplinary and hence, students gain exposure to scholarship in multiple fields through this course, including political science, law, anthropology, economics, women's studies, and cultural studies.

3. Acquire critical judgment: Because human rights issues are contested both among states and within them (i.e., within civil society, between and among members of differing ethnic, racial, religious and other groups), students in this course will be exposed to a wide range of viewpoints on core issues within the field. They will be required to assess and determine the validity of differing points of view.

4. Acquire moral sensitivity: The ethical dimensions of human rights are central to this course, particularly in terms of the thematic issues addressed. The course requires students to consider complex questions of the universality of rights versus cultural particularism; it also engages questions of economic distribution and social justice as well as racial, gender, ethnic and other social inequalities.

6. Acquire consciousness of the diversity of human culture and experience: The protection and promotion of human rights has varied widely throughout the world, depending on the particular historical, political, economic and cultural factors relevant in each area. Human rights are highly contested by various groups at the local, national, regional and international levels. This course engages a wide range of cases from all major regions of the world and multiple historical periods. As with the acquisition of moral sensitivity, this course by its very nature forces students to engage the diversity of human culture and experience.

CA2 Criteria: This course enables the students to analyze and understand interactions of the numerous social factors that influence behavior at the individual, cultural, societal, national, or international level, and meets the four required criteria in this manner:

1. Introduce students to theories and concepts of social science: The course explores the role of human rights norms, ideas, and ideology as structuring forces in local, national, regional and international relations. It introduces students to issues of power, agency and authority in the realm of human rights. It does so by analyzing related conflicts and consensus among individuals in given societies, among states, and within the international system. The course introduces students to theories of natural rights law, humanitarian law and the laws of war, as well as refugee law. The course also requires students to consider the place of human rights in larger theoretical debates such as those in political science concerning realism, liberalism, and Marxism, and in anthropology concerning cultural relativism.

2. Introduce students to methods used in the social sciences, including the ethical problems social scientists face: The course discusses the philosophical perspectives central to human rights research, and it surveys a variety of methods available and at the disposal of human rights scholars and activists. The course provides an overview of techniques involved in human rights documentation, including field research, analysis of primary and secondary source data on violations and compliance, as well as archival research. The course also helps students understand the ethical dilemmas that human rights scholars face in pursuing their research agendas, such as protection of victims' confidentiality, protocols for safeguarding intellectual property. It also explores the challenges of carrying out research on politically sensitive topics that may endanger both the researcher and subjects.

3. Introduce students to ways in which individuals, groups, institutions or societies behave and

influence one another and the natural environment: The course explores negotiations among individuals, groups, institutions, and societies that cumulatively influence the establishment of international norms of behavior and ethics. It focuses on dilemmas of power in human interaction and corresponding tensions concerning rights of access and distribution to resources, including the natural environment.

4. Provide students with tools to analyze social, political or economic groups and social issues at the societal, regional, national and international levels: Human rights inquiry provides students with the tools to analyze all of the above entities and issues. The course requires students to understand the philosophical, legal and cultural justifications for individual and group-based claims to rights and social justice. This course familiarizes students with key human rights instruments, exposes them to leading scholarly work on human rights, introduces them to actual cases and activists (both guest speakers and documentary film, literature, and news coverage) and offers students a range of outlets for pursuing continued study and personal activism, if desired.

CA4 Criteria: The course leads students to an appreciation of the differences as well as commonalities among people by studying the ideas, history, values, and/or creative expressions of diverse groups from the perspectives of the groups under study in this manner:

1. Emphasize that there are varieties of human experiences, perceptions, thoughts, values, and/or modes of creativity: Human rights are highly contested by various groups at the local, national, regional, and international levels. This course engages a wide range of cases from all major regions of the world to illustrate key political controversies and challenges of contemporary human rights advocacy. Central to human rights inquiry is an appreciation and understanding of the diversity of the human experience at the political level, which rests, in turn, on a foundation of social, cultural, and interpersonal interactions.

2. Emphasize that interpretive systems and/or social structures are cultural creations: By introducing Western philosophical underpinnings of contemporary human rights institutions and practices as well as non-Western philosophical traditions that sometimes coincide with and at others may oppose these international norms and institutions, students are forced to grapple with the social construction of interpretive systems and social beliefs and practices. Students will engage the question of universalism versus cultural particularism central to political and social controversies in the human rights field.

4. Develop an understanding of and sensitivity to issues involving human rights and migration: The study of human rights and migration are at the very core of this introductory course. The course covers not only basic refugee law but also contemporary dilemmas related to human rights and migration -- such as the plight of internally displaced persons, or the labor rights challenges facing migrant workers. Students use a variety of sources and methods, ranging from UN and specialized agency reports to secondary source analyses and popular press accounts of human rights and migration issues.

5. Develop an awareness of the dynamics of social, political, and/or economic power in the context of any of the above four items: The study of human rights is centrally about

understanding the dynamics of social, political, and economic power, exploring negotiations among individuals, groups, institutions, and societies that cumulatively influence the establishment of international norms of behavior and ethics. The course requires students to analyze related conflicts and consensus among individuals in given societies, among states, and within the international system, focusing on dilemmas of power in human interaction.

International: 1. The course focuses on issues of diversity/multiculturalism outside the United States: The study of international human rights institutions, politics and advocacy focuses, by its very nature, on both the domestic and the international arenas. This course includes a wide variety of cases and perspectives of actors and groups from all the major regions of the world.

Role of Grad Students: This course will be taught by a regular faculty member, Shareen Hertel, in the department at Storrs. If the enrollment numbers increased, the course might be assigned a graduate student, who would serve as the Teaching Assistant (TA) and would grade for the faculty member. Graduate students who are advanced in their studies and have specialized in the topic might also teach their own sections. All political science TAs are required to attend the Teaching Institute's roundtables on pedagogy offered prior to the start of Fall semester. International students are additionally required to take teaching tests and to attend a three-day training session at the Institute. Every Fall the department sponsors a TA information session to offer advice and discuss potential problems they may encounter. The department offers roundtables on pedagogical issues throughout the academic year. Finally, the appropriate faculty member, Department head, and the Department's Teaching Mentor supervise the TAs work throughout the semester.