

The Curriculum of the Shimer Great Books School at North Central College

Humanities Sequence

SGBH 101: Journeys through Art and Fiction

Visual art and fictional narratives tell stories. We will cross cultural and historical boundaries to examine each artistic mode on its own terms, laying the groundwork for comparison, contrast, and even combination of the two. The guiding theme for the epics, novels, short stories, paintings, graphic novels, and films used in the course is the journey of self-discovery, which provides a common point of reference for an investigation of diverse modes of storytelling.

SGBH 102: Music, Verse, and Drama

Music, verse, and drama all create heightened, focused experiences through performances, though in distinct ways. With words and sounds, verse and music create unique emotional experiences through elements such as meter, rhythm, tone, duration, and silence, while drama provides a window into an alternate world. Through poems, classical music, jazz, plays, operas, and musicals from a wide range of cultural traditions, as well as exercises in making both verse and music, we investigate the interplay of formal constraint and freedom in the arts of performance.

SGBH 201: Philosophy and the Human Condition

How does what we think and know determine how we should live? Using both classic and contemporary texts from a variety of world traditions, we explore a range of viewpoints on how the world works, what we can know about it, and what that means for important day-to-day questions about what we owe each other and ourselves.

SGBH 202: The Search for Meaning in Religion

Together, humans face a common set of ultimate questions: Why do we suffer? What happens when we die? What is our place in existence? And though answers to these questions have varied widely, all seek to make our experiences meaningful. We examine major religious and artistic answers to such questions in particular, with special attention to first person accounts of varying beliefs and the practices that enact them, along with major architectural monuments that have shaped those practices in major religious traditions across historical time and space.

Integrative Studies Sequences

Math and Logic

SGBI 101: The Classical Foundations of Logic and Mathematics

Axiomatic systems are the foundation of mathematics and logic. Accordingly, we investigate the nature of proof using reasoning based on formal statements following the geometry of Euclid and the logical writings of Aristotle. Descartes' unification of algebra and plane geometry relying on his new approach to truth and analytic reasoning concludes the course.

SGBI 102: The Foundations of Modern Mathematics and Logic

The study of modern mathematics and logic begins with probability and formalization of statistical calculation based on the writings of Pascal, Hume and LaPlace. Students investigate how the "Imaginary Geometry" of Lobachevsky examines the assumptions of Euclidean space, how Einstein's relativity theory corrects and

expands the Newtonian world system, and Gödel's proof demonstrates the inherent limits of axiomatic reasoning.

Senior Capstone

Integrative Studies 451: The Ancient to Early Modern World

The Shimer Great Books School's senior capstone sequence explores the complex relationship between text and context. The course is organized around a series of interdisciplinary units that explore a particular historical and geographic setting through the lens of the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. During this first semester, the course focuses on the premodern world (i.e. before the end of the 15th century).

Integrative Studies 452: The Modern World

During this second semester of the Shimer School's senior capstone sequence, students focus on the modern world from the 15th century to our contemporary moment. Again, students will examine a series of interdisciplinary units that explore a particular historical and geographic setting through the lenses of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

Integrative Studies 496: Thesis

Students plan, research and carry out a senior thesis project centered on an important work, figure, movement or concept, which must be grounded in their major area but may span multiple disciplines. Students in each of the Shimer School majors (Humanities, Liberal Studies, Natural Sciences and Social Sciences) meet as a cohort to discuss writing strategies, report on their progress and present their work. Students in the Humanities and Liberal Studies majors have the option of completing a creative work, whether written or in some other medium as their thesis project.

Natural Sciences Sequence

SGBN 101: The Shape of the World

How do we understand how people in the past came to their beliefs about the natural world and pursue questions about it? This gateway to the Natural Sciences surveys general forms of ancient knowledge about nature. What questions were important? How did the answers form a system? Through texts, experiments and observations from the Presocratics to the late Medieval Cosmos, including contributions of Islam and other cultures, students study the early formation of holistic conceptions of nature and our relation to it.

SGBN 102 What is Matter?

Western ideas of matter proceed from the Presocratics through Aristotle, medieval scholastic-Aristotelianism and alchemy before being reshaped by the views enunciated by Bacon, which herald new practices and ideas (mathematization, experimentation, and mechanism). Through texts, experiments and observations developed from ancient to modern times, we see a shift in fundamental questions, particularly regarding the nature of matter. Through historical accounts of the transition, we come to distinguish between the ancient project to understand the world and the modern project to predict and control it.

SGBN 201: What is Motion?

The history of the modern study of motion (or mechanics) begins with Galileo, followed by Descartes and, above all, Newton. Generations later, Faraday offers experimental work to unify the idea of "force," which leads to attempts to unify physical theories of matter, electricity,

light and energy in the work of Einstein and quantum mechanics. Through primary texts and reflections on the social and cultural contexts in which the science of mechanics developed, students carry on epistemological inquiries begun in prior courses. They also undertake a semester-long experimental investigation into the nature of light.

SGBN 202: What is Life?

Concentrating on the modern development of biology, this course begins with answers to the question of the course title in the 17th century and proceed thence to the recent neo-Darwinian synthesis. Through readings and laboratory exercises in evolutionary and genetic theory, students study their origins and the social and cultural milieux in which they developed. Epistemological questions raised earlier in the Natural Sciences sequence continue to guide inquiry, along with new ethical and even political considerations involving the question of the course title.

Social Sciences Sequence

SGBS 101: Models of Social Thought

The disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and economics gave shape to many of the most fundamental concepts of social thought. The texts in this “gateway” to the Social Sciences focus on specifically social phenomena and the theories, normative and descriptive, that arise from the study of structural realities such as the state, the economy, race, gender and class. This course concludes by considering economics as a "model" social science, testing its methods and how its theoretical commitments purport either to describe or guide social action.

SGBS 102: The Western Political Tradition

The development of the Western political thought and of the US in particular can be traced from ancient through contemporary texts. This course addresses questions about the nature of laws and the authority of the state across this long tradition. Students study key terms in political thought, including freedom, liberty, equality, power and responsibility. The course concludes by looking deeply into challenges posed to the American political order over time by the movements for abolition, women's suffrage and civil rights.

SGBS 201: Critical Theories of Society and Politics

Western political history and its theoretical background have undergone serious critique over time, particularly regarding forms of domination and alienation that are not addressed by classical liberal political theory. Beginning with Hegel's philosophical defense of the modern state, students engage with Marxist, anarchist, feminist and post-colonial critiques of the dominant Western power structures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

SGBS 202: Social Formation and Social Transformation

Societies form individuals. In texts illustrating a wide range of social scientific methods, this course examines how the process of individuation might be interrupted or diverted. Beginning with a study of various accounts of the social and moral formation of children, the course moves to a study of broader theories of the social construction of reality within a range of social contexts. The course concludes with a consideration of the possibility for transforming society itself through the emergence of new social structures and norms. Students complete a major research paper.