

## Remaking Undergraduate Education A Model of Interdisciplinary, Collaborative Teaching

### WELCOME BACK!

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#### **Critical Issues in Race & Criminal Justice: A New Model of Under-graduate Teaching**

*"The class proved that racial disparities cannot be understood in an academic vacuum, but rather in a broader discussion that covers the historical, political, economic, sociological, and legal implications of these issues."-Gwen Prowse, undergraduate student*

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*"Issues of race and justice don't confine themselves to neat disciplinary boundaries." – Lisa L. Miller*

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*In 2008-2009, the Center became a locus for cross-disciplinary undergraduate teaching aimed at bringing research insights into the classroom, enlivening students' understanding of the far-reaching impact of race and ethnicity in the realm of criminal justice. The syllabus was developed by Lisa L. Miller in Political Science and Paul Hirschfield in Sociology, working with graduate students in English, History, Sociology, Media and Journalism, and Political Science in the fall, and taught with their assistance and with guest lectures by policy-makers and faculty in the Spring. The result was an unusually rich experience for Rutgers undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty -- a model the Center continues in 2009-2010 with a new course on Race, Ethnicity, and Film.*

A cross-disciplinary collaboration, which began with a roundtable session on crime and race entitled "Criminal Differences," culminated in the undergraduate honors course "**Critical Issues in Race and Criminal Justice**" offered in the Spring of 2009. Organized by political scientist Lisa L. Miller and sociologist Paul Hirschfield, the course examined the complex inter-relationships between race, crime, and the justice system within America's distinctive political and social context. A team-taught, interdisciplinary course, "Critical Issues" blended lectures, discussions, and a wide range of guest speakers – including faculty, advanced graduate students, activists, and politicians.

"Critical Issues in Race and Criminal Justice" is the first course sponsored by the Center and will be followed in the spring 2010 semester by another interdisciplinary course on race, ethnicity and film (see page 2).

#### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ISSUES & UNDER-GRADUATE EDUCATION**

As we know, "issues don't confine themselves to neat disciplinary boundaries," said Miller, adding that, "Similarly, undergraduate education is not a single disciplinary affair." Instructors often assign readings from a wide variety of perspectives in order to discourage rote recitation and enhance students' critical

thinking. In this course, students were not only able to read different perspectives but to see, hear, and engage with those who employ different approaches to the same topic. For example, guest lecturers Keith Wailoo, an historian, and Anne Piehl, an economist, both talked about how crime-related fears of ethnic minorities shaped public policy. Wailoo informed the class that as an historian his interest was in looking at the context in which policy is made. To this end, he evoked the selective use of racialized images which demonize certain drugs while treating other drugs and users as acceptable. Piehl used statistical analysis to demonstrate the inaccuracy of perceptions of greater criminality among immigrant populations.

One student, Ben West, noted, "each professor focused on different parts of the same topic, but made sure to point out and encourage us to search for connections between their specific methods. Because of this, I was able to gain a richer understanding of the broader topic of race and criminal justice." Another student, Gwen Prowse, remarked, "The

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The CRE would like to welcome **Lisa L. Miller**, Associate Professor of Political Science, as the **2009-2010 Acting Director**. Miller has a Ph.D. from the University of Washington and a B.A. from the University of Virginia. Her research and teaching interests are in law, social policy and racial inequality, specifically the politics of criminal punishment, the role of political institutions in maintaining inequality, and the political mobilization of racial minorities on crime and justice issues. She has written extensively on the development of crime and justice policy and legal frameworks in the United States and has also published research examining the inner workings of the federal criminal courts. Her most recent book, *The Perils of Federalism: Race, Poverty and the Politics of Crime Control* (Oxford University Press, 2008), explores the impact of American federalism on racial inequality and crime policy.



class proved that racial disparities cannot be understood in an academic vacuum, but rather in a broader discussion that covers the historical, political, economic, sociological, legal, etc. implications of these issues.”

The variety of disciplinary perspectives enriched the understanding of all those involved. “I can think of no better way to model and espouse critical thinking skills than to feature two professors questioning each other’s assumptions. Both students and faculty came out of the course with a broader and more complex view of the fundamental and conditional influence of race on the criminal justice system,” said Hirschfield.

#### DEFINITIVE KNOWLEDGE AND COMPLEX ISSUES

Students can fall into the trap of seeing knowledge as a set of definitive facts to memorize rather than as concepts to grapple with. In other words, too often knowledge is seen only as products that we accumulate rather than also as a process by which we continually develop skills. “Critical Issues” sought to counter this tendency.

As undergraduate student West noted, “The professors, who would sometimes jump into each other’s lectures to kindly offer some related information, seemed to learn from each other, and sometimes offered slightly different points of view. Overall, this made the course seem more like a shared learning experience than a one-way conversation.”

The course was able to present an issue in its full complexity without relying on false debates, which give equal weight to ideas with highly unequal validity and empirical support. Hirschfield noted that “teaching a course with a professor from another discipline forced me to

“Having a guest speaker was different than reading an article ...it was good to have a source there to ask questions directly instead of trying to interpret the meaning.”  
—Deann Green

defend and, sometimes, rethink and refine, both my perspective and more fundamental assumptions about race that are commonly shared by sociologists. For the most part, however, our individual and disciplinary perspectives on race and criminal justice were not in conflict but, rather, were mutually enhancing.”

For example, Miller recalled, “Paul’s presentations on institutional racism allowed me to talk about political institutions like federalism, interest groups and criminal courts, which have their own design, functions and outcomes independent of people’s attitudes.” Miller continued, “Paul’s perspective encouraged students to think about structural factors while mine led them to consider the role political factors had in producing racial disparities.”

Of course, there are disagreements in the academy about how much focus a factor deserves, but in order to accept the validity of one research project students saw that they did not need to reject another. As student West noted, “That professors were learning from, asking questions to, and sometimes even disagreeing with one another made me feel even more comfortable contributing to the discussions.” In this context, students were

encouraged to integrate and compare perspectives. The course was able to present scholarly discussion on race and crime without reliance on the all too common “racism v. no racism” debate, which undermines scholarly research by providing false claims equal time and seriously distorts reality.

Professors could also engage guest speakers and help students gain confidence to ask probing questions that yield better understanding. One student, Deann Green, said, “having the guest speaker was different than reading an article, because regardless of the article questions will always arise. It was good to have a source there to ask questions

directly instead of trying to interpret the meaning.” Gwen Prowse, a student, noted, “I found it invaluable to be able to ask questions of speakers and receive answers to the issues we discuss in class.” The guest speakers from outside of the academy, such as the Chairwoman of NJ State Assembly’s Judiciary Committee and the Director and a legal advocate from the ACLU Racial Justice Project, were essential to assessing whether and how concepts and ideas from the course are manifest in the real world of policy and practice.

#### BENEFITS TO INSTRUCTORS: COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

The Center is committed to a multi-disciplinary exchange of ideas, and toward this end, we regularly set up informal roundtables. This last semester we

### ***New Course: Race, Ethnicity & Film (Spring 2010)***

In the spring of 2010, the CRE will be sponsoring a new interdisciplinary course geared toward deepening students’ understanding of the ways in which film, media, and visual culture intersect with questions of race and ethnicity. Team-taught by Deepa Kumar, Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Studies, and Susan Martin-Márquez, Professor of Spanish and Cinema Studies, the course aims to introduce a wide array of undergraduate students not only to key films, but also to different ways of reading and understanding film by using a variety of disciplinary lenses. As Kumar and Martin-Márquez explain, “For many, our understanding of race and ethnicity--and the experience of what it is like to be the ‘other’--is shaped by the culture of which we are a part. Film, and the media in general, play a key role in shaping our cultural consciousness. It is therefore important that we learn to critically examine how the story of racial ‘others’ is told through film texts as well as ancillary media (such as film reviews and advertisements). In this course, then, we will study the methods by which racial minorities are represented on film. We will look at stereotypes and their structural and social basis, and discuss how they may be (re)produced through the storytelling routines and modes of operation of dominant film industries such as Hollywood. We will also examine how alternative forms of global filmmaking as well as independent cinema in the United States may challenge the dominant cinema’s constructions of race and ethnicity.”

**This course begins with the premise that film is not merely “entertainment” but rather a part of a cultural industry that consciously or unconsciously shapes our worldview.**



Susan Martin-Márquez



Deepa Kumar

successfully applied this ideal to undergraduate education. We found that much in the same way that research benefits from cross-disciplinary engagement, teaching does as well. Not only did students gain from this course model but teachers were able to exchange ideas about teaching, see other teach (which we rarely do), and discuss lesson plans and class formats with their colleagues.

With the help of the Center, the professors were able to provide more feedback than would usually be feasible for a class of 28 students. For example, after students wrote reaction papers for readings and class lectures (5-7 papers each) they received not just grades but substantive feedback. Graduate Assistants at the Center were able to share this workload and also offer input. As one GA and guest

lecturer, Jeffrey Dowd, remarked, "This course model expands upon what many of us believe makes for productive undergraduate experiences." Ultimately, the course provided an opportunity for undergraduate students to connect more closely with research faculty and as a result, student Gwen Prowse will be working with Professor Miller this year on a research project to map civic engagement on crime and violence in New Jersey's minority communities.

### **Please note:**

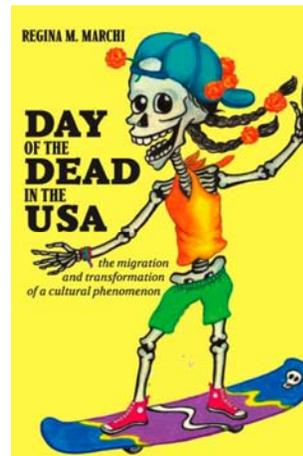
With the success of its pilot class, "Critical Issues in Race and Criminal Justice," and strong interest in its 2010 course on race, ethnicity and film, the CRE is committed to organizing additional courses that bring together faculty from diverse disciplines and specialties and use a team-teaching model that relies on experts from across the university as guest lecturers.

If you have ideas for other interdisciplinary courses on issues related to race & ethnicity, or are interested in participating, please contact the CRE at [raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu](mailto:raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu).

## Recent Faculty Publication

Honoring relatives by tending graves, building altars, and cooking festive meals has been a tradition among Latin Americans for centuries. "El Día de los Muertos" has enjoyed renewed popularity since the 1970s when Latino artists in the United States began expanding "Day of the Dead" north of the border with altar exhibits, performance art, Aztec danza, and other public expressions. This celebration has been featured in newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, museums, and commercial venues across the country.

Regina M. Marchi (Assistant Professor of Media Studies) combines a mix of ethnography, historical research, oral history, and critical cultural analysis to explore the manifold and unexpected transformations that occur when the tradition is embraced by the US mainstream. *Day of the Dead in the USA* examines the influence of the mass media, consumer culture, and globalization on the growth of El Día de los Muertos, providing insights into the power of public ritual to create community, transmit oppositional messages, and advance educational, political, and economic goals.



Rutgers University Press, 2009



## Announcements

In 2009-2010, CRE Founding Director **Keith Wailoo** will be Distinguished Visiting Professor at Princeton University's Center for African-American Studies. At Princeton, he will also be affiliated with the Program in the History of Science in the Department of History, and with the Center for Health and Wellbeing at the Woodrow Wilson School of International and Public Affairs.

CRE Associate Director **Mia Bay** has been appointed a John Hope Franklin Fellow at the National Humanities Center for the 2009-2010 academic year, in support of her project, *The Ambidexter Philosopher: Thomas Jefferson in Black Thought, 1776-1877*.

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**Director:** Keith Wailoo, History/Institute for Health  
**Associate Director:** Mia Bay, History  
**Acting Director (2009-10):** Lisa L. Miller, Political Science

**Senior Program Coordinator:** Mia Kissil

**Graduate Assistants/Editors:** Jill Campaiola, Media Studies; Bridget Gurtler, History; Fred Hanna, Graduate School of Education; Shakti Jaising, English; Stephanie Jones-Rogers, History; Fatimah Williams-Castro, Anthropology. **Special thanks to Jeffrey Dowd, GA 2008-09, for preparing this newsletter.**

- Facilitating research and enriching education on matters of race and ethnicity in contemporary life in America, in New Jersey, and the world
- Promoting collaborations and fostering cross-disciplinary seminars and discussions on topics from immigration and work, to ethnic politics and racial classification, from preservation of cultural identity to its transformation, and including questions of poverty, discrimination, advancement, integration, and privilege
- Identifying critical areas for future research and supporting race and ethnicity research and policy development.