Research Tutorials, which are listed in the college catalog as colloquia, offer faculty and students the opportunity to collaborate on shared research projects. The enrollment for each tutorial is limited to six students. Offered for sophomores and juniors, the courses present ongoing research on a series of related questions in the faculty member’s area of expertise. By exploring how different scholars approach a topic, students learn to frame a research question, develop research strategies, and identify and use sources. Students pursue a research topic that dovetails closely with the professor’s scholarly interests.

Students enrolled in these courses are guaranteed funding for six weeks of work during the summer following the academic year in which they take the course.
RESEARCH TUTORIALS in the HUMANITIES and “HUMANISTIC” SOCIAL SCIENCES

America’s Death Penalty  COLQ 234  Professor Sarat

The United States, almost alone among constitutional democracies, retains death as a criminal punishment. It does so in the face of growing international pressure for abolition and of evidence that the system for deciding who lives and who dies is fraught with error. This seminar is designed to expose students to America’s death penalty as a researchable subject. It will be organized to help students understand how research is framed in this area, analyze theories and approaches of death penalty researchers, and identify open questions and most promising lines of future research. It will focus on the following dimensions of America’s death penalty: its history, current status, public support/opposition, the processing of capital cases in the criminal justice system, race and capital punishment, and its impact and efficacy. During the seminar, each student will develop a prospectus for a research project on America’s death penalty. This course is part of a tutorial series that engages Amherst students in substantive research with faculty in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

Open to Sophomores and Juniors interested in research. Enrollment will be limited to 6.

The Making of Dictionaries  COLQ 240  Professor Stavans

The course focuses on the history of dictionaries as epistemological resources from the Enlightenment to the present. It debates the changing nature of language, the strategies lexicographers employ to compile word banks and the capital bestowed on them, the connections between dictionaries and readers, the evolution of dictionaries from print to digital and the marketing mechanisms they have used, as well as the multifaceted nature of the genre (historiographic, etymological, bilingual, specialized, etc.), gaming (crosswords, scrabble, and so on), and other derivatives. While concentrating on the English-speaking world, comparisons with Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, and other languages will be made. Students will collaborate on a study that includes working with Merriam-Webster in Springfield, Mass. Co-taught by Professor Stavans and Peter Sokolowski.

This course is part of a tutorial series that engages Amherst students in substantive research with faculty in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

Open to Sophomores and Juniors interested in research. Enrollment will be limited to 6 students.
RESEARCH TUTORIALS in the HUMANITIES and “HUMANISTIC” SOCIAL SCIENCES

Natives in Transit: Indian Entertainment, Urban Life, and Activism, 1930-1970

COLQ 246

Professor Vigil

This class takes Los Angeles and New York as case studies for tracing different histories related to Native Americans, urbanism, and entertainment. So students can engage a range of interdisciplinary strategies for studying Native American migration in the twentieth century we will draw on materials from the Kim-Wait/Pablo Eisenberg Native American Literature Collection to practice developing researchable questions. Students will also assist in conducting primary research and data gathering related to Native American actors and entertainers to shed light on the lives they led off-screen and off-stage while they worked in Los Angeles and New York City. To ground our discussions and approach to research students will read secondary sources about the history of Native performance in the United States, especially in relation to cinema. There may be some ethnographic work as well and an introduction to methods from oral history. The main aim of this research tutorial is to have students focus on the ways in which Native people have participated in the film industry as laborers and shapers of culture, and since there are no “official” archives left to us by Native entertainers much of what students will learn is how to conduct research based on clues from a diverse array of sources. For example, by examining articles from Variety, catalogs from the American Film Institute, and papers from social reform institutions, like the L.A. Indian Center and the American Indian Community House (AICH) in New York City, students will begin to piece together a meaningful understanding of Native people as actors and activists during the twentieth century. Students who can be in residence for part of the summer following the tutorial will visit archives in New York related to the AICH—a non-profit organization that has served the health, social service, and cultural needs of Native Americans in the city since 1969. Additional work over the summer will involve visualization tools from the Digital Humanities, like Gephi, so students can demonstrate what they have learned about the many Native entertainment and activist networks that existed in L.A. and NYC.

This course is part of a model of tutorials at Amherst designed to enable students to engage in substantive research with faculty.

Open to Sophomores and Juniors interested in research. Admission with consent of the instructor. Enrollment will be limited to 6.

Continue for more Tutorials
Secret Lives of the Late-Soviet Stage: The Archive and the Repertoire

How can an archive tell the story of a cultural practice that resists the very idea of being archived? If performance, in Peggy Phelan’s formulation, “becomes itself through disappearance,” what might it mean to document this endless disappearance? And what can we learn about the relationship between performance as an artistic project, theater as a cultural institution, and the everyday, intimate existence of those who made performances happen from examining such an archive?

We will examine these questions through the lens of the Alma Law Soviet Theater Collection at the Amherst Center of Russian Culture. Over the course of nearly thirty years, Alma Law (1927-2003), the best-informed American scholar of Russian and Soviet theater in her generation, amassed a treasure trove of materials that chronicle the theater scene of the late-Soviet period. Hundreds of interviews with actors, directors, designers, playwrights, critics, and scholars working in Soviet theater at the time, which Law conducted during her frequent research trips to the USSR, are complemented by video and audio recordings of live rehearsals and performances, thousands of photos and over a hundred reels of microfilm. They give us access to very rare testimony about the “backstage” existence of a crucial cultural institution. What kinds of things can we actually learn from these diverse pieces of evidence?

The tutorial will begin by exploring key methodological insights from the fields of performance studies and cultural history, which will help us formulate the research questions that we will pursue, individually and in pairs, as we examine Law’s notebooks (diaries and drafts), and card catalogs. These materials were originally created in English, so no knowledge of the Russian language (or Soviet culture or theater studies) is required. Students who are able to read Russian are highly encouraged to participate and will receive research assignments that allow them to employ their proficiency.

This tutorial builds on the work, in the spring and summer of 2018, of the pioneering group of Amherst undergraduates who produced a comprehensive inventory of Alma Law’s diaries from one key period of her travels (the early 1990s, when she was working closely with the legendary theater maker Yuri Lyubimov) and an inventory of the hundreds of personalities, on both sides of the ocean, with whom she worked on her Soviet theater-related projects. The research conducted by that group makes it possible to take several important new steps in conceptualizing the material and shaping the first scholarly study of the archive and the world it captures.

This course is part of a tutorial series that engages Amherst students in substantive research with faculty in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

Open to Sophomores and Juniors interested in research. Enrollment will be limited to 6.

Pre-Register, as space is very limited in these tutorial courses.
What are our obligations to future generations of human beings? This question has pressing implications for everything from climate change policy to the accumulation of national debt. Perhaps we owe nothing to future people, since they don’t (yet) exist, or since their future identities depend upon our actions. But if we reject these lines of thought, as most of us do, then how exactly should we weigh the well-being of future people against the lives of those currently living? Should we apply some sort of “discount rate”, and if so, which one? Should we aim for a future population whose well-being is maximized or should we apply some other standard, perhaps one that includes considerations of justice? Even more fundamentally: are we right to think that human life is, on balance, a positive thing, or are we under an “anti-natalist” obligation not to bring more people into this world? (And how should non-human animals and the environment-as-such figure into our thinking here?) Finally, how might a policy based on answers to such questions be weighed against other factors, such as our reproductive rights, or procedural and historical considerations?

These questions have been the subject of recent work by philosophers and social scientists in the emerging and fascinating field of population ethics. In this colloquium, we focus on several theoretical puzzles that lie at the heart of this area of inquiry. In conjunction with the professor’s own research on these issues, students will be introduced to the central puzzles of population ethics, and then guided through the process of developing their own proposals for further research.

This course is part of a model of tutorials at Amherst designed to enable students to engage in substantive research with faculty.

Open to Sophomores and Juniors interested in research. Enrollment will be limited to 6.
In America, a child’s address, more than any other factor, often determines what kind of public education he or she will receive. A complex set of historical forces including local and federal housing policies, mortgage lending practices, highway construction, and school districting have channeled particular economic, racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups into particular neighborhoods, where many remain today. And because public schools are funded by local property taxes and influenced by neighborhood boundaries, they often become harnessed to a narrative of inequality. Yet recent Supreme Court rulings have severely circumscribed the strategies communities might employ to disrupt the linkage between residence and educational opportunity. This research seminar blends urban history with educational policy to explore how spatial relationships have shaped educational opportunity since World War II. It will investigate a range of historical, legal, and contemporary issues relevant to both the segregation and desegregation of American cities and their public schools in the twentieth century. Class meetings will alternate between seminar-style discussion and an intensive, hands-on study of one particular community—Cambridge, Massachusetts—note-worthy for the innovative strategies it has utilized to desegregate its public schools. This course involves a significant research component designed to expose students to a range of approaches including archival analysis and oral interviews. In particular, students will learn to utilize geographic information systems (GIS) to visualize the spatial evolution of inequality in urban communities like Cambridge and to analyze past, present, and future strategies to equalize educational opportunity in American cities.

This course is part of a new model of tutorials at Amherst designed to enable students to engage in substantive research with faculty in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

Open to Sophomores and Juniors interested in developing a senior thesis project.

Enrollment will be limited to 6.
RESEARCH TUTORIALS in the HUMANITIES and “HUMANISTIC” SOCIAL SCIENCES

Hearing Difference: The Political Economy of Accent
COLQ 342
Professor Rangan

Accents can be global and local, ethnic and national, cosmopolitan and provincial, unconscious and performative, racialized and gendered—often all at once. And yet, although everyone speaks with an accent, some accents are heard as “neutral” whereas others are heard as “accented.” These differences have serious implications: accent can be a passport for entry or grounds for discrimination, leading to the denial or approval of asylum claims and job or housing applications. Indeed, accent has become a lynchpin of the contemporary global economy, with complex industries devoted to the training, detection, neutralization, and monetization of particular accents. This seminar will introduce students to representations of accented speech and the experience of accented subjects as a researchable subject that teaches us much about the political economy of listening and the commodity-status of vocal sounds. The course will be organized into three units: theory, method, and site. During the first half of the course, we will encounter how accent has been theorized in a range of disciplines, including sociology, linguistics, sound studies, literary studies, and film studies. Diverse methods, from ethnography and case studies, to close textual analysis and quantitative analysis are employed in each of these fields. In the final unit of the class we will mobilize these competencies by studying various global sites that demand an approach that is intersectional, interdisciplinary, and methodologically nimble, including the offshore call center and cloud-based voice services. Students will then write their own prospectus for a research project on accent focused on a site that they will identify.

This course is part of a tutorial series that engages Amherst students in substantive research with faculty in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

Open to Sophomores and Juniors interested in research. Enrollment will be limited to 6.
RESEARCH TUTORIALS in the HUMANITIES and “HUMANISTIC” SOCIAL SCIENCES

Casting and Identity Politics  COLQ 347  Professor Eliraz

Since the emergence of theater in early societies, the concept of Character has always been at the core of this art form. The character’s identity was usually different than the actor’s. Since the rise of Realism (and especially in recent decades), however, we encounter a very different approach: there is a clear call that the identity of the actor will match the identity of the character she plays.

This new phenomena goes hand in hand with another major trend in recent decades, relating to the topics and stories of contemporary plays. More and more, plays bring stories of social groups and individuals that were rarely told in the past. This, along with the rise of Identity Politics, has led to an even greater demand that the identities of the actors, those who are casted to portray these stories on stage, will match the identities of their characters.

What are the implications of these new trends on playwriting, casting and production methods and values? If the actor’s identity should match the character’s, what room does it leave for the director’s interpretation of the play and of the characters? What aspects of identity are we looking at, besides race, gender and ethnicity? What about religion, body size, or age, for example?

This research tutorial would be an opportunity to engage with a very “hot topic” in contemporary theater. Inquiry will inevitably expand to explore other bodies of research, such as Political Science, Culture and Media Studies, and Art theory. In addition to more traditional research methods, students will also conduct interviews with artistic directors and actors, read plays and watch productions. All this would hopefully culminate in one or more articles that the group will publish academically.

This course is part of a tutorial series that engages Amherst students in substantive research with faculty in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

Open to Sophomores and Juniors interested in research. Enrollment will be limited to 6.

Watch for these courses to appear in the on-line catalogue. Pre-Registration is strongly recommended.