For centuries happiness has enjoyed a privileged seat at our human table. It is considered a self-evident truth, a desire, and a goal for society. What is happiness, how have its meanings changed, and what makes it an enduring human value? Our course examines happiness in great works of philosophy, religion, psychology and social science, literature, and art. We will study and discuss these works in a seminar, approaching happiness as an idea, an experience, and a comment on culture. What are the common and unique themes of the history of happiness, how can we evaluate them, and what does the pursuit of happiness tell us about ourselves and our country?

We will study works of Aristotle, Augustine, Beethoven, the Bible, Blake, Camus, Willa Cather, the Dalai Lama, Darwin, Descartes, Emily Dickinson, Emerson, Freud, Kant, Keats, Marx, Matisse, John Stuart Mill, Rousseau, Bertrand Russell, Sappho, Wallace Stevens, Thoreau, Wagner, Max Weber, and Walt Whitman.


Besides three brief papers, student will undertake a final research paper related to a specific discipline or interest (usually an academic major or career goal). The final paper may be written individually or with several authors, and will be presented to class. The course is an intensive writing class.