

The Past and Future of American Youth:
Growing Up, Becoming Independent, Forming Intimate Relationships.

Fall 2010, Winter 2011

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Program Description

This program covers the history and contemporary sociology of American youth, with an additional emphasis on ethnography. First we examine the changing history of family life, child-rearing, and the transition to adulthood from colonial times through the 1970s, paying particular attention to the socioeconomic communities as well as the family settings in which these take place. We also explore changes in courting and sexuality for young people during the same span of time. Again, we examine variations in these experiences by race, class, and gender. Indeed, the final four weeks of the program focus specifically on the contrast between the hopes raised by youthful participation in the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s and the obstacles facing impoverished inner-city youth during the 1980s.

Winter quarter we turn to recent developments, including the changing opportunities and constraints of the work world, new trends in forging intimate relationships, changes in expectations and patterns of courtship and marriage, and the establishment of a new stage of life that one author calls “emergent adulthood.” We will read several different points of view about how families, schools, and other institutions reproduce or ameliorate economic racial, class, ethnic, and gender differences. We will also discuss the relative weight of factors that contribute to success, including cultural heritage, timing, persistence, and consider what kind of changes would offer more youth the opportunity to fulfill their potential

In both seminar discussions and frequent papers, students will be expected to demonstrate a firm command of the program material and to critically analyze conflicting historical and sociological theories about the causes and consequences of the phenomena we studied. Reading and writing demands are heavy, and faculty will give detailed feedback on students’ written work, with the expectation that students will then revise their papers.

In addition to the historical and sociological content of the program, students will do 7-8 hours learning-service work a week in a local elementary school or a low-income after-school program. They will work as classroom aides, but after receiving some training in taking ethnographic field notes, they will also type up daily summaries of their observations and write a paper on their experience at the end of each quarter.

Expect to be in class 10-3 on Monday, 10-4 on Tuesday, 10-1 on Friday and EITHER all day Wednesday or Thursday or three hours in the late afternoon on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, depending on where you do your field work.