What is this course about?

This course will explore the contemporary American family as a thing made on purpose—not only by individuals or couples, but also by legislatures, courts, churches, insurance companies, and others. Looking at topics from gay marriage, polygynous marriage, and arranged marriages, to inter-racial adoption, assisted reproduction and the new voluntary childlessness, the course will examine current topics in the public debate on the family though the lens of social science. For example, we will consider:

- Who are the stake-holders in the shape and character of the family?
- What forms of leverage do they have to influence family form?
- What positions do they take? And why?

Thus, our aim is not so much to takes sides (for or against gay marriage, for or against surrogacy contracts, etc.), but rather to understand how the sides are aligned, organized, and motivated.

How much work should you expect?

Not too much. Like all Freshman Seminars, this course is intended to introduce you to a way of thinking about a topic, rather than to transmit a particular corpus of knowledge. We will read popular non-fiction, rather than technical academic work, and not more than 25 pages a week. The only requirements are that you read and participate in the discussion. There will neither exams nor required papers. My goal is that you acquire the habit of thinking critically about seemingly obvious and inevitable things, so that you can approach the news, electoral politics, and the choices you will face in your own lives with more information and better analytic skills.
Schedule of topics

August 26. Introduction

September 2. For and against marriage


September 9. Gay marriage


September 16. Cohabitation and divorce


September 23. Marriage and welfare reform

September 30.  **American Polygyny**

October 7.  **Arranged marriage and mail-order brides**

October 14.  **Childlessness: voluntary and involuntary**

October 21.  **New Reproductive Technologies, part 1:**
October 28. **New Reproductive Technologies, part 2:**


November 4. **Adoption**


November 11. **No Class** (Veteran’s Day)

November 18. **Non-marital and teen childbearing**


November 25. **Bioethics**


December 2. **Conclusion (a.k.a. class party)**