Enduring Questions Course Grant: “Is there such a thing as a just war?”

National Endowment for the Humanities
Dr. Christopher Bellitto, PI

The National Endowment for the Humanities has funded Enduring Questions Course Grant: “Is there such a thing as a just war?” Dr. Christopher Bellitto, Department of History at Kean University, will serve as the PI of the project. The course’s goal is to ask students to examine this question from a variety of perspectives, which frequently will conflict with one another. The students will negotiate competing perspectives to gain broader historical, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary contexts for today’s challenges.

Kean University is embarking on a major emphasis on human rights education through its emerging Human Rights Institute and long-standing Holocaust Resource Center, both with an emphasis on community outreach and education free-of-charge. Kean is an excellent setting for a global perspective: a particularly diverse campus, sitting as it does in urban northern New Jersey, just across the river from New York City, one of the most ethnically varied areas in the country. Over one-third of the undergraduates are immigrants—first-generation Americans—and they come from 81 countries. They enrich the classrooms with their experiences and perspectives.

Pursuing this enduring question will take the students on an intense journey through more than three thousand years of intellectual history and frequently-disturbing case studies. Employing student-centered learning tools, the students will read classic texts in just war theory and apply them to historical situations. The goal of reading is to explore multiple, conflicting interpretations; comparative analysis of primary source documents is the course’s bedrock.

Students will lead discussions, offer presentations on their project research, and engage in role-playing and in-class debates. In order to experience the reality of intellectual pluralism head-on for themselves, students will be assigned a particular side of a debate for class, but another side for a writing assignment.

There will a series of short assessment essays based on classroom reading, discussion, and role-playing, and then one longer research paper. The research project will be to select, research, and discuss a case study related to students’ interests. Students will also help create a website and teaching unit on the topic, producing a digital humanities component of the course for public consumption. By way of assessment, students will participate in the “preconceptions revisited” exercise; respond to a survey that will be administered about the course; and review the syllabus with suggestions on how they might teach the course now that they have taken it.