Uses of Knowledge: The Role of Scientific Experts in Society

Instructor: Prof. M. Goldenberg

This course focuses on the role of scientific expertise in personal and political decision-making. Members of the public routinely rely on scientific knowledge to inform everyday decisions, including the choice whether to support or protest scientifically-informed public policy decisions that impact our lives. Due to limited research time and specialized training, we rely on expert advice. Where ASCI*1120 asked "what should we believe?", and in ASCI*2050 we ask "who should we believe?". When the channels of knowledge transfer, translation, and mobilization work well, trustworthy scientific experts conduct the relevant research soundly, apply it appropriately to the social issue in question, and receptive users of this information (members of the public, policy makers) act on these findings. When trust is in place, our “uses of knowledge” should go smoothly. But the current political landscape’s many sites of conflicting knowledge claims indicate that expert/non-expert relations are not so secure. This course will focus on the challenges of scientific expertise in democratic societies, investigating such questions as:

- What distinguishes expert knowledge from other types of knowledge?
- How do non-experts identify experts and when is it appropriate to defer to them?
- When experts disagree, how do we determine which one to believe?
- Does reliance on expert authority undermine democratic values?


Course Assignments/Evaluation:

- Discussion board contributions 15%
- Quizzes 15%
- Short writing assignments 20%
- Final essay 40%
- Final reflection 10%

Note: This is an approximate course outline and is subject to change over the summer.