

Course Description for AscI 2050:

This course focuses on the relationships between scientific experts and the public in democratic society. This is a fast-expanding area of research in science studies (history, philosophy, and sociology of science) and science communications due to the persistence of heated science controversies dividing scientific communities and the publics (e.g., climate change, vaccination, GMOs, public health during COVID-19) that threaten scientific progress, economic and health security, and political stability.

Where ASCI*1120 asked "what should we believe?", in ASCI*2050 we ask, "who should we believe?"

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 a lot. 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?

How can scientific experts help or harm public conflicts over scientific claims?

Answering these questions about the nature and role of experts requires further thinking about the role that members of the public play in scientifically-informed democratic societies and the structures that need to be in play in order for us to benefit from expert knowledge.