

How science informs public policy topic of special honors course

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December 18, 2017

"Universities are places to speak truth to power," honors faculty fellow John Parker said. "They should be, at least."



(/files/johnparker2014smjpg-1)
John Parker, honors faculty fellow

With this in mind, Parker spent Fall 2017 hoping to empower students with evidence-based insights to further discussions about political and social change. He led a one-semester, three-credit course called *Science, Trumped*. As the course title suggests, this was not your average Barrett, The Honors College class. It was inspired by a not-your-average political climate in the U.S.

"We're facing a lot of really serious issues as a species right now, and as a country," Parker said. "We desperately need better scientific leadership and better use of science to inform politics and political decision-making."

Parker alluded to the tension between the Trump administration and the scientific community. Notably, the president's June decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement marked a national shift in conversation about climate change — a phenomenon accepted by 97% of scientists as being human-driven, according to NASA. Expressing concern over having political leadership that seemed adverse to scientific research and thought, Parker designed *Science, Trumped*, a special topics course that would allow honors students to objectively and constructively discuss the impact of the Trump administration on science.

This special topics course followed an untraditional format, featuring guest lectures every other week. North American scholars with various backgrounds joined Parker's students in person or via Skype for discussions on topics from climate change to nuclear war.

Students had the opportunity to learn from people like Philip Taubman, vice provost at Stanford University and a world-renowned expert on nuclear weapons and arms races. Other guest lecturers included Sheila Jasanoff, director of Harvard University's Program on Science, Technology and Society, and Scott Frickel, a sociologist from Brown University.

"I enjoyed the opportunity to hear from scholars and experts outside of the ASU community that I would not otherwise be able to meet," said Dominique Reichenbach, a Mandarin and global studies junior. Reichenbach looked forward to *Science, Trumped* after a positive [Human Event](https://barretthonors.asu.edu/academics/honors-courses-and-contracts/signature-courses) experience in Parker's class as a freshman.

"I knew this class would place an emphasis on environmental policy in the U.S. and I am interested in a career in this field," Reichenbach added.

This course enabled students to productively discuss contemporary issues in a classroom, as noted by Natalie Andros, a senior majoring in philosophy and family and human development.

"I was upset about the current political climate, and I wanted another way to educate myself about what was going on," Andros said. "I wanted to be able to discuss solutions with my peers in an academic setting."

Students enjoyed the unique opportunity to earn course credit by engaging with scholars and fellow students about current events.

"Sometimes, college classes can feel like they don't matter or are too abstract to carry any weight outside of a university setting," Andros said. "This class isn't like that."

Parker felt similarly about academic institutions offering timely courses like *Science, Trumped*.

"I think it's important in a place like the Honors College that we use the freedom we have to create innovative courses to address contemporary issues – particularly political and social issues," Parker said.

What could have been seen as a "touchy" course topic was instead embraced by ASU and Barrett leadership, Parker noted.

"(This class) speaks to many of the principles that ASU strives for in terms of social embeddedness, engagement and outreach. I know that I've been supported at all levels of the university."

While *Science, Trumped* was a special topics course offered only during Fall 2017, new honors classes are developed each semester as determined by professor and student interest. [View HON 394 course topics for Spring 2018. \(https://webapp4.asu.edu/catalog/classlist?s=HON&n=394&t=2181&e=all&hon=F&promod=F\)](https://webapp4.asu.edu/catalog/classlist?s=HON&n=394&t=2181&e=all&hon=F&promod=F)

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