ALISON TOVAR

With public health, nutrition, and overall wellness being one of the most talked about subjects in our society today, it is no wonder Dr. Alison Tovar has dedicated her attention to this important topic. Her passion for these issues shines through when teaching her course, NFS 212G – Public Health Nutrition. Dr. Tovar views nutrition as a complex global issue that needs to be addressed both at an individual and societal level. In her grand challenge course, she pushes students to think beyond their own experiences. She moves away from the idea that this is only an individual concern, and thinks “nutrition is certainly a personal responsibility – but bigger change needs to be made on a more global level.” Dr. Tovar encourages her students to question the ethics of health and nutrition through in-class debates, using prompts such as, “Should sugary drinks be taxed as a way of deterring consumption?” Students then research and dissect arguments on both sides. According to Dr. Tovar, this is a favorite assignment among students. It gets them fired up about the ethical issues and other obstacles surrounding nutrition and public health. The course also focuses on the importance of initiating change. Students are charged with identifying nutrition problems on campus and work in groups to design possible solutions. Ultimately, at the end of the semester Dr. Tovar hopes her students are able to think beyond themselves when it comes to nutrition, and recognize the big changes that can have an impact on our society’s health and wellness.

DOUGLAS GOBEILLE

It is an all too familiar question: Do aliens really exist? For Dr. Douglas Gobeille this question never gets old. In fact, every semester it is the first question he asks his students in AST 118 – The Solar System. Described as an astrobiology course, this introduction to planetary science incorporates math, physics, and biology to explore if there is intelligent life beyond earth. Applicable to students from all majors, the course focuses on big topics about the Universe, discussing life forms on other planets and planetary evolution. Dr. Gobeille engages his students by connecting planetary science to students’ own academic and personal interests, whether they study philosophy, art, mathematics, or science. In doing so, he provides an array of assignments and activities and allows students to pursue what they are drawn to, what sparks their curiosity. Working with the physics engine to simulate shuttle flights and rocket tests, and observing the night sky at the URI planetarium are two such activities that allow students to put into practice the information they are reading and discussing. According to Dr. Gobeille, the best part of teaching AST 118 is, “when the students force me to grow the same way I am pushing them to grow. They ask questions I have never thought about before and this ends up pushing the entire class.” No matter what the subject, Dr. Gobeille’s goal is always the one constant – teaching students how to form cogent arguments so they can contribute to the everyday yet powerful conversations around science.

JASON KOLBE

Biology shapes all aspects of human life, including our evolution, our ecological and environmental development, as well as our medical advancements. When teaching BIO 396 - Biology and Society, Dr. Jason Kolbe chooses to focus the course on evolution and our understanding of human origins. Taking a dual perspective, his course examines how evolution impacts our lives and how humans affect evolutionary change. Discussing topics like climate and habitat change, Dr. Kolbe underscores the importance of recognizing that there is a reciprocal connection between the scientific method and society — society guides how we engage in science and science influences how society evolves and changes. With this in mind, students are encouraged to integrate their own passions and strengths in answering the big question: what has shaped or caused evolution? Student’s interpretations of this question always inspire an eclectic array of projects such as a children’s book explaining evolution, an original song and performance chronicling our evolution, and even a cartoon depicting climate change. Dr. Kolbe finds the final project to be one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching the course. Seeing students’ creativity and satisfaction in connecting evolution to their interests and future professions undoubtedly feeds his own curiosity. When the semester is complete, Dr. Kolbe hopes his students are comfortable with and articulate in defending the evidence for evolution, and most importantly that they recognize the imperfect but vital relationship between society and science.

VALERIE MAIER SPEREDELOZZI

For Dr. Valerie Maier Speredelozzi, the three pillars of sustainability; economic, environmental, and social integrity, are far more than a theoretical perspective or ideology, they are a way of life. Whether she is studying lean systems and manufacturing waste reduction or working to reduce the waste stream of her daughter’s elementary school cafeteria, Dr. Mair Speredelozzi is always focused on promoting a sustainable society. It is this ambition that lead her to design ISE/SUS 261G – Waste Not, Want Not: Sustainable Lean Production. With no prerequisites, this course is geared towards students who are interested in working to create societal change is more likely to follow. Dr. Mair Speredelozzi underscores that witnessing her students’ shift in mindset, from unaware, to aware, to focused on making a change, is the most gratifying aspect of teaching the course. Knowing that her students can be inspired to champion sustainability is the most hopeful.