Lecture on Health Disparities and Social Movements

Professor Dean E. Robinson, associate professor in political science and Terrence Murray Professor for the Commonwealth Honors College, delivered the Honors College Plenary Lecture on October 9, 2018. Robinson’s talk, entitled “The Science of Health Disparities and Social Movements,” demonstrated the ways economic, political, and social inequality affect health, a topic that has been the focus of his research over the past years.

Robinson illustrated that social status serves as a key indicator for life expectancy and health, charting how, as individuals move up the social ladder, the risk of disease decreases because of less exposure to stress. He used graphs to demonstrate this, including one that compared mothers’ educational level and infant mortality, and how the trend changes by race. The graph showed that white mothers with the least educational attainment have better outcomes than black mothers with the highest educational attainment. By examining the black/white gap in mortality, Robinson demonstrated how racial inequality significantly impacts health, sharing that the experience of racism functions like a chronic stressor. In examining these trends, he came to the conclusion that the changes in these health gaps over time prove that the issue is not “mysteries of DNA” or “diet and physical activity,” but instead “changes in politics and corresponding changes in public policy.”

The United States underperforms compared to peer nations on measures of health, like infant mortality and life expectancy; Robinson discussed how this disparity has to do with the degree of inequality that is tolerated in American society, which itself reflects varying matters of politics and policy processes.

Robinson went on to talk about times in history where this process of inequality has been reduced. He found that times when reduction occurs are when labor union and Civil Rights movements are strong. Using the social movements of the 1960s as an example, Robinson noted that if the decade’s trend of diminishing deaths among black Americans had continued to today, we would have eliminated racial health inequalities in mortality by 2005.

In light of this, Robinson encouraged students to join unions and social movements. He talked about how movements and unions are shaping our society today, referencing Black Lives Matter, Communications Workers of America, and #redfored. His advice to students who wish to use their knowledge for the public good was simple: choose a cause, address it in research, and be engaged scholars outside of the classroom. Listing a sample of labor and civil rights organizations, Robinson suggested that students choose one to get involved with.

“Absolutely devote yourself to education training and mastery of your field of study,” he advised, “but for every nine hours you spend working on your vocation, devote at least one hour to a campaign that addresses a social or especially economic policy addressing inequality.”

Robinson concluded his talk with a quote by 19th-century African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass: “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” Robinson said the quote made clear that “ideas and moral pleas are never enough to advance equality, and that persistence and contestation are always essential.”

“I think that it’s really interesting, what stuck out the most was probably the union part,” said sophomore journalism and political science major, Kelly Palacios. “Sometimes I think that rallies and stuff maybe aren’t doing enough, but seeing the
research that he talked about shows that they are doing a lot to help society change.”

Sarah Lee, a freshman political science major, remarked on how the talk echoed discussions of power in her honors class, Ideas That Change the World.

“In my Ideas class, we talked about different ways of knowing and one of them is authority,” Lee said. “I thought it was really interesting how the authority of the general population affects how the elite authority of government reacts to them, and the way they shape society. I think that’s the definition of democracy, how it should be working.”

Professor Nicole Nemec, who teaches Ideas That Change the World, said the plenary talk “really connected to what we’re learning in class in many ways.”

“One example is they’re doing their own individual research into social movements and the interconnection between them.” Nemec said. “I think that’s a good connection to what the students have been looking at in their own work.”

In addition to teaching, Dr. Robinson offers a yearlong thesis seminar on health disparities. During the seminar, he travels with students to Montreal for three days to learn how other governmental systems deal with health care delivery.