Uncovering COVID-19: Critical Liberal Arts Perspectives  
Oberlin College // Spring 2020

Tuesdays, 6:30–8:30 p.m. EDT  
Zoom classroom

Instructor of Record: Dr. Laura Baudot  
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Office Hours: Thursdays, 2–4 p.m. EDT or by appointment  
Zoom details in calendar link

Course Description
As the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, has spread throughout the world and prompted entire countries to close non-essential operations, it has dominated the news cycle and demanded our attention in nearly every facet of our lives. This course offers a holistic understanding of a complex global phenomenon that is reshaping how we work, play, learn, and engage with each other. Oberlin faculty members in Biology, Mathematics, Politics, Comparative American Studies, Cinema Studies, Economics, Psychology, and Rhetoric and Composition will provide a variety of perspectives on the pandemic, demonstrating the interdisciplinary approach necessary for fully comprehending the current crisis. This course serves as an introduction to the power of a liberal arts education. Prospective Oberlin College students will have the opportunity to meet Oberlin faculty and student leaders, and get a sense of what it means to ask big questions at Oberlin.

Course Learning Goals
Through this course, students will:

- Learn how different academic disciplines search for and create knowledge;
- View complex, global challenges from multiple perspectives;
- Critically assess media about rapidly-developing global stories;
- Find personal voice in times of local, national, and global upheaval;
- Collaborate with peers and faculty members in a genuine Oberlin College learning environment.

Course Texts
There are no texts required for purchase. All readings assigned by faculty lecturers are included on the syllabus under the description of their lecture, and should be completed in advance of each class meeting. All assigned readings will be available to students as free PDFs, collected in this folder. If you have difficulty accessing the folder, please reach out to the Course Manager.
Course Assignments and Grading
This is a two-credit course graded on a pass/no-pass scale. Students who enroll at Oberlin College can apply this course as academic credit toward graduation. Students who choose to enroll at a different institution can work with Oberlin College and their own institution to apply this course as transfer credit, subject to the policies of both institutions. Each student will be assessed based on the following criteria:

Attendance (50%). Students are expected to attend all lectures and participate in the post-lecture conversations facilitated by current student leaders at Oberlin College.

Weekly assignments (25%). Faculty members will assign readings and short assignments to be completed ahead of their lectures, in order to encourage full and meaningful engagement with the topics and themes they present. All students are expected to complete these readings and assignments by the time of each lecture. The Course Manager will communicate information about how to submit assignments. Assignments will be graded based on completion.

Final assignment (25%). The final assignment is an opportunity for students to take material presented by faculty lecturers and discussed in breakout sessions and use it to propose a self-directed project that moves from consuming to interpreting information. Peer leaders will guide students through a reflection process that will culminate in every student posing a question that they want to explore in some way. This exploration can be of any form or genre — including writing, artistic expression, data analysis, videography, and more — and must bring together approaches and information presented in at least two of the faculty lectures. Students are welcome to build upon assignments already submitted for previous lectures. Instructions for the assignment will be distributed during the fifth lecture, taking place Tuesday, May 5th, and projects will be due Tuesday, June 2nd — a week after the final lecture. Students are welcome to work individually or as a group; projects will be graded on completion.

All students will have the opportunity to submit their final project to be published online by The Oberlin Review, Oberlin College’s student-run publication of record. The Review has developed a hub for COVID-19 coverage that pertains directly to Oberlin, and is more than happy to work with students to publish their work, regardless of whether they ultimately choose to attend Oberlin. Review editors will also work to connect students with other campus publications when appropriate.

Course Policies
Below is information about general course policies and expectations. Any questions about these policies and expectations can be directed to the Instructor of Record or the Course Manager.

Honor Code: Oberlin College is an Honor Code institution, meaning that all students are expected to complete assignments and assessments while holding themselves to a standard of academic integrity.
More information about the Honor Code, as well as the full Honor Code Charter, can be accessed here. All students should be familiar with the general expectations of academic integrity, and any questions about this can be directed to the Course Manager. At the bottom of all assignments, students will be expected to include the following statement: “I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment.”

Accomodations: Any students who anticipate needing accessibility accommodations in order to participate fully in the course should contact the Course Manager, who will work with students on a case-by-case basis to ensure that their needs are met. Our goal is for all interested students to be able to fully participate in this course!

Connectivity: All course meetings will be exclusively conducted via Zoom. Any students with difficulties connecting to the sessions should contact the Course Manager, who will work with students on a case-by-case basis to address technology challenges as effectively as possible.

Course Schedule

Week 1: Tuesday, April 7
Lecturer: Dr. Yolanda Cruz, Robert S. Danforth Professor of Biology
What is COVID-19, and why is it dangerous to humans?
Pre-class assignment: Write a short paragraph (150 words) explaining why antibiotics don’t work against viruses.

Week 2: Tuesday, April 14
Lecturer: Dr. Jeff Witmer, Professor of Mathematics/Statistics
How should we interpret statistics about COVID-19? Can we ‘flatten the curve,’ and what does that mean? What is herd immunity, and is it possible to achieve?
Pre-class assignment: Visit this website and spend some time working with the data (instructions for how to work with the data here): https://tinu.shinyapps.io/Flatten_the_Curve/.

Week 3: Tuesday, April 21
Lecturer: Dr. Michael Parkin, Erwin N. Griswold Professor of Politics
How should we assess the political reaction to COVID-19? How have governments, political organizations, and citizens reacted to the pandemic?
**Pre-class reading:** If you have not already done so, please read at least three articles that cover the U.S. government’s reaction to the COVID-19 outbreak.

**Pre-class assignment:** Find, document, and upload an article that describes a positive/effective government reaction to the COVID-19 outbreak — i.e., an article that shows, in your opinion, how governments should respond to situations like this.

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**Week 4: Tuesday, April 28**

Lecturers: [Dr. Jan Cooper](#), John C. Reid Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Composition and English; [Dr. Geoff Pingree](#), Professor of Cinema Studies and English

*How has the media covered the COVID-19 outbreak, from beginning to present? How has this developing coverage shaped our understanding of pandemic? Does the way we interact with and consume media change when we are in relative social isolation?*

**Pre-class reading:** “Americans Immersed in COVID-10 News; Most Think Media Are Doing Fairly Well Covering It,” Amy Mitchell and J. Baxter Maxwell

Podcast: “Local media and COVID-19—the canary in the coalmine,” Amanda Darrach

**Pre-class assignment:** Write a substantial paragraph describing how the local news organizations of your community have covered the COVID-19 in the past month. How present is the sense of crisis in that coverage, and how do you know that? What kinds of language do local reporters, government officials, and health agencies use to describe the crisis and the extent to which the virus is affecting your community? Do you notice particular metaphors, analogies, arguments, and advice circulating in more than one local news source?

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**Week 5: Tuesday, May 5**

Lecturer: [Dr. Laurie McMillin](#), Professor of Rhetoric and Composition

*In many ways, writing is an act of making sense. But what happens when our usual ways of making sense no longer serve us? How can new forms of writing help us come to terms with our current reality? This session focuses on personal narratives to explore these questions.*

**Pre-class reading:** [awayjournal.org](http://awayjournal.org), Read through the “Sheltering in Place” issues


Reid, Catherine (2014). Disorder, the Trope, and the Storyline.

**Pre-class assignment:** Classically, stories follow a common structure: A beginning with rising action, a middle with a climax, and then a resolution and the end. Browse recent first-person accounts of the coronavirus in, for example, the New York Times, and see if they use this structure. What kind of persona tells the story? What feeling does the story create at its conclusion?
Now look at the assigned readings for today and consider: what structures do they use? What stories do they tell, and what structures and forms do they use to tell them? Why might the writers tell their stories in these particular ways?

Now write about your current reality. What does your day look like? What is going through your mind? What form could help represent your emotional state and the situation you find yourself in? Feel free to imitate one of the readings.

Week 6: Tuesday, May 12

Lecturer: Dr. Cindy Frantz, Norman D. Henderson Professor of Psychology

*What are the psychological impacts of social isolation? How can we find other ways to connect?*

**Pre-class reading:** Gawande, A. (2009). Hellhole. New Yorker, 1/30/09


**Pre-class assignment:** Find, document, and upload (e.g. screen shot, photo, verbal description) an example of people finding new ways to socially connect.

Week 7: Tuesday, May 19

Lecturer: Dr. Martin Saavedra, Assistant Professor of Economics

*How can studying historical examples of pandemic and crisis inform our responses to COVID-19?*

**Pre-class reading:** [https://voxeu.org/article/coronavirus-meets-great-inuenza-pandemic](https://voxeu.org/article/coronavirus-meets-great-inuenza-pandemic)

**Pre-class assignment:** Write a paragraph about the ways the 1918 influenza pandemic and COVID-19 are similar. Write another paragraph about the ways in which the two are dissimilar.

Week 8: Tuesday, May 26

Lecturer: Dr. KJ Cerankowski, Assistant Professor of Comparative American Studies and Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies

*Who has access to care? How do communities that already experience inequitable access to health care manage during a time of health crisis? How does the “social distancing” protocol reshape what community health organizing looks like or can look like?*

**Pre-class reading:** “What do we mean by ‘mutual aid’?,” Dean Spade

**Pre-class assignment:** Given what you’ve learned so far about COVID-19, write two paragraphs reflecting on the following questions: Do you think a mutual aid response to the COVID-19 pandemic is feasible? Why or why not? If so, what would it look like (you may also describe an example of a mutual aid response you know about)? If not, what type of aid response do you propose instead?