



Arts & Sciences Spring 2020 Instructor Report for SP2020.L57.RelPol.225.01 - Religion and Politics in American History (Cyrus O'Brien)

Project Title: **WashU Spring 2020 Course Evaluations**

Courses Audience: **37**

Responses Received: **16**

Response Ratio: **43.24%**

Report Comments

Welcome to your Instructor Report for WashU Course Evaluations. Below you will find response data from the specified course section. Responses to personalized questions appear at the bottom of the report.

The intention of this report is to provide feedback, and also to prompt improvement in areas that may be lacking. This report is accessible to appropriate department level and school level users, as determined by your school. We appreciate your dedication to our learning community at Washington University.

If you have questions about this report, please contact evals@wustl.edu

Creation Date: **Thursday, May 21, 2020**

Thinking about this course before spring break, what three words would you use to describe it to another student?

Comments
relevant, exciting, interesting
Intersting, informative
Interesting, passionate professor
Biased, dogmatic, disgusting
Intersectional, current, and engaging.
discussion-based, interesting, important
Fascinating, engaging, useful
organized, thoughtful, discussion focused
Interesting, survey, well-taught
Reading semi-engaging relevant
interesting, slightly disorganized
Engaging, informative, fun
Discussion-based, engaging, important
inviting, engaging, and critical
enjoyable, fascinating, unique
Thought-provoking readings Productive Discussions Uncomfortable but necessary Topics

Thinking about this course before spring break, describe at least one thing about this course that helped you learn.

Comments
the size of the class, it was a really great size for both both large and small class discussions
I enjoyed the readings and smaller group discussions
Professor's eagerness to help students understand
I did not really learn anything.
All students had to tweet 5 times throughout the semester and at the beginning of every class, we discussed what was in the news. This helped me learn because it kept the class current and allowed students to see what other students were interested in.
the in-class discussions were very interesting and important
Class discussions really allowed me to engage with the reading at a deeper level and get many different perspectives on the information presented. I liked that we returned to common themes during the semester to reinforce ideas about the interplay of religion and politics in american history.
the flow and organization between the twitter to talk about current events, small group discussions leading to big group discussions and finally the final conclusion or take-away
Professor O'Brien simply asked all the right questions – he knew how to direct students into meaningful conversations without giving them answers
Small discussion groups
Blog posts.
I found class discussion as a whole to be really helpful.
Readings were all well thought-out. I never questioned why we were reading what we were. Also, tying even old texts to current events through the tweets was helpful as it provided a way of looking at concepts that was more easily understood
peer discourse
I liked having big and small group discussions. I thought #RelPol would be silly, but it actually was super interesting and made me appreciate the relationships between religion and politics and how they shape our lives today.
Every class we split up into small groups to discuss the readings with questions/prompts to guide us. We also spent multiple class periods creating the Midterm exam together in order to ensure the material on it was stuff we covered and thoroughly understood.

Thinking about this course before spring break, describe at least one thing that could be changed about this course to help you learn.

Comments
the classroom we were in
I feel like the larger group discussions were hard to participate in. I also would have liked a little more lecture to learn even more.
N/A
Less bias, more middle-of-the road readings.
The class was a bit larger than I would have liked. I think if the class was smaller, everyone would have been able to participate more. I always felt like discussions in small groups in class were better than our large group discussions.
nothing
N/A
Probably one reading a week that we focus on instead of multiple
I wish we focused more on current events.
I think spending a little more time on the so what would help enhance my learning.
A little more structure in discussions, especially regarding key points (maybe on powerpoints or just written on the board), discussion was so heavy that I wanted to take notes but it was hard to pick out what was important among the conversations
what were the points that we should have really picked up on?
More historical context???
The classroom itself– it was too small and the set up was cramped and awkward so that we couldn't look at each other when we spoke so it was hard to have true dialogue.

Thinking about the differences in the course before and after spring break, describe at least one change that helped you learn better in the remote version.

Comments
the google doc collaboration with our small groups
The weekly discussions really helped me better understand the readings.
N/A
Having small group discussions over outlets like google hangout was very helpful because we were still able to talk with each other rather than to each other like we do with a blog post.
I was able to have more time to complete the readings, and the additional blog post assignments helped me assess my own comprehension in a more helpful way.
having the smaller and shorter blog posts
Having shared Google Docs with small groups
Small group discussions were great actually. Best transition to online out of all of my classes. Didn't try to do too much and overcompensate like other classes. Well done.
I enjoy meeting with our small groups for a longer period of time.
I think the questions were formatted in a way that made discussion flow more naturally after break.
Discussion posts instead of quizzes forced me to analyze texts and make an original argument rather than just recall information
a written dialogue is easier to follow
I liked that the course assignments were cut back. It alleviated a lot of stress
We were able to discuss the tweets within our small groups. Though typing on a shared doc took veryyyy long and was tiresome, it helped to organize our thoughts and gave us time to really articulate what we wanted to share.

Thinking about the differences in the course before and after spring break, describe at least one change that made learning more challenging in the remote version.

Comments
not having larger class discussions and learning about their interpretations and understandings of different texts we visited
It was harder to take as much away from the readings because usually professor O'Brien gave a so what each class before spring break.
Small-group discussions were a little awkward/not sure how much they expanded my understandings.
N/A
We did not have meetings with our professor as a class, only through office hours, and although they were helpful you needed to have specific questions, so we did not get our professors views on the articles we were reading and discussing as we would have in class.
It was harder to remember everything because our discussions were only once a week.
It was not ideal to have to chat in small groups on a google doc. That being said, it was probably the best option available and I understand that this was not the intended format of the course.
its hard to match the quality of conversations/ connection when you are virtually chatting compared to the in-person thing.
Lack of class-wide discussion
Just the detached nature of it all.
Same as before!
I thought it was challenging and time consuming to do the discussion online.
Not having the ability to have conversations in person was difficult, especially because you were always talking with the same people and we never came together to speak as a whole class.
it takes a lot longer to type responses than to say them.
the synchronous discussions took a while due to the amount of time spent typing and waiting for everyone's responses. It was rather clunky but it was fine
The doc also made things difficult because we had to sit and wait for each person to type, and it was hard to respond to each other because by the time everyone had said something time had passed and we were ready to move on.

Are there any features of the remote course you would encourage your instructor to retain when the course returns to in person format, and why?

Comments
no
Less reading and more frequent, shorter blog posts
Writing down my thoughts on the readings using the google doc helped me remember them more than when we just talked about them in class. I would suggest that students be expected to take notes in some stricter fashion so as to better absorb the material.
Shared Google Docs with small groups – not everyone is a great note taker and it helps to have a written out progression of the conversation
More focus on small group discussions!!!! Like way more. Unless you can get a better classroom because ours was not very conducive to group conversation.
no
It wasn't unique to the online aspect but I loved the twitter hashtag for relpol. I really enjoyed seeing modern connections to our course material.
Discussion posts more often than quizzes for the aforementioned reasons
Zoom discussions could have been useful
Perhaps alternating between a doc and in class discussion, or responding to people's blog posts or tweets.

Are there any features of other remote courses that you have experienced that you think would have worked particularly well for this course?

Comments
no
I think this class did especially well in transitioning to online learning. Thanks for your flexibility and for being understanding of the atypical circumstances!
This was probably my best remote course
no
no
Short 10-minute videos explaining the readings from Prof. O'Brien's eyes would have helped, like Prof. Bialek provided.
zoom big class?
Not necessarily.

Do you have any other feedback for your instructor(s)?

Comments
i loved your positive energy!
You are doing a disservice to what is supposed to be a reasonable narrative American history. it is important to learn about slavery and American empire, but not to the extent that they completely eclipse all the good religion in America has done. Have students learn, don't simply indoctrinate them.
Thanks for a great semester! This course was an awesome opportunity for me to engage with my interests in both religion and history at the same time.
Professor O'Brien – thank you so much for everything. It was an absolute pleasure to be your student.
Great Job with the transition to online
I wish we received midterm grades so we knew where we stood in the class in terms of participation.
Thank you for a great semester! This was one of my favorite classes and I really enjoyed coming to it. I think your positive energy and compassion made students feel comfortable and ready to learn.
Keep playing the songs in the beginning of class
Thank you for an excellent semester! I hope I can take another one of your classes.
Perhaps the doc could have been transferred to zoom to continue the face-to-face interaction and speed up the discussion process. Zoom is also difficult to rely on though and it would have been hard for the prof to access it.

Do you have any feedback for your AI?

Comments
Emily was incredibly helpful!
Emily really helped me with my first essay!
Thanks
Emily did a great job and I especially appreciate her comments on blog posts and essays as well as her willingness to discuss articles with us even after spring break.
Thanks for keeping everything up to date in the class!
Emily, thank you for all of your hard work this semester. You were an amazing teaching asset and I wish you the best in your career.
Thanks Emily!
No

Did the instructor(s) promote an inclusive learning environment with regard to the diversity of student personal backgrounds and identities? Please explain your answer to the above, giving specific examples.

Comments
yes, everyone was welcomed
Yes
Yes, worked hard especially on the topics of religion and trans experience but didn't necessarily have the background information/knowledge to fully discuss it with class.
Yes, I think the instructor tried very hard to promote an inclusive learning environment and to make students feel comfortable expressing themselves.
Yes
Yes. Called himself out on his own mistakes. That accountability was noticed and appreciated.
Yes, even when we touched on sensitive subjects ie. transgender rights in sports, he was respectful of all opinions and let everyone share their point of view without interjecting or making anyone feel wrong
Yes, he made sure to be mindful of all identities especially when talking about LGBT and race issues both in the readings and in the twitter discussions
Absolutely. The readings themselves gave various and contrasting perspectives, always including those who's voices tend to be erased and suppressed throughout history. We were constantly reminded of how history is shaped and worked to inform ourselves of all the perspectives and consequences/impacts events had, and then compared them to today in order to think critically. With class discussion, everyone had equal chances to contribute so we got varying opinions, and Cyrus worked to maintain a safe environment so that we weren't just spewing opinions but rather basing our contributions on our readings and personal experiences. When there were discussions that were more controversial, Cyrus laid a foundation so that we could discuss while being cognizant of how not to harm others.

Past research shows that the students' answers to any one question can be noisy, more prone to biases, and provide less useful data for evaluating courses and instructors. Since interpreting individual questions, including their relative highs and lows, can easily lead to inaccurate conclusions due to low reliability, individual question responses are not available in any standard report.

However, combining students' responses to several questions aimed at measuring the same underlying attribute can improve the quality of the measures. Therefore, the statistics displayed for each attribute (mean, median, mode, and standard deviation) are calculated from the grouped responses to all the questions in each topical block.

All questions below use a 5-point response scale: 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree

The varied rating scale responses are statistically reliable as individual questions.

Personalized Questions

What are two or three things or approaches you learned in this class that made an impact on you?

Comments
I don't think I was as aware of the religious presence in our politics prior to this class
How to read more efficiently and write more concisely
I learned that there is significant truth to the idea that college turns people away from what makes America great.
I think I was able to learn more about analyzing historical documents.
I think I learned to view historical events as less of a singular occurrence, and more as a culmination/combination of many different factors and previous events. I also learned to become more nuanced in my evaluation of primary sources, and tried to consider the viewpoints of the time before making judgements.
Asking "So What?" Small group discussions —> large group Focusing on relpol in current events
Space force
I learned how to interpret primary sources, how to write a concise blog post, and how to decipher information from various news sources.
I was struck by the idea of collective memory and how we choose what to tell as our history. I also realized that although we have the separation of church and state, our government throughout history was way more entangled in religion than I thought.
The importance of discussion, the ways in which we as a society have not really progressed (and in contrast, the ways we have) and the way that religion is so ingrained in our society that we don't even realize it
Ronald Reagan's Farewell Address and James Madison's remonstrance
Learning about collective memory and how people in power shape how we remember history was really humbling. It'll make me much more skeptical of political figures going forward. This class also made me realize how religion can be weaponized to justify literally anything, so I'll always be skeptical of people evoking religious arguments to back their political leanings.
All the readings deeply and personally impacted how I feel and view myself and my country and the world. Continuously discussing with others helped me gain insight. I only wish that perhaps we could have rotated discussion groups in order to meet more people, be challenged and learn in different ways.