

Eastern Illinois University
New Course Proposal
EIU 4116G, Conspiracy Theories in the US

Agenda Item #17-88
Effective Spring 2018

Banner/Catalog Information (Coversheet)

1. ☒ **New Course** or ☐ **Revision of Existing Course**
2. **Course prefix and number:** EIU 4116G
3. **Short title:** Conspiracy Theories in the US
4. **Long title:** Conspiracy Theories in the US
5. **Hours per week:** 3 Class 0 Lab 3 Credit
6. **Terms:** ☐ Fall ☐ Spring ☐ Summer ☒ On demand
7. **Initial term:** ☐ Fall ☒ Spring ☐ Summer Year: 2018
8. **Catalog course description:** This course examines conspiracy theories that have flourished in contemporary U.S. culture. Special attention is paid to how conspiracy arguments are crafted and how they are disseminated in our media age. Conspiracy theories are analyzed as texts that are designed to persuade others, thus we use communication and rhetorical theory to critique how these arguments are structured. The primary goal is to hone critical thinking skills by applying evaluative criteria to conspiracy theories. WI

9. Course attributes:

General education component: Senior Seminar

☐ Cultural diversity ☐ Honors ☐ Writing centered ☒ Writing intensive ☐ Writing active

10. Instructional delivery

Type of Course:

☒ Lecture ☐ Lab ☐ Lecture/lab combined ☐ Independent study/research

☐ Internship ☐ Performance ☐ Practicum/clinical ☐ Other, specify: _____

Mode(s) of Delivery:

☒ Face to Face ☒ Online ☐ Study Abroad

☐ Hybrid, specify approximate amount of on-line and face-to-face instruction _____

11. Course(s) to be deleted from the catalog once this course is approved. NA

12. Equivalent course(s): None

a. **Are students allowed to take equivalent course(s) for credit?** ☐ Yes ☒ No

13. Prerequisite(s): 75 hours

a. **Can prerequisite be taken concurrently?** ☐ Yes ☒ No

b. **Minimum grade required for the prerequisite course(s)?** _____

c. Use Banner coding to enforce prerequisite course(s)? ____ Yes X No

d. Who may waive prerequisite(s)?

____ No one ____ Chair ____ Instructor ____ Advisor ____ Other (specify)

14. Co-requisite(s): None

15. Enrollment restrictions

a. Degrees, colleges, majors, levels, classes which may take the course: All students may take this course, but CMN majors will not receive Senior Seminar credit

b. Degrees, colleges, majors, levels, classes which may not take the course: CMN majors may not take this course for Senior Seminar credit

16. Repeat status: X May not be repeated ____ May be repeated once with credit

17. Enter the limit, if any, on hours which may be applied to a major or minor: ____

18. Grading methods: X Standard ____ CR/NC ____ Audit ____ ABC/NC

19. Special grading provisions:

____ Grade for course will not count in a student's grade point average.

____ Grade for course will not count in hours toward graduation.

____ Grade for course will be removed from GPA if student already has credit for or is registered in:

____ Credit hours for course will be removed from student's hours toward graduation if student already has credit for or is registered in: _____

20. Additional costs to students:

Supplemental Materials or Software NA _____

Course Fee X No ____ Yes, Explain if yes _____

21. Community college transfer:

____ A community college course may be judged equivalent.

X A community college course may not be judged equivalent.

Note: Upper division credit (3000+) will not be granted for a community college course, even if the content is judged to be equivalent.

Rationale, Justifications, and Assurances (Part I)

1. ☐ Course is required for the major(s) of _____
☐ Course is required for the minor(s) of _____
☐ Course is required for the certificate program(s) of _____

X Course is used as an elective

2. **Rationale for proposal:** A version of this course has been taught as a special topics course twice before in the Department of Communication Studies, to excellent response from students who have repeatedly asked for it to be added to the regular curriculum. Offering it as a senior seminar adds to the variety of courses seniors may take to fulfill their general requirements. Conspiracy theories are no longer relegated to the paranoid fringes of society. In fact, with the proliferation of “fake news,” especially as disseminated on social media, conspiracy theories have moved into the mainstream. Research shows that a large percentage of people are not equipped with the critical thinking skills needed to differentiate between fake news and real news, to evaluate source credibility, or to properly critique conspiracy theories. By exploring contemporary conspiracy theories that have gained traction in cultural imagination, this course will offer students the necessary skills to enable them to analyze and critique conspiracy theories with the goal of becoming more critical consumers of news media and popular culture. In addition, students will explore the material dangers conspiracy theories present to democracy. This course will also be offered online in response to an increased demand for online senior seminar courses.

3. **Justifications for (answer N/A if not applicable)**

Similarity to other courses: None

Prerequisites: 75 hours is a university requirement for senior seminars

Co-requisites: NA

Enrollment restrictions: CMN majors may not take this course for senior seminar credit as per university requirements. CMN majors may, however, take this course as an upper division elective that does not fulfill their senior seminar requirement.

Writing active, intensive, centered: Several writing assignments are required and, in total, make up at least 35% of the grade. In addition, the final writing assignment will be revised after the student has received feedback from the instructor.

4. **General education assurances (answer N/A if not applicable)**

General education component: Senior Seminar

Curriculum: This course meets the requirements for the Humanities and Fine Arts segment of EIU’s general education curriculum. The course focuses on the “interpretation and critique of visual and written artifacts” using methodology generally accepted in rhetorical theory and criticism. Further, this course emphasizes oral and written communication skill building. For a complete listing of the undergraduate learning goals this course will target, see model syllabus.

Instruction: See model syllabus

Assessment: See model syllabus

5. Online/Hybrid delivery justification & assurances (answer N/A if not applicable)

Online or hybrid delivery justification: Offering this course online will give off-campus and distance learning students more options for completing their degree requirements. There is also increasing demand for online offerings throughout the university curriculum.

Instruction: The course content is asynchronous, and will be delivered via audio PowerPoint presentations, readings, films, and videos uploaded to current LMS. Faculty teaching the course will be OCDi certified, or equivalent.

Integrity: All quizzes and exams will utilize lockdown browsers, and will be timed. Papers will be submitted via Turnitin to avoid plagiarism.

Interaction: Students will interact with the instructor through email, live chat, video chat, and when possible and desirable, face-to-face office visits. Students will interact with each other through discussion boards, and will be required to design a presentation in the form of an audio PowerPoint presentation. Others in the class will respond through a discussion board, and the presenter will be required to respond to student comments.

Model Syllabus (Part II)

Please include the following information:

1. Course number and title: EIU 4116G: Conspiracy Theories in the US
2. Catalog description: This course examines conspiracy theories that have flourished in contemporary U.S. culture. Special attention is paid to how conspiracy arguments are crafted and how they are disseminated in our media age. Conspiracy theories are analyzed as texts that are designed to persuade others, thus we use communication and rhetorical theory to critique how these arguments are structured. The primary goal is to hone critical thinking skills by applying evaluative criteria to conspiracy theories. WI
3. Learning objectives.
 - a. Apply tools of critical thinking in the analysis of conspiracy theories (CT 1-5)
 - b. Gain an understanding of why conspiracy theories flourish in contemporary U.S. culture (CT 1-5; WCR 6; RC 1)
 - c. Apply tools of criticism to numerical data, and use numerical data in debunking conspiracy theories (CT 1-6; WCR 5; QR 1, 3-6)
 - d. Understand and critique the rhetorical strategies used by conspiracy theorists (CT 1-6; WCR 1-7)
 - e. Differentiate between real and fake news with regard to source credibility (CT 1-6)
 - f. Recognize and evaluate the threat to democracy and civic life presented by conspiracy theories (CT 1-5; RC 1-2)
 - g. Critique the argumentative structure of conspiracy theories for fallacies and problems of logic (CT 1-6; WCR 1-7)
 - h. Formulate cogent arguments against conspiracy theories (CT 1-6; WCR 1-7)
 - i. Hone presentation skills through group and individual presentations (SL 1-7)
 - j. Improve writing skills through multiple writing projects (WCR 1-7)

4. Course materials.

Uscinski, JE & JM Parent (2014). *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barkun, M (2013). *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 2nd edition. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Additional readings uploaded to LMS.

5. Weekly outline of content.

FOUNDATIONS

Reading

Week 1: Course introduction

What are conspiracy theories and why do we care?

Barkun Ch. 1, Uscinski & Parent, ch. 1

Week 2: Critical thinking

Case Study: Fake News

Makau & Marty Ch. 1
Uscinski & Parent, ch. 2 & 3
Miller

Argumentation analysis and evaluation

Week 3: Fallacies

Problems of innumeracy

Why do conspiracy theories flourish in the U.S.?

Best (*Damned Lies...*)
Olmstead: Introduction
Uscinski & Parent, ch. 4 & 5

UFO's AND ALIENS

Week 4: Aliens among us!

"Trust no one": Popular culture and alien conspiracies

Case study: David Icke and the reptilian elite

Barkun Ch. 5
Kelley-Romano

Week 5: *X-Files*

Moon Landing conspiracies: Flying in the face of visual evidence

Perlmutter & Dahmen

POLITICAL CONSPIRACIES

Week 6: US and a history of conspiracies

Case study: Breitbart

Conspiracy theories and politics

Hofstadter; Olmstead

Uscinski & Parent, ch. 6

Week 7: Conspiracy theories and elections

Case study: Hillary Clinton and alt-right media

Week 8: Group presentations

Midterm

SECRET SOCIETIES AND CABALS

Week 9: History of secret society conspiracies

Case study: The Illuminati

Zeitgeist film

Barkun Ch. 3

Week 10: Conspiracy theorists go mainstream: Alex Jones
Secret societies and popular culture
Conspiracy theories and white nationalism

Hodai
Walker pp. 317-332

NATIONAL CRISIS CONSPIRACIES

Week 11: Case study: James Tracy and Newtown
Case study: Timothy McVeigh and Oklahoma City

Week 12: 9/11 conspiracies

Barkun Ch. 10;
Olmstead ch. 7

Case study: Popular Mechanics v. Truthers
Loose Change film

Week 13: *Fahrenheit 911* and discussion
Writing workshop

Week 14: PRESENTATIONS

Week 15: PRESENTATIONS

Week 16: Final exam

6. Assignments and evaluation, including weights for final course grade.

Reading response papers: Three response papers will be completed during the course of the semester at the student's discretion. At the end of each week where readings are assigned, the instructor will pose a series of questions about those readings. Students will write an essay that responds to the questions, referring to the appropriate readings, and turn it in the following Monday. **3 @ 50 points ea. = 150 points**

Logic essay: 3-page analysis of the evidence and logic used in a conspiracy text to be selected by the student. Student will summarize the nature of the evidence presented, comment on its deficiencies and strengths. Student will also analyze the logic used by the theorist(s) in making their argument with special attention to the logical fallacies discussed in class. **75 points**

Rhetorical analysis essay: In this 5-page essay students analyze the way a particular author OR filmmaker tries to persuade the audience that a conspiracy does or does not exist. A student may, for example, examine the rhetorical strategies used in claiming a U.S. government cover-up in the September 11th attacks—or the rhetorical strategies used in replying to such a claim. A draft of the paper will be due in week eight. It will be read by the instructor, who will offer written feedback, and the student will revise the paper incorporating the feedback. This paper also includes a professional presentation, which will be scheduled for the last few weeks of the semester. The presentation is required in order for the analysis paper to be accepted. **150 points**

Group presentation: The purpose of the assignment is for students, working in groups, to develop a presentation that will debunk a conspiracy theory using numerical data, and/or critique the numerical data used by a conspiracy theorist in making an argument. **75 points**

Reading quizzes: There will be a reading quiz for every day that a reading is assigned. These quizzes are designed to encourage students to keep up with the readings. **Total 150 points possible for quizzes, 10 points each. All quiz points earned over 150 will count toward extra credit.**

Exams: There will be a mid-term and a final exam in this class. The exams will be comprised of multiple choice, true/false, matching vocabulary, and short answer essays. **Mid-term: 100 points; final: 200 points**

Active participation: Participation points are based on students contribution to class discussion, regular class attendance, and respectful behavior to classmates and to the instructor (e.g., giving others your full attention, not texting or playing around on-line during class, etc.). These points are given at the instructor's discretion and are not subject to dispute at the end of the semester. **100 points**

7. Grading scale.

90-100% A
80-89.9% B
70-79.9% C
60-69.9% D
0-59.9% F

8. Correlation of learning objectives to assignments and evaluation.

| Objectives | Reading Response 15% | Logic Essay 7.5% | Rhetorical Analysis 15% | Group Presentation 7.5% | Reading Quizzes 15% | Exams 30% | Active Participation 10% |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
| a (CT 1-5) | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| b (CT 1-5; WCR 6; RC 1) | x | | | | x | x | x |
| c (CT 1-6; WCR 5; QR 1, 3-6) | | x | x | x | x | x | |
| d (CT 1-6; WCR 1-7) | x | | x | x | x | x | x |
| e (CT 1-6) | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| f (CT 1-5; RC 1-2) | x | | x | | x | x | x |
| g (CT 1-6; WCR 1-7) | | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| h (CT 1-6; WCR 1-7) | | x | x | x | | x | |
| i (SL 1-7) | | | x | x | | | x |
| j (WCR 1-7) | x | x | x | | | | |

Date approved by the department or school: February 14, 2017

Date approved by the college curriculum committee: March 8, 2017

Date approved by the Honors Council (if this is an honors course):

Date approved by CAA: March 30, 2017 CGS: Not applicable