

Syllabus
INTS 355: CONSCIOUSNESS, MEANING, AND LIFE-PURPOSE
Spring 2017
Tuesday & Thursdays, 1:30 to 2:45 pm West Building, room 1004

Instructor: Mark Thurston, Ph.D. Email: mthursto@gmu.edu
Office: Northern Neck, room 118
Office phone: 703.993.1352
Office hours: Wednesdays, 10:30 to Noon, and by appointment

Teaching assistant: Ashley Whimpey Email: awhimpey@masonlive.gmu.edu

This course examines scientific evidence about states of consciousness, with an emphasis on research findings about mindfulness and meditation. It explores the science of well-being, including theories and practices linked to various domains of well-being such as resilience, life-satisfaction, happiness, mind-body wellness, meaning and purpose. The course provides opportunities for experiences and reflections about the impact of states of consciousness on how we can find meaningful direction for using our strengths and talents in the world. Students will complete outside-the-classroom practical application assignments designed to explore how we can live more mindfully, build capacity for enhanced well-being, and clarify a personal life-direction.

LEARNING COMMUNITY OBJECTIVES:

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the essential themes and issues in the study of human consciousness and mindfulness, making use of insights that integrate theory, research, and practical experience.
- Practice methods for the exploration of consciousness which one finds personally meaningful – including mindfulness practices, dream interpretation methods, visualization for stress management, creative expression, etc.
- Identify the central dimensions of meaningfulness, and articulate a personal sense of what makes life meaningful.
- Describe key strengths and personal assets that might have a role to play in the expression of one's statement of life purpose.
- Write clearly about your own experiences with well-being practices.

COURSE RESOURCES AND TEXTS:

I have asked the Mason Bookstore to stock several titles. They will likely have new and used copies. The books are also available from online used booksellers. You will need to buy these three books:

Southwick, Steven and Charney, Dennis (2012) *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Levoy, Gregg (1997). *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life*. New York: Harmony Books.

Pearson, Carol (1991) *Awakening the Heroes Within*. San Francisco: HarperCollins.

We will use the Mason e-journal library resources to access a number of peer-review journal articles to supplement our academic study. Among them are

Baumeister, R. (2013) Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life. *Journal of Positive Psychology* (8) 505-516.

Baumeister, R. (1996) Life stories and the four needs for meaning. *Psychological Inquiry* (7) 322-325.

Walach, H. (2006) Measuring mindfulness – the Frieberg mindfulness inventory (FMI). *Personality and Individual Differences* (40) 1543–1555

Plus, a selection of articles and book segments available 1) at designated web pages on-line, or 2) posted on our course web site via Blackboard

THE COURSE WEB SITE

We will be using the Blackboard space allocated to us and accessible via MyMasonPortal.gmu.edu. **Please note that there are some things to do online before you show up for the first day of class.**

INSTRUCTOR BIO

Mark Thurston, Ph.D. is director of educational programs at George Mason University's Center for the Advancement of Well-Being (formerly the Center for Consciousness and Transformation). Dr. Thurston has been a part of the Center staff since its founding in January, 2009. He serves as director for Mason's undergraduate minor in Consciousness and Transformation, and he teaches required and elective courses for the minor. He is an affiliate faculty member of the School of Integrative Studies. He has also served as an affiliate faculty member of Mason's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (S-CAR) where he has taught the course "Conflict Transformation from the Inside Out." With an academic background in psychology, Dr. Thurston worked for 35 years before coming to Mason in adult education related to mindfulness, holistic health, and personal transformation. He is author of numerous books related to personal spirituality, dream psychology, meditation, and the transformation of consciousness.

COMPETENCIES FOR THIS LEARNING COMMUNITY

Using active and collaborative learning strategies and reflective practice, we shall address several of the eight competency areas of the School of Integrative Studies. Most prominent among the learning community competencies are:

- Communication: We will depend significantly on effective classroom oral discussions to shape our evolving understanding of consciousness and its role with meaning and life purpose. Equally important to this course is effective writing. Issues of consciousness are often challenging to write about because they require a synthesis of inner, subjective experience alongside objective, critical analysis.
- Well-being: One central component to well-being is a clear, personal sense of meaning in life. In this course we will explore many theories and models about how one goes about finding meaning, and each student will have the opportunity to enhance personal well-being by making strides in this direction.
- Critical thinking: This course emphasizes the importance of comparative studies about the nature of human consciousness and methods for finding meaning in life. Students will have frequent opportunities to employ critical analysis to the materials we will be studying.

E-MAIL AND WEB-BASED COMMUNICATIONS

As faculty, we are allowed to communicate with you only via your GMU e-mail account. This is a means of protecting your privacy and academic confidentiality. If you wish to automatically forward mail from your GMU mail account to another account (e.g., cox, aol, yahoo, gmail, etc.) see the Mason Online Student Technology Guide

CLASS MEETING TIMES ← IMPORTANT

We will be meeting Tuesdays and Thursdays throughout the semester. Please recognize that classroom attendance is a priority – both because of the way in which classroom activities will constitute a very significant amount of the learning for this course, and because your final grade is largely impacted by participation points. (See below.)

GRADING -- 1,000 possible points

LEARNING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION 25% of course grade = 250 points

This is a large portion of how you will be graded for the course. You and your fellow students benefit from your active participation in this learning community. My intention is to create a classroom environment in which discussion feels both safe and respected. It is very important that you make an effort to attend all scheduled classes and participate in class discussions and activities.

Plenary discussions, small group discussions, in-class writing, formal and informal collaboration with peers, and hands-on creative projects will all contribute to the assessment of your class participation. For the 28 class sessions, you have the opportunity to earn 7 points per session by showing up for the full time period and being fully involved. (7 points times 28 sessions = 196 points) The other 54 points for learning community participation are not tied to frequency of attendance. These points are earned based on excellence in quality of sharing during class, all-class Blog/Discussion-Board posts, and participation in pairs or small group work, etc.

NOTE ABOUT MISSING CLASS: Please email the instructor (mthursto@gmu.edu) in advance if you are going to miss class. If you don't attend class, then you have not earned any of the 7 possible points for that session. However, if your absence is due to illness or an excused absence due to unavoidable circumstances (such as inter-collegiate sports competition representing Mason), then you can negotiate with the instructor how you could make up **some or all** of those learning community participation points. Such a make-up should be done within 13 days of the missed class. It is the student's responsibility to initiate contact with the instructor about such make-up work.

ACADEMIC ESSAYS and REFLECTIVE ESSAYS **40% of course grade = 400 points**

Major elements of the School of Integrative Studies curriculum and pedagogy are writing and reflective practice. This ability to deepen or strengthen our learning through critical thinking, analysis, and reflection is an important writing skill that requires practice. There are several essay-writing assignments in this course, at least one of which will involve peer-feedback on your first draft. (Note: the peer-feedback you provide to a fellow student is part of your "Learning Community Participation" grade.) There is considerable attention in this course to writing about experiences with consciousness, in large part because of the importance of learning how to communicate a synthesis of inner, subjective experience alongside objective, critical thinking.

IN-CLASS QUIZZES (2) **20% of course grade = 200 points**

Two times during the semester there will be a short-answer, objective quiz covering the content of material recently assigned for reading, listening, or viewing. Most of the questions will be multiple-choice, but there might also be some free response questions, as well. It will NOT be open book or open notes. Each quiz will have its date announced, plus in-class the week before the quiz takes place there will be a classroom discussion of what materials it will cover and the distribution of a study guide. You will bring a Scantron for each quiz.

PERSONAL WELL-BEING PRACTICES **10% of the course grade – 100 points**

Each student will make a commitment to a set of well-being practices of his or her own choosing. The goal is to build those practices into your life-style during a specified six-week period of the course, keeping a weekly journal of your experiences with these practices you have chosen. The weekly journal entry will be recorded in a private space on Blackboard, accessible only to the student, the instructor, and the teaching assistant.

ONE-ON-ONE DISCUSSION **5% of the course grade – 50 points**

Each student will have an office-hours discussion with the instructor or teaching assistant to explore ideas and principles from the course and how they have applicability to the student's life. There will be ample time slots made available, and students will sign-up for an appointment time.

FINAL GRADE ASSIGNMENTS WILL FOLLOW THIS FORMULA:

- A+ (980 – 1,000 points)
- A (920 - 979)
- A- (900 - 919)
- B+ (880 - 899)
- B (820 - 879)
- B- (800- 819)
- C+ (780 - 799)

- C (720 - 779)
- C- (700 - 719)
- D (600 - 699)
- F less than 600 points
- IN see below

IMPORTANT NOTE IN REGARD TO “INCOMPLETE” GRADE. In most cases a grade of “IN” or “incomplete” is not available. Work that does not get submitted will earn no points, and that will be reflected in the point tabulation by the instructor after the last class session of the semester. **Please do not move through the semester with an expectation that you can simply “take an incomplete” if you cannot get everything done by the end of the semester.** A grade of incomplete is possible in cases of illness or other severe circumstances, but only if you have stayed in communication with the instructor and have negotiated an extension on specific assignments.

ACADEMIC POLICIES AND INFORMATION

SIS COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY

The School of Integrative Studies is an *intentionally* inclusive community that celebrates diversity and strives to have faculty, staff, and students who reflect the diversity of our plural society. We do not discriminate on the basis of race, class, linguistic background, religion, gender identity, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, or physical ability.

LEARNING DIFFERENCES

If you have a learning or physical difference that may affect your academic work, you will need to furnish appropriate documentation to the Disability Resource Center. If you qualify for accommodation, the DRC staff will give you a form detailing appropriate accommodations for your instructor.

In addition to providing your professor with the appropriate form, please take the initiative to discuss accommodation with him at the beginning of the semester and as needed during the term. Because of the range of learning differences, faculty members need to learn from you the most effective ways to assist you. If you have contacted the Disability Resource Center and are waiting to hear from a counselor, please tell your instructor.

POLICY FOR LATE AND MISSING ASSIGNMENTS

You are responsible for completing assignments on time. This includes assigned postings on the course web site. Essays are due on the dates listed on rubric and must be submitted electronically via Blackboard. **Late assignments CAN be marked down DAILY as much as 10% of the possible points for that assignment.** Unless arrangements are made otherwise with the instructor, no assignments will be accepted more than one week after the original due date.

FORMAT FOR ASSIGNMENTS AND QUIZZES

For the quizzes, you will need to bring a Scantron form, which is available from the campus bookstore or a vending machine in the Johnson Center.

For all written assignments in the course (i.e., essays), word processing files are to be saved as a “doc,” or “docx” or “pdf” file and submitted electronically to the instructor via Blackboard. Please do not submit in any other file format, such as “wps” files. **The file name should BEGIN WITH your own last name – for example, Smith-happiness-essay.docx**

Please use an 11- or 12-point standard font, and one-inch margins. Either single or double spacing is fine. All papers should include a title, your name and course number. Accurate spelling, clarity, and correct use of grammar and punctuation are expected, and their absence will definitely have a negative effect on your grade.

Each writing assignment will have specific guidelines in regard to whether or not you need to include references or citations. You are responsible for keeping a copy of all major papers you hand in, and it is suggested that you make both an electronic and a paper copy for your records.

ATTENDANCE AND IN-CLASS POLICIES

This course is a School of Integrative Studies “learning community” and classroom attendance and participation is vital to your learning and your grade. You are expected to be present (both body *and* mind) at all classes and actively participate in discussion and other activities. This includes not only speaking, but also listening carefully to others’ opinions and experiences with an open mind. You do not need to adopt another’s viewpoint, but you do need to extend to them the courtesy of trying to hear what they have to say. The more you can show, through your comments and in-class writing, that you have carefully read the assigned material, the higher your participation grade will be.

Please plan to have computers, cell phones, Blackberries, iPhones, etc. turned off during class. If you are expecting something important, you are welcome to step out of the classroom and check for messages. You will not need to have a laptop computer in class. This is a course about consciousness, and we are going to be using each class session to explore what it means to be present to each other in the learning community.

Much of the value you will receive from this course will come from your reactions to course materials and your interactions with your fellow students. Although there will be classroom lectures and video presentations, the class will be built around **your** reading, thinking, questioning, and exploration of course materials. As already mentioned in this syllabus, your attendance and participation is extremely important to the class and your learning process. You are expected to read assigned materials on time, to think critically about the readings, and to arrive on time to class, prepared to discuss and work with the topics.

ACADEMIC HONESTY AND COLLABORATION

The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. According to the University catalog, plagiarism includes the following:

- Presenting as one's own the words, the work, or the opinions of someone else without proper acknowledgment.
- Borrowing the sequence of ideas, the arrangement of material, or the pattern of thought of someone else without proper acknowledgment.

Be particularly careful to credit work through citations or appropriate means of attribution. In addition to direct quotations, you must also provide an in-text citation and an entry in your list of works cited for paraphrases and summaries of opinions or factual information not formerly known to the writer. If you decide to use another person's ideas you must either quote the idea verbatim or completely rephrase the ideas in your own words and voice. Even when you paraphrase information, you still must cite the original source of the information. Please give credit where credit is due, even in our class discussions. For example, if you have had an interesting conversation about a text or your learning with a friend, family, or group member, then acknowledge their contribution to your learning.

Each essay writing assignment will have a specific rubric that includes directions regarding the audience you are writing for, as well as the way you will handle references to sources. If the rubric indicates that an essay is an academic paper, then use Modern Language Association (MLA) or the American Psychological Association (APA) formatting for your in-text citations and lists of works cited.

Assignments for this particular course are designed to be undertaken independently. **You may discuss your ideas with others and confer with peers or the Writing Center staff on drafts of the work** (e.g., getting feedback and critique on clarity, spelling and grammar); however, it is not appropriate to give your paper to someone else to revise. You are responsible for making certain that there is no question that the work you hand in is your own. If your name appears on an assignment, the instructor expects that you have done the work yourself. **Remember to carefully read the University's Honor Policy. It is your responsibility to understand it and abide by its provisions.**

STUDENT LEARNING RESOURCES

WRITING RESOURCES

Writing is an important component of this learning community and represents one facet of effective communication. You may wish to use the Writing Center to assist you with an assignment. Tutors at the Writing Center can help you brainstorm, structure, and revise your written work. The Writing Center has multiple locations on campus. See <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu> or call 703-993-1200.

DISABILITY RESOURCE CENTER

The staff members of the DRC assist students with learning differences or any other conditions that may impact academic performance. DRC is located in SUB I, Room 2500; 703-993-2474; <http://ods.gmu.edu/>

COUNSELING SERVICES

Professional counselors provide individual and group sessions for personal development and assistance with a range of emotional and relational issues. Counseling Services are located in SUB I, Room 3129; 703-993-2380; <http://caps.gmu.edu/> Also, the Learning Services Program (703-993-2999) offers academic skill-building workshops as well as a tutor referral service.