

Understanding Communities – 220 Fall 2026

INSTRUCTOR

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EMAIL

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OFFICE LOCATION

Urban Building

OFFICE HOURS

By appointment only

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course explores the nature of the communities we live in, whether defined spatially (such as a neighborhood) or as a set of ties based on sharing a common interest. Building community has become a central debate in several social sciences, including sociology, political science, economics, and psychology. In a culture that emphasizes individualism and individual rights, how can we balance the need for community and responsibility to others with individual needs for personal development? Students gain practical as well as theoretical experience in understanding communities.

This class is 100% online, with no scheduled weekly sessions. This course uses Canvas as the main learning platform. This course is divided into weekly modules, each with course materials, class activities, and assignments. Every Monday, I will release a new module. Click on each week to access the learning modules. If you haven't used Canvas before, please take the PSU Learning Center's remote readiness course this week. If you've used Canvas and you need occasional technical support, contact the OIT Helpdesk. If they can't help you, please let me know. You can find further online resources for students at [this link](#).

REQUIRED TEXT

This class has no required texts to purchase. We will rely on articles, websites, and videos posted to Canvas or through the PSU library (which will require you to sign in with your PSU email).

NOTES

This class has no final exam – no exams or tests at all, but you are expected to complete the work in a timely manner, and I do not allow condensed submission of the work in this course.

Please be aware that this syllabus may be updated from time to time. Announcements will be sent out accordingly.

**** Important notice about my schedule: during OCTOBER 12-28, I will be out of town, so I may not always be available during business hours. Please keep this in mind when contacting me.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is a [Sophomore Inquiry Class \(SINQ\)](#), meaning you will work on improving your writing skills on the topic of Understanding Communities. In this course, we will explore the nature of the communities in which we live. The [Understanding Communities Cluster](#) offers an opportunity to gain the skills and knowledge needed to explore the balance between individualism and social responsibility in communities. This course introduces and explores concepts of community through Sociology, Anthropology, Geography, History, Community Organization, and Urban Planning.

This is a [Writing Intensive Course \(WIC\)](#). WIC offers students an opportunity to engage deeply in course materials. Students learn how writers in the field develop and disseminate knowledge. In UNST 220, we will write as a process, including both informal tasks and final drafts that:

- Frame writing tasks within their rhetorical situations.
- Integrate elements of the writing process en route to final products.
- Use writing as a tool for thinking and learning.
- Encourage transfer of writing knowledge and skills across contexts.
- Reflect current research on writing assessment.

UNIVERSITY STUDIES (UNST) OBJECTIVES

Communication: Students will strengthen their ability to communicate in various ways—writing, graphics, numeracy, and other visual and oral means—to collaborate effectively with others in group work and use appropriate communication technologies.

Diversity, Equity and Social Justice: Students will explore and analyze identity, power relationships, and social justice in historical contexts and contemporary settings from multiple perspectives.

Ethics, Agency, & Community: Students will examine values, theories, and practices that inform their actions, and reflect on how personal choices and group decisions impact local and global communities.

Inquiry and Critical Thinking: Students will learn various modes of inquiry through interdisciplinary curricula—problem-posing, investigating, conceptualizing—to become active, self-motivated, and empowered learners.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITIES CLUSTER LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students in the [Understanding Communities Cluster](#) will:

- Better understand themselves, their own communities, and how the communities fit into the larger world;
- Employ multiple disciplines to learn about community and distinguish how different fields of study or ways of questioning impact the way a community is understood;
- Focus on the different concepts, tools, and techniques that can be used in practical application today to impact community formation, the power those communities have in society, & how changes can be made in the future.

THIS COURSE MEETS MANY CURRICULAR REQUIREMENTS AT PSU:

- University Studies second-year general education course and the gateway to the Community Studies upper-division cluster ([UNST program](#) and [cluster](#) goals)
- Writing-Intensive Course ([WIC](#) learning goals)
- Domestic Race and Ethnic Studies Course ([RESR goals](#)) taught outside the School of Gender, Race, and Nations ([SGRN](#))
- A required course for the major in Community Urban Studies and Planning (CUSP)

Domestic RESR (Race & Ethnic Studies Requirement) Objectives for this Course

This course fulfills PSU's Domestic [RESR requirement](#) and is committed to these learning outcomes:

- Understand, compare, and accountably apply the multiple theories, principles, and methodologies of Ethnic Studies as pertaining to domestic and global realities.
- Discern how perspectives are deepened through centering the experiences, pedagogies, and methods of Black, Indigenous, local, and global communities of color into the curriculum.
- Develop relational understanding and consider social responsibility while collaborating with others to address topics of inquiry.

- Differentiate and apply a variety of perspectives regarding anti-racist, anti-white supremacist, and decolonial theories and practices, and understand the histories of these ideas and the communities they come from.
- Identify and clarify various contemporary forms of oppression and discrimination and their origins.
- Engage in anti-oppressive and non-discriminatory practices that reflect an awareness of interlocking dynamics of multiple identities and intersectionalities (e.g., race, ethnicity, nationality, caste, religion, class, gender, sexuality, and ability).
- Understand how the interlocking dynamics of identity shape communication practices and learn best practices for engaging in accountable cross-cultural communication.
- Define and learn to interpret co-existing, multiple perspectives, as well as intersectional and collective consciousness.

CUSP (Community Urban Studies and Planning) Degree Objectives for this Course

Students in UNST 220 are introduced to the ideas, topics, and theories that will be further developed in classes in the Understanding Communities Cluster and the majors and minors in Urban Studies and Planning. This course is the first class in the CUSP major and introduces students to the field.

- UNST 220 will introduce the topics of **redlining, urban renewal, and gentrification**
- Students in UNST 220 will recognize & discuss **biases in institutional decisions, power, belonging, & social norms.**
- Students in UNST 220 will employ multiple disciplines to learn about community and focus on the different concepts, tools, and techniques that can be used in practical application today to impact **community formation, the power those communities have in society, & how changes can be made in the future.**

GRADES

Grades are determined entirely based on points assigned. The points for each assignment are detailed in both the syllabus and each assignment. I use the standard university grading scale as detailed below. I keep all grades up to date in Canvas. Feedback is provided on larger assignments. If you have any questions about a grade at any time, please email me. You are responsible for checking your grades on Canvas and ensuring you are making progress. You may earn up to 106 points (if you complete everything, receive full credit, and complete 2 extra credit assignments).

Your percentage is based on these points:

Grade	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
Percentage Cutoff/ based on points	94%	90%	87%	84%	80%	77%	74%	70%	67%	64%	60%	0%

LATE WORK POLICY: Online classes move very fast & 10 weeks is very quick when you get behind. Late work makes it hard to keep up and engage with your peers. As a result, I will accept late work for up to 1 week after the due date, with a 20% penalty. **After one week, I will not accept late work.**

DUE DATE FLEXIBILITY: I know that many unexpected things may happen. If you fall behind or something comes up that requires an extension, please contact the instructor immediately. Extensions require emailing the instructor and creating a new work plan; I will not grant extensions if I receive your email more than a week after the original due date.

University policy does not allow Incomplete grades ("I" grades) in UNST 220. If you are experiencing difficulty, please seek help from the instructor or other campus supports as soon as possible. For more information, please consult the university "I-to-F" grade policy.

ASSIGNMENT BREAKDOWN:

1. **Weekly summary notes** (aka writing reflections): 2 points each (for 9 weeks, 2-10) = 18 points total. Each week, you will have reading and viewing materials to engage with. As part of this class, you are required to write, **in your own handwriting**, a summary of these readings/videos/podcasts, etc. See "note taking methods" under the week 2 weekly summary notes assignment overview for further support on note taking.
2. **Class discussions:** 2 points for each discussion, and 2 points for 4 **peer responses** (every other week) = 16 points total. These are casual conversations between classmates. In the first of the two weeks, you will post an initial discussion post addressing the prompt, and the following week you will respond to at least 4 peer posts. For full credit, ensure all posts and comments are substantial and respectful.
3. **Introductory survey, Midterm and end-of-term surveys:** 3 points each = 9 points total
4. **Writing reflections:** 8 points each = 16 points total ("thinking locally")

5. **Neighborhood photo essay/ walking tour essay:** 10 points in total (in this assignment, you will lead your group members through space using at least 6 locations in your chosen neighborhood. Create a clear citation for every photo/artifact shared, including the location, and write a short paragraph defining the place itself and its role in (or relationship to) the community.
6. **Neighborhood group work and written assignments:** 34 points total (please see instructions below for further information about process and expectations). This includes a demographics analysis, your role in assessing food/health/education/arts and culture/transportation/accessibility, Presentation, and Reflective paper.
7. **Extra credit-** available throughout the term. Up to 6 points total.

*Yes, there are more than 103 points available in this class (and extra credit and bonuses); that means that if you miss one or two small assignments, there are ways of making up the points.

** If you complete all weekly summary notes (and they are up to standard), you will receive 1 bonus point.

*** If you complete all class discussions and peer comments (and they are up to standard), you will receive 1 bonus point.

****Extra credit options and bonuses – up to 8 points (just to be clear- there is no way to receive a **final grade** above 100 points for this course).

NEIGHBORHOOD ASSESSMENT PROJECT

This project will be part of your learning throughout this term. Some weeks you will work with your group, and some weeks you will work on your own. This is in an effort to create an in-depth look at communities from different angles, as well as learn to share information and learn from each other, thus creating an enhanced understanding, and some might even say practicing what we preach- understanding communities by creating communal knowledge!

- 1) Photo walking assignment (due at the end of week 3)
- 2) Learn about the history of your neighborhood using books/articles/city archives, etc.
- 3) Create a themed map or table using quantitative data about your theme
- 4) Share your information with your group (over Zoom or Google Meet)
- 5) Create a shared group document to present the group findings (Google slides/powerpoint/ youtube video/ pamphlet)
- 6) Complete a reflection and submit it along with your revised history, map, statistics, and other findings.

* If some group members do not pull their weight, do not worry; all grades are individual, and you will not lose out based on someone else's work.

A note from your instructor:

As part of thinking about communities, I want to make an effort to think about multiple scales of community. In this class, I will attempt to provide at least one reading/video/audio piece per subject about Portland or Oregon, and one about an international case. We should think about these ideas on multiple scales: local, state, federal, and international/global.

COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEK	SUBJECT	TO READ / WATCH / LISTEN	TO SUBMIT
Week 1 (Sep. 28- Oct. 4)	INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY	- Read the syllabus (please take the time to read through ALL of it and reach out with questions or concerns). - Read and view tutorial: "PSU Library Introduction" - Determine if this is the right class for you. - Read the definition: What is a community? (in this class).	Sunday: 1) <u>Class Discussion #1 - Introduce Yourself</u> . Post a comment. 2) <u>Introductory Survey</u> 3) <u>Neighborhood Choice Worksheet</u> .
Week 2 (Oct. 5- 11)	WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?	- Watch: This is what our community looks like (based on information from your Week 1 survey responses). - Read 2 Introduction to Sociology chapters: "Why Socialization Matters: and "Agents of Socialization" - Read and watch "The segregation in work and home life" - Watch "What is space, and how do we study it" - Read and begin assignment due next Sunday: "Instructions for your first neighborhood assignment"	Thursday: <u>Weekly summary notes</u> Sunday: <u>Class Discussion #1 – "Introduce Yourself"</u> : Review and leave at least 4 peer comments.
Week 3 (Oct. 12- 18)	SENSE OF PLACE AND BELONGING	- Read "Connection's Missing Middle: Why the future of connection is hyperlocal" - Read and Browse: "Invisible Epidemic" - Read "The Need to Belong is Fundamental" - Watch "What Does it Mean to Belong" - Watch "Some Latinos Face Community Criticism Over Spanish Skills"	Thursday: <u>Weekly summary notes</u> Sunday: 1) <u>Neighborhood Assignment: Photo essay/ walking tour essay</u> . 2) <u>Class Discussion #2 – "Implicit Bias"</u> : Post comment
Week 4 (Oct 19- 25)	HISTORY AND DISPLACEMENT IN COMMUNITIES (includes redlining)	- Watch NPR "Race and Redlining in America" - Watch PBS "Redlining and Urban Renewal" - Read "A Brief History of Redlining" (NYC) - Read "Mapping Chicago's Racial Segregation" - Watch PBS short "Why Do We Say African American"? - Watch "America's Caste System They Don't Teach You About"	Thursday: <u>Weekly summary notes</u> Sunday: <u>Class Discussion #2 – "Implicit Bias"</u> Review and leave at least 4 peer comments.

Week 5 (Oct. 26- Nov 1)	HISTORY AND DISPLACEMENT IN COMMUNITIES (includes urban renewal and gentrification)	• Read “The Racist History of Portland, The Whitest City in America” • Watch “Gentrification Explained” • Watch “Pushed Out: Displacement Today and Lasting Impacts” • Watch “History of Redlining and Urban Renewal in Portland” • Watch PBS documentary “Beyond the Beats”	Thursday: <u>Weekly summary notes</u> Sunday: 1) <u>Draft of neighborhood history</u> 2) <u>Mid-term survey</u>
Week 6 (Nov. 2- 8)	DEMOGRAPHICS	• Look at an example of the “US Census 2020” form • Read New York Times “No Box to Check: How to Access Data for Your Neighborhood in Just a Few Clicks” • Watch “How to access data for your neighborhood in just a few clicks” • Read “The urgent need for Data Equity, Justice and Sovereignty”	Thursday: <u>Weekly summary notes</u> Sunday: 1) <u>Community Map / Displaying Statistics</u> 2) <u>Writing reflection #1: thinking locally</u>
Week 7 (Nov. 9- 15)	IDENTITY	• Watch “Understanding Communities major/minor”. (Dr. Hough) • Read Introduction to Sociology, chapter: “Racial, Ethnic, and Minority Groups” • Watch “Intro to Intersectionality” • Optional: watch “The Dangers of a Single Story”	Thursday: <u>Weekly summary notes</u> Sunday: 1) <u>Draft of theme community profile</u> 2) <u>Class Discussion #3 – “What Makes a Community Good or Successful?”: Post comment</u>
Week 8 (Nov. 16- 22)	BIAS AND POWER	• Read the Introduction to Sociology chapter: “Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism” • Handedness • Optional: Watch TED Talk “3 Steps to Better Connect with Your Fellow Humans”.	Thursday: <u>Weekly summary notes</u> Sunday: 1) <u>Writing reflection #2: thinking like a minority</u> (example of handedness) 2) <u>Class Discussion #3 - “What Makes a Community Good or Successful?”</u> Review and leave at least 4 peer comments.

Week 9 (Nov. 23-29)	MOBILITY AND CHANGE	• Watch TED Talk “Connected, But Alone?” • Watch TED Talk “How Social Media Can Make History” • Watch PBS video “How did Portland Become the Global Epicenter of Women’s Sports” • Brookings Institution (2014) “Is America Dreaming? Understanding Social Mobility • Read Pew Research Institute “The State of the American Middle Class”	Thursday: <u>Weekly summary notes</u> Sunday: 1) <u>Meet with your group</u> (*submit a shared update via email) 2) <u>Class Discussion #4 – “Are virtual communities true communities?”</u>: Post comment
Week 10 (Nov. 30-Dec. 6)	RECAP AND LOOKING AHEAD	• Read The Guardian “Weekly Bread Rolls and an Irish Bender...” • Watch “A Love Letter to Portland” by Rukaiyah Adams • Optional: Listen to “For Immigrant Communities, These Organizations Build Belonging”.	Thursday: <u>Weekly summary notes</u> Sunday: 1) <u>Group presentation</u> 2) <u>UNST end-of-term survey</u> 3) <u>Class Discussion #4 – “Are Virtual communities true communities?”</u> Review and leave at least 4 peer comments.
Finals Week Dec. 7-11)			Thursday: <u>Final neighborhood project paper</u> (individual work) NO GRACE PERIOD <u>End-of-term survey.</u> NO GRACE PERIOD
*Extra credit (due end of week 10)	You can earn up to 6 extra TOTAL points by completing one or more of the following (if you choose to complete more than 6 points' worth of assignments, you will NOT be given more): 1) Attend a community event (lecture, screening, etc.) that aligns with the class materials (if you are unsure, run it by me first via email). After attending the event, fill out the Google Form and include your thoughts on the event and how it relates to what we learn in this course. You can do this up to 2 times for up to 3 points each time. 2) Create a recommendation for a book, series, or art exhibition that aligns with the themes of this class. Write a 300–500-word recommendation including helpful information about the background, how to access this material, and some of your own thoughts about it. Ensure you include a full bibliography. Submit using a Google Form. You can do this up to 2 times for up to 3 points each time.		

RESOURCES & INFORMATION

STUDENT RESOURCES: encompasses a wide range of resources, including various centers for students with different identities- e.g., Cultural Resource Center, Disability Resource Center, Queer Resource Center, Students with Children Resource Center, Women' s Resource Center, and Veterans Resource Center; lots of academic resources like the Library, tutoring, and technical support (Office of Information Technology); and various counseling, financial, health and wellness, services- including some that are culturally specific.

Access and Inclusion for Students with Disabilities/ DRC: PSU values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to fostering mutual respect and full participation for all students. My goal is to create a learning environment that is equitable, usable, inclusive, and welcoming. If any aspects of instruction or course design result in barriers to your inclusion or learning, please notify me.

If you have, or think you may have, a disability that may affect your work in this class and feel you need accommodations, contact the Disability Resource Center, drc@pdx.edu , <https://www.pdx.edu/drc> .

*If you already have accommodations, please get in touch with me to confirm I have received a faculty notification letter and to discuss your accommodations.

Cultural Student Services: Includes links to Multicultural Retention Services, Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (MENASA) Initiative, the Native American Cultural Center, and more, including some duplications from the above and some additional resources. <https://www.pdx.edu/cultural-resource-centers/>

University Career Center: Job Search Resources, Networking, Resume Help, Interviewing Practice, and workshops with employers. <https://www.pdx.edu/careers/>

Basic Needs at Portland State: It can be challenging to do your best in class if you have trouble meeting basic needs like safe shelter, sleep, and nutrition. Resource centers across campus provide assistance, referrals, and support. Don't hesitate to get in touch with anyone on this list for assistance:

- Basic Needs Hub: basicneedshub@pdx.edu
- Portland State Food Pantry: at SMSU 325 or pantry@pdx.edu
- Emergency/ Hardship Fund - emergency financial assistance <https://www.pdx.edu/basic-needs-hub/emergency-funds>
- C.A.R.E. Team: askdos@pdx.edu or (503) 725-4422
- Student Health and Counseling: askshac@pdx.edu or (503) 725-2800
- More resources for students dealing with economic hardships: <https://www.pdx.edu/dean-student-life/student-homelessness-and-economic-crisis>

FURTHER POLICIES & INFORMATION

Generative AI

The assignments in this course are designed to be completed **WITHOUT** the use of generative AI and, in most cases, using generative AI will not give you the "correct" answer. Factually correct (or incorrect) AI answers will not substitute for reflective answers in this course, and you will not receive a passing grade.

If you feel that generative AI is helpful to you, please be sure to clearly attribute what text was generated by the AI

tool (e.g., AI-generated text appears in a different colored font, quoted directly in the text, or use an in-text parenthetical citation). In the event AI tools like ChatGPT/ similar tools are explicitly permitted for an assignment, use them with caution and proper citation. **AI is not a replacement for your own thinking and research.** As this is fast-changing, please also review the University's Policy at <https://www.pdx.edu/academic-affairs/ai>.

Writing Resources: This course does require you to stretch yourself as a writer. To be an effective communicator, your writing needs to:

- 1) meet the assigned task
- 2) be designed for the intended audience
- 3) convey all important information

Every writer needs to proofread and revise their work to obtain the best finished product. If you need help with this process, PSU's Writing Center (www.writingcenter.pdx.edu) has a variety of free services. This is a great free resource for everyone. Please use this resource.

Discrimination, Violence, & Mandated Reporter/ Title IX Reporting Obligations: PSU is committed to fostering a safe, productive learning environment. Title IX and our school policy prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, which includes sexual misconduct — including harassment, domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. We expect a culture of professionalism and mutual respect. Please be aware that as a faculty member, I have the responsibility to report any instances of sexual harassment, sexual violence, and/or other forms of prohibited discrimination to PSU's Title IX Coordinator, the Office of Equity and Compliance, or the Dean of Student Life, and cannot keep information confidential.

You may report any incident of discrimination or discriminatory harassment, including sexual harassment, to either the Office of Equity and Compliance or the Office of the Dean of Student Life. If you would rather share information about sexual harassment or sexual violence with a confidential employee who does not have this reporting responsibility, you can contact a confidential advocate at (503)725-6994 or by scheduling online (<https://psuca.youcanbook.me/>) or another confidential employee found on the sexual misconduct resource webpage. For more information about your obligations and resources for sex/gender discrimination and sexual violence (Title IX), please complete the required student module Creating a Safe Campus in Canvas.

Free-Speech Policies & Guidelines: Portland State University has free-speech policies and guidelines for the classroom environment. I will use the PSU Conduct policy: discriminatory or harassing behavior will be reported.

Academic Honesty & Plagiarism: Students are expected to be ethical not only in the classroom but also outside the classroom. It is in all students' interest to avoid academic dishonesty and to discourage others from committing it. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, the following examples: engaging in any form of academic deceit; referring to materials or sources or using devices not authorized by the instructor for use during any quiz or assignment; providing inappropriate aid to another person in connection with any quiz or assignment; engaging in plagiarism. Cheating and/or plagiarism will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade for the assignment, which may result in a failing grade for the course as well. For more information, please look at the PSU Student Code of Conduct (www.pdx.edu/dos/psu-student-code-conduct).

ATTRIBUTION

This syllabus is based on course development by Norene Hough, PSU Senior Instructor, and several versions by instructors of this course over the years, with great appreciation for their work and for sharing knowledge as a community.