

# College Course Evaluations

## NEHC 20501: Islamic History & Society-1: The Rise of Islam & the Caliphate

### Section 1 - Autumn 2016

**Instructor(s):** Donner, Fred M; Peruccio, Kara

**Identical Courses:** HIST 35704, ISLM 30500, RLST 20501, NEHC 30501, HIST 25704, CMES 30501

**Number Enrolled:** 55

**Number of Responses:** 30

### Evaluation Comments

#### What were the instructor's strengths? Weaknesses?

- Professor Donner did a great job of presenting a lot of content clearly and quickly. I appreciated the photos he incorporated into lectures - the visual element was a nice touch. He ran over time with lecture at almost every session
- The professor was great. He lectured in a manner that made taking notes easy, and I did not feel like I was missing anything. He did however tend to run over class time almost every class which made it difficult to pay attention to the last few minutes since I had a class immediately afterward.
- Professor Donner is very knowledgeable about the topics and came to lecture extremely well-prepared. I very much hope to have the opportunity to take another class with him.
- He is incredibly knowledgeable and his lectures are completely full of information. He is also both respectful but also points out inconsistencies within texts or within current ideas and knowledge about the events studied in this course. The lectures do contain a lot of information so note-taking is crucial but it is interesting.
- Professor Donner is very knowledgeable and passionate about the subject, but his lectures were a bit boring at times.
- Donner is great. His lectures were clear, and he gave a handout every class to outline the structure of his lecture. His only weakness is that he always ran over by a couple of minutes, which could be frustrating.
- His lectures were very compelling, and he is incredibly knowledgeable about the subject matter. Professor Donner is one of the best lecture class instructors I've ever had.
- Professor Donner was very nice. He held my attention well and was very knowledgeable on the subject material. He speaks rather softly, so it helps to sit closer to him.
- always went over time but very passionate
- Probably the best lecturer I have ever had. Very engaging and well paced. Conveyed a lot of information in an efficient and understandable manner.
- good lectures
- Professor Donner has clearly worked hard to lay out a course that covers a huge span of time and different regions/dynasties. In general, the topic changes from week to week made chronological sense (with the exception of a few of the dynasties in the 2nd half of the course). His lectures are filled with information, though he is not a very strong lecturer and lost me quite a few times by just rattling off different people and places. More slides would probably help with studying and identifying who/what he is talking about.
- Professor Donner presented clear and content-filled lectures and holds unparalleled knowledge, understanding and passion for the topic area.
- Professor Donner has no weaknesses, his lectures are engaging and interesting. He knows a lot and is a friendly and understanding person.
- Prof. Donner was clear and understandable in lecture. He presented material which was relevant to the goals of the course and illuminated its entwinement with itself.
- Donner was great - clearly knows his subject and yet doesn't get too bogged down in detail that would be unfair for an intro level course.
- Excellent lecturer and communicator. Complex information was presented clearly and accessible. He is also an effective discussion leader, building discussions around student needs and interests.
- Strengths: Knowledge and insight into the subject, objective, fair, ability to introduce complex and difficult material in a clear, concise, and engaging way for an audience that includes many students who are unfamiliar with the region and its history
- The instructor's strengths are his knowledge of the subject material as well as his excitement about the topic. He presents the lectures in a clear and detailed way that is easy to follow. Perhaps, one weakness would be that discussion groups sometimes talked about the readings and other times not as much.
- Professor Donner is a wonderful lecturer, able to hold your attention and provide intriguing insight to historical topics.
- The lectures are very clear and informational. Professor Donner is very knowledgeable in the field and his lecture is enjoyable to listen to
- Professor Donner did a good job of sectioning off the very complex early history of Islam into digestible chunks. It was clear that he knew a lot about the subject. Taking notes in class was sometimes a bit stressful, because if you missed something he said there was no way to know what it was, but in all the lectures were great.
- Professor Donner clearly knows a lot about the subject matter. Handing out sheets with important terms for each lecture was a lifesaver. Even with that though, it took a while to figure out how best to take notes for the class. He also never took questions, and frequently ran over time. Overall, he is a good lecturer and his lectures and the readings he assigned that he wrote were easy to follow.
- I appreciated Donner's skepticism with some of the sources and claims made by scholars. I know understand the importance of questioning when it comes to historical texts. I think he could have spoken louder and changed his lectures a bit. There was a lot of focus on battles, when I would have liked to hear more about the repercussions of those battles.
- Professor Donner is extremely knowledgeable about the material and presented insightful information on the Early Islamic movement in clear and understandable way.
- great lecturer
- Presented the material in a very clear manner. Had tons of knowledge about the topic.

**What were the teaching assistant's or writing intern's strengths? Weaknesses?**

- Kara is a good leader in the classroom. She is encouraging and helpful and it seemed like she genuinely wanted the students to succeed. Certain gestures really stood out - she was prompt at answering emails and made herself available for office hours and meetings, coordinated a shared study guide for us to all work on together, and quizzed us on important terms at discussion section to help us prepare for the exam. She also did a great job at facilitating discussion. I've never had a more prepared or supportive TA.
- Kara is a great TA. She was always available outside of class if we needed help on anything, and she was a fair grader. Her discussion sections were helpful in preparing for the exams, and she also always made sure to have a review session before the midterm and final.
- Kara was extremely enthusiastic about the topic and always willing to meet outside of class. Furthermore, she facilitated discussions during section very effectively and kept the class engaged throughout; she certainly broadened my understanding of the readings and topics in the course as a whole. I would absolutely want to take another class with Kara. I can't think of any weaknesses.
- Kara is great; she is both knowledgeable and approachable and knows how to frame questions such that they prompt a little more independent thought on the students' parts. I found discussions to be interesting and helpful, especially since she would also go over terms that were probably going to show up on the tests.
- Kara was great. She was very enthusiastic and knowledgeable, and led discussion section well. I would definitely recommend her as a TA.
- Kara was very prepared for discussions, with good questions and interpretations to help us work through the readings. She was clearly very devoted to helping us learn the material, and made herself very accessible outside of class too.
- She was very helpful overall in giving students an idea of what to expect for essays and tests, particularly since she has taken the course herself.
- Kara was very enthusiastic, and as such did a good job making herself available for help on papers. She answered questions well and seemed to be in touch with the course material. The lecture she gave seemed like she was reciting something, though it was clearly well researched. Jessica helped a lot with some of the more obscure material. She was often harder to get a hold of, but I got responses to my emails within a day.
- good discussion leader
- Overall no complaints with Kara. Nice person and ran her section in an organized manner. Also setting up the class wide google doc was incredibly helpful
- TA was overly nervous about asserting authority, overly harsh without basis on assignments (i.e. providing no justification for downgraded marks)
- Kara was a really good TA in that she gave us good discussion questions and motivated independent thinking. She was always available outside of class and was incredibly helpful in office hours. No weaknesses.
- Kara was very helpful during discussion section in identifying key terms for the midterms and in parsing through the readings (especially the primary materials which were sometimes really difficult to understand). I thought the review session she held was helpful because it identified a few more key terms that did appear on the exam. Her lecture on the almohads/almoravids was packed with information, but it felt like she was doing a lot of reading and so she lost me. She usually communicates very clearly in discussion so I think it was just lecturing that was harder to follow. I also appreciated that she made a group google document to help all of us study for the exams, that was very helpful. Jessica was also very helpful during discussion, it is evident that she is very familiar with this material. She asked us thoughtful questions during discussion that really forced us to analyze what some of the primary docs were saying and what we could really learn from them.
- Kara led productive discussion sections where she was able to shape the conversation in a way that allowed students to contribute effectively. Additionally, she was always quick to respond to student inquiries and set up times to meet outside of class for office hours. Kara and Jessica also led very helpful exam preparation sessions.
- Kara's discussion sections were really helpful in preparing and reviewing. She really cares about having the students enjoy the class and genuinely wants to see the students do well.
- Kara was helpful and productive in discussions, and offered helpful feedback on assignments. Perhaps providing questions to open discussion of the reading would make the discussions more oriented towards placing the material in the context of its era.
- Kara was great! Always incredibly accessible and responsive to questions and emails - she also made discussion a very friendly environment and did a very good job of prepping us for exams and of being an intermediary between Professor Donner and the class
- N/A
- The TA was helpful in providing feedback on assignments as well as helping to prepare for the final.
- Kara is very enthusiastic about the material and she tries very hard to promote discussion. She has a good grasp of the material and is often able to offer unique insights to readings by applying her biographical knowledge of the author.
- She leads the discussion really well. The questions she prepared for discussion was great.
- Kara was very enthusiastic and clearly worked very hard to make discussions an enjoyable experience. She put a lot of effort into helping us prepare for exams, more than you would expect from a TA. It sometimes showed that her expertise wasn't exactly this area, but regardless of that, she was still able to provide a lot of insight.
- Kara was always willing to answer questions and help us understand things from class. The most useful part of discussion by far was going over terms from the lectures that week. She also always made herself available to meet outside of class for help on papers. When she lectured, she seemed to move through everything very quickly. I would recommend taking pauses after important points so that students have a chance to write everything down. I did like that she had pictures of different things in her slideshow.
- Kara was really helpful outside of class. She was very open to discussing papers. Like Donner, I appreciated the healthy skepticism to some of the claims in the primary sources we were reading.
- Although Kara may have not been an expert on the origins of Islam, she prepared well for discussions and the lecture that she presented. She had a systematic approach to teaching that included a review of terminology, introduction of the primary documents, and facilitated interesting discussion. In her lecture, she presented in a clear and audible tone, however if she could slow down her pace a bit to get students to catch up while taking notes that would have been appreciated. She posted her lecture online though, so that solved that issue.
- Kara facilitated discussion very well. She was also very helpful with exam preparation and writing assignments
- Kara was excellent! Very helpful in discussion sections, did a great job of keeping us engaged with the material, and extremely cooperative and understanding.
- Kara did a good job of expanding on the information Professor Donner gave and drawing our attention to which bits were most important; she also did an excellent job making herself available to the students, such as through review sessions. I thought her lecturing was a little fast-moving, which made it harder to keep all the names straight. Her use of powerpoint meshed very well with the lecture, and made it a little easier to keep track of what was going on.

**What, if anything, what would you change about this course and why?**

- I think that the midterm design is a bit overwhelming considering the fact that it is a core class, but other than that I found it to be fair.
- I wouldn't change anything.

- I understand that you need some kind of exam, and that essay exams are not good measures of what a student has learned, but memorizing all of the terms gets to be a bit much and doesn't really contribute to the overall course goal, as I ended up forgetting many of the less important terms. Maybe there should be a smaller list of the most important terms that are required to be known for the exams.
- Nothing.
- The reading, like for most civ courses, are long enough that doing all of them is too time-consuming for many people, so if they were more focused on particularly important topics, that would be more useful.
- test structure
- The midterm/final exams! I think the format of the tests is really awful for assessing how much time/effort we put in. In trying to study, I just crammed 3-4 facts about each person/place/concept which did not really underscore the important themes and consequences of the course.
- The exam structure is quite daunting with the memorization of hundreds of terms. It doesn't seem like the most productive way of testing the material from the course. I think more of focus on synthesizing the material/content - possibly in longer form essays- from the course would be more effective.
- I would change the structure of the tests, and include more papers, which in writing I found greatly helpful to my understanding of the subject.
- The amount of memorization required for the midterm and final is a little absurd. The study guides generally ended up being about 42 pages of names and terms; I think maybe 3/4 of the amount of material would have been more reasonable
- I would absolutely change the format of the test. While I understand that the professor believes in-class essays are unhelpful, to me this style of identification is unhelpful. There was such a large assortment of terms on both the midterm and the final that it was hard to really study. Further, the terms chosen were not generally main themes or big ideas but rather very specific terms. I found that preparing for such a large test was highly stressful and felt that it actually reduced what I could have been learning. I would have rather had an in-class essay.
- I think the discussions need to focus on deeper questions for the material instead of topics that, frankly, amount to little more than checks to see if the students actually read the material. I would have liked to see a discussion section in which we sorted into factions and had to prepare for a debate on the material using evidence from the readings; something like that might encourage a more thoughtful approach to the material. I would also say that the test and essay assignments are far too easy. It is quite possible to avoid all the lectures, skim the readings, and do very well by simply memorizing terms before the test and doing a little of your own research before you write an essay.
- I would add a third paper and get rid of the exams. Memorizing terms we're all going to forget later doesn't seem all that productive.
- Get rid of some of the required textbooks. The lectures sufficiently cover the material and the textbooks are not necessary.
- I wish discussion didn't take up the third class period. 2 50 minute periods is not enough to learn the history and content.
- None

**Is there any topic in this course that you wished you had had previous background in?**

- Nope.
- Not really. Maybe general islamic history or arabic just so the names stuck in my head better but you don't need much background.
- No
- No
- No
- none
- no
- Yes, having more context on the geography of the region and Byzantine/Ottoman empire would be helpful
- N/a
- Arabic
- Nope
- I wished that I had taken a course that touched on some of these dynasties or empires before, I think it would have helped me in preparing for the tests.
- No
- No
- None.

**Which texts were most useful?**

- Egger
- I thought they were all very useful in many different ways.
- Donner's text and Egger.
- I enjoyed Donner's text. Egger was good, but gave a very high level overview of the material, which isn't the best source when wanting more detailed information.
- Egger and Donner
- Egger, Donner
- donner
- Donner, Egger, Primary texts
- Donner's book was very helpful as well as the Egger book. These are secondary sources but collect a lot of useful info.
- Egger & Donner
- I found Prof. Donner's book to be helpful.

- Donner's book and the Egger
- Texts from Donner, Kennedy, and Hodgson were particularly helpful.
- Egger, Kennedy
- I found Egger's book and the translations of the Qur'an to be the most helpful.
- Most of the readings were interesting, but I can't say that one was particularly useful.
- All of the three are very useful
- Donner's book was excellent. Egger was good too.
- The Quran for the first paper
- Egger
- Egger

#### Which least?

- N/A
- The Qur'an, though interesting, provided probably the least insight into the historical aspects of the course, which is most of it.
- None
- Kennedy
- none
- Abun-Nasr
- Many of the primary texts were really confusing and hard to get through.
- N/A
- None in particular.
- I felt that I bought a bunch of books we never ended up reading
- The translation of the Quran by Pickthall - I bought it to compare with the translation I have by Tarif Khalidi and found the Pickthall to be lacking in clarity in many passages, sometimes due to the use of antiquated English terms. I cannot speak with respect to accuracy, but I found the Khalidi translation to be far easier to read and more useful for interpretation with respect to class assignments.
- Abun-Nasr is really dense and a pain to read (though it went into a lot more depth about some of the kingdoms and is probably necessary for that reason).
- Abu Nasr

#### How productive was class discussion?

- I think some people were disengaged because this is a required core class, but Kara still encouraged people to talk and jump in. It was productive enough to get us to move along.
- The discussion was very helpful I feel. Sometimes the readings felt a little bit disconnected from lectures, but through discussion, the connection became more clear.
- Section discussion was more interactive than class discussion, and during section Kara very effectively stimulated discussions and questions amongst our group. I felt like these very much contributed to the course as a whole.
- We didn't discuss anything during lecture with Prof. Donner but discussions with Kara were interesting. The texts we discuss and pertinent but in some ways feel tangential to the major themes of the course. The bulk of the reading is not discussed, which is reasonable given time constraints, but also perhaps limits what we get out of them.
- Somewhat productive. It varied based on how much reading people had actually done.
- N/A
- Discussion was good. It might've helped if more of the students had come prepared to discuss the text, as there were sometimes completely unanswered discussion questions.
- a little unrelated
- The review at the beginning of each discussion was helpful but as far as the actual discussion it didn't always entirely relate to the class.
- Pretty productive, but productivity may have been a bit low because discussion was at 9:30 am on Fridays.
- I liked discussion especially when we went over key terms because it was very helpful to have the reinforcement identifying what is really important. Sometimes going over the primary docs wasn't very helpful, just because many of us were unprepared to really discuss them or didn't understand them.
- Productive for the most part!
- It was productive, but perhaps too short. 50 minutes was typically not enough to 'dig into' the material.
- It was good
- I felt that every class was highly efficient in terms of its content; it provides a good overview for students not familiar with the history of early Islamic, and also casts a wide geographic and temporal net that even more advanced students could benefit from.
- Class discussions were always interesting, but sometimes we did not get to cover the full scope of materials
- Class discussions were incredibly interesting and I learned a great deal. However, sometimes these discussions didn't really cover the readings for that week, but rather an assortment of questions.
- Discussion sections were probably too large to facilitate the best conversations -- it was too easy for people to be left out or to hide.
- The class is mostly lectures
- It depended on the readings. If readings were difficult and long, sometimes discussion would be a bit stilted, but otherwise they were usually quite productive.

- Going over terms in discussion was the most important part in my opinion. The rest of discussion was spent talking about primary source readings that were not relevant outside of weekly discussion. The primary source documents were never discussed in class, and they were not necessary for the papers or the exam, so I didn't really understand the point of reading and discussing them.
- Class discussion was pretty productive. My discussion section had a lot to contribute and the questions were good.
- Very productive
- very
- Decently so; generally more useful when reviewing material from lecture than when discussing the readings, if only because it was clear that not all students had done the readings.

#### How has this course contributed to your education?

- It has made me excited to take further courses in Islamic history.
- I had little to no background in this topic so it has been extraordinarily helpful and insightful and helped frame my understanding of current tensions within Islam and parts of the middle east.
- Given me a solid background in early Islamic history that is helpful for contextualizing modern issues in a more nuanced way
- a lot
- It taught me a lot about early Islamic history and allowed me to give the modern state of the Middle East more of a historical context.
- It is a great crash course in early Islamic Civilization, I learned a lot from it.
- I definitely learned a tremendous amount of Early Islamic history from this course, and I am thankful for this.
- NEHC 205 situated Islam as simultaneously a religious and political force, a quality which it has maintained to the present. Beginning to understand the cause and nature of this phenomenon gives me a greater appreciation.
- I have a MUCH better understanding of early Islamic history and feel that it helps me ground my knowledge of the contemporary Middle East a lot more
- Definitely; I feel that I now have a much more well-rounded view of the history of early Islam.
- This course gave me a solid foundation in the history of the region during the Early Islamic period and helped clarify areas of further interest for me.
- This course has allowed me to develop a nuanced understanding of early Islamic history, which is critical for my MA degree.
- Learning more about Islam is something I've always wanted to do, and this course has really given me a grounding in the early history, and importantly, the intellectual history.
- I now know more about early Islamic history.
- I've learned a lot more about the Islamic civilizations, which I feel like was brushed over in my high school history classes.

#### Why did you take this course?

Core requirement	20 / 67%
Instructor Reputation	8 / 27%
Faculty member recommended it	1 / 3%
Concentration Requirement	3 / 10%
Meets at a convenient time	6 / 20%
A student recommended it	2 / 7%
Topic interests me	23 / 77%
Concentration elective	4 / 13%

#### In summary, I had a strong desire to take this course

Strongly Agree	14 / 47%
Agree	14 / 47%
Neutral	1 / 3%
Disagree	0 / 0%
Strongly Disagree	0 / 0%

**How many hours per week did you spend on this course?**

Low Answer	2
Average Answer	4.7
High Answer	11

**What proportion of classes did you attend?**

All	23 / 77%
75%	6 / 20%
50%	2 / 7%
25%	0 / 0%
None	0 / 0%

**Were the time demands of this course reasonable?**

Yes	31 / 103%
No	0 / 0%

**The Instructor**

	N/A	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Organized the course clearly.	0%	0%	0%	0%	27%	<b>77%</b>
Presented clear lectures.	0%	0%	0%	0%	30%	<b>73%</b>
Held my attention and made this course interesting.	0%	0%	0%	17%	33%	<b>53%</b>
Stimulated and facilitated questions and discussions.	30%	0%	7%	10%	<b>33%</b>	23%
Responded well to student questions.	17%	0%	0%	10%	20%	<b>57%</b>
Was available outside of class.	<b>40%</b>	0%	0%	10%	27%	23%
Was helpful during office hours.	<b>60%</b>	0%	0%	3%	10%	27%
Motivated independent thinking.	10%	0%	3%	10%	33%	<b>47%</b>

**The Readings**

	N/A	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Fulfilled the objective of the course.	0%	0%	0%	10%	40%	<b>53%</b>
Were reasonable in number.	0%	0%	0%	20%	27%	<b>57%</b>
Were appropriately difficult.	0%	0%	7%	3%	43%	<b>50%</b>

**Approximately how much of the reading did you do?**

	<b>N/A</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>100%</b>
	0%	0%	0%	0%	<b>47%</b>	27%

**The Assignments**

	<b>N/A</b>	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>.</b>	<b>.</b>	<b>.</b>	<b>A great deal</b>
How helpful were the lectures and discussions in preparing for exams and completing assignments?	0%	0%	0%	10%	33%	<b>57%</b>
How appropriately were the requirements of the course proportioned to course goals?	3%	0%	7%	7%	27%	<b>57%</b>
How well did the requirements contribute to the goals of the course?	3%	0%	7%	0%	40%	<b>50%</b>
How timely and useful was feedback on assignments and exams?	0%	0%	7%	10%	<b>43%</b>	40%
How fairly were the assignments graded?	0%	3%	3%	13%	23%	<b>57%</b>

**Overall**

	<b>N/A</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
This course met my expectations.	0%	0%	0%	3%	37%	<b>60%</b>
This course provided me with new insight and knowledge.	0%	0%	0%	3%	17%	<b>80%</b>
This course provided me with useful skills.	3%	3%	0%	20%	<b>40%</b>	33%
The content of this course was presented at an appropriate level.	0%	0%	0%	3%	27%	<b>70%</b>
I put my best effort into this course.	0%	0%	7%	13%	33%	<b>47%</b>
The class had a high level of morale/enthusiasm.	0%	0%	0%	23%	37%	<b>40%</b>

**The Teaching Assistant(s)**

	<b>N/A</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Were available outside of class.	7%	0%	3%	0%	13%	<b>80%</b>
Were helpful with assignments.	13%	3%	0%	0%	20%	<b>63%</b>

**Discussion Sections, Problem Sessions, Writing Tutorials**

	<b>N/A</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Were well coordinated with this course and contributed to it.	7%	0%	0%	10%	30%	<b>57%</b>

Provided well-designed materials.

7%

0%

0%

17%

33%

**47%**

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