



MIT Sloan School of Management Action Learning Lab

USA Lab: Bridging the American Divides

[Note: This is a sample syllabus, adapted from the syllabus for the spring 2019 class]

Class Times & Location:

Mondays: 4:00 – 7:00pm E51-376

Class Admission and Size:

Class size is limited to enable strong interaction. This class is only open to enrolled graduate students who take the course for credit.

As this is an action learning lab course with a significant project component, we are unable to accommodate listeners. To be fair to the organizations hosting projects and to fellow team members, students matched with a project are expected to complete the entire course for credit. This course qualifies for Sustainability Certification credit. The course abides by MIT Sloan Professional Standards.

Instructors:

Barbara Dyer
Leigh Hafrey
C. Christine Kelly
Thomas Kochan

Teaching Assistant:

Alina Xu

Administrative Assistant:

Lisa Barone

Office Hours:

By appointment.

Course Credit:

This is a 9-credit, full-semester course in spring 2019

Grading:

Course participation	35%
Three reflection memos	15%
Team project	50%



Assignment Pre-Course:

- Review project descriptions and rank your top three preferences
- Write a short statement indicating your top choice project and the skills and perspectives you bring to your project.

Pre-Course Suggested Reading & Viewing:

- James Fallows and Deborah Fallows, *Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America* (2018)
- Amy Goldstein, *Janesville: An American Story* (2017)
- David Merrill and Lauren Leatherby, "Here's How America Uses Its Land," *Bloomberg* 7/31/18, at: https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-us-land-use/?utm_source=pocket&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=pockethits.
- Chris Boebel and Christine Walley, *Exit Zero* (video): <https://vimeo.com/210191636>. Password: exitzero2018

Course Objectives

This course has three interlocking objectives:

1. Deepen **understanding of America's divides** and possible **solutions** to them.
2. **Explore** the **resilience** of individuals, communities and the American experiment.
3. **Address specific challenges through projects** in partnership with leaders across the U.S.
4. **Strengthen leadership qualities**

Specifically students will:

- Develop an **understanding of place, work and community** through the prisms of history and contemporary thought and immersion in field work
- **Examine varying conceptions of the common good and individual liberty** to gain greater perspective on what divides and what unites Americans
- Hone **analytic/research tools along with those of teamwork, dialogue, collaboration and coaching** in fieldwork and in the classroom
- Assess local/regional **opportunities** for **innovation** as you **complete well-defined projects** that are material to the progress of your host organizations

The course has three modules:

- **Module One:** The Common Good and Individual Identity – A Delicate Balance
- **Module Two:** Good Work as a Bridging Force
- **Module Three:** The Common Good – Work, Community and Culture



COURSE MODULES & CLASS PLANS

Introduction

“...this country’s hope, from its very beginnings as a nation, was to model the good society. Over the centuries, Americans have fought for and enjoyed a sense of difference from their fellows, even as they committed to an economic and philosophical equality with them. Today more than ever, we live that difference in the diversity of our origins, our political beliefs, and our expectations for the future. A shared idealism and the humanity we wish it to inspire remains, now as in our earliest days, the challenge to which we must rise.”¹

This course is motivated by concern about America’s deep divides and a determination to better understand the issues and uncover solutions. While the United States provides a focal point, as students grapple with the complexities of this country’s challenges, they will find universal themes that resonate across the globe.

Throughout this course we will look at our current challenges as part of an ongoing struggle to realize the idea of America. We will grapple with the messy issues that have shaped the American experiment throughout history as we peer at it through the prisms of work, community and culture. We explore the idea of a community acting on a shared notion of the common good; the idea of individual liberty as an organizing and defining principle; and the idea that conflicting values can be reconciled. These ideas have inspired and tested America throughout our history. Field work will enable you to explore these divergent points of view in play on the ground in a range of communities across the country. Provocative and challenging classroom discussions will be informed by your life experiences, course readings and team work getting to know the people and circumstances in your host sites.

¹ Leigh Hafrey and James Russell Muirhead, Jr., for Aspen Socrates Seminar “‘As a City Upon A Hill’: On Becoming America,” offered Aspen, CO, July 7-10, 2017.



Module One: The Common Good and Individual Identity – A Delicate Balance

2/11/19 –3/15/19

In this module we will:

- Engage core ideas in tension or harmony with each other: common good and individualism; shared responsibility and liberty
- Examine specific divides: race, class, culture and place
- Refine skills for listening and recording observations through interviews and field notes as you develop greater understanding of how these issues present themselves in the contexts of your team project sites
- Build team trust, establish team norms and sort roles and responsibilities
- Develop refined team project plans

Assignments & Due Dates:

- ✓ **Team Contract (2/26/19)** *See detailed assignment handout*

Contracts should specify:

- Overarching team objectives
- Commitments, expectations, roles and responsibilities of individuals, sub-groups and full group
- Methods and frequency of communication to support and track progress outside of class meetings
- Permissions and means for addressing problems

- ✓ **Initial Project Work Plan (3/8/19)** *See detailed assignment handout*

Initial project work plan should include:

- Refined problem/opportunity statement
- Central research questions and plan for gathering data from the field and other sources
- Deliverables defined (interim and final)
- Specific individual and subgroup assignments and target dates (RACI)

- ✓ **Reflection Paper (3/14/19)** *See detailed assignment handout*

Reflection paper will capture how place, work, community, identity and the common good present themselves at three levels:

- Individual/personal – How does where you’ve lived, your work, your community and the many components of your identity – for example, culture, race, gender...define you?
- Team – How have these issues presented themselves as your team is getting started?
- In the Field – How do people in your host region see things? How do they talk about place, work, community and identity? What is revealed to you through these conversations?

Module One Class Plans

February 11, 2019

Introduction - Bridging the American Divides: The Common Good

Objectives:

- Begin to build class community
- Achieve a grasp of the entirety of the course and its core themes
- Delve into the question: What is the common good, what is individualism and why the divides between them?
- Confirm team and project assignments

Required Reading Prior to Class:

- ✓ David A. Moss, *Democracy: A Case Study*, "Introduction" (2017), pp. 1-14
- ✓ Arthur Okun: *Equality and Efficiency: The Big Trade-Off* (1975; excerpt)
- ✓ Eleanor Roosevelt et al., *UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Dec. 10, 1948
- ✓ Host Site Overviews & Project Descriptions

Class Schedule

3:55 – 4:05	Music playing as class gets going
4:05 – 4:40	Brief overview and longer introductions Students & faculty will share hopes and expectations for this class
4:40 - 5:40	Discussion of core themes with focus on the common good
5:40 - 6:00	Break for refreshments and logistics briefing
6:00 –6:45	Team-time to focus on team-building and project contours
6:45 – 6:55	Wrap-up & preview next-week's class

February 19, 2019 (This is a Tuesday)
Identity – Separate vs Shared

Objectives:

- Explore the concept of identity
- Examine consciousness of place
- Develop listening and trust-building tools

Required Reading Prior to Class:

- ✓ James Madison, “Federalist Paper No. 10,” *The Federalist Papers*, Nov. 23, 1787
- ✓ Colin Woodard, *American Nations*, “Introduction” (2011), pp. 1-19
- ✓ Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (2016), “A Method of Listening,” pp. 26-44

Workshop: Field Tools for Exploring Work, Community & Culture
M. Pilar Opazo Breton, Postdoctoral Associate and Lecturer, will conduct a workshop on understanding identity – individual, work, community and culture. This workshop will also review approaches to field research. Teams will develop their plans for their 2/19 meetings with Community Partners.

Class Schedule

3:55 - 4:05	Music playing as class gets going (optional)
4:05 - 4:15	Review module objectives and assignments Review class objectives and flow
4:15 - 5:10	Discussion of core theme: Identity – One Nation with Liberty
5:10 - 5:20	Break for refreshments
5:20 - 6:45	Workshop: Field Tools for Exploring Work, Community & Culture
6:45 - 6:55	Wrap-up & preview next-week’s class

February 25, 2019

Workshop with Community Partners

Teams will meet with their hosts to begin their exploration of work, community and culture in their regions and start to scope their projects.

Required Reading Prior to Workshop:

- ✓ James Fallows and Deborah Fallows, *Our Towns: a 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America* (2018), "Introduction," pp. 3-17
- ✓ Project materials from community partners

[Note: Students are encouraged to review the sections of *Our Towns* and *American Nations* that are relevant to their project location]

Class Schedule

- 3:55 - 4:05 Music playing as class gets going (optional)
- 4:05 - 4:30 Welcome and Introductions
- 4:30 - 5:45 Moderated dialogue with community partners
- 5:45 - 6:00 Break for refreshments
- 6:00 - 6:50 Teams meet with community partners to develop project plans
- 6:50 - 6:55 Wrap-up & preview next-week's class

- 7:00 – 9:00** **Dinner with Community Partners** Samberg Conference Center
A dinner with a slightly larger group of interested parties will enable the conversation to continue.

March 4, 2019

Rural, Urban Identity – Common Good and Individualism

Objectives:

- Understand rural/urban tensions and ties
- Begin to reframe the rural/urban challenge

Required Reading Prior to Class:

- ✓ Christiana K. McFarland, *Bridging the Urban-Rural Economic Divide* (2018), National League of Cities
- ✓ Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (2016), “The Contours of Rural Consciousness,” pp. 45- 71 and p. 89
- ✓ Sandra Cisneros, “Notes of A Native Daughter,” in *Tales of Two Americas: Stories of Inequality in a Divided Nation* (2017), pp. 21-25

[Note: Students are encouraged to review from pre-course suggested reading David Merrill and Lauren Leatherby, “[Here’s How America Uses Its Land](#),” *Bloomberg* 7/31/18]

Class Schedule

- 3:55 - 4:05 Music playing as class gets going (optional)
- 4:05 - 4:20 Welcome guest(s) and Introductions
- 4:20 - 5:45 Presentation and moderated dialogue with guests:
 - Ted Abernathy, Managing Partner of Economic Leadership LLC
 - Christiana McFarland, Research Director, National League of Cities
- 5:45 - 6:00 Break for refreshments
- 6:00 - 6:50 Teams work with one-on-one team consultation with guests
- 6:50 - 6:55 Wrap-up & preview next-week’s class

March 11, 2019
Race, Class & Culture

Objectives:

- Explore dimensions of race, class and culture
- Hone listening skills

Required Reading Prior to Class:

- ✓ John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630; excerpt)
- ✓ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter From Birmingham City Jail” (1963)
- ✓ Joan Williams, “What So Many People Don’t Get About the U.S. Working Class,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 10, 2016
- ✓ Michelle Alexander, “The Future of Race in America,” [TEDxColumbus 2013](#)
- ✓ Natalie Diaz, “American Arithmetic,” in *Tales of Two Americas: Stories of Inequality in a Divided Nation*, pp. 305-306

Class Schedule

3:55 - 4:05	Music playing as class gets going (optional)
4:05 - 4:10	Overview of class objectives and other business
4:10 - 4:30	Listening Exercise: Race, Class and Culture
4:30 - 5:30	Discussion: Race, Class & Culture
5:30 – 5:45	Break - Refreshments
5:45 - 6:45	Team Work
6:45 – 6:55	Wrap-up & preview next class

March 18 – March 29: Field Work at Host Sites during SIP (Sloan Innovation Period) & Spring Break



Module Two: Good Work as a Bridging Force

4/1/19 – 4/29/19

In this module we will:

- Focus on the role of work in society, the evolution of the American social compact and the impact of economic and technological transitions on work, community, culture and identity.
- Through the prism of work – examine the character and composition of American divides. How do these dynamics present themselves in the context of work?
- Explore concepts of innovation, resilience vs. stagnation and decline in the context of local experiences.
- Refine analytic skills as we explore community cultural, social and economic assets, entrepreneurial “infrastructure,” local labor markets, industry composition and the regional effects from larger technological, economic and political forces.
- Solidify project designs and make substantial progress as teams connect the dots between their specific projects and the larger course frame of work, community and culture.
- Strengthen team effectiveness skills – listening, arriving at shared expectations, managing differences and having difficult conversations, accountability and accommodation.

Assignments & Due Dates:

- ✓ **Team Presentations (4/1/19)** *See detailed assignment handout*
In these presentations students will:
 - Facilitate classroom discussions presenting team field experiences through the contexts of work, community and culture
 - Present project challenges/opportunities at this inflection point to gain feedback from fellow classmates
- ✓ **Interim Project Report (4/10/19)** *See detailed assignment handout*
Projects will have evolved. The interim reports will capture that evolution to include:
 - Revised problem/opportunity statements and refined descriptions and timetables for deliverables
 - Evidence of progress
- ✓ **Project Posters for Action Learning Poster Day (4/17/19 Posters due to Action Learning & 4/25/19 is Poster Day)** *See detailed assignment handout*
Specifications for posters and flow of the event to be provided by Sloan Action Learning Program
- ✓ **Reflection Paper (5/1/19)** *See detailed assignment handout*
Reflection paper will capture how work shapes identity at three levels:



- Individual/personal – How does work define you? How has work shaped your family experience? Your community experience? How do you define good work, quality jobs?
- Team – How do individual experience with work as a defining characteristic of identity shape the norms of work on your team? Do team members have shared perspectives about work? Diverse and constructive perspectives? Conflicting perspectives? How well is your team working together?
- In the Field – How has the prism of work added to your understanding of your community or region of focus? How do people in your host region relate to work? What do they consider to be the elements of good jobs? How do they see their working future? What are their hopes, expectations and disappointments when they think about the future of work for themselves, their families and their community?



Module Two Class Plans

April 1, 2019

Innovation, Resilience/Stagnation, Decline

Objectives:

- Paint team portraits of American communities drawing from field experience to shed light on the conflicting yet often coincident forces of innovation, resilience, stagnation and decline
- Capture nuanced lessons from field visits and place these in the context of the broader debate about American divides – explore how field experiences influenced student views about work, community and culture
- Review/revise project plans and determine next steps based upon insights from the field

Required Reading Prior to Class:

- ✓ No required reading for this class

Class Schedule

- 3:55 - 4:05 Music playing as class gets going (optional)
4:05 - 4:15 Overview of class objectives and other business
4:15 - 6:45 Teams will lead class discussion and will develop a flow-plan in advance
6:45 - 6:55 Wrap-up and preview next class

April 8, 2019

Work, Identity and the Quest for the Common Good

Objectives:

- Explore the past, present and future of work
- Recognize the importance of work as a core element of identity, community, culture.
- Delve into the local context to gain understanding of how work shapes people and places and how they in turn shape work.
- Enhance interviewing skills in preparation for field visits and worker interviews.

Required Reading Prior to Class:

- ✓ Kochan & Dyer, *Shaping The Future of Work*, Ch. 2
 - ✓ “3,000 Years of the History of Work in 3 Minutes” video
 - ✓ Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (1972), “Introduction,” pp. xii – xxx
 - ✓ [Working Then & Now – The Working Tapes Podcast](#)
 - ✓ Janet Topolsky & Deborah Markley, [Redefining Wealth for the 21st Century](#) HuffPost, 10/19/15, updated 12/6/17
- **[Note: Students are encouraged to review the following material from the pre-course suggested reading: Amy Goldstein, *Janesville: An American Story* (2017) and the video *Exit Zero* by Chris Boebel and Christine Walley]**

Class Schedule

3:55 - 4:05	Music playing as class gets going (optional)
4:05 - 4:15	Overview of class objectives and other business
4:15 - 5:50	Discussion of work, identity and the common good
5:50 - 6:00	Break for refreshments
6:00 - 6:50	Team work – Worker interviews
6:50 - 6:55	Wrap-up & preview next class

April 25 is Action Learning Poster Day.

Team Posters will be reviewed in advance of submitting to the Action Learning Program on their due date of April 17

April 15: No class, Patriot's Day

Deborah and James Fallows will be our guests on April 22

April 22, 2019

Resilience – Work, Community & Culture

NOTE: Deborah and James Fallows will be our guests in class followed by an MIT-Wide Community event (See below)

Objectives:

- Explore the idea of quality work in context
- Examine the conditions for resilience and innovation

Required Reading Prior to Class:

- ✓ Amy Goldstein, *Janesville*, Prologue and Ch. 54
- ✓ James Fallows and Deborah Fallows, *Our Towns: a 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America* (2018), pp. 394-408
- ✓ American Creators Series, [Marfa Texas](#), PBS News Hour

Schedule with Deb and James Fallows:

4:00 - 5:30 Discussion with USA Lab Students and Faculty

5:30 - 6:00 Break to set up for evening event

Book table and pizza...

6:00 - 7:30 Conversation with James and Deborah Fallows about *Our Towns* and Bridging the American Divides

Book signing to follow program



April 29, 2019

The Technology Debate: AI and the American Divides

Objectives:

- Understand how technological advances are shaping American communities
- Consider the role of technology in shaping work, community and culture in isolated communities
- Consider how technology might contribute to solutions and how it might deepen divisions

Required Reading Prior to Class:

- ✓ Jason Koebler, "[The City that was Saved by the Internet](#)"
- ✓ Barbara Dyer, "[A Dance with Technology: Automation and Tomorrow's Jobs](#)"
- ✓ Nicol Turner Lee, "[Closing the Digital and Economic Divides in Rural America](#)," Brookings

Class Schedule

3:55 - 4:05	Music playing as class gets going (optional)
4:05 - 4:15	Overview of class objectives and other business
4:15 - 5:50	Discussion of technology, the future of work and the American divides
5:50 - 6:00	Break for refreshments
6:00 - 6:50	Team work
6:50 - 6:55	Wrap-up & preview next class

Module Three: The Common Good: Work, Community & Culture

5/6/19 – 5/13/19

In this module we will:

- Bring ideas and practice together, as class discussions and field work create a weave of the American story
- Complete projects that are relevant and valuable to community partners
- Better understand how these projects relate to the larger issues of place, work, community and identity
- Have a nuanced understanding of the resilience of communities and the challenges that wear away at that resilience
- Advance team skills through experiences good and bad
- Lead a final event with community partners and the larger MIT community to share insights and lessons

Assignments & Due Dates:

✓ **Completed Projects** (5/13/19)

Projects will include:

- Detailed report encompassing the team analysis
- Presentation deck for final event

✓ **Final Reflection Paper** (5/17/19)

The final reflection paper will have two parts:

- Part one will compare initial assumptions with perspectives gained during the semester reflecting on these questions:
 - Can a society embrace a shared vision of the common good?
 - What is the role of community and who are the actors poised to mediate conflicting values and move society forward?
 - What is the significance of place and work and community and identity?
 - What are the prospects for bridging the American divides?
- Part two will be an assessment of the course. Describe what went well and what can be improved for the following:
 - In-class discussions and overall experience
 - Team experience at MIT and in the field
 - Project quality
 - Community partners
 - Field experience

Module Three Class Plans

May 6, 2019

Bridging the Divide – Can what divides us also unite us?

Objectives:

- Take another look at division and unity in the various contexts made visible throughout the course
- Consider how to tip the balance toward bridging forces in a nation of such diversity and magnitude

Required Reading Prior to Class:

- ✓ “Declaration of Independence”
- ✓ Mayor Mitch Landrieu’s Address on Removal of Four Confederate Statues

Class Schedule

3:55 - 4:05 Music playing as class gets going (Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins, and Stephen Sondheim, “America,” from *West Side Story* (1961; YouTube)

4:05 - 4:15 Overview of class objectives and other business

4:15 - 5:50 Discussion of bridging the American divides

5:50 - 6:00 Break for refreshments

6:00 - 6:50 Team work – finalize project presentations and event details

6:50 - 6:55 Wrap-up & preview next class



May 13, 2019

Final Event with Community Partners

The final event, planned by the students, will bring community partners back to MIT and include a broader public event in the 4:00-7:00 pm timeframe.