



Astr 120H Life in the Universe

COURSE SYLLABUS: FALL 2026

Class Location: Mon., Wed. & Fri. 11:00 AM – 11:50 AM, McFarland Science Building 107

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Instructor: Dr. Kurtis A. Williams, Professor & Department Head

Preferred Pronouns: He/him/his

Office Location: Room 106A, McFarland Science Building

Student Hours:

Tues 11am -- Noon

Wed 1pm – 2pm

Fri 2:30-3:30

By Appointment

Zoom meetings available by appointment

University Email Address: Kurtis.Williams@etamu.edu

Preferred Form of Communication: **email**

Office Phone: (903) 886-5488

Communication Response Time: Before the end of the following business day

COURSE INFORMATION

Materials – Textbooks, Readings, Supplementary Readings

Required Books:

- Life in the Universe, 5th Edition by Jeffrey O. Bennett and Seth Shostak. Access to Courseware will not be used or needed.
 - <https://press.princeton.edu/books/ebook/9780691241791/life-in-the-universe-5th-edition-pdf>
 - As of August 20, purchase code PUP30 was offering 30% off the ebook.
- Contact by Carl Sagan

Optional Texts and/or Materials

- Ear buds / headphones for listening to online videos and podcasts
- ABCD Cards Smartphone App (<https://cij.wvu.edu/ABCD>) *free*

The syllabus/schedule are subject to change.

Course Description

Hours: 3

The basic science of the search for evidence of life in the universe, including the origin and evolution of life on the Earth, terrestrial extremophiles, the history of the search for life in the Universe, the search for habitable environments in the Solar System, and the search for habitable (exo-)planets and signs of life around other stars.

Are we alone in the Universe? In the 1500s, the Catholic Church executed a monk who dared to suggest the presence of other intelligent species living on other worlds, yet over the past century, popular culture has become littered with discussions of space faring civilizations being commonplace. But is life common? Is intelligent life common? What is intelligence, anyway? What is life?

Since the discovery of the first planets outside our Solar System in the mid 1990s, the science of astrobiology has grown by leaps and bounds. It is a very broad field that attempts to bridge biology, chemistry, geology, physics and astronomy under one monumental goal: the discovery of life elsewhere in the Universe.

In this course, we will explore the field of astrobiology. We will look at the necessary ingredients for life. We will learn about possible habitats for life in our own Solar System. We will explore how astronomers discover and study planetary systems around other stars. And we will end by discussing the probability of other civilizations in the Universe and how we might find them.

Student Learning Outcomes

1. You will discuss the chemistry and origins of life on Earth.
2. You will employ knowledge of current and past life on Earth to identify criteria for habitability and life
3. You will identify potential habitats in our Solar System
4. You will calculate individual terms of the Drake Equation to estimate the number of intelligent civilizations in our galaxy
5. You will criticize proposed solutions to the Fermi Paradox

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Minimal Technical Skills Needed

You will need to be able to access myLEO Online, the new learning management system, and be able to learn how to use it. You should also be able to read PDF documents. You should be able to create either Microsoft Word documents (.docx) or plain text files. You must be familiar with Internet usage and safe browsing. You need to be able to watch YouTube videos on a computer.

The syllabus/schedule are subject to change.

How to Get Started

myLEO Online Access Information

This course uses myLEO Online, the new learning management system at ETAMU. All materials, assignments, and resources will be made available through this system. To access this course, go to: <http://myleoonline.tamuc.edu>. Log in with your myLEO account and password. Then click on the link to Fall 2026 – Life in the Universe to get to our course.

How This Course Is Organized

This course is organized by units. Some units will last just one week, but some units will cover multiple weeks. Some units cover one chapter in the text; some cover multiple chapters. You should listen in class and check the course page on myLeo Online often to see what activities and assignments are coming due.

What Should You Do First?

After attending class and reading this syllabus, you should proceed to the course page on myLeo Online and familiarize yourself with the resources. Next, order the course materials if you haven't yet. Get signed up for the Slack channel if you wish. Finally, look at the Unit 1 web page and consider digging in!

Instructional Methods

Participation

In order to give you some encouragement to attend class and keep up with the work, I will usually take attendance and assess your in-class learning using either colorful voting cards or the ABCD App for smartphones. You may receive some extra credit points for correct answers to clicker questions.

Quasi-Quizzes Participation

I will be assigning some reading and video watching quite often, due just before the start of most classes. At the start of class, I will give a short “quasi-quiz” with questions that probe whether or not you did the reading. For quasi-quizzes, you will get a 70% score *just for finishing the quiz*. You will earn a higher score for each quiz question you answer correctly. You will earn no points if you show up to class late, don't turn in the quasi-quiz, and are not granted an excused absence. You can miss a few quasi-quizzes without greatly hurting your grade very much.

If you are certified as needing special accommodations for examinations, please see me privately well before the exam with your letter of accommodation from the Student Disability Resources and Services office.

Exams

Short exams will be given roughly monthly during the semester. These exams will focus on material covered since the previous exam. There will also be a cumulative final exam. Most students do well enough on the exams that they get decent course grades,

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even if you bomb one exam.

If you are certified as needing special accommodations for examinations, please see me privately well before the exam with you letter of accommodation from the Student Disability Resources and Services office.

Homework

Homework will be assigned for each unit. Homework will be distributed online; due dates will be announced when it is distributed. Each assignment carries the same weight as all other homework assignments. Late homeworks are penalized 20% for each day late. After 5 days, any missing homework will receive a zero.

The following are considered cheating and will not be tolerated: Searching for answers on the internet, using artificial intelligence to complete answers (unless an assignment explicitly asks you to do so), **obtaining copies of solutions to homework questions (whether from past students or other sources), directly copying another student's work, etc.** See the section on "Academic Integrity" below for full details.

Honors Project

The honors portion of this course will consist of reading, written, and oral assignments regarding topics in the book "Contact" by Carl Sagan. These assignments will typically be included in the homework assignments and be due throughout the semester. Some exam questions will be based on the book.

Extra Credit:

The *only* extra credit available in this course are the two options below. If you fully complete an option, you will earn 1.5% extra credit on your total calculated grade. You may earn extra credit for each activity only once (i.e., a maximum of 3% extra credit). There are no other options for extra credit. **All extra credit must be completed by November 13.**

Visit a planetarium show: The East Texas A&M Planetarium exhibits several different shows every Friday night at 7 pm and 8 pm. Tickets are \$5 for all ages. <http://www.etamu.edu/planetarium/> has a current listing of shows. Family of any age is welcome to the planetarium shows; be sure to check on the age-appropriateness of shows (all are rated appropriate for all audiences, but typically the 7 pm show is aimed at children and the 8 pm show is more appropriate for teens and adults).

If you attend a show, tell the staff that you are a member of this class. The staff will have class rosters; you are responsible for making sure the staff mark down that you attended.

Visit the Commerce Observatory: You will have one opportunity to visit the Commerce Observatory (about 5 miles south of Commerce). We will have

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telescopes set up to look at planets and other interesting objects in the night sky, and there will be an activity you must complete in order to earn extra credit. A rain date has also been scheduled. Times and transportation options will be announced closer to the event.

Student Responsibilities and Tips for Success in the Course

Students who do well in this course share most of the following common habits:

- Arriving a couple minutes early for class and not leaving until class is dismissed.
- Not using phones, tablets, or computers during class
- Checking myLeo Online often for announcements and assignments
- Completing all assignments on time
- Asking for help and advice early in the semester
- Taking responsibility for their own grade.

GRADING

Final grades in this course will be based on the following scale:

A = 90%-100%

B = 80%-89%

C = 70%-79%

D = 60%-69%

F = 59% or Below

Grading is on an absolute scale with no competition. If you all earn an A, you all get an A. I may “curve” grades for specific assignments at my discretion; your percentage earned will never go down if I apply such a curve. Your current grades are available through the gradebook on myLEO Online – look for “Total Calculated Grade.”

Grades are based on a weighted system. The categories and weights are:

- Attendance: 5%
- Quasi-Quizzes: 10%
- Homework Assignments: 35%
- Midterm Exams: 30%
- Final Exam: 20%

COURSE OUTLINE / CALENDAR

The course will cover many of the topics outlined below. The dates below may change, so pay attention to announcements for final due dates.

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1st Block: Introductions

- Unit 1: Considering Life in the Universe
 - Bennett and Shostak Chapters 1-2
- Unit 2: Our Universe and Our Solar System
 - Bennett and Shostak Chapter 3
- *Midterm Exam 1 (On or after Sept 27)*

2nd Block: Life on Earth

- Unit 3: The Habitability of Earth
 - Bennett and Shostak Chapter 4
- Unit 4: The Nature of Life on Earth
 - Bennett and Shostak Chapter 5
- Unit 5: The History of Life on Earth
 - Bennett and Shostak Chapter 6
- *Midterm Exam 2 (On or after October 20)*

3rd Block: Life in our Solar System

- Unit 6: Life on Mars
 - Bennett & Shostak Chapter 8
- Unit 7: Life on Icy Moons
 - Bennett & Shostak Chapter 9
- Unit 8: The End of Habitability
 - Bennett & Shostak Chapter 10
- *Midterm Exam 3 (On or after Nov 20)*

4th Block: Life Outside the Solar System

- Unit 9: Detecting Exoplanets
 - Bennett & Shostak Chapter 11
- Unit 10: The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence
 - Bennett & Shostak Chapter 12
- Unit 11: Interstellar Travel
 - Bennett & Shostak Chapter 13

The final exam will be Wednesday Dec 9th, 10:30 AM – 12:30 PM.

Important Class Dates:

- Aug 21: First Day of Class
- Oct 9: **No Class (Fall Break)**
- Oct 14: Observatory Visit (Extra Credit)
- Oct 29: Last Day to Drop Class
- Nov 11: Observatory Visit (if 1st attempt were clouded out)
- Nov 12: Observatory Visit (if 1st and 2nd attempts were clouded out)
- Nov 14: Last Day for Planetarium Extra Credit
- Nov 25: **No Class (Thanksgiving)**

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- Dec 4: **Last Day of Classes**

TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS

D2L (a.k.a. Brightspace, MyLEO Online, LMS)

All course sections offered by East Texas A&M University have a corresponding course shell in the myLEO Online Learning Management System (LMS). The link below gives technical requirements for accessing the LMS

LMS Browser Support:

<https://community.d2l.com/brightspace/kb/articles/5663-browser-support>

ACCESS AND NAVIGATION

You will need your campus-wide ID (CWID) and password to log into the course. If you do not know your CWID or have forgotten your password, contact the Center for IT Excellence (CITE) at 903.468.6000 or helpdesk@etamu.edu.

Note: Personal computer and internet connection problems do not excuse the requirement to complete all course work in a timely and satisfactory manner. Each student needs to have a backup method to deal with these inevitable problems. These methods might include the availability of a backup PC at home or work, the temporary use of a computer at a friend's home, the local library, office service companies, Starbucks, a ETAMU campus open computer lab, etc.

COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT

If you have any questions or are having difficulties with the course material, please contact your Instructor.

Technical Support

If you are having technical difficulty with any part of Brightspace, please contact Brightspace Technical Support at 1-877-325-7778. Other support options can be found here:

<https://community.brightspace.com/support/s/contactsupport>

Interaction with Instructor Statement

Email:

I can be reached by email at Kurtis.Williams@etamu.edu. Please put "Life in the Universe" in your email subject header. It may take me up to 24 hours to send you a response (48 hours on the weekend or holidays). If you don't hear back from me in that time, please send another email or give me a call.

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Student Hours:

Student Hours are available in both real-world and virtual formats. Office hours are times that I set aside when I promise to be in my office so that you can come by and talk to me. During office hours, you can ask questions about the course material, ask about homework, see your current grade, or ask other questions about the class or astronomy in general.

It's important to realize that office hours are *not* just for students who are having problems in the course. If you are uncertain about anything, please visit, email, phone or drop into virtual hours before your small problems grow into big ones. If you are worried about what might be on the test, stop in. If you are curious about astronomy jobs and research opportunities, come by.

Office hours work best if you have your textbook, notes, and homework sets with you.

If you want to talk but cannot come during office hours, please contact me by email in order to set up an individual appointment. By setting an appointment, you both guarantee that I will be in my office (or online) and that I will have plenty of time to talk with you. You may feel free to stop by my office any time my door is open, but if you do not have an appointment and if it is not my scheduled office hours, please understand if I'm not free to talk at that instant.

Social Media:

Please don't follow me on social media until after you've graduated. You'll be disappointed anyway.

Assignment and Due Date Policy

Assignments and due dates will be posted in the main page for each week. Submission requirements for each assignment will also be given on that page.

Dropping the Course

You may drop this course by logging into your myLEO Portal (<https://leoportal.tamuc.edu>) and clicking on the hyperlink labeled 'Register from Classes' from among the choices found under the Student Resources tab. For more information, see this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NU5q_58o3uA.

Incompletes

I only offer incompletes in extraordinary circumstances. Any student interested in an incomplete should contact me as soon as possible after the situation arises, and should keep in mind that I have the final decision on whether or not to grant your request.

Technical Issues

Personal computer problems do not excuse the requirement to complete all course work in a timely and satisfactory manner. Each student needs to have a backup method to deal with these inevitable problems. These methods might include the availability of a

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backup PC at home or work, the temporary use of a computer at a friend's home, the local library, office service companies, an Internet cafe, or a coffee shop, etc.

Administrative Withdrawal

Although I have the right to drop you for excessive absences, I won't do so.

Syllabus Change Policy

The syllabus is a guide. Circumstances and events, such as student progress, may make it necessary for the instructor to modify the syllabus during the semester. Any changes made to the syllabus will be announced in advance.

COURSE AND UNIVERSITY PROCEDURES/POLICIES

Course Specific Procedures/Policies

Academic integrity

A major goal of this and most every university course is for you to learn and appreciate subject material. Academic dishonesty ("cheating") actively prevents you from achieving this goal. Academic dishonesty is taken seriously by the University and by me, and **will not be tolerated.** (See the TAMU-C Code of Student Conduct and the TAMU-C Procedures A 13.04, 13.12, 13.31, and 13.32.)

This conduct is not only considered wrong in this course and at this University, but also in the real world. Engaging in these activities will get you fired from a job and prevent you from getting another job.

Unethical student conduct includes:

- **Plagiarism**, or copying the words of others with the intent of making it look like your own. Whether you use someone else's phrase word for word, or whether you try and change a few words, or even if you just borrow someone else's original idea and don't give them credit, that's unethical. Use your own words whenever possible, give credit to wherever you got an idea, and put direct quotes inside quotation marks.
- **Cheating** involves trying to trick me or others into thinking you did work that you really didn't do, or into thinking you know what you really don't know. This can include stealing exams, changing your answers on a graded exam or assignment and claiming it was graded wrongly, putting your name on someone else's homework, and so on.
- **Searching the Internet for homework solutions and entering answers you find.** Searching the Internet for help on a topic is okay. For example, suppose a question asks, "Describe the life cycle of a star that has the same mass as the sun." Typing that phrase into Google and cutting and pasting the text in the answer box is considered cheating. Typing "star life cycles" into Google, reading a few web pages, and summarizing the information in your own words is not cheating.
- **Borrowing a previous student's homework, exams, or solution sets.**

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“Borrowing” includes looking at someone’s submitted homework, screen shots, stealing returned homeworks, and so on.

- **Collusion** is working with another person to cheat. This can include copying someone else’s answers to an exam or assignment, doing work for another student, buying or otherwise obtaining homework/exam solutions from any source online or off-line, or any other instance of multiple people engaging in some form of cheating or dishonesty. Working with other students on an assignment is fine as long as everyone contributes and each student does their own work.
- **Unauthorized use of AI content generators**. This includes using ChatGPT or similar tools to create text or content, unless an assignment actually requests you to do so. Using such tools to correct grammar, spelling, or style is acceptable as long as you admit it and submit a link to the log of all prompts and responses.
- **Any other activity that, to a reasonable person, looks wrong**. If you have any doubt whatsoever whether a certain action is considered dishonest, please ask me *before* engaging in the activity. There is no need to be embarrassed about asking, and I won’t penalize you for asking! In this class, if you follow the maxim “it’s easier to beg forgiveness than to ask permission”, don’t expect forgiveness to be forthcoming.

If you engage in academic dishonesty during any graded activity, you will receive no credit for that activity. More than one instance of dishonesty by a student will result in automatic failure of the course and referral of the student for disciplinary action.

For further information, search the ETAMU website for “academic integrity policy”.

D2L provides me with tools that check for common forms of online cheating and collusion. These include, but aren’t limited to: time stamps, location stamps, and automated comparison of essay answers. I will use these tools.

Administrative Withdrawal

Although I have the right to drop you for excessive absences, I won’t do so. You have a right to get an F if you decide to quit working but don’t withdraw.

Syllabus Change Policy

The syllabus is a guide. Circumstances and events, such as student progress, may make it necessary for the instructor to modify the syllabus during the semester. Any changes made to the syllabus will be announced in advance.

COURSE AND UNIVERSITY PROCEDURES/POLICIES

Student Conduct

All students enrolled at the University shall follow the tenets of common decency and acceptable behavior conducive to a positive learning environment. The Code of

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Student Conduct is described in detail in the [Student Guidebook](https://www.etamu.edu/student-guidebook/):
<https://www.etamu.edu/student-guidebook/>

Students should also consult the Rules of Netiquette for more information regarding how to interact with students in an online forum:
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/netiquette>

Mental Health and Counseling

The Counseling Center at ETAMU, located in the Halladay Building, Room 203, offers counseling services, educational programming, and connection to community resources for students. Students have 24/7 access to the Counseling Center's crisis assessment services by calling 903-886-5145. For more information regarding Counseling Center events and confidential services, please visit www.etamu.edu/counseling-center

ETAMU Attendance

For more information about the attendance policy please visit the [Attendance](#) webpage and Procedure 13.99.99.R0.01.
<https://inside.etamu.edu/admissions/registrar/generalInformation/attendance.aspx>

Academic Integrity

Students at East Texas A&M University are expected to maintain high standards of integrity and honesty in all of their scholastic work. For more details and the definition of academic dishonesty see the following procedures:

[Undergraduate Academic Dishonesty 13.99.99.R0.03](#)

<https://inside.etamu.edu/aboutus/policiesproceduresstandardsstatements/rulesProcedures/13students/undergraduates/13.99.99.R0.03.pdf>

Artificial Intelligence

East Texas A&M University acknowledges that there are legitimate uses of Artificial Intelligence, ChatBots, or other software that has the capacity to generate text, or suggest replacements for text beyond individual words, as determined by the instructor of the course.

Any use of such software must be documented. Any undocumented use of such software constitutes an instance of academic dishonesty (plagiarism).

Individual instructors may disallow entirely the use of such software for individual assignments or for the entire course. Students should be aware of such requirements and follow their instructors' guidelines. If no instructions are provided the student should assume that the use of such software is disallowed.

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In any case, students are fully responsible for the content of any assignment they submit, regardless of whether they used an AI, in any way. This specifically includes cases in which the AI plagiarized another text or misrepresented sources.

13.99.99.R0.03 Undergraduate Academic Dishonesty

13.99.99.R0.10 Graduate Student Academic Dishonesty

Students with Disabilities-- ADA Statement

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please contact:

Office of Student Disability Services

East Texas A&M University

Velma K. Waters Library 162

Phone (903) 886-5150

Fax (903) 468-8148

Email: StudentDisabilityServices@etamu.edu

Website: [Office of Student Disability Resources and Services](https://www.etamu.edu/student-disability-services/)

<https://www.etamu.edu/student-disability-services/>

Nondiscrimination Notice

East Texas A&M University will comply in the classroom, and in online courses, with all federal and state laws prohibiting discrimination, sexual harassment, and retaliation against any individual on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other legally prohibited basis. Such discrimination, harassment, and retaliation are violations of A&M System policy and will not be tolerated. Further, an environment free from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression will be maintained.

Campus Concealed Carry Statement

Texas Senate Bill - 11 (Government Code 411.2031, et al.) authorizes the carrying of a concealed handgun in East Texas A&M University buildings only by persons who have been issued and are in possession of a Texas License to Carry a Handgun. Qualified law enforcement officers or those who are otherwise authorized to carry a concealed handgun in the State of Texas are also permitted to do so. Pursuant to Penal Code (PC) 46.035 and ETAMU Rule 34.06.02.R1, license holders may not carry a concealed handgun in restricted locations.

For a list of locations, please refer to the [Carrying Concealed Handguns On Campus](#) document and/or consult your event organizer.

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Web url:

<https://inside.etamu.edu/aboutus/policiesProceduresStandardsStatements/rulesProcedures/34SafetyOfEmployeesAndStudents/34.06.02.R1.pdf>

Pursuant to PC 46.035, the open carrying of handguns is prohibited on all ETAMU campuses. Report violations to the University Police Department at 903-886-5868 or 9-1-1.

Sexual Harassment and Violence

Violence and harassment based on sex and gender are Civil Rights offenses subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, etc.

If you or someone you know is a victim of harassment, stalking, domestic violence, sexual assault, or related crimes, has been harassed or assaulted, here are some resources for you:

24/7 Resources

- National Domestic Awareness Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7223)
- National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988

Campus Resources

- **Call 911 in emergency situations**
- If you or someone you know has been impacted and needs support, email: CARE@etamu.edu (monitored Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm)
- Victim Advocacy and Support: <https://www.etamu.edu/student-advocacy-support/victim-support-services/>
- How to Help and Report: <https://www.etamu.edu/student-advocacy-support/victim-support-services/>
- How to Report Concerns About a Fellow Student: https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?TAMUCommerce&layout_id=20
- University Title IX Compliance Office: <https://www.etamu.edu/titleix/>
- University Title IX Contact: Amanda Berry, 903-886-5991, TitleIX@etamu.edu
- University Police Department Sexual Assault pages: <https://www.etamu.edu/university-police-department/crime-prevention/>
- University Counseling Center: <https://www.etamu.edu/counseling-center/>
- Campus police email: upd@etamu.edu

External resources:

Crisis center of Northeast Texas: <http://www.ccnetx.org>
Know your IX: <https://www.advocatesforyouth.org/campaigns/know-your-ix/>
End rape on campus: <https://endrapeoncampus.org/>
Clery Center for Security on Campus: <https://clerycenter.org/>

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National Sexual Assault Online Hotline: <https://hotline.rainn.org/online>

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