

# Goddesses and Other Divine Women

WCL 3355

Dr. Caryn Tamber-Rosenau

Spring 2022

Tuesdays and Thursdays 1-2:30 p.m.

Agnes Arnold Hall 10

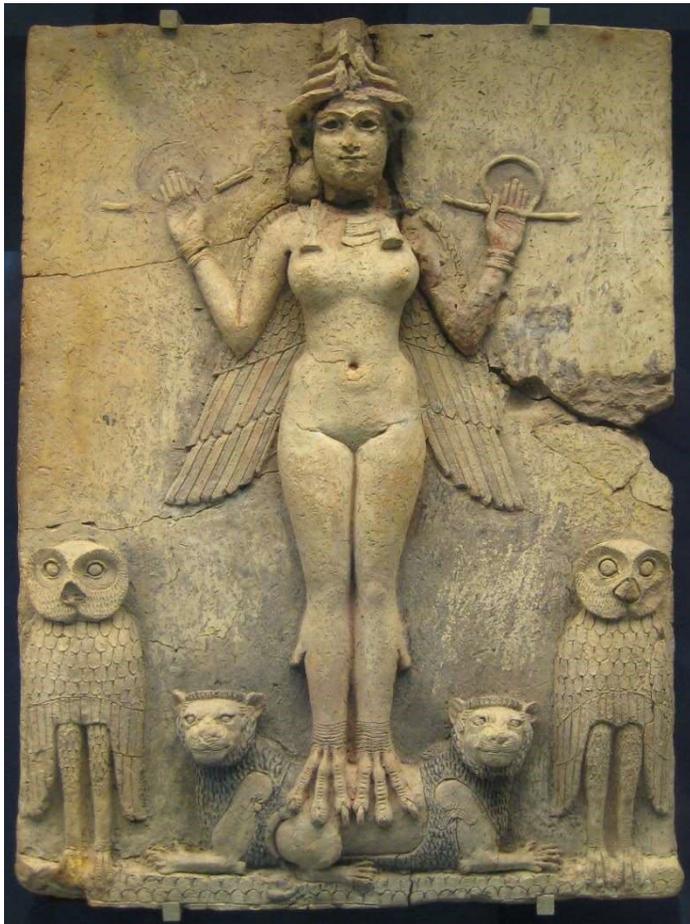
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**Phone:** (713) 743-9341

**Please call me:** Dr. Tamber-Rosenau, Prof. Tamber-Rosenau, Dr. T-R, Prof. T-R, or just Professor (she/her pronouns)

**How to get in touch:** Send me an email! I generally respond within 24 hours during the week and within 48 hours over a weekend. If I don't reply within that time frame, please contact me again.

**Office hours:** By appointment via Zoom or outdoors. You can make an office hours appointment to discuss the course, questions you have, assignments, etc.



B.C.E., British Museum

**Course description:** What do goddesses do? What are the connections between gender and divinity? Are there transgender divine figures? How are goddesses and other female divine figures represented in popular culture? Why do scholars and the public often misinterpret goddesses? How do monotheistic faiths incorporate the divine feminine? Did God kill the goddess? In this course, we will explore these and other questions by examining visual and literary primary sources, as well as secondary scholarly literature. We will discuss goddesses and other divine women in a variety of historical and modern cultures, including ancient Egypt, Greece, and Mesopotamia as well as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Students will hear guest lecturers from around the university.

Image: Burney Relief, 19<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries

**Course goals:**

By the end of the semester, students should:

- Be able to discuss a variety of goddesses and other divine women;
- Have a basic familiarity with the religions and cultures that produced those figures;
- Understand the modern “goddess movement” and be able to evaluate its claims;
- Be able to evaluate textual and visual evidence concerning female divinities;
- Have gained experience in creatively presenting material to classmates.

**Readings:** You are not required to purchase any books for this course. (Yay!) All readings will be posted on Blackboard. Please bring assigned readings to class on the appropriate day.

**Course requirements and policies:**

1. Attendance is required. Excessive absences or lateness will affect your grade, as will unexcused early departures from class. If you must miss class, arrive late, or leave early on a given day, please let me know in advance if at all possible; it will be your responsibility to make up work that you have missed.
2. You are entitled to two absences, no questions asked, without your attendance and participation grade suffering. Further absences will affect your grade unless they are excused. Examples of excused absences include holidays, personal illness, or family emergency. Documentation of absences may be requested by the professor for them to count as excused. *Experiencing COVID symptoms and needing to get tested is always an excused absence, as long as you let me know at the time. Never come to class if you are experiencing COVID symptoms. Never come to class when you have a pending COVID test.*
3. Class participation counts significantly (25%) toward your grade! Please come to class prepared to contribute to class discussions. You are expected to do the assigned readings for every class and share insights or ask questions.
4. Laptops, tablets, phones, and other electronic devices are permitted only for class-related uses. Do not text, post, or chat during class. Do not do work for other classes during our class time. No earbuds or headphones may be worn in class. Failure to honor these rules will result in a lowered attendance and participation grade.
5. I strongly encourage you to use paper and pen to take notes; research has shown that retention of class material is improved when students use pen and paper rather than a computer for notetaking.
6. For most class sessions, I have provided a few questions for you to consider while doing the readings for that day. I hope that this will focus your time and allow you to get more out of both the readings and class sessions.
7. In between class sessions, I will occasionally need to communicate important information to the class via e-mail. It is your responsibility to check your university e-mail regularly.
8. *Group project:* Students will pair up to research and deliver a short (10-15 minutes) presentation. The presentations will relate to modern pop culture images of female divinities. Each pair will deliver its presentation on the day on which we discuss their assigned divine figure. Assignments will be given and discussed on January 27.

9. *Written response papers:* Seven times during the semester, students will write short (mostly 1-1.5 pages, or 250-400 words) response papers to course readings or other materials. The questions to be addressed in the response papers will be shared in class beforehand. The response papers will be submitted via TurnItIn.
10. *Final project:* Students will complete a final paper of 8-10 pages, or an alternative project with commentary, about a female divine figure of their choice. Final project topics will be discussed in class later in the semester. Projects will be due on May 6 via TurnItIn.
11. My policy on late work is as follows: I accept late written work up to one week after the due date. Late papers will be docked 1/3 of a letter grade per late day. For example, a paper handed in up to 24 hours late would start with a 97, 24-48 hours late with a 94, 48-72 hours late with a 90, and so on.
12. There will be opportunities to earn extra credit points, by attending events on campus or doing a bonus assignment. Stay tuned for more information. By policy, I do not offer individualized extra credit.
13. To succeed in this class:
  - a. You should expect to spend at least 4-6 hours per week outside of class on work for this course: reading, taking notes, asking questions, working on written assignments, and studying.
  - b. Make sure to keep a document on your computer or in a notebook where you record your observations about the course material. Write down notes when reading, record your answers to any guiding questions or prompts, and keep a record of your thoughts and important quotes from your readings. Make sure to write down questions that occur to you, or objections you have to what you are reading. These will be useful for your other activities.
  - c. Communicate with me regularly.
14. We are (still) in the midst of a global pandemic that is upending all facets of our lives. There may be circumstances where following the above guidelines becomes challenging or impossible for you. Please keep me in the loop if this happens, and we will work together to find a solution. Additionally, there may be COVID-related circumstances in which it becomes impossible to meet in person on a particular day. I am prepared to pivot any individual session to synchronous online instruction if necessary, and I will give you as much notice as possible if this needs to happen.
15. Attending class on Microsoft Teams: every class at the university has a dedicated Microsoft Teams channel. You can find a link to ours on Blackboard. If it becomes necessary to hold class online at some point, this is the format we will use. Additionally, if you cannot attend class due to personal illness/fear of infecting others, but are well enough to attend virtually, you may arrange with me in advance to attend via Teams. I will only be live-streaming class on Teams on days when someone has made this arrangement. If you are on Teams but haven't made this arrangement, you will not get credit for attendance.
16. This syllabus is subject to change. If I make any changes, I will notify you.

## **Grading:**

Attendance and participation: 25%  
Group project: 20%  
Response papers: 30%  
Final project: 25%

Participation points may be earned by asking or answering questions in class, making respectful and valuable contributions to class discussions, actively participating in group activities or discussions, and/or attending office hours to discuss course material.

Grading will be on the following scale. Please note that the highest final course grade the University permits is A.

97-100: A+	77-79: C+
93-96: A	73-76: C
90-92: A-	70-72: C- 87-
89: B+	67-69: D+
83-86: B	63-66: D
80-82: B-	60-62: D-
	<60: F

**Diversity statement:** This class includes and honors students of all backgrounds. The following will not be tolerated: hate speech, belittling others' religious traditions, arguing about whose religion is best/most valid/closest to "the truth," and proselytizing (also known as evangelizing, missionizing, seeking converts, or witnessing).

**Citations:**

Film titles should be in italics.

Book titles should be in italics.

Article or chapter titles should be in "quotation marks."

Writers should be referred to on first reference as Firstname Lastname. On subsequent reference, use Lastname. Example: "In her book, Cynthia Eller argues that goddess religion is an incredibly diverse collection of beliefs and practices. Eller interviewed dozens of practitioners for her research."

**Course Schedule:**

Week 1

Tuesday, January 18: Introductions, syllabus review

Thursday, January 20: Studying religion; Goddess worship today

Read: Mara Lynn Keller, "Goddess Spirituality" and Cynthia Eller, "Not Just God in a Skirt"

- What is the Great Goddess? What happened to her, according to Keller?
- What does goddess worship do for practitioners, according to Keller?
- What happened to the practice of goddess worship starting in the 1970s?

- Identify key questions debated within goddess circles.
- Why do both Eller and Keller speak of “thealogy”?
- According to Eller, what is a “spiritual feminist”? How does feminism relate to goddesses?
- What do you make of Eller’s questions and answers on the bottom of p130 and top of p131? Are they satisfying to you? Why or why not?
- Why doesn’t Eller make a sharp distinction between monotheistic and polytheistic goddess worship?
- What is the relationship of feminist spirituality to male deities, in Eller’s telling?
- What do goddesses have to do with nature?
- Why do so many spiritual feminists “identify” with the goddess? What does identification with a deity mean?
- What do you think Eller and Keller would say to one another if they were in the same room?

## Week 2

Tuesday, January 25: How do we discern gender? What does archaeology say about goddesses?

Read: Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris, “Introduction: Exploring Female Divinity: From Modern Myths to Ancient Evidence”

- What is the controversy about a “mother goddess”? Who are the players in the controversy and what does each side argue? Why don’t they talk to one another?
- Can you tell what the authors think of the archaeologists’ side of the story? Of the goddess movement’s side?
- What kinds of questions do Goodison and Morris argue for asking about a found object?
- To the authors, why does the debate over evidence for goddesses strike such a chord with so many?

## *Unit 1: Goddesses of the Ancient Mediterranean World*

Thursday, January 27: The first goddess? Exploring Çatalhöyük

Read: Kathryn Rountree, “Archaeologists and Goddess Feminists at Çatalhöyük: An Experiment in Multivocality”

In class: Group projects assigned

- Why is Çatalhöyük important?
- What is the main conflict Rountree describes? Can you tell whether she takes a side?
- How do local attitudes toward Çatalhöyük play into the debate among outsiders (archaeologists and goddess feminists)?
- What is “multivocality”? Is it really present at Çatalhöyük, according to Rountree?
- What does this article tell you about debates over the objectivity of archaeology? What is your stance on these debates?

### Week 3

Tuesday, February 1: Goddesses of Egypt

Read: Texts about Nut, Hathor, and Neith

Optional: Fekri A. Hassan, "The Earliest Goddesses of Egypt: Divine Mothers and Cosmic Bodies"

Due: Response to Egyptian goddess primary texts

- What do these hymns and prayers say about the goddesses? What *don't* they tell us?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of gleaning information on goddesses from written sources such as these?
- To what does Hassan trace the origin of goddess images in Egypt? What is his evidence?
- What was the connection between Egyptian pharaohs and the gods? What is "divine kingship"?
- What is the relationship of cows to Egyptian goddesses?
- What did goddesses have to do with life after death, according to Hassan?

Thursday, February 3: Isis

Read: Plutarch, *Moralia*, "Isis and Osiris"

Optional: Barbara S. Lesko, "Isis, Great of Magic"

- What is the role of Isis in this story? What are the problems with relying on this source for information about Isis?
- Why does Isis seem to gain prominence over time and among worshipers beyond Egypt?
- What was the relationship of Isis to kingship? To death?
- How is Isis depicted in iconography and what does this tell us about how ancient Egyptians perceived her?
- What sorts of magical abilities are attributed to Isis?
- What connections have been proposed between Isis and the Virgin Mary?

### Week 4

Tuesday, February 8: Inanna/Ishtar

Read: Hymn to Ishtar, Prayer of Lamentation to Ishtar, Self-Laudatory Hymn of Inanna and Her Omnipotence, Tablet VI of The Epic of Gilgamesh

- Describe the relationship between Inanna/Ishtar and humans displayed in these ancient texts.

Thursday, February 10: Inanna/Ishtar; Tiamat

Read: Rivkah Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites;" *Enuma Elish*

Due: Response to Harris article

- What does Harris mean when she calls Inanna/Ishtar a "paradox"?
- How is Inanna/Ishtar ambiguous in gender?

- What does Inanna/Ishtar have to do with prostitution?
- How does Harris explain the goddess's ambiguity?
- Who is Tiamat? What is her role in the Enuma Elish?

## Week 5

Tuesday, February 15: Anat

Read: The Baal Cycle, Aqhat Epic

Murphy, Kelly J. "Myth, Reality, and the Goddess Anat: Anat's Violence and Independence in the Ba'al Cycle"

- Why do you think Anat is portrayed as so violent in the Baal Cycle?
- Describe the role of Anat in the two Canaanite stories. What is the significance of her epithet "Virgin"?
- What is Murphy's argument about Anat's violence and sexual status?

Thursday, February 17: Asherah, or did God have a wife?

Read: William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?* pp209-236

Keret (Kirta) Epic

- Who is Asherah? What does she do in the Keret Epic?
- According to Dever, how have modern scholars erred in explaining Asherah?
- What is Ugarit and what is its relevance for the Bible?
- In what contexts does the word "asherah" appear in the Bible?
- What is "folk religion," and how does it relate to Asherah, in Dever's opinion?
- What does folk religion have to do with women?
- What does Dever say the iconographic evidence tells us about Asherah?

## Week 6

Tuesday, February 22: Woman Wisdom

Read: Proverbs 7-9:6

- How would you describe the portrayal of Woman Wisdom in the Proverbs passage?
- Is Woman Wisdom a goddess? If not, what is she? What does your answer signal about how you define "goddess"?

Thursday, February 24: Did God kill the Goddess?

Watch: Seder-Masochism (2018): <https://vimeo.com/263398514>

Read: Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, "The Goddess in the Exodus: Nina Paley's *Seder-Masochism* and Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism"

Due: Response to *Seder-Masochism* and Tamber-Rosenau article

- How does filmmaker Nina Paley write goddesses into the biblical story of the Exodus? What happens to the goddesses in the film?

- How do you see this film as interacting with the “goddess feminists” we discussed at the beginning of the semester?
- What does Paley’s portrayal of goddesses have to do with her anti-trans ideology?

## Week 7

Tuesday, March 1: Intro to Greek goddesses: Hera, Aphrodite, Artemis, Hestia

Read: Mary E. Voyatzis, “From Athena to Zeus: An A-Z Guide to the Origins of Greek Goddesses,” pp 133-147 in *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence*

[“In ‘Rumors,’ Lizzo and Cardi B pull from the ancient Greeks, putting a new twist on an old tradition.”](#) Salon

In class: Discuss final projects

- What are our sources of information about Greek goddesses? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those sources?
- What is a votive, and what can votives tell us about these goddesses?
- How does Voyatzis assess the theory that goddess such as Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite derive from an earlier mother goddess? What do you think of her conclusion?

Thursday, March 3: Demeter, Persephone, Hecate; The Great Mother Goddess of Rome (guest speaker Dr. Richard Armstrong, Classical Studies)

Read: Homeric Hymn to Demeter

Sarah Pomeroy, “Goddesses and Gods”

- Why are so many of the major Olympian goddesses virgins?
- What insights does Pomeroy bring to discussions of mother goddesses?

## Week 8

*Unit 2: The Female Divine in Monotheism*

Tuesday, March 8: Virgin Mary

Read: Luke 1-2

Excerpt from Marina Warner, *Alone Above All Her Sex*

Due: Response to Mary readings

- How is Mary characterized in the Gospel of Luke?
- How do the Gospels portray Mary’s role in the life of Jesus? Are there differences among them in this regard?
- How does the idea of the virgin birth develop in early Christianity? Why do you think this idea becomes so popular?

Thursday, March 10: Athena and Metis (guest speaker Dr. Casey Dué Hackney, Classical Studies)

Due: Final project topic and format

## SPRING BREAK

### Week 9

Tuesday, March 22: Shekhinah and Binah

Read: Luke Devine, How Shekhinah Became the God(dess) of Jewish Feminism

- What is Shekhinah in Jewish tradition, and how did the idea develop?
- How and why did Jewish feminists gravitate toward Shekhinah and adopt it/her as a patron and powerful figure?
- How has Jewish feminist feeling about Shekhinah evolved over the last few decades?

Thursday, March 24: Virgin of Guadalupe (guest speaker Dr. Marie-Theresa Hernández Ramirez, World Cultures and Literatures)

Read: Excerpt from Maria del Socorro Castaneda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen de Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America*

Due: Final project proposed bibliography

### Week 10

Tuesday, March 29: Female God-language

Read: Excerpt from Elisabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (chapter 3) and Julia Watts-Belser, “Transing God/Dess: Notes from the Borderlands”

Due: Response to Johnson and Watts-Belser readings

- What does Johnson identify as the problem with male God-language?
- What is her response to using feminine traits to talk about God?
- Why does Johnson suggest using female metaphors about God? What does she hope this will accomplish?
- How does Johnson propose using the discourse of ancient deities to inform modern discussions of God?
- When Watts-Belser became Jewish, what was her “God problem”?
- Why does Watts-Belser talk about the divine feminine in Judaism as “Goddess,” rather than other options?
- How is divine gender unstable, according to Watts-Belser?
- How can transness inform conceptions of God?

Thursday, March 31: Field trip: [Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart](#), tour starts at 1:15 p.m.

### Week 11

Tuesday, April 5: Deified Arab Queens and the Divine Feminine in Islam (guest speaker Dr. Emran El-Badawi, Arab Studies)

Due: Response to Co-Cathedral Field Trip

Thursday, April 7: The Demon Lilith

Read: Rebecca Lesses, "[Lilith](#)"

Due: Final project annotated bibliography

- Describe lilitu/lilith demons. What did they want? What did they do?
- What is Lilith's role in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*?
- What is Lilith's role in kabbalah?
- How have contemporary feminists reclaimed Lilith?

## Week 12

*Unit 3: Contemporary and Historical Goddesses around the World*

Tuesday, April 12: The divine feminine in Niger-Congo (guest speaker Dr. Kairn Kleiman, History)

Watch: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "[The Danger of a Single Story](#)"

Thursday, April 14: Hindu goddesses (guest speaker Dr. Bhavya Tiwari, India Studies)

Read: Ayesha Matthan, "Woman or Goddess?"

## Week 13

Tuesday, April 19: Kuan-Yin

Read: The Legend of Miao-shan

Cathryn Bailey, "Embracing the Icon: The Feminist Potential of the Trans Bodhisattva, Kuan-Yin"

Due: Response to Bailey article

- Who is Miao-shan? What is the point of her story?
- What is a bodhisattva?
- What can the transformation of Avalokitesvara into Kuan-Yin tell us about Buddhism in China, and vice versa?
- What do you make of Bailey's contention that Kuan-Yin is "trans"?

Thursday, April 21: Oshun

Read: Ifa Divination

Wande Abimbola, "The Bag of Wisdom: Osun and the Origins of the Ifa Divination," pp141-154 in *Osun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*

- What is Ifa divination? Can you get a sense from this article of its importance?
- What is the popular story about Osun, Orunmila, and divination?
- How does Abimbola upend this conventional view?

## Week 14

Tuesday, April 26: TBD

Thursday, April 28: Wrap-up

Final project due **May 6** at 11:59 p.m.

**Academic integrity:** Students at the University of Houston are required to adhere to the university's academic honesty policy. If you are unsure how the honesty policy applies to a given assignment in this course, please ask me. I have a zero-tolerance policy towards any type of academic dishonesty (including plagiarism) and will refer all violations to the department hearing officer. According to plagiarism.org, plagiarism includes:

- a. "turning in someone else's work as your own
- b. copying words or ideas from someone else without giving credit
- c. failing to put a quotation in quotation marks
- d. giving incorrect information about the source of a quotation
- e. changing words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit
- f. copying so many words or ideas from a source that it makes up the majority of your work, whether you give credit or not" (<http://www.plagiarism.org/plagiarism-101/what-is-plagiarism>)

**CAPS Statement:** Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) can help students who are having difficulties managing stress, adjusting to college, or feeling sad and hopeless. You can reach CAPS ([www.uh.edu/caps](http://www.uh.edu/caps)) by calling 713-743-5454 during and after business hours for routine appointments or if you or someone you know is in crisis. No appointment is necessary for the "Let's Talk" program, a drop-in consultation service at convenient locations and hours around campus. [http://www.uh.edu/caps/outreach/lets\\_talk.html](http://www.uh.edu/caps/outreach/lets_talk.html)

**Special accommodations for students with disabilities:** The University of Houston System complies with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, pertaining to the provision of reasonable academic adjustments/auxiliary aids for students who have a disability. In accordance with Section 504 and ADA guidelines, the Student Accessibility Center strives to provide reasonable academic adjustments/auxiliary aids to students who request and require them. If you believe that you have a disability requiring an academic adjustments/auxiliary aid, please call the Justin Dart, Jr. Student Accessibility Center at [\(713\) 743-5400](tel:7137435400) or email them at [JDCenter@central.uh.edu](mailto:JDCenter@central.uh.edu).

**Title IX reporting:** Please note that the instructor is a mandatory reporter for sexual misconduct and other concerns related to Title IX (including sexual harassment, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, sexual intimidation, intimate partner violence, or stalking). Moreover, recent changes to Texas law impose increased reporting requirements and more drastic penalties for failure to report. According to the UHS Sexual Misconduct Policy and state law, a disclosure regarding either a past or recent incident, or mention of your identity as a

survivor of past misconduct, is sufficient to trigger reporting requirements. Thus, all students should be aware that no faculty member in a teaching role can agree to confidentiality in discussing these topics, and no statement from a faculty member should be taken as granting confidentiality. If you (in person or in writing) disclose any such information, it will be reported consistent with Texas law and UH policy. Please know that if a report is made, you will hear from UH Equal Opportunity Services (EOS)/the UH Title IX Office regarding your rights under the Sexual Misconduct Policy and the campus and community resources available to you, but you are not required to respond. Additionally, EOS/the UH Title IX Office will not compel you to make a police report, though it will assist you in doing so upon your request. Please know also that there are places on campus where you can instead make a confidential report: the Student Health Center, Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Sexual Misconduct Support Services, and the A.D. Bruce Religion Center.

**Face Covering Policy:** To reduce the spread of COVID-19, the University strongly encourages everyone (vaccinated or not) to wear face coverings indoors on campus including classrooms for both faculty and students.

**Presence in Class:** Your presence in class each session means that you:

- Are NOT exhibiting any [Coronavirus Symptoms](#) that makes you think that you may have COVID-19
- Have NOT tested positive or been diagnosed for COVID-19
- Have NOT knowingly been exposed to someone with COVID-19 or suspected/presumed COVID-19

If you are experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms that are not clearly related to a pre-existing medical condition, do not come to class. Please see [Student Protocols](#) for what to do if you experience symptoms and [Potential Exposure to Coronavirus](#) for what to do if you have potentially been exposed to COVID-19. Consult the (select: [Undergraduate Excused Absence Policy](#) or [Graduate Excused Absence Policy](#)) for information regarding excused absences due to medical reasons.

**COVID-19 Information:** Students are encouraged to visit the University's [COVID-19](#) website for important information including on-campus testing, vaccines, diagnosis and symptom protocols, campus cleaning and safety practices, report forms, and positive cases on campus. Please check the website throughout the semester for updates.

**Vaccinations:** Data suggests that vaccination remains the best intervention for reliable protection against COVID-19. Students are asked to familiarize themselves with pertinent [vaccine information](#), consult with their health care provider. The University strongly encourages all students, faculty and staff to be vaccinated.

**Excused Absence Policy:** Regular class attendance, participation, and engagement in coursework are important contributors to student success. Absences may be excused as provided in the University of Houston [Undergraduate Excused Absence Policy](#) and [Graduate Excused Absence Policy](#) for reasons including: medical illness of student or close relative, death of a close family member, legal or government proceeding that a student is obligated to attend, recognized professional and educational activities where the student is presenting, and

University-sponsored activity or athletic competition. Under these policies, students with excused absences will be provided with an opportunity to make up any quiz, exam or other work that contributes to the course grade or a satisfactory alternative. Please read the full policy for details regarding reasons for excused absences, the approval process, and extended absences. Additional policies address absences related to [military service](#), [religious holy days](#), [pregnancy and related conditions](#), and [disability](#).