

Fall 2026: Alexander von Humboldt's Cosmos Course syllabus

Instructor:

- Eric J. Simon, Ph.D.
- ericjsimon@berkeley.edu (feel free to email any time)

Course Description:

- Alexander von Humboldt was both the most famous scientist and the most accomplished mountaineer of the 19th century. This course picks up Humboldt's life just after his world-famous ascent of Mount Chimborazo. From there, we'll finish out his expedition, including his influential visit to the United States and his meeting with President Thomas Jefferson. We then trace his return to Europe, where he transformed his observations into a series of groundbreaking publications that reshaped humanity's understanding of the natural world.
- Along the way, we explore Humboldt's life as a scientist, author, and international celebrity, his remarkable expedition across Russia, and the development of the ideas that helped lay the foundations of modern ecology, biogeography, and environmental science.
- The course culminates with *Cosmos*, Humboldt's masterwork and one of the most influential scientific books ever written.
- This course is a continuation of my previous course "Alexander von Humboldt's Hero's Journey to South America." That course will be available for viewing on Best of OLLI for those who wish, but this course stands alone and does not assume any foreknowledge.
- All participants are encouraged to consider and discuss the broader implications of the topics under discussion. Ample time will be given for discussion and all participants are encouraged to share their thoughts on these important and relevant topics.

Course schedule:

- All sessions are on Zoom for 90 minutes on Thursdays from 1:30-3:30PM Pacific time.
- Each class will consist of a 75 minute lecture and a final 15 minute Q&A and discussion

Instructor biography:

Eric J. Simon, Ph.D., is a Senior Professor in the Department of Biology and Health Science at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. There, he specializes in teaching biology to non-science-major students. In addition to teaching, Dr. Simon is an award-winning nature photographer who leads educational trips for both undergraduates and lifelong learners to such destinations as Belize, the Galapagos, Tanzania, Cuba, the Amazon river, and Patagonia. Dr. Simon received a B.A. in biology and computer science and an M.A. in biology from Wesleyan University, and a Ph.D. in biochemistry from Harvard University. Dr. Simon is the author of a widely used series of college biology textbooks with over 2 million books in print that help teach biology to students in over 40 countries. Prof. Simon also teaches online lifelong learners at a variety of institutions.

