

# Disaster-preparedness course trains students to avoid doomscrolling

**'How to Survive the 21st Century' uses games, apocalyptic movies to navigate uncertainty**

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News  
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September is [National Preparedness Month](#), and with the growing number of natural disasters, not to mention other emergencies like nuclear accidents, preparing for today can feel a bit scary.

But Arizona State University students can take a class that puts their existential anxieties into perspective, called “How to Survive the 21st Century.”

The class, offered by the [School of Public Affairs](#), is now designated as fulfilling the Gold general studies requirement for [sustainability](#) and enrollment has surged to more than 400 students, up from about 40 when the course debuted last year.

The class was designed and is taught by [Sarah Bassett](#), a professor of practice in the [Emergency Management and Homeland Security](#) program in the School of Public Affairs. She is an expert in disaster planning, focusing her professional practice on the management of natural and technological hazards.

Bassett not only wants students to confront their disaster fears by learning about preparedness, she wants them to move away from doomscrolling in favor of something more essential that they can apply to their careers and personal lives.

“One of my motivations and passions is how we collectively think about navigating uncertainty,” she said.

Bassett said it comes down to learning the principles of risk and emergency management.

The students start with relating to risk at a personal level and then expand to thinking about community, regional, national, international and existential risks through fundamental principles, policy and applied practice.

Gamification is another way of making the course content approachable.

"We use games to connect to topics from our formal lectures to embed a deeper understanding of the material," she said.

"Students engage with virtual disaster simulations, practice constructing feedback loops, investigate statutory laws and deconstruct apocalyptic cinema," said Bassett, who is co-director of the Resilient Visions CoLab in the ASU Media and Immersive eXperience Center in Mesa.

"It's taking what is often viewed as existential threats — or stressful content — and delivering it in a way that is more approachable and very interactive."

Students also assess the threats in their own lives.

"It can be everything from taking aspirin to a nuclear meltdown. They map it on different quadrants, using risk perception paradigms and analysis techniques," Basset said. "And they are always very surprised at what they're actually afraid of. And that's by design."

"That then gives us a platform to explore different types of hazards (and) ask the question, 'How does this relate to my life and my future job?'"

Sustainability as a process is embedded in the course.

"Sustainability and disaster risk are inherently tied and this course embeds sustainability thinking into hazard management more broadly, acknowledging our current planetary position without surrendering to fatalism," she said.

Students map their carbon footprint to see how it relates to their own vulnerability to certain hazards, and by the end of the semester, they understand how to take incremental steps in applying the concepts.

"And to me that is the absolute biggest win with this class," Bassett said.

For their final project, students select an apocalyptic movie to watch.

"Apocalyptic and disaster films serve as thought experiments that help students understand societal vulnerabilities and envision more sustainable, resilient futures by analyzing what went wrong from a risk-management perspective in these fictional scenarios," Basset said.

Students are encouraged to choose films that connect to their majors. For example, nursing students might choose "Contagion," about infectious disease.

"My goal always is that they can take what they're learning in this class and apply it to their field," she said.

And in fact, several students who have taken the course have decided to add an emergency-management minor to majors such as nursing, political science, urban planning and engineering.

"The mission of the School of Public Affairs is to live the ASU Charter by preparing students and professionals for ethical, inclusive and effective public service; conducting cutting-edge research of public value; and engaging locally, nationally and internationally with the communities we serve," said Shannon Portillo, director of the School of Public Affairs.

"We bring that mission to life through our general education courses, ensuring that students from any major, across the university, have engaging ways to learn about emergency management, public policy and public administration," Portillo said. "Part of taking fundamental responsibility for the communities we serve is ensuring that students understand how public affairs — policymaking, community leadership, etc. — will shape their lives regardless of their future careers."

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



The "How to Survive the 21st Century" class, offered by the School of Public Affairs at ASU, was designed and is taught by Sarah Bassett, a professor of practice in the Emergency Management and Homeland Security program. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News