

Syllabus
Public Policy 1700
Economics and Public Policy
Spring 2009

Basic Information

Professor: Brian G. Knight
Office: Robinson 102C
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Office hours: 10:00am-noon Tuesdays
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Meets Thursdays 9:00am-11:20am

Course Description

An economic analysis of major social programs in the United States with a focus on the redistribution of income and incentive effects created by the programs. Specific policy issues to be examined are welfare, Medicaid, Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), anti-discrimination policies, and school finance reform.

A link to the reading list is available on my website, which is www.econ.brown.edu/fac/Brian_Knight/

Prerequisites:

Intermediate microeconomics (ECO1110 or equivalent)
Statistics or econometrics (PS1600 or ECO1620 or equivalent)

Course format

This course is a research seminar and thus student participation is key to our collective learning. I expect that you will learn as much, if not more, from the other students than from the professor. The format of each seminar will be as follows. During the first hour of the seminar, students will present the assigned readings. Following a short break, we will spend the second hour in a more informal setting discussing issues arising from the readings.

Each of you will be responsible for helping me in presenting the material and organizing the discussion during one or two lectures (depending upon class size). You may share this responsibility with one or two other students. Along with your fellow students, you should prepare a presentation covering the material. You should be prepared to compare and contrast the 1) questions, 2) assumptions, 3) methods, 4) conclusions, and 5) policy implications of the studies. I will do my best to assign you topics that align well with your interests.

In order to receive full credit, you must email me a copy of your presentation in pdf format by 8pm on the night before your presentation so that I can load the presentation onto the course computer (several websites, such as <http://www.pdfonline.com/>, provide free conversion from powerpoint to pdf format). Your performance during these weeks will determine **25 percent** of your course grade.

Class participation

During the weeks in which you are not leading the discussion, you are expected to have read the required readings and to participate in class discussions.

To encourage discussion and close reading of the material, I would like for the non-presenters to bring to class a paper copy of two questions and two comments on the readings. An example of a question is “Why did the author measure variable X using method Y rather than method Z? Method Z might be preferred to several reasons...”. An example of a comment is “This finding has several implications for the introduction of school vouchers. First, ...”.

Students will be evaluated on the quality of submitted questions and comments and, more importantly, verbal participation during seminar. Good participation will be original, grounded in economic principles, and backed by empirical evidence. Comments that are vague, repetitive, unrelated to the current topic, disrespectful of others, and without sufficient foundation will be evaluated negatively. Given the importance of class discussions, attendance is mandatory and points will thus be deducted for absences for which I do not give prior approval. Your performance in class discussions excluding the session in which you lead will determine **25 percent** of your course grade.

Course paper

The final **50 percent** of your grade will be determined by a course paper. The paper should answer a “question” related to one of the sections of the course. You may wish to write a paper on the topic for which you have been assigned to lead the weekly discussion. Your paper will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

1. A starting point for the paper is a synthesis of the course readings required to answer your question. This synthesis should **not** be a restatement of the abstracts of the papers but rather should compare and contrast the methods and findings of the papers.
2. The next step is to conduct a broader literature review, including papers not listed on the syllabus, in order to bring additional evidence to bear on your question. For other papers in the literature, you may wish to consult the reference listing of the papers on the syllabus. Other tools for conducting literature reviews include Google Scholar, ECONLIT, and JSTOR, all of which are available at the Brown University’s library’s website.

The following deadlines pertain to the paper:

March 19: A proposal for the paper of 300 words or less (about 1 page). This proposal should state the question that you are asking and your initial interpretation of what you have read. This draft will not be graded, but I will try to provide you specific comments.

April 23: The final draft of the paper is due. The paper should be 3,000 words or less (about 10 pages). I will grade this draft according to the criteria described above.

Enrollment Criteria

This is a limited enrollment course. To the extent that excess demand remains, I will use the following criteria in admitting students:

- 1) Attendance
- 2) Prerequisites
- 3) Pre-registration
- 4) Junior or senior standing

I will post the list of accepted students on my office door (102C Robinson) by noon on Monday, February 2. If you are admitted but decide to drop the course, **please email me** so that other students can enroll. I will also keep a waiting list. If you would like to know your status on the waiting list, please email me.