Welcome to my class! The purpose of this course is to provide students with a grounding in how economists think about a variety of important issues in higher education. We will explore the basic economic foundations of individual decision-making and discuss the ways in which economists hypothesize that individuals respond to the incentives embedded within social policies. We will pay particular attention to the nature and detail of higher education as it exists in the United States, and use economic analysis to predict how these policies might influence educational outcomes and behavior. This class is an introduction to the theoretical and empirical tools of economic policy analysis, and we will read and discuss scholarly articles written by Ph.D. economists for Ph.D. economists. I hope that by the end of the course students will understand the logic behind the theoretical frameworks economists bring to their analyses of higher education issues. You need not be convinced that these frameworks are the only ones that could be applied to program analysis. But you should understand them sufficiently to be able to begin to analyze a higher education issue in the way that an economist would.

Rather than teaching classes on an economic subject-by-subject basis, I will introduce economic concepts through the context of specific questions in higher education. The classes will be a combination of lecture and discussion. While the language of professional economics is mathematics, I will teach this class with the least amount of mathematics possible, focusing instead on the intuition behind the economic reasoning.

Reading economics journal articles: A central focus of our class involves the interpretation of empirical evidence to determine the degree to which maintained hypotheses and economic reasoning turn out to be valid. Therefore, as mentioned above, we’ll read papers by Ph.D. economists for Ph.D. economists. I don’t expect you to absorb every detail of the papers we read – that would usually require advanced graduate work to do. But you should plan to spend at least 20 minutes reading each paper, and you should come away from each paper with a sense of how to answer the following questions:

(1) What is the specific research question being addressed, or the hypothesis being tested?

(2) What are the methods that the authors are using to address the research question? (I want you to be able to verbally, not mathematically, explain this.)

(3) What do the authors do to convince the reader that their causal claims are valid?
What data do the authors use to address their research questions?

Course grades

I believe that you are here at Northwestern because of your intrinsic motivation, and I prefer to focus on formative assessment rather than evaluation. As such, you will grade yourself on each component of the class, as well as (subject to the minimum quantity standards for engaging with the course, as described below) for the course as a whole. The TAs and I will provide you feedback on assignments. If I believe that your self-assigned grade is far different from the grade that I think you deserve, I’ll let you know and we’ll discuss this. Ultimately, I’ll decide the final grades, but I expect to change very few, if any, grades.

I expect you to grade yourself on your level of effort and your views about the quality of your engagement with the class. The only standards I’ll pre-specify involve the quantity of tangible engagement with the class. The following identifies the minimum amount of each of the course requirements you turn in on time:

To earn a grade of C- or better for the course, you must:
(1) Write at least two paper summaries (one apiece for two different class periods), as discussed below
(2) Submit questions for guest speakers for at least six class periods PRIOR to the start of class, as discussed below
(3) Be an active participant in your group project, as reported by your teammates

To earn a grade of B- or better for the course, you must:
(1) Write at least three paper summaries (one apiece for three different class periods), as discussed below
(2) Submit questions for guest speakers for at least eight class periods PRIOR to the start of class, as discussed below
(3) Be an active participant in your group project, as reported by your teammates

Note that these quantity standards are necessary, but not sufficient, for a given grade. But if you don’t turn in at least the above number of paper summaries/questions for guest speakers, your final course grade will be below the grades mentioned above. I’m setting that standard because I want you to remain actively engaged, at some meaningful level, throughout the course.

Why are you grading yourself? I believe that college is about the process of learning, rather than production. You wouldn’t have made it this far in your educational career if you didn’t set high standards for yourself; I trust that you’ll live up to these high standards without the extrinsic motivation associated with externally-assigned grades. I’ll ask you to evaluate yourself both on effort and quality.

You will want to grade yourself on:

(1) Your group proposal Powerpoint and presentation (~50 percent)
(2) Contributions to class discussions – through active engagement in class and submission of questions prior to each class (~30 percent)

(3) Summaries of readings (~20 percent)

Please submit your assignments through the class Canvas site. (There will be separate “assignments” for every class period you can write a summary for and every class period you can submit questions for.) Please be sure to put your name on everything you turn in.

Group proposal Powerpoint and presentation: Half of your course grade (50%) will be based on a group project in which you will propose some innovation to Northwestern University and use economic arguments to describe the potential benefits and costs of such a proposal. You will be expected to describe the possible evidence you would need to know in order to address the benefits and costs of your proposal, and to identify and discuss the available empirical evidence elements of the benefits and costs of your proposal. The innovation to Northwestern could be on any subject you desire – from curricular to residential life to admissions to financial aid, and do on. Your grade is based only on the thoughtfulness of your analysis – its workability at Northwestern is not a determinant of your grade (though it would of course be wonderful if you came up with terrific innovative ideas for helping Northwestern get better!) Please know that your proposals might end up changing practice at Northwestern or SESP; two of the eight proposals from Spring 2019 and Spring 2020 have already been implemented!

You don’t need to submit a paper, but you should submit a thoughtful and detailed Powerpoint (or equivalent, in PDF format) that clearly describes your proposal, describes a variety of benefits and costs (if you can’t think of at least a few costs, you’re not thinking hard enough, because nothing is “free”) of your proposal, and describes the types of empirical evidence you’d expect that the President, Provost, Dean, or Vice President (as the case warrants) would want to know before acting on your proposal. The paper is due at the beginning of class on May 26.

The presentation will be 30 minutes long. You should prepare a 15 minute summary of the key elements of your proposal and the remainder will be Q+A with the rest of the class. I expect the rest of the class to be engaged in the discussion of the proposals. There will be University leaders in the audience – the provost, vice provost, VP for student affairs, registrar, and associate provost for undergraduate education will all be attending presentations!

Each member of the group will privately evaluate the other group members’ contributions to the paper and presentation. If your teammates think that you are a free rider, that will factor strongly into my likelihood of changing your grade if you don’t think that you are a free rider!

You will have two intermediate assignments: On April 19 you’ll owe me a simple one paragraph summary of your idea for your proposal. This need not be fleshed out, but will give me a chance to give you feedback if I think that you need to focus or dramatically rethink your idea.

On May 3 you’ll owe me a one-page summary of your idea for your proposal. This will include a first draft of bulleted lists of benefits and costs, from an economic perspective, and some
thoughts about the types of empirical evidence you’d require to evaluate the benefits and costs of your proposal. This won’t be your final thinking – but is a way to make sure that you’re on the right track here.

The TAs (Briana and Stephanie) and I will be helping to push you to think through your proposals. But remember: Your proposal and presentation are your work, and not theirs/mine!

Questions for speakers and active engagement in class: 30 percent of your course grade is based on your active engagement in class. This means asking questions – either on camera or through the chat – and participating in class discussion.

As mentioned above, I expect you to prepare and submit questions before class periods for at least six class periods (to earn a grade of C- or better) or at least eight class periods (to earn a grade of B- or better). Questions can be turned in for the following classes: April 14, April 19, April 21, April 28, May 3, May 5, May 10, May 12, May 19, or May 24.

For each class period for which you turn in questions, you should submit a minimum of two questions for the speakers. Questions could relate to things you were wondering about based on the readings, or that you were wondering about regarding the topic in general. You can feel free to ask about anything you’re curious about in class itself (it doesn’t need to be one of these questions) but these questions will help you to be prepared to participate in the class.

Paper summaries: 20 percent of your course grade is based on short (2 single-spaced pages are fine) summaries of readings. As mentioned above, I expect you to prepare summaries of one paper apiece for at least two class periods (to earn a grade of C- or better) or at least three class periods (to earn a grade of B- or better). Summaries can be turned in for the following classes: April 14, April 19, April 21, April 28, May 3, May 5, May 12, May 19, or May 24.

The paper summaries you submit should address the following questions:

(1) What is the specific research question being addressed, or the hypothesis being tested?

(2) What do the authors do to convince the reader that their causal claims are valid?

(3) What data do the authors use to address their research questions?

(4) What is something you learned from this paper?

Contributing to class discussion

Please talk in class. (“Talking”, in our virtual world, might mean asking questions and volunteering answers by video or in the chat feature of Zoom); what I really care about is engagement. Your assignments will help you to be ready to ask questions. Please also be respectful to your classmates by allowing everyone a chance to speak; listening respectfully and actively; criticizing ideas but not individuals; committing to learning rather than debating;
avoiding blame, speculation, and inflammatory language; and avoiding assumptions about others, especially based on their perceived social group.

Presentations and write-ups about the readings

We’re going to dig into readings from time to time, and I’ll ask you to turn in some write-ups from time to time about the readings that we’ve been doing. I’m mainly looking to see whether you get the main ideas and comprehend the key aspects of a paper; these assignments will help me to understand more about what you’re getting and what you’re not.

Getting together in person (optional)

While regular class sessions will meet on Zoom, I’d love to interact as a class in person as well. Therefore, over the course of the term, we’ll have optional discussion sessions in which we’ll talk more about the topics we’ve been discussing in class. They will meet between 12-1 on different days of the week (to maximize the chance that people who want to participate can participate), will take place in or outside of Annenberg, and will include (socially-distanced) food! We will follow whatever Northwestern-approved protocols are in place at the time (e.g., signing up in advance, limiting to 10 people); we will keep you posted and will give you the opportunity to sign up and share dietary restrictions.

The dates for these optional group activities are Wednesday, April 7; Friday, April 23; Tuesday, May 4; Thursday, May 20; and Wednesday, June 2. I hope to see you at one or more of these sessions!

Accessibility

Any student requesting accommodations related to a disability or other condition is required to register with AccessibleNU (accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; 847-467-5530) and provide me with an accommodation notification from AccessibleNU, preferably within the first two weeks of class. All information will remain confidential.

Learning and community in a virtual time

We are currently in an extraordinary time. Certainly, none of us expected to have this class be delivered in the way in which we find ourselves. (And, of course, none of us signed up for the sickness, the social distance, the remote learning experience, etc.) But I’m committed to make the best of it, and to make our class as interactive as we possibly can, and I hope that we can be as mutually-supportive and caring toward one another as we possibly can be, as we’re living through a time the likes of which none of us have ever experienced. Meanwhile, I’ve decided to take advantage of our virtual class environment by Zooming in experts (scholars whose work you’ll be reading) into many of our class sessions.

The plan is to meet synchronously at our regularly-scheduled class times via a recurring Zoom meeting which you can access through the Zoom page on the class Canvas site. We’re going to
use both the chat feature as well as the video sharing feature of Zoom. Please keep your screen on mute unless you are speaking, so that there’s not lots of distracting feedback.

I want to make this class as accessible as possible. The TAs will be taking notes, and we’ll save some materials to the Canvas site. If your internet connection is too slow to meaningfully participate in the class, or if you’re in a time zone very different from Chicagoland, please let me know, so that we can investigate alternatives to the interactive synchronous Zoom meeting plans. But I’m hoping that this is going to be a sufficiently satisfying way to have this class in a difficult situation.

Recording of class activities

Unauthorized student recording of classroom or other academic activities (including advising sessions or office hours) is prohibited. Unauthorized recording is unethical and may also be a violation of University policy and state law. Students requesting the use of assistive technology as an accommodation should contact AccessibleNU. Unauthorized use of classroom recordings — including distributing or posting them — is also prohibited. Under the University’s Copyright Policy, faculty own the copyright to instructional materials — including those resources created specifically for the purposes of instruction, such as syllabi, lectures and lecture notes, and presentations. Students cannot copy, reproduce, display or distribute these materials. Students who engage in unauthorized recording, unauthorized use of a recording or unauthorized distribution of instructional materials will be referred to the appropriate University office for follow-up.

Course schedule and readings

Wed March 31: What do universities do?

Mon April 5: The university’s “optimization problem”

Wed April 7: Conversation with Professor and President Morton Schapiro


Mon April 19 and Wed April 21: Economics of financial aid and student debt (special guests: Mon Susan Dynarski, University of Michigan; Wed Bridget Long, Harvard University)

One paragraph summary of proposal idea due April 19


Mon April 26: Meet during class time with TAs to discuss projects

Wed April 28: College completion (special guest: Judy Scott-Clayton, Columbia University Teachers College)


Mon May 3: Matching students and colleges (special guest: Kalena Cortes, Texas A&M University)

One-page summary of proposal due


Wed May 5: Peer effects in higher education (special guests: Scott Carrell, University of California-Davis, and Ulf Zoelitz, University of Zurich)


Mon May 10: **Behavioral economics in higher education**  
(special guest Phil Oreopoulos, University of Toronto)  

Wed May 12: **Face-to-face vs. online education**  
(special guest: Cassandra Hart, UC-Davis)  


Mon May 17: **Workshop projects during class time with TAs and David Figlio**

Wed May 19: **Money in higher education: Philanthropy and big-time sports**  
(special guests: Jonathan Meer, Texas A&M University, and Glen Waddell, University of Oregon)  


Mon May 24: **Staffing the higher education classroom**  
(Special guest: Morty Schapiro, Northwestern University)  


Wed May 26: Class presentation of proposals; proposal paper due
(Special guests: Kathleen Hagerty and Jake Julia)

Mon May 31: NO CLASS – Memorial Day

Wed June 2: Class presentations of proposals
(Special guests: Jaci Casazza, Marianna Kepka, Julie Payne-Kirchmeier, and Miriam Sherin)