

**William & Mary
Poverty in America
Syllabus**

ECON 453
Fall 2020
Mon., Wed.
3:30 – 4:50 p.m. in ISC 1111

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Course description and objectives

America is one of the wealthiest countries in the world yet continues to struggle with high rates of poverty. Even our cherished Williamsburg has a homelessness problem. This course will consider poverty in America with particular attention to public policies that mitigate or exacerbate the problem. Students will learn about details of public policies such as cash assistance, housing assistance, food stamps, minimum wages, healthcare provision, and discrimination law. Students will quantify the scale and distribution of poverty by using government data to measure family incomes and other characteristics. We probably won't end poverty, but we'll move in the right direction by understanding it better.

The course is designed as a capstone for the economics or public policy major, drawing upon prior courses about economic theory, statistics, and data analysis. The course fulfills the COLL 400 requirement. Students will take initiative in synthesis and critical analysis of poverty statistics, solve problems associated with how social scientists and policy makers should measure poverty, create original measurements of poverty in America, and communicate effectively with a diversity of audiences through an op-ed piece and other writings.

Prerequisite courses are Intermediate Microeconomic Theory (ECON 303) and Econometrics (ECON 308).

Healthy Together Community

We're learning this semester under pandemic conditions. Members of the class (including, of course, Prof. McHenry) will fulfill the Healthy Together Community Commitment to the best of our ability (<https://www.wm.edu/sites/pathforward/health/index.php>). We will undoubtedly make mistakes. This course will be a place of graciousness in the midst of anticipated messiness. But we as students of economics know about externalities and public goods, and those lessons tell us that I count on you making socially responsible decisions, just as you count on me. Let's do what we can to keep each other healthy and focused on learning.

In addition, we recognize that plans may need to change depending on public health conditions and regulatory guidance. We may need to switch to fully remote instruction. I have a plan for that. We may need to be flexible with the timing of some activities like meetings and due dates. Please communicate with me about what you need.

Course Materials (available online for free)

John Iceland. 2013. *Poverty in America: A Handbook*. 3rd ed. U of California P. *For access:* Go to <https://libraries.wm.edu/> and select the "Reserves" tab in the catalog search section. Navigate to this course (e.g., search for McHenry as instructor).

Selected readings posted at the course Blackboard site

Determinants of the Final Grade

Quizzes	10%
Project 1: Calculation of the official poverty rate	15%
Project 2: Poverty policy op-ed	20%
Project 3: Universal Basic Income paper	20%
Project 4: Poverty rate design and calculation	25%
Class participation	<u>10%</u>
	100%

Quizzes

Quizzes will be available in the “Weekly activities” tab on the Blackboard course site. Most weeks will include one or two quizzes that will be due before class meetings. Quizzes provide a check on preparation for class meetings. There will be enough quizzes through the semester that any individual quiz is a low-stakes evaluation.

Projects

Students will complete four projects. See the separate document called “Guide for Projects” for details. Projects involve a mixture of written work and presentations. Essays will be evaluated for economic content and writing style. Late submission earns a reduced grade.

The Writing Resources Center, located on the first floor of Swem Library, is a free service provided to W&M students. Trained consultants offer individual assistance with writing, presentation, and other communication assignments at any stage, from generating ideas to polishing a final product, and across disciplines. To make an appointment, visit the WRC webpage www.wm.edu/wrc.

Class Participation

Class meetings are most productive when students participate in an active way. Part of the course grade will reflect the frequency and quality of a student’s participation in the class, especially during class meetings. Students should study reading assignments prior to the relevant class meetings. To facilitate this, I will distribute questions for class preparation; students should prepare responses to them and come to class ready to discuss their responses. Reading assignments for each week are posted at the Blackboard course site.

Some meetings this semester will take place on Zoom. Students are expected to have their video feeds turned on and to remain actively engaged with the class. The link to Zoom class meetings is on the Blackboard course site.

Grading Standards

Letter grades for the course will be based on a standard 100-point scale where the range [93-100] implies an A, [90-93) implies an A-, [88-90) implies a B+, [83-88) implies a B, and so on.

Virtual Office Hours and Other Access to the Instructor

I will be available on Zoom from 11 a.m. to noon each Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday during the semester. The Zoom meeting link for office hours is:

<https://cwm.zoom.us/j/8312785710>. Please let me know if you would like to schedule a meeting outside those times. E-mail is an excellent way to contact me (pmchenry@wm.edu).

Honor Code

I encourage you to collaborate in your studies and discussion of course material. However, plagiarism on a writing assignment is a violation of the Honor Code. Plagiarism is presenting someone else's words or ideas as your own. When you write a document and distribute it, you imply that its words and ideas are your own, except where explicitly noted in the text (as with citations to others' work). Please do not plagiarize. If you have questions about plagiarism, please ask me.

A common impetus for plagiarism is desperation. When a student waits until the night before a due date to begin work on an assignment, and his computer crashes at 3 a.m. leaving no back-up file, he is often tempted to find someone else's work and submit it as his own. Please avoid such temptation by spreading your writing process over several days (or weeks).

More resources about plagiarism (and writing in general) are available through the Writing Resources Center (see above).

Students may refer to course notes and other materials when completing quizzes. However, assistance from other people on quizzes is prohibited.

Schedule with Meetings and Due Dates

(Reading assignments for each week are posted at the Blackboard course site.)

Week 1: Introduction and course details

Meeting: 8/19 at 3:30 p.m. on Zoom

Week 2: Poverty and decision making / Measuring poverty

Meetings:

8/24 at 3:30 p.m. on Zoom

8/26 at 3:30 p.m. on Zoom

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

8/28 is the end of the Add/Drop registration period

Week 3: Stata practice / Characteristics of poverty populations

Meetings:

8/31 at 3:30 p.m. on Zoom

9/2 at 3:30 p.m. on Zoom

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Week 4: Anti-poverty public policies

Meetings:

9/7 at 3:30 p.m. on Zoom

9/9 at 3:30 p.m. on Zoom: Fred Liggin visit

Assignments:

Blackboard quiz before Monday class meeting

Project 1 (Calculation of the official poverty rate) due by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday, September 13

Week 5: Housing

Meetings:

9/14 at 3:30 p.m.

9/16 at 3:30 p.m.

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Week 6: Neighborhoods

Meetings:

9/21 at 3:30 p.m.

9/23 at 3:30 p.m.

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Week 7: Stata practice / Employment

Meetings:

9/28 at 3:30 p.m.

9/30 at 3:30 p.m.

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Project 2 (Poverty policy op-ed) due by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday, October 4

Week 8: Employment

Meetings:

10/5 at 3:30 p.m.

10/7 at 3:30 p.m.

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Week 9: Universal Basic Income (UBI)

Meetings:

10/12 at 3:30 p.m.

10/14 at 3:30 p.m.

Assignments:

Meetings with group for Project 3

Project 3 (Universal Basic Income analysis) due by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday, October 18

Notify Prof. McHenry about your Project 4 group by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday, October 18:

whether individual, or who is in your group

10/12 is the last day to withdraw from courses

Week 10: Health

Meetings:

10/19 at 3:30 p.m.

10/21 at 3:30 p.m.

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Project 4 plan due by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday, October 25

Week 11: Food assistance / Race, ethnicity, and nativity

Meetings:

10/26 at 3:30 p.m.

10/28 at 3:30 p.m.

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Week 12: Race, ethnicity, and nativity

Meetings:

11/2 at 3:30 p.m.

11/4 at 3:30 p.m.

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Project 4 Stata code due by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday, November 8

Week 13: Education

Meetings:

11/9 at 3:30 p.m.

11/11 at 3:30 p.m.

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Project 4 presentations to be scheduled November 12-23

Project 4 due by 11:59 p.m. on Monday, November 23

Additional instructional hours

The fall 2020 semester was shortened by one week. As a result, the above class meetings will be augmented by 3 hours of additional instructional time. That time will be filled by Project 3 meetings, Project 4 presentations, and instructional videos posted at Blackboard.

Instructor: Peter McHenry

I was born 50 miles away into a Navy family in Portsmouth, VA. I earned my BS from Vanderbilt and my PhD in economics from Yale. My research is mostly in labor economics and health economics. I use economic models of human behavior to understand people's choices about how much and where to work and to understand how much money people earn at work. I focus on explanations of wage determination related to workers' locations (reflecting their migration behavior) and workers' skills (reflecting their work choices and education). I use a variety of survey and administrative data sets to test and measure theories about work and pay. I have studied schools, hospitals, and nursing homes in depth, and I have a particular interest in the influence of public policies on people's lives.

Over the past several years, I've been getting more involved with those trying to serve the poor in Williamsburg. I'm learning a lot. I hope you can say the same throughout this semester. Toward that end, I welcome your questions and comments. My contact information is on the first page.