

PUBP 490/ECON 400: Health Policy Research Lab (Version 8.26.22)

Fall 2022

TR 5-6:20 pm, Chancellors 219

Instructor

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Course Description

This is an experiential learning course in which students will work in teams to conduct research projects related to a pressing health policy issue for an actual external “client” – either a public-sector organization or a nonprofit entity. With guidance from the instructor, teams will learn about an issue, describe a problem, pose questions, and analyze possible solutions. Teams will present their results to the client in a formal briefing and submit a written report incorporating client feedback. Completion of this course satisfies W&M’s COLL 400 requirement.

While the specific theme of this course varies each semester to meet the needs of the selected client, students in every semester’s course will draw on the knowledge from prior courses in their major. For Public Policy majors, the pre-requisites are PUBP 201 and the second methods requirement (ECON 308, GOVT 301, GOVT 302 or SOCL 353). For Economics majors, the pre-requisites are ECON 303 and ECON 308. All students are expected to synthesize and apply prior knowledge to study a problem, create original material, and communicate effectively with policy professionals. Because the class consists of Economics and Public Policy majors, there are opportunities to share knowledge and skills.

This course is designed to be different from other W&M Economics and Public Policy courses. First, this is an experiential learning course, which means you will *learn-by-doing*. Second, this is a research course, so you will be learning something *new*. You are studying a new topic and/or in a new way, so there is no way of knowing at the outset what the right answer is or what the “best way” to produce the answer is. In other words, this course has no problem sets with solution keys, and there may not even be a single “best” solution. This experience may be a little unsettling at first, but it’s also exciting. You will gain a sense of what it means to do policy research in the real-world, with the benefit of doing so in a structured semester-long experience led by your professor!

So that you know what to expect, here are some specific elements that you might see in this course, but not see in a typical W&M course:

- *Some uncertainty.* You will be working on a real project that has not been carried out before, and this involves some unpredictability. Expect that we may need to modify the specific direction of a project to fit the available timeline or to adapt to new information including preliminary findings. There may be a time we need to reschedule a meeting to accommodate the client.
- *Imperfect data/information.* You may not have all the information you would like to have to make recommendations, either because it doesn’t exist or is too costly (in terms of money and/or time). You may need to do the best with what you have, acknowledging the limitations, and maybe even proposing solutions that others might address in the future!
- *Teamwork!* You will be working in teams with your peers throughout the semester. It is essential for teammates to respect others’ time, deliver on commitments, communicate with one another in a timely and respectful manner, share information inclusively, weigh-in on decisions, and listen to others’ findings and opinions. The decisions made and the work produced by the team should reflect the substantive input and contributions of *all* members.

Fall 2022 Theme/Client

This semester's theme is "Analyzing Causes of and Assessing Policy Solutions to the Problem of High and Variable Hospital Prices in Virginia." Hospital prices are a contributing factor to high and rising levels of aggregate healthcare spending, household and employer spending on insurance premiums, and consumer out-of-pocket expenditures.

This semester's client is the staff of the *Virginia Joint Commission on Health Care (JCHC)*, in partnership with *Virginia Health Information (VHI)*. The JCHC is a standing commission of the Virginia General Assembly that seeks through its research, recommendations, and legislative actions to "ensure that the Commonwealth as provider, financier, and regulator adopts the most cost-effective and efficacious means of delivery of health care services so that the greatest number of Virginians receive quality health care." VHI is a nonprofit organization that administers healthcare data collection programs in Virginia. VHI's mission is to enhance the quality and value of healthcare delivery and promote informed decision-making by consumers, purchasers, and other stakeholders.

The class will be divided into 3 teams of 3-5 students each. Each team will work on a project addressing one of these questions: 1) What can be learned about Virginia hospital prices and their posting from extract and analyzing price data (e.g., variation across markets, payers, hospitals; accessibility to consumers)? 2) What could/should the Commonwealth of Virginia do to improve hospital price transparency regulation? 3) Beyond price transparency regulation, what could/should the Commonwealth do to address high hospital prices?

Learning Objectives

Research process objectives include:

- Learn about the research process, including how to develop a research methodology, how to interpret one's findings, how to adapt the research process as new information is learned.
- Apply prior knowledge to conduct a literature review or environmental scan using search engines and research databases to identify source material.
- Apply and develop expertise reading and analyzing sources used in health policy formation/evaluation.
- Apply and develop knowledge related to quantitative analysis of health policy issues to describe the policy problem and/or evaluate proposed solutions.
- Develop skills needed to communicate research findings to health policy audiences in writing and in oral presentations.
- Develop effective ways of collaborating with fellow students and interacting with health policy professionals.

Theme-specific objectives include:

- Demonstrate in-depth knowledge related to hospital prices, including patterns and trends related to hospital prices, factors that contribute to hospital prices, the types of policy tools available to address the problem of high hospital prices, and the effectiveness of these tools.

Required Text/Readings

Bardach, E., and E. Patashnik. 2020. *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path To More Effective Problem Solving, Sixth Edition*. Los Angeles: Sage CQ Press. Referred to as BP in the course calendar. *Additional readings will be available on Blackboard.*

Grading and Assignments

Letter grades for the course will be based on a standard 100-point scale as determined by the following ranges: A (≥ 93 through 100), A- (≥ 90 through < 93), B+ (≥ 88 through < 90), B (≥ 83 through < 88), B- (≥ 80 through < 83), C+ (≥ 78 through < 80), C (≥ 73 through < 78), C- (≥ 70 through < 73), D+ (≥ 68 through < 70), D (≥ 63 through < 68), D- (≥ 60 through < 63), and F (less than 60). Assignments include:

Percent	Item	Individual or team?	Due date
25%	Preliminary work products <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Draft problem statement (presentation)- Team contract- Draft workplan (presentation)- Progress report 1- Progress report 2	Team	9/15 present in class 9/19 submit on Bb 9/27 present in class 10/5 submit on Bb 11/2 submit on Bb
15%	Milestone deliverables <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Practice presentation - (Partial) draft report	Team	11/13 submit slides on Bb 11/15-17 present in class 11/20 submit on Bb
30%	Final deliverables <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Final presentation - Final report	Team	11/28 submit slides on Bb 12/1 present to clients 12/15 submit on Bb
10%	Participation at class meetings	Individual	Each class
15%	Peer reviews/self-review	Individual	10/12, 11/9, 12/15 submit on Bb
5%	Reflection on your learning experience	Individual	12/15 submit on Bb

Class Meetings/Time Commitment

Your participation at class meetings is a vital part of the lab experience for everyone. Failure to attend class without notifying me first will be considered an unexcused absence that will have an adverse impact on your attendance/participation score. Students who miss class are expected to complete an assignment describing what they learned from discussions with their teammates. Outside of class meetings, each student should plan to spend **7-10 hours** per week on Health Policy Lab work. This includes team meetings, identifying, reading materials, analyzing data and information, preparing deliverables, planning for client meetings, etc. This is only slightly more than what is expected for a traditional 3-credit 300-level class.

Contacting Me

My W&M email address (jmmell@wm.edu) is the best way to get in touch with me. I will generally respond within 24 hours to emails received during the week; it may take me a bit longer to reply if your email comes in on the weekend, so plan ahead.

Regular office hours are on Tuesdays/Thursdays 10-11 am in my office in Chancellors (#433). Office hours are first-come, first-served, and no appointment is needed. If you would like to meet outside these scheduled times or if you prefer Zoom, please email me your request. My Zoom room is <https://cwm.zoom.us/jenmellor/>

Course Calendar

Module/Class Date	Activities/Focus	What's Due?
Introduction Thurs Sept 1	Course Overview Review syllabus (Pre-reads: BP, Intro pp. xv-xx.)	
Module 1 Tues Sept 6 Thurs Sept 8 Tues Sept 13 Thurs Sept 15	Defining/Describing the Problem Background on Hospital Prices (Pre-reads: "The Role of Prices in Excess US Health Care Spending"; BP, "Step One", pp. 1-14) Background on Price Transparency in Virginia and virtual visit with client (Pre-reads: <i>Richmond TD</i> news article; <i>Virginia Mercury</i> news article; BP, "Tips for working with clients", pp. 173-177. Overview of State Approaches to Address Hospital Prices (Pre-reads: Commonwealth Fund reading) TEAMS MEET IN GROUPS TO FORM PROBLEM DESCRIPTION AND BRAINSTORM WORKPLAN. Pre-Reads: BP "Step Two", pp.14-21	 Th 9/15 In-class activity and presentation Mon 9/19 11:59pm: Team contract
Module 2 Tues Sept 20 Thurs Sept 22 Tues Sept 27 Thurs, Sept 29 Tues Oct 4 Thurs Oct 6 Tues Oct 11 Thurs Oct 13	Defining the Project's Scope/Preliminary Analysis Sources/Analysis of Hospital Price Data (Pre-reads: see Bb) Constructing Policy Alternatives (Pre-reads: BP "Step Three", pp. 21-31; App. A "Things Governments Do" pp. 147-155). TEAMS DESCRIBE DRAFT WORKPLAN Assembling Evidence. (Pre-reads: BP: pp. 97-105.) Teams meet individually with me (times TBD) Teams prepare/share Progress Report 1 with Class Virtual visit with client; feedback on Progress Report 1 No class (Fall Break)	 T 9/27 In-class presentation M 10/3 Email any team questions to me by 11:59 pm! W 10/5 11:59 pm: Progress Report 1 for prof review (share w/ client by date/time TBD) W 10/12 5 pm: Peer/Self Review #1

Module/Class Date	Activities/Focus	What's Due?
Module 3	Conducting Analysis	
Tues Oct 18	Selecting Criteria (Pre-reads: BP "Step Four", pp. 31-36; skim pp. 37-49.)	
Thurs Oct 20	Projecting Outcomes (Pre-reads: BP "Step Five", pp. 49-69.)	
Tues Oct 25	Readings/discussion topics based on team progress	
Thurs Oct 27	Confronting Tradeoffs (Pre-reads: BP "Step Six", pp. 69-77.)	
Tues Nov 1	Stop, Focus, Narrow, Decide. (Pre-reads: BP "Step Seven", pp. 77-84.)	W 11/2 5 pm: Progress Report #2
Thurs Nov 3	Presentations of progress report #2	
Tues Nov 8	No class (Election Day)	W 11/9 5 pm: Peer/Self Review #2
Module 4	Telling Your Story	
Thurs Nov 10	Presentation/writing tips for policy audiences. (Pre-reads: BP "Step Eight," pp-84-97; MIT Policy Communication tools; Policy Brief , UNC-CH Writing Center.)	Sun 11/13 11:59pm: Draft slide deck
Tues Nov 15	Practice presentations by Teams 1 & 2 present; all discuss	
Thurs Nov 17	Practice presentation by Team 3 presents; all discuss	
Tues Nov 22	Teams provide peer reviews on partial drafts (remote class)	Sun 11/20 11:59pm: Partial draft to peers
Thurs Nov 24	No class (Thanksgiving)	
Tues Nov 29	Practice round 2	M 11/28 11:59pm: Submit "Final" slides for my review
Thurs Dec 1	Virtual presentations to client	
Tues Dec 6	Teams debrief on presentation feedback and responses	
Thurs Dec 8	Policy communication methods: Op-Eds, Twitter, and more (Pre-reads: TBD)	
Finals Period	Submitting Final Report and Other Deliverables	Th 12/15 5pm: Final Report; Reflection; Peer/Self Review #3

Student Wellbeing

William & Mary recognizes that students juggle different responsibilities and can face challenges that make learning difficult. There are many resources available at W&M to help students navigate emotional/psychological, physical/medical, material/accessibility concerns, including: The W&M Counseling Center at (757) 221-3620, where services are free and confidential, and the W&M Health Center at (757) 221-4386. For additional support or resources & questions, contact the Dean of Students at 757-221-2510. For a list of many other resources available to students, see [Health and Wellness Resources for Students](#).

Course Policies

Blackboard. The Blackboard website is the central repository for the course. I will use it to communicate to the class as a group, accept and grade response submissions of team work, and post materials for the course. Make sure that you regularly check both it and the email account associated with Blackboard.

Etiquette. Please do not use devices during class for non-class-related activities. Several methodologically strong academic studies show that using laptops during class to browse social media, shop, catch-up on email, etc. distracts other students, lowers the quality of classroom interaction, and affects the multi-taskers' grades and comprehension. I reserve the right to ask you to close laptops during face-to-face meetings.

COVID and this course. Please follow current W&M requirements including vaccinations and boosters and indoor masking. If you test positive, remember that you must fulfill W&M's requirements before attending class in person. If you have symptoms consistent with COVID - even if you don't have a positive test – you should not come to class. If/when you need to miss class, please let me know as soon as possible and follow-up with me about your plans to catch up on what you missed. I anticipate that the class will be held largely in-person, but I also anticipate certain adjustments, like making class recordings available to students who notify that they are missing class due to COVID, or *temporarily* holding class by Zoom if a high proportion of students cannot attend on a given day, or if I am sick/exposed.

Disabilities. W&M accommodates students with disabilities in accordance with federal laws and university policy. Any student who feels they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a learning, psychiatric, physical, or chronic health diagnosis should contact Student Accessibility Services staff at 757-221-2512 or at sas@wm.edu to determine if accommodations are warranted and to obtain an official letter of accommodation. For more information, please visit www.wm.edu/sas.

Honor Code. Academic integrity is at the heart of W&M, and we all are responsible for upholding the ideals of honor and integrity. The [Student Handbook](#) includes your responsibilities as a student and the full Code. I expect your full participation and observance of the Honor Code.

Other Important Dates to Know

- Add/drop period ends on September 12.
- Withdrawal period ends on October 31.