

## ECON/PUBP 455: Health Policy Research Lab

Fall 2023

TR 5-6:20 pm, Chancellors 219

### **Instructor**

Jennifer Mellor, Paul R. Verkuil Professor of Economics and Public Policy

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Email is the best way to get in touch with me. I generally respond within 24 hours to emails received during the week; replies take longer when your email comes in on the weekend, so please plan ahead. Scheduled 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 in advance.

### **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 with real world policy implications and then present their findings to an external audience comprised on members from the public sector, nonprofit organizations, and/or relevant interest groups. With guidance from the instructor, teams will learn about an issue, describe a problem, devise a methodology, and produce results. Teams will then present results in a formal briefing and submit a written report. Completion of this course fulfills the COLL 400 requirement.

While the course theme varies each semester, this course requires students to draw on knowledge from prior courses in their major. For Economics majors, the pre-requisites are ECON 303 and ECON 308. For Public Policy majors, the pre-requisites are PUBP 201, ECON 303, and the second methods requirement (ECON 308, GOVT 301, GOVT 302 or SOCL 353). Students will synthesize and apply prior knowledge to study a problem, conduct original research, and communicate effectively with policy professionals.

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-relevant 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:

- *Some uncertainty.* You will be working on a real project that has not been carried out before. 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.
- *Imperfect information.* You may not have all the information/data you would like, either because it doesn’t exist or is too costly to get (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, communicate with one another in a timely and respectful manner (including listening actively to your teammates), and be inclusive when it comes to sharing information and decision-making.

## **Fall 2023 Theme**

This semester's theme is "Public Policies Affecting the Quality of Care in Nursing Facilities." For decades, patient advocates, researchers, and various members of the public policy community have expressed serious concerns about deficiencies in the quality of care provided to residents of U.S. nursing facilities, and recently these concerns have only escalated following the alarming impacts of COVID-19 on nursing facilities and their staff. Since the Medicaid program pays for the stays of about 6 in every 10 nursing facility residents, changes to state Medicaid programs are a key approach to addressing nursing facility quality. Additionally, states and the federal government can use other policy tools to improve nursing facility quality; they may also enact policies that have unintended or indirect effects on quality.

In this course, students will work in teams of 3-4 students to conduct research on a specific public policy that has direct or indirect implications for nursing facility quality. The three projects for this term have been identified and vetted by your professor, who will serve as advisor at all phases and will prepare you to present your work to policy practitioners and summarize your research in a draft journal article.

Each project has the potential to produce publishable results. As the source of the research question and data sources, I reserve the right to co-author works with all students provided there are promising results and we all meet [authorship requirements](#) used by health policy journals. In so doing I would help guide teams through the publication process in the Spring.

The three projects selected for this semester's Lab are listed below, and more details will be provided during the first week of class:

*Project 1:* When state Medicaid programs use pay-for-performance policy to improve nursing home quality, which types of nursing facilities, residents, and communities benefit most in the short-term?

*Project 2:* When states raise minimum nurse staffing requirements at nursing facilities, what are the effects on the quality of resident care and the financial performance of facilities?

*Project 3:* When state Medicaid programs pay private plans to manage the delivery of long-term services and supports (LTSS), does this have spillover effects on nursing home quality?

## **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 evaluation.
- Apply and develop knowledge related to quantitative analysis of health policy issues.
- Develop skills needed to communicate research findings to non-academic audiences in writing and in oral presentations.
- Develop effective ways of collaborating with fellow students.

*Theme-specific objectives include:*

- Demonstrate in-depth knowledge related to nursing home quality, such as how it is measured, what sources of data are available to measure it, what policy options are available to improve quality, and what are some of the limitations of those policies, and what types of policies may indirectly contribute to nursing home quality deficiencies.

## Grading and Assignments

Your grade will be based on individual (I) and team (T) submissions. Your individual submissions count toward about half of the grade while submissions made as a team count toward about half. The table below summarizes these contributions and shows due dates. More details on all assignments will be made available in-class/on Blackboard as the assignment nears.

Course Focus	Assignments	Ind or Team?	% of Grade	Due Date
Preparing for Research	Policy description	I	6	9/14
	Literature contribution	I	6	9/21
	Data analysis plan	T	10	10/1
Conducting Research	Log-file or documentation Deliverable	I	6	10/16
	Desc Statistics Deliverable	T	5	10/19
	Prelim Results Deliverable	T	7	11/1, 11/2
Communicating Your Research	Poster	T	10	11/10
	Presentation of final work	I	4	11/28, 11/30
		T	8	
	Report/manuscript	I	6	12/14
T		12		
Process	Peer reviews	I	8	11/5, 12/15
	Participation (in-class, at poster session)	I	12	daily

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

## Course Timeline

A general structure of this course is given by the table below. A more detailed course calendar will be available on Blackboard, where you will also find course readings and submit completed assignments.

Class Dates	Activities/Focus
Thurs Aug 31	<b>Course Overview:</b> Review syllabus, introductions
Tues Sept 5 through Thurs Sept 21	<b>Preparing for research:</b> Lecture material on nursing facility quality deficiencies, Medicaid financing on long-term services and supports, use of managed care in Medicaid; use of DD models in policy evaluation; Students assigned teams and complete assignments on describing policies and contributing to a literature view for their research question.
Thurs Sept 21 through Nov 2	<b>Designing/conducting your analysis:</b> Workshops on sources of data, using Stata to read and combined datasets. Students work in teams to draft a data analysis plan and receive feedback from professor. Teams then complete dataset extraction and build and execute data analysis generating descriptive statistics and preliminary results
Thurs Nov 2 through Thurs Dec 7	<b>Communicating your research:</b> Teams gain instruction and apply learning-by-doing to communicate results in three venues: a poster presentation to a mixed audience (academic/policy), a formal presentation to policy audience, and a written manuscript for a scholarly journal.
Finals Period	<b>Submitting Final Report:</b> Due Dec 14 midnight

### ***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. Each student should plan to spend 7-10 hours per week (outside of class) on Health Policy Lab work. This includes team meetings, identifying/reading materials, obtaining/working with data, preparing deliverables, etc. This is only slightly more than what is expected for a traditional 3-credit 300-level class.

### ***Required Text/Readings***

There is no required textbook for this course; instead, all required readings will be selected from policy reports, journal articles, and other sources. These readings will serve the purpose of either providing background on subject matter or guidance on research methods or communication of research. Readings will be made available on Blackboard.

### ***Schedule Adjustments***

For Fall 2023, the add/drop period ends September 11, and the withdrawal period ends October 30.

### ***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 with the class as a group, accept and grade response submissions of teamwork, and post materials for the course. Make sure that you regularly check both it and the email account associated with Blackboard.

*Late work.* Assignments submitted after the due date will receive reduced grades.

*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 W&M requirements and guidelines about COVID safety which are available here: [https://www.wm.edu/about/administration/emergency/current\\_issues/coronavirus/](https://www.wm.edu/about/administration/emergency/current_issues/coronavirus/).

*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](mailto: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](http://www.wm.edu/sas).

*Honor Code.* I support the Honor Code and am obligated to report concerns for review and resolution by the Honor Council. As it is your obligation to resolve ambiguities about course expectations in advance of submitting any work, I encourage you to contact me with any questions about my course and grading policies. You also are welcome to contact me if you have concerns that any fellow students are not fulfilling their obligation to uphold the Honor Code.

In this course, I expect and require collaboration on team assignments. However, on individual assignments, all submitted work must be your own and must be cited appropriately.

This course, as does all research, requires referring to other sources and building upon the prior work of others. I expect students to acknowledge these sources in the form of citation and, if using the words or phrases of others, direct quotation. A reader/reviewer should be able to discern what portion of your paper represents your original thought and argument. Proper scholarly procedures require you to organize your writing such that you keep track of original source material so you can cite it appropriately in your deliverables. I recommend you develop a system to do so from the beginning of the course, and I would be happy to provide you with suggestions as to how to do so.

*ChatGPT/AI-generated content.* The use or incorporation of any AI-generated content (from ChatGPT, Dall-e, etc.) in assignments is not allowed. Submitted work may be reviewed, as needed, for AI-generated content.

### **Course Resources**

*Writing Resources Center.* This is a great resource to assist you with your writing assignments, research papers, and presentations in any course. Feel free to book a time with them to meet and chat here: <https://www.wm.edu/as/wrc/>.

*Economics Department Stata Lab.* The Economics Department provides students with easy access to Stata help from their peers through its Stata Lab. The Stata Lab is staffed by student teaching assistants who have all been recommended by their former econometrics/stats professors. Stata Lab hours will be available for the Fall in the first few weeks of the semester, and you can check the Econ department website [for more information](#). In past semesters, Lab hours were Sun-Thurs from 7-10, and were held in Chancellors 228. Please consider using this free resource.