

**Economics 150: Economic Confidence, Social Mood and Decision Making**  
**Tuesday and Thursday 11:00-12:20**  
**Chancellors Hall 121**

**Instructor: Peter Atwater**  
**Chancellors 350**  
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**Spring 2025**

**Course Description:** Financial anxiety not only impacts individual preferences, decisions and actions but societal choices as well. This freshman seminar explores the relationship between economic confidence and political, economic, financial, social, and cultural decision-making. Using examples from current events, history, and academic research, the class will offer a cross-discipline investigation into the role economic confidence plays in public and private sector actions. We will study how changes in economic confidence levels impact voting behavior, food decisions, prejudice and social norms, media behavior and music choices, among other topics. The goal is to illustrate not only the impact of changes in economic confidence on economic and financial choices, but to enable class participants to see and appreciate the full mosaic of clear, consistent, and coincidental linkages between confidence-driven behavior across all choices.

Students should anticipate ambiguity in assignments and class discussion as the class will challenge many of the conventional causal arguments offered routinely in the media.

No prior coursework in economics is required.

As a COLL 150 class, this course will be writing-intensive. Three papers of 5 pages each will be required, with short, follow-up assignments related to each, aimed at improving your writing skills across a variety of audiences. Writing for impact will be emphasized. Papers will be graded anonymously.

Toward the end of the semester a final (fourth) paper of 10-12 pages of original research will be due which will require you to apply the concepts of the class to a topic of your choice. Each class member will then present his/her paper's findings in an 8–10-minute presentation at the end of the semester.

**Course Objectives:**

- To obtain a clear understanding of confidence as a cognitive state and the role of economic confidence in decision making.
- To understand how cycles of confidence with their periods of extreme over- and under-confidence trigger consistent, predictable behaviors. Why, as Twain put it, history “rhymes.”
- To understand and appreciate the value of cross-discipline social science exploration – seeing the clear and coincidental behavioral linkages across economics, government, history, psychology, sociology, socio-economics and neuroscience.

- To apply the principles from the class to original research in political, economic, financial, or cultural decision making.
- To develop your ability to articulate individual opinions and original ideas in impactful oral and written form for specific audiences.
- To develop your scholarly research skills using the full resources of Swem Library.

### **COLL 150 Requirement**

This course is designated as a COLL 150 seminar. The goal of COLL 150 is to initiate students into the culture of critical thinking, persuasive writing, and independent inquiry that is at the core of the W&M undergraduate program. COLL 150 seminars highlight student discussion. **Students must receive a C- or better for the course to satisfy their degree requirements.**

### **Course Requirements and Assignments:**

25% - In-class participation/attendance/final paper presentation

15% - Paper 1: 5 pages in length each focused on a personal experience with extreme confidence – its preconditions and consequences

17.5% - Paper 2: 5 pages on a current event topic and its relationship to the concepts covered in class

17.5% - Paper 3: 5 pages on *Scarcity* and its relationship to the concepts covered in class

25% - Final paper (10-12 pages) – original research on a mutually-agreed upon topic within economics, politics or culture that explores the role of changing economic confidence on the related behavior/subject.

**Papers:** The first three papers will be graded anonymously with a particular emphasis on basic construction, strength of argument and the ability to engage and maintain reader interest. The final research paper will be graded on the quality of research, the strength of argument and persuasiveness. MLA should be used for all papers.

The attached schedule shows due dates for papers. Papers are due in hard copy form at the beginning of class. Except in cases of documented emergencies, late assignments will receive reductions in their grade. **There will be no opportunity for extra credit or for graded paper revisions.**

**Final Presentation:** Each student will present his/her findings in an 8–10-minute presentation accompanied by no more than 8-10 slides. Presentations will be graded on preparation, the strength of argument, persuasiveness, and audience engagement.

### **Individual Grade Assignment Equivalents:**

A+ = 98.5	B+ = 88.5	C+ = 78.5	D+ = 68.5
A = 95	B = 85	C = 75	D = 65
A- = 91.5	B- = 81.5	C- = 71.5	F = 50

**Midterm/Final Grading Scale:**

A = 94 - 100    B+ = 87 - 89.9    C+ = 77 - 79.9    D+ = 67 - 69.9

A- = 90 - 93.9    B = 84 - 86.9    C = 74 - 76.9    D = 60 - 66.9

B- = 80 - 83.9    C- = 70 - 73.9    F = Below 60

Midterm grades will be posted by March 26<sup>th</sup> and reflect all graded papers and class participation to date.

Note: The instructor reserves the right to modify the course requirements, assignments, grading procedures, and other related policies as circumstances dictate.

**Course Readings And Textbooks:**

*Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Paperback – April 2, 2013) by Daniel Kahneman

*Scarcity: The New Science of Having Less and How It Defines Our Lives* (Paperback – November 4, 2014) by Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir

Copies of both required books are on reserve in Swem Library.

Pre- and post-class reading assignments will be posted on Blackboard for this class. You will be expected to read all assigned materials and to come prepared to discuss them in detail.

Current events offer great opportunities to see the role of confidence in real-time. Throughout the semester we will identify and discuss current events and how they tie to topics discussed in class.

**Class Participation:** Because having a good class discussion requires student participation, your presence in class is essential. You will be graded on the level of your preparation, attention, and participation during the course with an emphasis on the quality rather than the quantity of participation. The size of the class is small and so it will not be difficult to track how much each of you adds to the discussion. Around midterm, I will provide you with an intermediate score for class participation. This will give you an idea of where you stand and allow you to make changes if necessary.

Introverts will be encouraged to speak before they think, while extroverts will be encouraged to think before they speak.

**Class Etiquette:** Please, no texting, video games, video watching etc. during class.

**Attendance:** Students are expected to attend all classes and to be on time for all class meetings. However, if you notify me by email in advance of class, you will be allowed three personal absences from class without the need for documentation or excuse.

Out of an abundance of caution and out of consideration for your fellow classmates and me, I would ask that you not attend class in person when you don't feel well or if you have tested positive for the flu (whether or not you are symptomatic.) There are no limits on medical absences.

In the case of any extended absence (more than three consecutive classes) I ask that you contact me.

**Academic Honesty:** William & Mary has the nation's oldest honor code, dating back to at least 1779. The Honor Code establishes a level playing field where all can be fairly evaluated based on their own ability and preparation. The Code also provides the bond of our word based on our honor.

Unless otherwise stated explicitly by me, all work you submit must be your own, and I expect you to work independently on assignments. On written assignments, you must provide appropriate citation for all thoughts, words, or ideas that are not your own (this includes the ideas of peers). Unless authorized by me, you cannot consult outside resources. The student-led honor system is responsible for resolving any suspected violations of the Honor Code, and I will report all suspected instances of academic dishonesty to the honor system. I also encourage you to contact me with any questions or concerns.

The Student Handbook ([www.wm.edu/studenthandbook](http://www.wm.edu/studenthandbook)) includes your responsibilities as a student. Your full participation and observance of the Honor Code is expected. To read the Honor Code, see [www.wm.edu/honor](http://www.wm.edu/honor).

All assignments are to be completed in adherence with the Honor Code

**Instructor Office Hours/Availability:** I will be on campus Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays with office hours Tuesday afternoon from 2-4:30 and on Wednesday from 9-12 and 2-4:30. I will be happy to meet with you then or before or after class. Just let me know during class or via email when you would like to meet.

I am also available via email at [pwatwater@wm.edu](mailto:pwatwater@wm.edu). Emails sent after 9 pm are likely to be answered early the following morning.

**Available Resources:** The Writing Resources Center, located on the first floor of Swem Library, is a free service provided to W&M students. I strongly encourage all class members to take advantage of this resource. Trained consultants offer individual assistance with writing, presentation, and other communication assignments across disciplines and at any stage, from generating ideas to polishing a final product. To make an appointment, visit the WRC webpage [www.wm.edu/wrc](http://www.wm.edu/wrc).

### **Useful Dates**

March 24 – Last day to Withdraw from ECON 150

### **Special Accommodations:**

**Health Safety:** The physical and mental well-being of the class is my top priority. While I intend to teach this class in person, the delivery format of the class may be subject to change due to changes in state and local regulations, change in college policies, and student compliance with campus health safety rules and regulations.

Should conditions warrant, students may be required by College policies and/or state regulation to wear masks at all times and to remain seated, maintaining as much social distance as necessary to minimize the risk of potential contagion. Students who fail to comply will be asked to leave class immediately.

### **Accommodation for Students with Disabilities**

**William & Mary 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 see [www.wm.edu/sas](http://www.wm.edu/sas)**

If you believe you need accommodation for a disability, please let me know as soon as possible. Some aspects of this course may be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make me aware of your needs, we can work with the Dean of Students Office (221-2510) to help us determine appropriate accommodations. I will treat any information you provide as private and confidential.

### **Religious Holiday Statement**

I will make every reasonable effort to allow members of the College community to observe their religious holidays without academic penalty. However, it is your obligation to provide me with reasonable notice of the dates of religious holidays on which you will be absent; and, as with any absence, you will be responsible for the material covered in class.

### **Student-Athletes**

You must provide me with a letter from your coach indicating that you are in fact a member of the team, and the dates and times you will be out of town.

## **Tentative Class Schedule**

**Thursday, January 23**

**Class 1 Course Overview – Defining Confidence**

**Tuesday, January 28**

**Class 2 Certainty and Control**

**Thursday, January 30**

**Class 3 The Confidence Quadrant**

**Tuesday, February 4**

**Class 4 Quadrant Behaviors**

**Thursday, February 6 – First Paper Due**

**Class 5 System 1 and System 2**

**Tuesday, February 11**

**Class 6 Horizon Preference**

**Thursday, February 13**

**Class 7 Priming and Higher Education**

**Tuesday, February 18**

**Class 8 Cognitive Ease**

**Thursday, February 20**

**Class 9 Introductions**

**Tuesday, February 25**

**Class 10 Stereotypes and Food – Second Paper Due**

**Thursday, February 27**

**Class 11 Food Part 2, Paper Ideas**

**Tuesday, March 4**

**Class 12 Narratives**

**Thursday, March 6**

**Class 13 Group Think**

**Tuesday, March 18**

**Class 14 Sports**

**Thursday, March 20**

**Class 15 The Media and Advertising**

**Tuesday, March 25**

**Class 16 Admissions Slogan and Politics – Third Paper Due**

**Thursday, March 27**

**Class 17 Politics, Leadership and Crisis Management**

**Tuesday, April 1**

**Class 18 Sexuality**

**Thursday, April 3**

**Class 19 Design**

**Tuesday April 8**

**Class 20 Economic Decision Making**

**Thursday April 10**

**Class 21 Investment Decision Making**

**Tuesday April 15**

**Class 22 Scarcity and Social Unrest**

**Thursday April 17**

**Class 23 Linguistics, Pandemics, Movies, Broadway – Final Paper Due**

**Tuesday April 22**

**Class 24 Class Presentations**

**Thursday April 24**

**Class 25 Class Presentations**

**Tuesday April 29**

**Class 26 Class Presentations**

**Thursday May 1**

**Class 27 Class Presentations**