Econ 341 - American Economic History

This course covers the economic history of the United States from colonial times through the twentieth century. The course emphasizes both the stylized facts about American economic history and the process of using historical data to develop and test economic theory. We will cover the economics of the Revolutionary War, demographic changes over time, the development of the banking sector, the evolution of educational institutions, the economics of slavery, transportation and market integration over time, and other topics.

Requirements

Students should have completed Econ 101 or 151 and Econ 102 or 152. I will assume a basic vocabulary of economic terms and concepts.

Grading

Grades for the class will be based on two midterms, a final exam and a paper weighted as follows:

- Midterm 1 (September 28, 2011): 20%
- Midterm 2 (November 2, 2011): 20%
- Final Exam (December 5, 2011): 35%
- Paper (Due December 2, 2011): 25%

The exams will be a combination of essays and short answer questions designed to evaluate your comprehension of the readings, your ability to work with the analytical tools presented in class, and your ability to think critically about the issues presented in class and in the readings. There are no makeup exams or alternate times for taking exams. If you are unable to take a midterm due to an emergency or a William & Mary sponsored travel commitment your other exam scores will be reweighted to make up for the missed exam.

Grades will be curved to conform to the typical grade distribution at William & Mary (see http://www.wm.edu/offices/registrar/studentrecords/grades/index.php for statistics on grade distributions at William & Mary). The curve will be set at the end of the semester based on the class distribution of overall numerical scores. Each time graded material is returned you will be given the class distribution of numerical scores for the exam and a guide to how those numerical scores would correspond to curved letter grades if the course curve were based solely on that exam (in other words, the numerical cutoffs for an A, B, C, and so on). You have one week after graded material is returned to raise any issues about the grading.
Readings

The required text for the course will be *A New Economic View of American History: From Colonial Times to 1940* (second edition, W.W. Norton and Company) by Jeremy Atack and Peter Passell. Additional required readings are noted in the outline of the course at the end of this syllabus. These additional readings will either be posted on the course website or will be available through *JSTOR*. For all of the readings, I will post several questions on the course website to help guide your reading and stimulate class discussion. These questions are a good starting point for engaging the reading but should not be considered an exhaustive list of what you should retain from the readings.

When reading journal articles there are several things to keep in mind. I do not expect you to follow all of the technical details of the article. What you should focus on are identifying the following aspects of the article. What question is the author attempting to answer? Why is this an important question? What does previous research have to say about the question? What sort of evidence does the author rely on? Are there any drawbacks or limitations to this evidence? What conclusions does the author reach? What are the implications of these conclusions for larger economic questions?

Paper

There will be a paper due at the end of the last week of classes. The paper should be roughly ten to fifteen pages in length and can be on any topic in American economic history of your choosing. Your paper should identify an economic question of interest, provide an overview of the existing literature on the question and present and interpret historical evidence relevant to answering the question. This historical evidence can take the form of quantitative historical data or can be drawn from primary documents. If you are interested in using primary documents, I strongly encourage you to take advantage of the Special Collections Research Center in the Swem Library. More details about the paper will be provided during the second week of classes.

Honor Code

You are expected to follow the William & Mary Honor Code. If I discover any academic misconduct, I will initiate an Honor Council proceeding and recommend failure of the course. Be particularly careful to avoid plagiarism when working on your research paper. This is one area where students can unknowingly commit serious honor code violations. It is very important that you cite all sources properly and fully acknowledge any help received. If you have any questions about how the Honor Code relates to this course, feel free to talk to me or refer to the Student Handbook and the William & Mary Honor Council’s website.
Outline of Course

Below is the general outline we will follow for the course. For each topic, the relevant chapters of the text are included. In addition to the chapters listed, there will be supplemental readings posted online (some required, some recommended) for several of the topics. These readings are also noted in the outline. Required readings are designated with a ♦. All of these supplemental readings will be available as pdf files either on the course website or through JSTOR (www.jstor.org, access requires being on the William and Mary network). At the beginning of each class I will update you as to where we are in the outline and what we will cover in the next classes.

I. The Study of Economic History
   • Readings:

II. A Brief Economic History of the United States
   • The sources of economic growth
   • Economic and demographic change over three centuries
   • Readings:
     – ♦ Atack and Passell, Chapter 1

III. The American Economy Before the Revolution
   • The pre-colonial economy
   • Mercantilism and British policy in the Americas
   • The increasing costs of empire membership
   • Readings:
     – ♦ Atack and Passell, Chapters 2 and 3

IV. Forging a New National Economy

- Financing a war
- Defining the roles of state and federal government
- A brief history of government regulation
- Readings:
  - ♦ Atack and Passell, Chapters 3 and 5
  - ♦ Federalist Papers, Numbers 11, 30 and 35
  - Articles of Confederation
  - ♦ Constitution of the United States, Articles I through VII and Amendments I through X

V. The Evolution of the Banking Sector

- Chartering banks
- Bank notes as currency
- The rise of federally chartered banking
- Readings:
  - ♦ Atack and Passell, Chapter 4

VI. The Transportation Revolution
• Early transportation networks
• The Erie Canal
• The rise of railroads
• Readings:
  – ◊ Atack and Passell, Chapters 6 and 16

VII. Labor Markets through the Nineteenth Century
• Labor scarcity in early America
• The use and disappearance of indentured servitude
• The economics of slavery
• Readings:
  – ◊ Atack and Passell, Chapters 2, 11 and 12

VIII. Demographic Change: Birth, Death and Migration
• Birth, death and the uniqueness of America’s demographic transition
• Family formation and fertility decisions over time
• International and internal migration

• Readings:
  - ◊ Atack and Passell, Chapters 8 and 9

IX. The Transition to Industrial Superpower

• The rise of American manufacturing

• Creating a skilled workforce

• Readings:
  - ◊ Atack and Passell, Chapters 7, 17, 19

X. The State of Economic History

• The evolution of techniques, evidence and beliefs
• Consensus or lack thereof

• Readings: