

Department: Sociology

Course No: 115/W

Credits: 3

Title: Social Problems

Contact: Bradley Wright

Content Area: CA2-Social Sciences

WQ: Writing

Catalog Copy: 115/W. Social Problems. Prerequisite: Engl 110 or 111 or 250.

Course Information: 1a. The course is designed to provide students with an introduction to the study of social problems, focusing upon the societal forces that produce it, how some types of behavior comes to be defined as a social problem, and the kinds of public policies that are designed to alleviate them.

1b. The course typically requires a textbook and supplementary text, and students are expected to read chapters each week. A midterm and final examination are standard, though some sections also require papers, and some have more than two examinations. The examinations are usually a combination of objective (i.e., multiple choice) and essay questions.

1c. Major themes include: an examination of specific social problems (such as alcohol and drug abuse, crime and delinquency, prejudice and discrimination); the interplay between social organization and social problems.

Meets Goals of Gen Ed: 1. Acquire awareness of the era and society. The major social problems of any era help to define that era by clarifying the societal conditions that give rise to the problem, why people in the society considered it to be a "problem," and how framers of public policy attempted to deal with it. By examining a range of social problems, the course provides a unique perspective on the era and society.

2. Acquire critical judgment. Most students have poorly developed conceptions of why drug use or out-of-wedlock birth rates or violence against women increases, decreases, or stays the same, but attracts more public attention. Students' ability to reason analytically is enhanced by the course material because it enables them to reflect critically upon their assumptions and biases, and try to surmount the limitations of their personal experience.

3. Acquire moral sensitivity. Most students' judgment about people who are different than them--for example, because they live in poverty, are victims of violence, suffer debilitating illness or discrimination--are based upon limited knowledge and understanding. With greater appreciation of the societal causes of these problems, students tend to become less judgmental and more sensitive to nuances among people and conditions.

CA2 Criteria: 1. The course examines the theories of major writers in sociology (such as Durkheim and Weber), and also the work of less discipline-bound writers, such as Marx. Social problems are examined from a broad perspective, entailing the application of core theorists. The course is built around such major concepts as exploitation, discrimination, labeling, and social strain.

2. The difficulties of acquiring unbiased information about social problems occupies a major place in the course. The primary methods of social science--field work and surveys--are examined for the types of information that they yield, and the types of biases that can distort them.

3. Conflict and cooperation among groups, classes, and institutions are important subject matters in social problems. This ranges from differences in what is considered a problem, to differences in how to "manage" a problem. At issue are political and economic resources that often entail different attitudes toward, and values about, the natural environment.

4. By analyzing social problems in relation to societal conditions, and by focusing upon conflicting interests, the course strives to develop students' ability to examine social issues at diverse levels.

Problems related to race, class, and gender, economic inequality and differential political influence are examined.

W Criteria: 1. There are three learning objectives in this course: (1) students should understand and be able to apply theoretical and empirical tools introduced in the course to understand and evaluate sociological study of social problems; (2) students should gain substantive knowledge of predominant theories of social problems, and specifically should be able to critically analyze each theory's major concepts, assumptions, and claims about the social world; (3) students should gain a basic understanding of the social problems, and specifically should be able to critically analyze these. The writing component of this class is key in meeting these objectives as it requires students to explore and evaluate an aspect of sociology.

Students are required to write a paper (minimum 15 pages) analyzing a recent book presenting original research on a current social problem [book selection varies by semester]. In the paper, students must explain the significance of the research for the field, summarize the author's arguments and research findings, and then critically analyze the content of the book by applying the theoretical perspectives, methodological principles, and empirical "facts" about social problems learned in class. The paper counts for 33% of the course grade and must be passed in order to pass the course (as stipulated in the syllabus).

Additional written work is required of students in the course, including approximately 15 short in-class essay quizzes that focus on comprehension of material in the readings (33% of course grade) and essay questions on the final exam (33% of course grade).

2. There are three modes of writing instruction employed in the course. First, early in the semester, the instructor provides formal instruction to the class regarding the requirements of the paper assignment, desired structure of the paper, and how to avoid common mistakes in academic writing (e.g., the use of passive voice, contractions, sentence structure). Second, students are required to turn in a complete, initial draft of their paper between weeks 8 and 10 of the semester. The instructor provides detailed written commentary on each student's initial draft focusing on mechanics (e.g., grammar, clarity, organization) and analytic quality (e.g., accurate comprehension of theory and research, creative application of theories from class). As well, the instructor provides in-class discussion of common problems evidenced in the students' initial drafts. Finally, the instructor actively encourages students to take advantage of one-on-one writing assistance during office hours, via email, and during appointments scheduled at the student's request.

3. All students must turn in a revised, final draft of their paper. For the revision, students are required to address all of the instructor's comments made on the initial draft (clearly stipulated in the syllabus as one criterion for grading). To ensure students fully address these comments in their revision, they are required to turn in a copy of the initial draft that includes the instructor's commentary along with their final draft. Students' grade on the final draft reflects the analytic and creative quality of the substance of the paper, writing mechanics (e.g., grammar, clarity, organization), and the extent to which students successfully addressed the instructor's comments on the initial draft.

Role of Grad Students: With suitable training and supervision, graduate students sometimes teach their own sections of this course. Graduate students are trained to teach in department's graduate teacher training program that is centered on classes such as Soc 107/W. In Soc 107/W, they serve as T.A.s who run once-per-week discussion sections. Each week they meet with their professor to debrief them on the previous week's discussion sections and examine how well the class responded to their presentation. They also discuss grading issues and examination construction. Finally, the professor observes them in their discussion sections and gives them written feedback for improvement.

Once the graduate student passes the training program and they have finished their master's degree, they can be assigned Sociology 115/W. In teaching this course, they will be supervised by a faculty member who specializes in the study of social problems. This supervision takes various forms, including meeting to plan the syllabus, discussing how to structure exams and written requirements, and weekly problem-solving.