

Law and Economic Inequality—GVPT 439i
Syllabus for Fall 2023

Note: This is a summary of the more extensive syllabus located at the course website on ELMS. For more detailed information, please contact Dr. Kobren at mkobren@umd.edu. In the event of a conflict between this document and the website, the website controls.

What Is This Course About And What Can I Expect to Get Out Of It?

This course is about economic inequality, the most insidious problem that confronts our country and our planet. Like climate change, it is insidious because it has gradually reshaped our environment so that we take as normal and static a system that is profoundly broken. Unlike climate change, economic inequality is a root cause of almost every other major problem our country and our world face--including our inability to muster the political will to address those problems.

It's important to understand that this is NOT a course about addressing or even ending poverty. It is NOT a course about the gap between the rich and the poor. It IS a course about the economic gap between the rich and everyone else, including you and who you are likely to be. What we are going to talk about this semester has had and will continue to have a direct impact on your lives unless something is done about it.

By the end of the course, I hope you will:

- Understand and be able to trace some of the changes in law that have transformed the moderately equal American society of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s into the highly unequal society that exists today.
- Understand and be able to explain some of the reasons that our society has been transformed from one with relatively high economic equality to one in which economic inequality is high.
- Understand the role that racism has played in creating a wealth gap, not just among races, but among the rich and everyone else.
- Be able to suggest changes to our current law that can address economic inequality without severely and adversely affecting our economy.
- Improve your ability to enter into discussions of public policy in a civil, constructive, and fact-based manner.
- Develop an ability to evaluate your work in a fair and honest way.

How Does This Course Work?

I think learning is much more interesting and effective when it occurs through interaction, rather than lecture. That's why I'll spend very little of our class time talking at you. Instead, we're going to structure our classes as "fishbowl discussions." This is how it works:

- When class begins, I'll pick about 16 students at random. Eight of those students will be in the fishbowl for the first 20 minutes of class and 8 of those students will be in the fishbowl for the next 20 minutes of class.
- In each of the learning modules, I have provided questions to think about while doing the assigned preparation. We'll discuss one or more of those questions (and anything else that comes up). While the students in the fishbowl actively discuss the question, everyone else will be taking notes on the discussion. Here are the kinds of things you should look for in the discussion:
 - Comments you agree with
 - Comments you disagree with
 - Comments you think are particularly insightful
 - Comments you think require more evidence that was provided by a discussant
 - Comments you think need more explanation or elaboration
 - Comments that changed your mind about something
 - Comments that provide a perspective you hadn't previously considered
- After each discussion, we'll review the notes of the observers on what they saw
- To do this well, you'll want to prepare yourself by carefully reading/watching/listening to the assigned materials. I understand that some people might be shy and prefer to sit back and listen while other people tend to dominate conversations. I won't let either of these things happen. If you're shy, I'll invite you to participate by asking for your views; and gregarious people should know that I'll control the floor so that everyone gets an equal chance to participate.

What Books Will I Need For This Course?

The only book you will have to acquire for this course is *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* by Heather McGhee.

You should be able to get this book from the University Bookstore as well as from any other mass market bookstore. You can also order an electronic copy from Amazon.com.

In addition, for Module 11, you will need to watch the documentary **Loan Wolves**, which is available on the Peacock streaming platform. Peacock is generally included in most Xfinity subscriptions. If the documentary is not available for free, you will have to pay the \$5.99 subscription fee for Peacock Premium. For that price, you get a month's worth of content, and you can cancel your subscription at any time after that. You can subscribe [here](#).

You can find all other materials you'll need for the course by clicking on the appropriate links in the Learning Modules listed below.

What is the "Real World Grading System"?

When my son was about 4, my wife signed us both up for Tae Kwon Do. My son wanted to be a Ninja Turtle; I wanted to avoid getting hurt. Over the course of 8 years (and after breaking a large number of boards) we both earned the rank of second degree black belt.

In getting to black belt, you first had to learn the curriculum for a number of lower belts that ran from the beginner white belt through advanced brown belt. In order to progress from one belt level to the next one, you had to demonstrate to the studio master the moves from the belt level you were testing for as well as all of the moves from all previous belt levels. While my son picked up the moves quickly, I never felt comfortable with the curriculum for any particular belt level until at least two belt levels later. This taught me an important lesson about learning and grading that I've never forgotten.

It takes a lot of practice to master anything, and you can expect to make lots of mistakes (or, as in my case, land on your butt lots of times) along the way. In the 14 weeks we have in this course, I think it's unlikely that anyone will master either the substantive course material or the methodological tidbits I'm going to introduce you to in that time. I know what it took me to learn all this stuff, and for what it's worth, I'm still getting interesting insights while I revise my own understanding of it. Some of the stuff you're going to see in this course might not make sense to you by the end of the course, though I'm sure you'll have an "aha moment" indicating that you've learned it months or even years later. That's how learning *really* works.

I also learned that we all come to learning with different backgrounds and abilities. My son, for example, is a natural athlete; I'm not. That meant that he picked up the curriculum a lot faster and did the moves a lot sharper than I did. The studio's instructors could have separated us out by natural ability, or even discouraged me from proceeding, but they didn't. They didn't think it was appropriate to reward my son for something that came easily to him and to punish me because I wasn't a "natural"; instead, they were patient and recognized my effort.

I'm going to treat you the way my Tae Kwon Do instructors treated me when it comes to grading. I use what I call the "Real World Grading System" because it resembles what you will face once you graduate from here and join the workforce. In the real world:

- If you prove yourself to be reliable, prompt, energetic, sensible, committed to your employer's objectives, helpful to the team, and a good producer, you'll get a bonus and a promotion. In my class, similar performance earns an A.
- If you prove yourself to be somewhat less reliable, you tend not to show up on time, you're sometimes unprepared, you don't make a substantial contribution to your team, you seem unenthusiastic and non-committal about your employer's objectives, you don't tend to put in a substantial amount of effort, and the work you turn in isn't complete or leaves obvious questions unanswered, you may be doing enough to keep your job, but you shouldn't count on any bonuses or promotions. In my class, similar performance earns a C.
- If you prove to be an unreliable team member in that you can't be counted on to show up on time, you don't contribute to the enterprise, you don't care about your

employer's objectives, you don't do your fair share of the group's work, and your work product is sloppy and looks like you didn't put any effort into it, you get fired. In my class, similar performance earns an F.

Over the course of the semester, because the class is relatively small, it should be clear to both of us which of these kinds of workers you have been. At the end of the semester, you'll write an in-depth reflection regarding what you learned this semester. You and I will take a look at the final reflection in light of what you wrote in your Statement of Intention and at all of the work you've done, and we'll collectively decide what grade seems fair and reasonable under the circumstances. Just like employers who hope all of their employees are outstanding and deserving of bonuses, I'm hoping to give everyone an A.

Instead of a letter or numerical grade for anything you do or submit, my plan is to give you extensive feedback. I will try really hard to be diplomatic and supportive, and you shouldn't take anything I say to you as a personal attack. In this course, we are all works in progress, all of us always able to improve and grow, even a little, and as beginners, I'm *expecting* you to make mistakes. Use that license to make mistakes to step out of your comfort zone. Most other grading systems encourage you to play it safe and can penalize you when you don't. I want to encourage you to be creative and honest.

There are probably some of you who will feel uncomfortable with this because you are used to being evaluated bit by bit, minute by minute. That's not your fault. Over the last 13 years or so, you've been trained to focus on evaluations from authority figures, even if your standing is based on a "one off" evaluation instrument like a test or a quiz that purports to measure learning, but in fact probably measures things like your writing ability, your memory, whether you had a good night's sleep the night before, or even your ability to game the professor. That kind of grading scheme seems unfair and arbitrary to me and may be giving you credit for what you brought into the course rather than what you got out of it. It also deprives you of the opportunity to develop confidence in self-assessment, which is what you will have to be able to do if you're going to prosper in the real world. Being able to give yourself a fair assessment of your work deprives other people of the power to hold your self-esteem hostage. Your future boss in the real world is not going to grade your work products in any ways other than the ways I've described above; you may as well get used to that now.

You've probably been conditioned to believe that you should strive for an A in every class. That may not be consistent with your needs and interests. You may be taking other courses that are critical to your major or require a lot more time and attention than this course does. It could be that you have work or family obligations that make it hard to put the kind of effort into this course than you might otherwise want to put in. I get it. As an adult, you have to make strategic decisions about where and how to spend the limited amount of time and energy you have. If you decide that you need to put more of your time and effort somewhere else, I won't take that kind of decision personally. Of course, if you put in less effort, the grade you get will reflect that.

Part of my objective is to reduce the level of unnecessary stress that comes with the college experience; I want to divert your attention away from grades and focus it on learning. The "real world grading system" is my attempt to alleviate some of that stress. If, however, you find it stressful not to know where you stand at any given moment, you can feel free to check in with me from time to time, and I'll give you an honest appraisal of how I think you're doing.

Campus Policies

It is our shared responsibility to know and abide by the University of Maryland's policies that relate to all courses, which include topics like:

- Academic integrity
- Student and instructor conduct
- Accessibility and accommodations
- Attendance and excused absences
- Grades and appeals
- Copyright and intellectual property

Please visit <https://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html> for the Office of Undergraduate Studies' full list of campus-wide policies and follow up with me if you have questions.

Course Policies

Communication with Val or me

Email: If you need to reach out and communicate with me, please email me at mkobren@umd.edu; you can reach Val at jakecitt@umd.edu. Please DO NOT email us with questions that are easily found in the syllabus or on ELMS (i.e. When is this assignment due? How much is it worth? etc.) but please DO reach out about personal, academic, and intellectual concerns/questions. We will do our best to respond to emails within 24 hours.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: We will send IMPORTANT announcements via ELMS messaging. You should make sure that your email & announcement notifications (including changes in assignments and/or due dates) are enabled in ELMS so you do not miss any messages. You should check your email and Canvas/ELMS inbox with regular frequency.

Communication with Peers

With a diversity of perspectives and experience, we may find ourselves in disagreement and/or debate with one another. This is a good thing! As such, it is important that we agree to conduct ourselves in a professional manner and that we work together to foster and preserve a classroom environment in which we can respectfully discuss and deliberate on controversial questions.

I encourage you to confidently exercise your right to free speech—bearing in mind, of course, that you will be expected to craft and defend arguments that support your position. Keep in mind, that free speech has its limit and this course is NOT the space for hate speech, harassment, and derogatory language. I will make every reasonable attempt to create an atmosphere in which each student feels comfortable voicing their argument without fear of being personally attacked, mocked, demeaned, or devalued.

Any behavior (including harassment, sexual harassment, and racially and/or culturally derogatory language) that threatens this atmosphere will not be tolerated. Please alert me immediately if you feel threatened, dismissed, or silenced at any point during our semester together and/or if your engagement in discussion has been in some way hindered by the learning environment.

Emergency Protocols

Zoom is a wonderful thing, isn't it? If we are unable to meet on campus for any reason, class will continue on Zoom using my meeting room, which is 955 907 3717. Assume that we will be having class unless we make an announcement that class has been cancelled.

Academic Integrity

The University's [Code of Academic Integrity](#)Links to an external site. is designed to ensure that the principles of academic honesty and integrity are upheld. In accordance with this code, the we won't tolerate academic dishonesty. Please ensure that you fully understand this code and its implications because all acts of academic dishonesty will be dealt with in accordance with the provisions of this code. All students are expected to adhere to this Code. It is your responsibility to read it and know what it says so you can remain in compliance.

Technology Policy

Please refrain from using cellphones, laptops, and other electronic devices during class sessions unless we have designated such use as part of a class exercise. You will need an internet enabled device to complete the exit tickets and to sign into class. Also, you can use your laptop, tablet, or phone to access your notes or the assigned readings if you need them for class discussions.

Participation

- Given the interactive style of this class, attendance will be crucial to getting something worthwhile out of this class. Attendance is particularly important because class discussion will be a critical component for your learning.
- Each student is expected to make substantive contributions to the learning experience, and we're expecting you to attend every session.
- Students with a legitimate reason to miss a session should communicate with Val or me in advance except in the case of an emergency.
- You should complete all readings and assignments in a timely manner in order to fully participate in class.

Course Evaluation

Please submit a course evaluation through CourseEvalUM in order to help faculty and administrators improve teaching and learning at Maryland. All information submitted to CourseEvalUM is confidential. Campus will notify you when CourseEvalUM is open for you to complete your evaluations for fall semester courses. Please go directly to the [Course Eval UM website](#) to complete your evaluations. By completing all of your evaluations each semester, you will have the privilege of accessing through Testudo, the evaluation reports for the thousands of courses for which 70% or more students submitted their evaluations.

Copyright Notice

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Learning Modules

[Prelude--Wicked Problems](#)

[Learning Module 1--The Road to Serfdom](#)

[Learning Module 2--American Dream or American Nightmare?](#)

[Learning Module 3--Monopoly is More Than a Game](#)

[Learning Module 4--Strength in Numbers](#)

[Learning Module 5--The Wages of Capitalism](#)

[Learning Module 6--Taxing IS Spending](#)

[Learning Module 7--A Bankrupt Bankruptcy System?](#)

[Learning Module 8--The Great Equalizer](#)

[Learning Module 9--How Big is Your Safety Net?](#)

[Learning Module 10--That Giant Sucking Sound](#)

[Learning Module 11--When Banking Isn't Boring](#)

[Learning Module 12--The Treatment of Black Lives](#)

[Learning Module 13--Why Inequality Matters](#)