

PPHA 30300, Philosophical Foundations of Public Policy

Spring, 2024

Instructor Scott Ashworth

Class meetings Monday and Wednesday, 1:30–2:50 in Keller TK.

Communication Please use the Message function on the Canvas site. I will do my best to answer your message within 24 hours (48 hours over the weekend).

Office Hours Monday 3–4 in Keller 2029

TA Matthew Stadnicki

TA Communication TK

TA Office Hours TK

Course Description

“Evidence-based policy making” sounds like a slogan everyone can get behind. But one of its central components, cost-benefit analysis, has been subject to severe philosophical questioning. How can value pluralism and expertise coexist in policymaking? Does cost-benefit analysis ignore important ethical concerns? We will introduce each of these debates, and apply the lessons to live policy debates.

Prerequisite Harris MPP core

Course Goals

The goal of this course is to lay bare the assumptions of some standard policy-analysis tools, including cost-benefit analysis and market analysis via supply and demand. The approach is slow, building up one by one the implicit and explicit assumptions supporting those practices. At each step, I will point out what issues are settled by the assumption in question, and discuss some alternative ways the development could have continued.

I’m not trying to convince you that these tools are good or bad.¹ Instead, I want to give you a map of the conceptual landscape surrounding them. At almost every turn, there is more complexity than is apparent either in textbook treatments or popular discussion. I want to lay a foundation for critical reflection about what trade-offs you are being asked to make in practice. This should be valuable in whichever particular policymaking roles you occupy—as citizens and, for many of you, as policy professionals.

¹ This is not to say I will be completely neutral. There are a few sections where you will have no doubt where I stand.

Reading

All readings will be available on the course website. You should have the relevant reading close to hand for each class meeting—we will be referring to the texts during class discussions.

I am writing a textbook for this course. For most topics, we will be using draft chapters of that book, available on Canvas. This file will be regularly updated as I revise sections.

The reading list below is subject to change. Any revisions to the readings will be announced in class and on Canvas.

Schedule

Foundations

March 18: Introductory meeting; Facts and Values

Susan Dynarski, [“For better learning in college lectures, lay down the laptop and pick up a pen”](#). Please read this **before** the first class meeting. As you read, keep these three questions in mind:

1. What position is Dynarski arguing for?
2. What is her argument for that position?
3. What are the normative presuppositions of that argument?

Start reading ch. 2 of the textbook (at least through the section “Normative Presuppositions”).

March 20: Consequences and Decisions

Finish ch. 2 of the textbook.

March 25: The Value-Free Ideal for Science

Read ch. 3 of the textbook.

March 27: Discussion: Measuring Top Inequality

Background: *The Economist*, [“Why economists are at war over inequality”](#)

U.S. House of Representatives hearing on [Measuring Economic Inequality in the United States](#). Read the prepared remarks of Gabriel Zucman, Heather Boushey, Douglas Holtz-Eakin, and Eric Zwick. You may also want to watch the recording of the hearing, but we will focus on the written texts.

April 1: Dominance and Efficiency

Start ch. 4 of the textbook.

April 3: Cost Effectiveness Analysis

Finish ch. 4 of the textbook.

Toby Ord, [“The Moral Imperative Towards Cost-Effectiveness”](#)

April 8: Discussion: Cost-Effectiveness and AIDS in Africa

Saloni Dattni, [“How political gridlock could kill the best global health program the US ever passed”](#)

Emily Oster, [“Treating HIV Doesn’t Pay”](#)

Justin Sandfur, [“How Economists got Africa’s AIDS Epidemic Wrong”](#)

Tom Drake and Peter Baker, [“Did Economists Really Get Africa’s AIDS Epidemic ‘Analytically Wrong’? \(A Reply\)”](#)

April 10: Preferences and Willingness-to-Pay

Read ch. 7 of the textbook.

April 15: Discussion: The Value of a Statistical Life

[To restore the value of every American in environmental decisions, and for other purposes, S.3494, 110th Cong. \(2008\)](#)

W. Kip Viscusi, [“The Devaluation of Life”](#)

Marion Fourcade, [“The Political Valuation of Life a Comment on W. Kip Viscusi’s ‘The Devaluation of Life’”](#)

April 17: Well-Being

Read ch. 8 of the textbook.

April 22: Discussion: Gender and the Labor Market

Richard A. Posner, [“An Economic Analysis of Sex Discrimination Laws”](#).

Marianne Bertrand, [“Gender in the Twenty-First Century”](#)

Marilyn Frye, [“Oppression”](#), in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*.

April 24: Pareto Efficiency

Read chapter 9 of the textbook.

April 29: Compensation Criteria

Read chapter 10 of the textbook.

Uwe E. Reinhart, [“Reflections on the Meaning of Efficiency: Can Efficiency Be Separated from Equity?”](#)

May 1: Social Welfare Functions

Start reading chapter 11 of the textbook.

May 6: “Optimal” Policy

Finish chapter 11 of the textbook.

May 8: Discussion: Redistributive Taxation

Peter Diamond and Emmanuel Saez, [“The Case for Progressive Tax: From Basic Research to Policy Recommendations”](#), pp. 165–175

Stefanie Stantcheva, [“Tax Reform: An Optimal Equation”](#)

N. Gregory Mankiw, [“Defending the One Percent”](#)

May 13: Cost-Benefit Analysis

Joseph Persky, [“Cost-Benefit Analysis and the Classical Creed”](#)

Tyler Cowen, [“Using Cost-Benefit Analysis to Review Regulation”](#)

Creedy, Policy Evaluation, Welfare Weights and Value Judgments: A Reminder

Fleurbaey and Abi-Rafeh, The Use of Distributional Weights in Benefit-Cost Analysis: Insights from Welfare Economics

May 15: Discussion: OMB’s new Circular A-4

[“Biden-Harris Administration Releases Final Guidance to Improve Regulatory Analysis”](#)

May TK: Final Exam

Course Work and Evaluation

Component	Weight
Reading Quizzes	10%
Attendance	20%
Problem Sets	30%
Op-Ed	10%
Final Exam	30%

Student Responsibilities

There are five primary responsibilities: reading, class participation, problem sets, a paper, and a final exam.

Reading Quizzes. For each of the class meetings labeled “discussion”, there will be a quiz on Canvas covering the associated readings. Quizzes must be completed before the relevant class meeting starts. Your grade will be based on your best 5 of 6 possible attempts.

Class Participation. Each course meeting will involve a mix of lecture, small-group exercises, and discussion. As such, regular attendance is crucial, as is active participation in exercises and discussions. Attendance must be in-person; classes will not be recorded or streamed.

I will not grade the content of your participation. Instead, I will indirectly monitor attendance and trust you to participate, not just show up. The indirect attendance measure will be a short, written reflection at the end of each class. These reflections cannot be made up if they are missed.

We have 18 class meetings. You get full credit for this component if you complete at least 15 of the reflections.

Problem Sets There will be 3 problem sets. Each will consist of a mix of short writing exercises and analytical exercises designed to give you some hands-on experience with the tools discussed in the readings.

I encourage you to talk to each other about the problems, and work together to solve them. But you must write up your solutions independently.

Op-Ed In place of a fourth problem set, you will write an op-ed that uses concepts from the course to address a policy issue of your choosing.

Final Exam. The final exam will be in person, at a time and place to be determined by the Harris Registrar.

The exam will be a mix of short answer questions and analytical problems. It will cover everything discussed in class, and everything in the assigned reading. So neither class alone nor reading alone is sufficient preparation.

Late Assignments Sometimes unexpected events make it difficult to submit a problem set on time. For this reason, you will have a pool of 3 late days to be used for any of the problem sets or the op-ed. That is 3 days total for the quarter, not 3 days per problem set. Weekend days are counted in the same way as weekdays (e.g., if the deadline is Friday and you turn it in on Sunday, that's two days late). Note that you are responsible for tracking your own late days.

Other than the late days there are no exceptions to the deadlines for any assignment, except in case of a serious emergency. If such an emergency does arise, you should contact the Harris Dean of Students Office.

Course Policies

Academic Freedom

Academic freedom in a university differs from freedom of speech in the wider society; it is not the right to say just anything. It guarantees scholars—including both faculty and students—protection for their scholarly inquiry regardless of the conclusions that it reaches, while demanding respect for scholarly methods. One aspect of that is that scholars will not be sanctioned in the classroom for what happens outside of it. The other aspect is

that scholars will be evaluated based on their use of scholarly methods, not on the basis of the conclusions that they reach.

What this means in a class like this: **your grade will not be affected by your speech in nonacademic settings, and it will not be affected by such things as whether the political conclusion you argue for is popular among fellow students, is shared by the TA, or is shared by the professor.** We are studying controversial and complicated questions, and you will be evaluated on the basis of such considerations as correctness of technical work, quality of argument, and quality of writing, not on the basis of the political orientation of your conclusions.

Academic Honesty

All University of Chicago students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic Integrity and honesty. Among other things, this means that students shall not represent another's work as their own, use un-allowed materials during exams, or otherwise gain unfair academic advantage. All students suspected of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Harris Dean of Students for investigation and adjudication. The disciplinary process can result in sanctions up to and including suspension or expulsion from the University. In addition to disciplinary sanctions, I will impose a grade of 0 on any assignment on which a student has committed academic dishonesty.

The Harris policy and procedures related to academic integrity can be found [here](#).

The University of Chicago Policy on Academic Honesty & Plagiarism can be found [here](#).

Mandatory Reporting As instructors, one of our responsibilities is to help create a safe learning environment. The professor and teaching assistant are also Individuals with Title IX Reporting Responsibilities. That means we are required to report all incidents of sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking to the Title IX Coordinator for the University.

Disability Accommodations Students who have disability accommodations awarded by the University Student Disability Services Office should inform the Harris Dean of Students office by the end of the first week of class. The Harris Dean of Students Office will work with the student and instructor to coordinate the students' accommodations implementation.

Harris students are not required to submit their accommodations letter to the instructor. Students from other divisions in the University must submit their accommodations letter to either the instructor or the Harris Dean of Students Office.

Students who do not yet have formal accommodations in place but who feel they need accommodations on a temporary or ongoing basis should contact the Harris Dean of Students Office or Student Disability Services.