

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
Graduate School of Education

Course Title: *Social Science Research and Education Policy*
EDUC 872 Sec: 001
Spring 2011

Instructor: Bridget E. Thomas, Ph.D.
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Class Day & Time: 7:30 – 10:00 Thursdays
Class Location: Innovation 139

Office Hours: Please contact me (or talk to me in class) if you need to make arrangements to meet.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course focuses on the research base used to support education policy actions. Students will identify and critically review research for selected K-12 and higher education policy issues and through their analysis determine the strength of the undergirding evidence. Prerequisite: Admission to the Ph.D. program and completion of EDUC 870 and 871 or equivalent doctoral-level policy coursework.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

At the conclusion of this course, students should be able to:

1. Demonstrate ability to critique education research articles.
2. Objectively analyze policy options and determine what research would be necessary to support their claims.
3. Identify gaps in the evidence undergirding education policy options.
4. Understand and explain why certain education policy decisions have not had the desired outcome.

RELATIONSHIP TO PROGRAM GOALS AND PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

The conceptual framework for this course is linked to the goals of the Graduate School of Education and more specifically to the mission of the Center for Education Policy as outlined in its Charter: (1) Translate education research into policy options and recommendations for a variety of audiences (decision makers, practitioners, and the public); (2) Conduct timely, sound, evidence-based analysis; and (3) Develop interdisciplinary and cross-sector policy networks. The student outcomes are linked to this mission, in particular to the importance of evidence-based analysis.

NATURE OF COURSE DELIVERY

This course is taught using lectures and class discussions.

TEXTS AND READINGS

- Jones, W.Paul & Kottler, Jeffrey A. (2006). *Understanding research: Becoming a competent and critical consumer*. Pearson Education, Inc, Upper Saddle River, NJ.
- Locke, Lawrence F., Silverman, Stephen J., & Spirduso, Waneen Wyrick (2010). *Reading and Understanding Research, 3rd Ed.* Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- McEwan, Elaine K. & McEwan, Patrick J. (2003). *Making sense of research: What's good, what's not, and how to tell the difference*. Corwin Press (Sage Publications). Thousand Oaks, CA.

Education Policy Analysis Archives (EPAA), available on-line: <http://www.epaa.asu.edu>

Educational Researcher, available on-line: <http://www.aera.net>

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Three presentations. Students will find research articles related to three education policy issues (one will be a team presentation and two will be individual presentations). Two issues will be selected from the list included with this syllabus and one will be identified by the student. Each student will be prepared to present to the class an objective summary and critique of a minimum of four to six research articles **confirming or challenging the selected policy topics**. Each of the three presentations should be approximately 45 minutes long (not including time for Q&A). Students are expected to be creative in their presentations through the use of PowerPoint or other instructional tools and **must** provide handouts to supplement their presentation (please see grading rubric for additional information on expectations for this assignment). Each student will complete an evaluation sheet to be given to the presenter at the conclusion of each class; these evaluations are intended to help students hone their evaluation skills as well as to help the presenter (they will not be reviewed by the instructor). Students' grades will be determined by the quality of *their analysis of the research*, not on the quality of the studies themselves.

(1) Each student is expected to make three presentations (one as part of a team and two individually) and lead the discussion on the policy issue and related research.

(2) Students not presenting will be prepared to ask appropriate questions and provide a careful written critique of the presentations.

(3) Each week, we will continue to consider the research issues discussed in class via Blackboard. Depending on the week, these online assignments may consist of a discussion question posted for the group, a brief response paper to be submitted to the instructor, or a short research article to read and assess. Instructions for each week's assignment will be posted on Friday each week, and students should respond to the assignment appropriately prior to the next class.

- 70% Research Presentations (3)
 - one team (20%); two individual (25% each)
- 20% Review Panel Participation
- 10% Online Discussions and Responses

EVALUATION

An evaluation rubric for this class is attached.

Grading Scale:

A =	93-100	A- =	90-92
B+ =	87-89	B =	83-85
C+ =	80-84	C =	73-79
F =	72 and below		

Week-Class

Topic and Readings

Prior to class on February 3, please look at the list of possible topics for presentations that accompanies this syllabus. In addition, be thinking of a topic that is of interest to you that could be used for one of your presentations. The topic should have an education policy component and a substantial body of research (pro/con). During class on 2/3, students will select topics from the list included with this syllabus (have a few choices in mind) and offer a self-identified topic. We will also schedule presentation dates.

- (1) 2/3/11 COURSE INTRODUCTION: Critiquing Educational Research. Basic concepts for reading and critiquing a research article.
Reading for next week:
 - McEwan—Chapters 1 – 4
 - Jones—Chapters 2 – 4.

- (2) 2/10/11 ****CLASS WILL BE ONLINE THIS WEEK**** (requirements for online class will be discussed on February 3)
 CRITIQUING EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: Framing Questions and Identifying Answering Tools. Reading and analyzing research.
Reading for next week:
 - Jones—Chapters 5 – 7 (note in particular pp. 149-150)
 - Locke—Chapters 7 – 9 (note in particular pp. 111-112)
 - McEwan—pp. 13, 48, 69, 86, and 105****If you need a review of quantitative research designs, please see Locke Chapter 6.****

- (3) 2/17/11 CRITIQUING EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: Using the Jones and Locke frameworks for evaluating research articles.
Class activity: Students will be randomly assigned to two groups. Using Jones's or Locke's framework, critique evidence presented in the McEwan book on class size reduction. Is there sufficient evidence to reach consensus on this matter? If not, what evidence is missing and what research might be done to fill the gaps? How would you refute the

assertion that class size reduction increases student learning? How would you refute the assertion that class size has no impact on student learning?

Reading for next week:

- **Locke—Chapters 11-12**

*****If you need a review of qualitative research designs, please see Locke Chapter 10.*****

- (4) 2/24/11 Team Presentations: 1 & 2
Reading for next week:
• **Locke—Chapters 4 & 13**
- (5) 3/3/11 Team Presentations: 3 & 4
- (6) 3/10/11 Student Presentations: 1 & 2
- (7) 3/17/10 NO CLASS: SPRING BREAK
- (8) 3/24/11 Student Presentations: 3 & 4
- (9) 3/31/11 Student Presentations: 5 & 6
- (10) 4/7/11 Student Presentations: 7 & 8
- (11) 4/14/11 Student Presentations: 9 & 10
- (12) 4/21/11 Student Presentations: 11 & 12
- (13) 4/28/11 Student Presentations: 13 & 14
- (14) 5/5/11 Student Presentations: 15 & 16

IMPORTANT INFORMATION FOR ALL GSE STUDENTS

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Student Expectations

- Students must adhere to the guidelines of the George Mason University Honor Code [See <http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/honorcode/>].
- Students with disabilities who seek accommodations in a course must be registered with the George Mason University Office of Disability Services (ODS) and inform their instructor, in writing, at the beginning of the semester [See <http://ods.gmu.edu/>].
- Students must follow the university policy for Responsible Use of Computing [See <http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/1301gen.html>].
- Students are responsible for the content of university communications sent to their George Mason University email account and are required to activate their account and check it regularly. All communication from the university, college, school, and program will be sent to students solely through their Mason email account.
- Students must follow the university policy stating that all sound emitting devices shall be turned off during class unless otherwise authorized by the instructor.
- Students are expected to exhibit professional behaviors and dispositions at all times.

Campus Resources

- The George Mason University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) staff consists of professional counseling and clinical psychologists, social workers, and counselors who offer a wide range of services (e.g., individual and group counseling, workshops and outreach programs) to enhance students' personal experience and academic performance [See <http://caps.gmu.edu/>].
- The George Mason University Writing Center staff provides a variety of resources and services (e.g., tutoring, workshops, writing guides, handbooks) intended to support students as they work to construct and share knowledge through writing [See <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/>].
- For additional information on the College of Education and Human Development, Graduate School of Education, please visit our website [See <http://gse.gmu.edu/>].

Student Presentation Topics

FOR ALL TOPICS, BEGIN BY ASKING: Is there sufficient evidence to reach consensus on this matter? If not, what evidence is missing? What research might be done to fill the gaps?

1. Do students perform better in small rather than large high schools? (Begin with but go beyond studies supported by the Gates Foundation.)

Policy Issue: School Size – What's too big and what's too small?

How would you refute a policy proposal to create smaller learning environments? How would you refute school consolidation to create larger learning environments?

2. What is the best method to prepare new teachers? (One side of this issues is presented in *The Secretary's Third Annual Report on Teacher Quality, Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge* available on the U.S. Department of Education's web site. Look also at research done by Linda Darling-Hammond and the work she cites.)

Policy Issue: Are certain models of preparing teachers better than others? How would you refute a policy that supports a particular teacher preparation model?

3. How Does the United States' Education System Compare with Other Nations? (Gerald Bracey's work will provide one perspective, but also look for others.)

Policy Issue: Is the U.S. truly falling behind? How would you refute assertions that students in U.S. schools are less competent than students in other nations? How would you refute the assertion that the heterogeneous nature of education in the U.S. makes cross national comparisons useless?

4. Is there a successful strategy to address and curb school violence? (Journals for school administrators and counselors are a good place to begin.)

Policy Issue: What strategies have been found to reduce or curtail school violence? Is there evidence to support some strategies over others? Is success tied to factors such as student age or school environment?

5. Does grouping students by ability promote student achievement? (The special education literature presents one perspective on this, however other research should be reviewed. The body of literature on this topic is large – be selective.)

Policy Issue: What are the benefits or liabilities of grouping students for instructional purposes (tracking, grouping within classes, gifted and talented programs, special education)? How would you refute the decision to group students for instructional purposes? How would you refute a decision not to group students?

6. Are single sex K-12 schools a successful strategy for promoting student achievement? (Look at research regarding single sex colleges, but do not limit yourself to this body of scholarship.)

Policy Issue: What are the benefits or liabilities of creating single sex schools? Has either gender been shown to be more successful in a single-sex environment? Are there additional factors involved? What are the effects beyond school age?

7. Select and evaluate one or more strategies to promote diverse learning environments. (Look at literature pertaining to both K-12 and higher education settings. Don't forget the Supreme Court.)

Policy Issue: Are there effective models to achieve diversity in educational institutions (K-16)? Are there reasons to support one model over another? Are there differences in the success of K-12 models vs. higher education models?

8. Is licensing (or certifying) teachers and/or school administrators a measure of teacher competence? (Fredrick Hess at the American Enterprise Institute opposes teacher licensure

while Linda Darling-Hammond at Stanford University thinks licenses are a good idea. What evidence do they rely on?)

Policy Issue: Should K-12 teachers and administrators be required to hold a state license? Is there data to support a requirement for licensure/certification? Does licensure correlate with a teacher's later success?

9. Is school choice (vouchers etc.) a good option for students and their families? (Paul Peterson at Harvard has written extensively in this area, but his work is not without its critics. Also look at studies of Milwaukee and Cleveland programs.)

Policy Issue: Does school choice improve student achievement (vouchers, charter schools, magnet schools, etc.)? Does the evidence support the correlation between school choice and student success? Are there school choice models that are more successful than others?

10. Is "pullout" an effective strategy to help students who are struggling in particular areas (reading, mathematics, etc)? (Begin your research search looking at the Title I program, but do not limit your search to research on this program alone.)

Policy Issue: Is pullout an effective way to help students who are weak in particular subjects? Do pullout programs help struggling students move forward? If not, why? Does grade level matter?

11. Does participation of children aged 3-5 in preschool result in higher achievement in elementary school?

Policy Issue: Can early childhood programs be tied to better outcomes/success in later schooling? Many policy makers are suggesting that universal preschool for children who are three and four years old will result in better learning outcomes once they enter elementary school. Does the evidence support this?

12. What is the best tool to predict student success in postsecondary education? Policy

Issue: Which variables should universities use when selecting students? In recent years some universities have dropped the requirement that students take and achieve a particular qualifying score on tests like the ACT and SAT. What evidence is available to support or not support the use of these exams or other measures to make college admissions decisions?

13. How should schools and/or districts deal with the issue of bullying? Policy Issue: What has been the effect of anti-bullying programs? In the past decade, attention in the popular press regarding bullying in schools has increased dramatically. What does the research literature say about the relative success of anti-bullying programs? Where does the responsibility lie for schools (if they are, indeed, responsible)? Where does cyber-bullying fit in?

14. How has the increase in remedial courses in mathematics and reading/writing affected American colleges and universities? Policy Issue: Do remedial courses improve outcomes for students and universities?

Colleges across the country have been forced to add remedial courses for incoming college freshmen due to the insufficient knowledge and/or preparation of many students. Are these tied to greater college success for these students? How has the installation of these courses affected university departments?

Grading Rubric: Social Science Research and Public Policy

Grade/Points	Consensus Group	Research Summary Assignments
A 93 – 100	Outstanding. Participates in and promotes conversation focused on the topic. Comments demonstrate a high level of understanding.	Exceeds Expectations; presentation of research is objective and demonstrates deep reflection; facilitation of class discussion is exceptional and promotes high level conversation on the topic. Work shows evidence of very strong analytic skills. Written material (handouts etc.) is error free.
A- 90 – 92	Well above the average doctoral student; actively advances the intellectual level of the discussion.	Well above average doctoral student; presentation of research is objective and on-target; good facilitation of class discussion, keeping discussion focused on the topic. Work shows evidence of strong analytic skills. Written material (handouts etc.) is primarily error free.
B+ 87 – 89 B 83 – 85	Reliable participant in discussions; questions and comments reveal some thought and reflection. Doesn't contribute often, but generally reveals some thought and reflection. Follows rather than leads group activities.	Presentation of research is solid and objective; during group discussions, questions and comments reveal some thought and reflection. Work shows evidence of solid analytic skills. Grammar or spelling errors on written materials (handouts etc.) do not distract the reader. Presentation of research is solid but not always objective or complete; one or more key points are not covered. Analytic work is generally sound but may have some gaps in logic. Grammar or spelling errors on written materials (handouts etc.) do not distract the reader.
C+ 80-84 C 73-79	Weak or minimal participation; passive; often sidetracks group.	Presentation of research is incomplete and not objective. Multiple key points are not covered or are misrepresented. Important studies are not referenced. Written materials are unclear. Facilitation of class discussion strays from the topic. Presentation of research is incomplete and not objective. Important studies are not referenced or are misrepresented. Written materials (handouts etc.) are not presented or are unrelated to the topic. Weak facilitation of the discussion as evidenced by lack of focus on the topic. Written materials have multiple spelling and grammar errors.
F 72 and below	No constructive participation; destructive; demeaning toward other points of view.	Assignments are not done or are significantly incomplete.