

George Mason University
College of Education and Human Development

EDUC 874.001 – The Achievement Gap
 3 Credits, Fall 2017
 M. 4:30-7:10 | Robinson Hall A243

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PREREQUISITES/COREQUISITES

Admission to Ph.D. program or permission of instructor.

UNIVERSITY CATALOG COURSE DESCRIPTION

Focuses on achievement gap in schools. Students research and analyze gaps in student achievement related to race and ethnicity, limited English proficiency, family background, gender, poverty, and ableism, and practices designed to close the gap.

COURSE OVERVIEW

For more than a century, researchers, policymakers and practitioners have fretted over, explained, measured and attempted to solve an array of so-called *achievement* gaps. Most often attributed to race, these gaps in performance motivate school reform and have become part and parcel of schooling, at all levels, in the United States. In this course, students will begin by surveying the terrain: what gaps exist; how have researchers studied them; how have policymakers and practitioners attempted to solve them? Even as gaps evident in standardized assessments have been long-identified and measured, they persist. Why? Over the semester, students will think anew about and challenge the standard trope surrounding performance, achievement and equality in the nation's schools. Drawing upon an array of theoretical and disciplinary traditions, students will question the role of race in policy discourse and the terms in which problems are defined and solutions offered. Students will interrogate the problematic nature of "achievement" discourse and the role of systems, structures and opportunity, historically and today, in school outcomes.

COURSE DELIVERY METHOD

A variety of instructional methods will be used in this course to include large and small group discussions, instructor lectures, small group case studies, individual and group presentations, and independent research. Because the creation of knowledge is a collaborative endeavor, your primary responsibilities are to: (1) read the literature; (2) share your questions, reflect on your experiences, and engage in productive discussion to make the literature relevant to research and

practice; and (3) write, share your written work, and provide feedback to others in a respectful fashion.

LEARNER OUTCOMES OR OBJECTIVES

Students who successfully complete this course will be able to:

1. Describe and analyze the achievement gap, its causes, effects, and implications for schools and society.
2. Analyze and critique achievement gap discourses in education research, policy, and/or practice from multiple disciplinary perspectives.
3. Deconstruct and examine in detail one aspect of the achievement gap to include its root cause, evidence base, and proposed solutions to close it.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Fields, K. E. and Fields, B. J. (2014). *Racecraft: The soul of inequality in American life*. New York: Verso.

Hlavacik, M. (2016). *Assigning blame: The rhetoric of education reform*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

You may purchase these texts in the campus bookstore or at another vendor of your choice or check them out of the library. All other readings will be available on the course Blackboard page.

COURSE PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

Final grades are based on class participation (10%) and quality, completeness, and timeliness of assignments (90%) described below.

Class Participation (10 points) Students are expected to attend all classes on time and participate actively in class discussions, small group activities, and serve as critical friends to one another. This requires completing the readings in advance, ensuring contributions to the discussion are informed and relevant to the topic at hand, and providing other students the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences in an intellectually stimulating but supportive classroom environment.

Assignments (90 points) To complete assignments, students will need access to a computer, basic word processing software, Internet, their GMU Blackboard account, and an active Mason email account. All written assignments must be submitted via email to Dr. D'Amico by 4:30 p.m. on the due date as a Word file attachment and formatted according to APA Publication Manual, 6th edition (12pt font, 1" margins, double spaced).

*****Unless prior arrangements are made,
late work will be penalized by 2pts/day past deadline.*****

1. **Small Group Presentation** (20 points) Each student will be assigned to a small group to conduct a mini-case study of achievement gaps in a school district in the surrounding areas. Each group will select a different school district and be responsible for presenting the following information about that district: a. Brief history of district and description of geographic area served; b. Demographic profile of students, teachers, and leadership; c. Board governance and leadership structure; d. Identification of 1-3 achievement gaps of interest; e. Descriptive statistics on selected achievement gaps by race, class, ability, language, and any other points of difference (make sure to include explanation of data sources here); f. Discussion of district-level strategies to close identified gaps, the extent to which they are working, and alternative policy recommendations identified by the group. The presentation should be no longer than 20 minutes followed by 15 minutes of Q&A and class discussion. Visual presentation software and handouts are recommended. No paper is required for this assignment. **Due: September 11 or 18, 4:30pm.** Have one group member email your presentation file and handout to the professor on behalf of the entire group AND bring copies of handouts for the professor and each student to class.
2. **Research Paper Proposal** (10 points) Submit a 4-5 page proposal for your research paper (see Assignment #3 below). Begin this essay by outlining the gap you wish to explore: where does it exist; how do you know; who is involved? Most importantly, explain why you believe this gap persists and why it is important. Then examine some of the key research theories, findings and literature: what do we know about this gap? How has it been studied? Close your proposal by identifying some of the questions you wish to explore and explaining why you believe they are significant. **DUE: October 16, 4:30pm (email to Dr. D'Amico).**
3. **Research Paper** (40 points) Each student is required to submit a research paper (18-20 pages) focused on a specific "achievement" gap of their choice. Students may examine any level of education and may define education and schooling broadly. The essay should begin with a clear exploration of the problem, identifying where it exists, how we know, who is involved and its broader significance. Next students will survey the existing scholarship: how has this problem been studied? What do we know about it and what remains to be learned? Then students will use some of the theoretical and disciplinary lenses introduced in the course to analyze the issue, how it has been studied and the policy debates that surround it. In this essay, students will examine the gap from multiple dimensions considering ideas of achievement alongside structures, systems and opportunity. The author will use this framework to craft a new research agenda that engages these ideas. We will discuss the assignment in greater depth in class together and a rubric will be distributed. In addition, we will devote the class session on Monday November 20th to a writing workshop. **Due: Monday December 4, 4:30pm (email to Dr. D'Amico).**

4. **Research Paper Presentation** (20 points) Each student will be responsible for presenting her or his research paper to the class during the final two weeks of the course. The presentation should be no longer than 15 minutes followed by 5 minutes of Q&A. Visual presentation software and handouts are recommended. **Due: November 27 or December 4** (sign-up sheet will be available in class). Bring copies of presentation handouts for the professor and each student to class.

Grading Scale

A = 96-100

B+ = 89-91

C = 75-79

A- = 92-95

B = 80-88

F = 74 and below

PROFESSIONAL DISPOSITIONS

See <https://cehd.gmu.edu/students/polices-procedures/>

[Additional course or program specific language may be added.]

CORE VALUES COMMITMENT

The College of Education and Human Development is committed to collaboration, ethical leadership, innovation, research-based practice, and social justice. Students are expected to adhere to these principles: <http://cehd.gmu.edu/values/>.

GMU POLICIES AND RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

Policies

- Students must adhere to the guidelines of the Mason Honor Code (see <http://oai.gmu.edu/the-mason-honor-code/>).
- Students must follow the university policy for Responsible Use of Computing (see <http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/policies/responsible-use-of-computing/>).
- Students are responsible for the content of university communications sent to their Mason 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 with disabilities who seek accommodations in a course must be registered with George Mason University Disability Services. Approved accommodations will begin at the time the written letter from Disability Services is received by the instructor (see <http://ods.gmu.edu/>).
- Students must follow the university policy stating that all sound emitting devices shall be silenced during class unless otherwise authorized by the instructor.

Campus Resources

- Support for submission of assignments to Tk20 should be directed to tk20help@gmu.edu or <https://cehd.gmu.edu/aero/tk20>. Questions or concerns regarding use of Blackboard should be directed to <http://coursesupport.gmu.edu/>.
- For information on student support resources on campus, see <https://ctfe.gmu.edu/teaching/student-support-resources-on-campus>

For additional information on the College of Education and Human Development, please visit our website <https://cehd.gmu.edu/students/> .

CLASS SCHEDULE¹

Date	Topic	Assignment
M. 8.28	Course Introduction; Thinking about the Achievement Gap – What’s at stake in a name?	
<i>Surveying the Terrain</i>		
M. 9/11	Case Study Group Presentations, I: Exploration of an existing gap, related research and attempts to close it. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the <i>problem</i> defined? Where is <i>blame</i> placed? • What assumptions inform the related research and policy responses? 	Readings TBD
M. 9/18	Case Study Group Presentations, II: Exploration of an existing gap, related research and attempts to close it. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the <i>problem</i> defined? Where is <i>blame</i> placed? • What assumptions inform the related research and policy responses? 	Readings TBD
<i>Theoretical Considerations</i>		
M.9/25	Identifying and exploring the discourse of blame: Whose fault is it?	Hlavacik, (2016) <i>Assigning Blame: The Rhetoric of Education Reform</i>
M. 10/2	Critical theories and problem definition	Delgado and Stefancic, (2017) <i>Critical Race Theory: An Introduction</i> (selection) Howard & Navarro, (2016) “Critical Race Theory 20 Years Later: Where Do We Go From Here?” <i>Urban Education</i> . Rochefort & Cobb, (1993) “Problem

¹ Professor reserves the right to alter the schedule as necessary, with notification to students

		<p>Definition: An Emerging Perspective” in <i>Problem Definition, Agenda Access, and Policy Choice</i>.</p> <p>Stone, (1997) “Numbers,” in <i>Policy Paradox</i></p>
T. 10/10 ²	What is race and why does it matter?	Fields & Fields, (2014) <i>Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life</i> .
M. 10/16	Theorizing inequality	<p>Espinoza, (2008) “Solving the Equity-Equality Conceptual Dilemma” <i>Educational Research</i>.</p> <p>Milner, (1987) “Theories of Inequality: An Overview and a Strategy for Synthesis” <i>Social Forces</i>.</p> <p>Bowles and Gintis, (1976) <i>Schooling in Capitalist America</i> (selection)</p> <p>Harris, (2006) “Social Constructionism and Social Inequality,” <i>Journal of Contemporary Ethnography</i>.</p>
Th. 10/18	Attend or watch archived webinar of AERA Brown Lecture	http://www.aera.net/Events-Meetings/Annual-Brown-Lecture-in-Education-Research
<i>Challenging the “Achievement” Gap</i>		
M. 10/23	The problematic nature of the “achievement” narrative and high stakes tests	<p>Billings, (2007) “Pushing Past the Achievement Gap,” <i>The Journal of Negro History</i>.</p> <p>Hutt and Schneider, (2018) “A History of Achievement Testing in the United States Or: Explaining the Persistence of Inadequacy,” <i>Teachers College Record</i>.</p> <p>Au, (2015) “Meritocracy 2.0: High-Stakes, Standardized Testing as a Racial</p>

² Because of Columbus Day, Monday classes meet on Tuesday this week.

		<p>Project of Neoliberal Multiculturalism,” <i>Educational Policy</i>.</p> <p>Gutiérrez, (2008) “A "Gap-Gazing" Fetish in Mathematics Education? Problematizing Research on the Achievement Gap,” <i>Journal for Research in Mathematics Education</i>.</p>
M. 10/30	Systems, structures and opportunity, Part I	<p>D’Amico, (2016) “Teachers’ Rights versus Students’ Rights: Race and Professional Authority in the New York City Public Schools, 1960-1986,” <i>American Educational Research Journal</i>.</p> <p>Anderson, (1978) “Northern Foundations and the Shaping of Southern Black Rural Education, 1902-1935,” <i>History of Education Quarterly</i>.</p> <p>Erickson, (2012) “Building Inequality: The Spatial Organization of Schooling in Nashville, Tennessee, after <i>Brown</i>” <i>Journal of Urban History</i>.</p> <p>Steffes, (2015) “Managing School Integration and White Flight: The Debate over Chicago’s Future in the 1960s” <i>Journal of Urban History</i>.</p>
M. 11/6	Systems, structures and opportunity, Part II	<p>Flores, (2007) “Examining disparities in mathematics education: Achievement gap or opportunity gap?” <i>The High School Journal</i>.</p> <p>D’Amico, et al (2017) “Where are All the Black Teachers?: Discrimination in the Teacher Labor Market” <i>Harvard Educational Review</i>.</p> <p>Dumas, (2015) “My Brother as “Problem”: Neoliberal Governmentality and Interventions for Black Young Men and Boys,” <i>Educational Policy</i>.</p>

		Gregory, et al (2010)“The Achievement Gap and the Discipline Gap: Two Sides of the Same Coin?” <i>Educational Researcher.</i>
M. 11/13	Work Night	
M. 11/20	Writing Workshop	
M. 11/27	Presentations, I	
M. 12/4	Presentations, II	