This is an upper-level seminar in social policy. The seminar will introduce you to the operation of social programs in the United States and will teach you how to use economic and econometric tools to evaluate them. Most of the course will be devoted to close reading and discussion of research papers, including discussion of the relative merits of various empirical and econometric techniques. Students will participate actively in class discussion, make oral presentations, evaluate empirical data, and write analytical papers. Throughout the course, we will think broadly about the goals of social policy, always keeping the canonical tradeoff between efficiency and equity at the forefront. We will also consider the practical challenges faced not only by policymakers in designing effective policies but also by scholars in evaluating the effectiveness of those policies.

The course is divided into four parts. In part 1, we will introduce social policy, discuss approaches to its evaluation, and gather some of the tools of the applied microeconomist. In part 2, we will discuss poverty and anti-poverty programs. In part 3, we will investigate ways in which environmental policy can serve as social policy. In part 4, we will discuss public health insurance programs, particularly those for children.

Readings: There is no textbook for this course. We will read journal articles and book chapters. The readings are available online as e-reserves on the course website. In order to be able to read actively and to participate fully in class discussion, you must print hard copies and bring them to class. (You may choose to read the articles on a tablet, but please use your judgment.)

Prerequisites: Economics 300/301 (Microeconomics)
Economics 360/361 (Econometrics)

Grading: Grades for the course will be based on a variety of assignments, as follows:

- Reading, class participation, and engagement papers 20%
- Empirical and theoretical assignments 15%
- Short Paper 15%
- Empirical paper 20%
- Final paper 30%

Academic Honesty: Students must abide by the Amherst College Honor Code, as outlined in the Student Handbook. Your work must be your own. If you consult any sources (including online sources), you must cite them clearly and completely. If you work with others, you must make a note of that on your own assignment.
COURSE SCHEDULE AND READINGS

I. Introduction

Introduction to Social Policy

Weeks 1-4 (1/22-2/12)


Methods: Econometrics

Week 3


Alan C. Acock. A Gentle Introduction to Stata, 3rd ed. Chapters 1, 4, 5. College Station, TX: Stata Press.

Methods: Experiments and Evaluation

Week 4


II. Poverty and Anti-Poverty Programs

Poverty and its Measurement

Week 5


Trends in Poverty and Economic Security

Week 5


Anti-Poverty Programs

Week 6


The Earned Income Tax Credit

Weeks 6-7


Welfare

Week 8

III. Environmental Policy  

Environmental Policy as Social Policy  


IV. Health Policy  

Medicaid Overview  


Katherine Swartz. “Health Care for the Poor: For Whom, What Care, and Whose Responsibility?” Focus, Fall 2009, 26(2).


Medicaid Effectiveness  


V. Wrap Up and Final Presentations  

Weeks 14-15 (4/28-5/5)