

PUBH 706
Introduction to the U.S. Health System

SYLLABUS PART ONE:
Description, Objectives, Requirements and Objectives

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FALL

Wednesdays, 23 August – 6 December, 2017
2:30p – 5:00p

1305 McGavran-Greenberg

The purpose of this course is to introduce you to the fundamental organization, behavior, financing, and challenges of the health system of the United States. The course treats the entire edifice of American health care as "the American health system," and intends to examine it *in toto*, including by comparing it to other national health systems, and in part, by examining critical components of the system.

The course takes a strong perspective that the health system is shaped by and dependent on the political system. In particular, accepting the definition of politics as *the authoritative allocation of values*, this course approaches the health system by asking how the authoritative allocation of the values associated with health care – paying and managing the **cost** of care, ensuring **access** to care, and creating and sustaining **quality** of care– has occurred over time. What ideologies and technologies have governed the values' allocations, and how have these shifted, if they have? How have their definitions changed? The health system does not exist in a vacuum, but rather shapes and is shaped by the larger political system.

The course flows from a general system overview down to specific aspects of the system and back out to major contemporary system-wide preoccupations, especially current reform efforts. It is intended to provide you with a broad and yet analytically coherent conceptual framework upon which you can continue to build or, against which you can construct your own unique critique.

I. Required Texts, Monographs and Other Readings:

Required texts:

Birkland, Thomas A. *An Introduction to the Policy Process*, 4th Ed. New York and London: Routledge World Health Organization. 2000. *World Health Report 2000 – Health Systems: Improving Performance*. Geneva and New York: World Health Organization. Download report and other materials from the 2 November page in the course Sakai site

Skocpol, Theda. 1997. *Boomerang: Health Care Reform and The Turn Against Government (with a new Afterword)*. New York: W.W. Norton.

These are available at Student Stores (Birkland and Skocpol) or downloadable from Sakai site.

Very strongly recommended if you want a reference with lots of health system “nuts and bolts:”

Kovner, Anthony R. and James R. Knickman, eds. *Jonas & Kovner’s Health Care Delivery in the United States*, 12th Edition. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

These two you can order from, e.g., Amazon or your favorite Indie bookstore.

All other required readings and resources are available on the course’s Sakai site.

II. Course Objectives

In this course, I look forward to our creation of what one scholar calls a “natural critical learning environment” – natural because I hope you will be taking on questions about the health system that you find inherently interesting and worthwhile; *critical* because we will be reasoning from the evidence, evaluating the quality of our reasoning, and sharpening our analytical approach (Bain, K, *Chronicle of Higher Education* April 9, 2004: B7-B9.)

This means our conversations will often be fluid, moving according to the way class discussion develops. You will seldom encounter a PowerPoint presentation in this course. You will very often encounter discussion that seems to wander – but it is **not** wandering. It is a result of your learning to play with these ideas. Some people won’t always be comfortable with this Socratic kind of conversation, and to some it won’t feel productive, especially after your more regimented recent education. You will be surprised, though, by how well class discussion will advance the sophistication with which you apply advanced policy concepts. Although we will not approach the readings in a “journal club” kind of way, you must absorb the readings before class in order to contribute to the conversation.

I am assigning more reading than you can probably absorb at once. This was a trick played on me by nearly every professor when I was in graduate school, and it was an extremely good trick, since it taught me to be critical and selective: I needed to learn right away what I had to read and understand in depth, and what I could touch on more lightly. For the rest of your life, you’ll be confronted with more information than you can absorb, and I hope my trick of assigning perhaps more than you can read – or that we can talk about in any given class – will help you as much as the same trick helped me, lo these many years ago! This does NOT mean you don’t have to read: it DOES mean you need to learn to read efficiently and strategically.

“AMAA:” In the first 15 minutes of each class, you can **ask me almost anything**. Did you hear or see something in the news? Did you encounter something at SHAC or recall something from rotation? Are you wondering how things fit together? Ask me. We will try to figure it out. When I don’t know (a common occurrence!), I’ll try help you find the best place from which to draw an answer. If you aren’t comfortable asking in class, just send an email message to me beforehand, with “AMAA” in the subject line. This way I will know you are participating, even if you don’t care to speak a lot in class.

The study of this topic, the American health care system and its politics and policy, may be new to you, but you are immersed in it in practice, and the lively spirit of critical inquiry will not be new either!

Competencies: Your completion of this course should confer certain areas of background understanding, knowledge, and analytical skills. The advantages you may take from the course include but are not limited to

- a general understanding of the American political and policy making systems and processes;
- a general understanding of the influence of significant political, economic, contextual and historical influences on the shaping of the American health care system and the making of health policy;
- a general understanding of the broad components of the American health care system;
- an understanding of the meaning of *cost*, *quality* and *access* as organizing concepts for analyses of the health care system;
- a general understanding of the economics of the health care system (although detailed health care finance is beyond the scope of this course);
- a preparation, based on a firm understanding of the system's origins, behavior, and responses to its environment, for understanding future developments in the system of American health care, and a readiness to build on this foundation with more focused, detailed knowledge.

In the terms of the Association of Schools of Public Health’s “competencies,” this course is intended to advance your competency considerably in the following areas: *Systems thinking, Concepts, Methods, and Tools of Data Collection, Population Health Concepts, Promoting Health and Preventing Disease, and Characteristics and Organizational Structures of the US Health Care System, and the Legal, Ethical, Economic, and Regulatory Dimensions of Health Care and Public Health Policy*, but, in fact, it may touch on most of the core competencies of the “21st Century MPH Degree;” see <http://www.aspph.org/ftf-reports/the-mph/>.

III. Course Requirements

A. Student and Instructor Responsibilities

Students’ acceptance of this syllabus constitutes an agreement on the part of each student to abide by the requirements described herein for participating in and completing this course. I, the instructor, agree to provide assistance and guidance as you work through the readings; direction and moderation of class discussions; any advice you may require on the completion of your assignments; prompt, thorough, and transparent evaluation of those assignments; and help with synthesizing the course information generally.

Your attendance in class meetings is, of course, required. Class sessions are group discussions; to be good discussions, they require collegiality, and assume a shared conceptual base. In other words, please complete the readings on each topic before that topic's class session occurs, and be prepared to engage in spirited but civil inquiry. The heaviness of the reading load varies somewhat from class to class; plan your time accordingly. I do also appreciate that much of the reading may be unlike the kind of literature you have been used to consulting in the recent past – if you will bear with me, you can expect rather quickly to get used to it – and maybe even to enjoy it.

The principles of academic honesty, integrity, and responsible citizenship govern the performance of all academic work and student conduct at the University as they have during the long life of this institution. Your acceptance of enrollment in the University presupposes a commitment to the principles embodied in the Code of Student Conduct and a respect for this most significant Carolina tradition. Your reward is the practice of these principles.

Your participation in this course comes with the expectation that your work will be completed in full and faithful observance of the Honor Code. Academic dishonesty in any form is unacceptable, because any breach in academic integrity, however small, strikes destructively at the University's life and work. Academic dishonesty includes even unwitting failures to cite the work and/or ideas of others, for the failure to attribute credit to the originator of a piece of work is theft of intellectual property.

If you have any questions about your responsibility or the responsibility of faculty members under the Honor Code, please consult with someone either in the Office of the Student Attorney General (966-4084) or the Office of the Dean of Students (966-4041); the Honor Code website is <http://honor.unc.edu>,

B. Assignments and Methods of Evaluation

The minimum course requirement for a grade of **PASS** is the completion of **3 (three)** short (5 to 10 pages excluding bibliography in 11 point font) critical essays on three course topics of your choice, **AND a revision of one of those essays – that is, you will rewrite and improve one of your 3 original essays, for a total of four submitted papers.**

I will ask you to declare your choices at the beginning of the course, and each of your papers will be **due no later than 24 hours AFTER the class meeting DURING WHICH its topic will be discussed. You may submit your paper as a Word document attached to an email message addressed to me.**

YOU MUST SUBMIT YOUR REVISE-AND-RESUBMIT PAPER BY 6P ON THE LAST DAY OF CLASS – NOT THE DAY AFTER!

I very strongly encourage you to complete your essay BY the beginning of class, and I will expect you to speak on it, but you may then find that the class discussion suggests some revisions to what you have done. I would advise you to have your draft essay, or your notes on it, with you in class, so you can use it to help shape the discussion on the days one of your topics will be discussed. I will penalize late essays 10% of the grade they would have earned had they been submitted on time. Should emergency, one's own illness or the illness of a loved one, or some other unforeseen circumstance cause you to be unable to complete your essay on time, you are encouraged to speak to me as soon as possible. I will handle these cases as they arise.

Please note: **ONE of your three essays needs to consider the policy leadership required to effect change.** In this essay, you must explicitly consider the politics of changing health policy and practice. What would policy entrepreneurs leading the change effort need to consider, and to do, to make change happen? You may, for example, imagine you are preparing a memo to the President, as one of his health advisors. You may track the leadership of an individual or institution in bringing about some policy, or change to the policy.

In your OTHER TWO ESSAYS, even though you are not explicitly trying to consider leadership, you may still find it helpful, as have so many past students, to pretend you are the Chief White House Health Advisor; your essays need to illuminate the issue for the President him- (or her)self. They need to be at a fairly high level – a good analytical overview -- but they must also be detailed enough that they can serve as the President's guide to the issue.

Students wishing to earn a **HIGH PASS** must complete each of the course requirements with distinction.

Simple completion of 3 essays and 1 revised essay is not, alone, sufficient to guarantee a grade of pass. Each essay must also be of high enough quality to merit a good evaluation, and students must also make a constructive contribution to class discussion, defined as coming to class prepared by having read that day's material and being capable of discussing and analyzing the material in a collegial spirit. Good essays are well-written and well-constructed expositions, with sophisticated and yet intelligible theoretical frameworks, strong analytical foci, a firm grounding in the literature, and an evident understanding of the context of the problem.

A word about the papers: these essays may be unlike most writing assignments you have had before! I am looking for analytical essays – articles in the journals *Health Affairs*, *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, *The Milbank Quarterly*, or policy-oriented articles in *NEJM* or *JAMA* may be helpful illustrations of the kinds of essays we write in this class, although you are not, of course, expected to write at such length or to produce original research findings! Do, however, note the approach. **Good writing is always important, but never more so than when one is attempting to convey new knowledge to others.** Good writing is not always highly valued, or perhaps even understood for the craft that it is, in the health sciences, so our unusually strong emphasis on it may be novel in your course experience. My preoccupation – some may say obsession – with good writing means that I will pay more attention to this aspect of your essays than you might have expected.

First, on writing: I care greatly about the clear, correct and concise exposition of ideas and findings. I believe that poor writing hampers the entry of new ideas into the living stream of human knowledge, and makes it very difficult to move those ideas from one subspecialty of knowledge into the wider world. I also understand, though, that no one is born writing well. She becomes a fine writer the same way she gets to Carnegie Hall: practice, practice, practice! Or to put it in the alleged words of Justice Brandeis, "there is no good writing, only good rewriting." [I think that's not an especially well-written phrase, but you get the point.]

One needs to keep the rules of good writing fresh in one's mind, and one needs to cultivate one's ability to be one's own first and best editor. I invite you to join me in this most valuable enterprise by using your essays as opportunities to enhance your own writing skills. To that end, on the first day of class I will emphasize the tools in the "Writing Resources" section of the course's Sakai site.

Second, on timely planning: although I appreciate the beauties of procrastination as much as does anyone, I nonetheless strongly urge you to choose an early date for the submission of your first essay. I find that students who pace themselves steadily through the essays do better and learn more.

You will find past examples of very successful student essays, published with the students' permission, on the course's Sakai site, in the "Writing Resources" section. Please do review these essays as examples of what your own essays might look like! Students tell me that these are of great help. Please also pay careful attention to ALL the documents in the "Writing Resources" section of the course's Sakai site – I will assume you are using these writing tools.

IV. Grading System

You may earn a possible total of 100 points in this course this way, for grades in this range:

Each essay (described above):	0-20 points, depending on quality of essay
Class participation	0-20 points, depending on strength of contribution to discussion

H:	90-100	P:	80-89
L:	70-79	F:	<69