

RACE, INEQUALITY AND PUBLIC POLICY: WRITING INTENSIVE ASSIGNMENTS IN A CORE CLASS

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My writing intensive course, CORE 2567: *Race, Inequality and Public Policy*, explores the policy implications of racial and ethnic inequality in the contemporary U.S. by exploring several competing explanations of racial inequality. The first section of the course reviews the debate over IQ and test scores in explaining racial and ethnic inequality. The next section considers a structural view of racial inequality through the lens of place, with particular focus on the causes and consequences of the concentration of poor blacks and Latinos in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. The final section of the course considers the role of prejudice among whites in their attitudes towards public policy aimed at reducing racial and ethnic inequality in the U.S.

Course objectives include the following:

1. Students will describe patterns of racial inequality in the contemporary U.S. by considering evidence of socio-demographic, geographical, economic and educational inequality.
2. Students will critically assess competing biological, social structural and attitudinal explanations for these patterns.
3. Students will discuss public policy implications of competing explanations for racial inequality.
4. Students will extend these perspectives to a public policy issue (e.g., in the criminal justice system) or racial/ethnic group (e.g., Korean-Americans) not explicitly covered in class by locating these issues or groups within the framework of the course's theoretical material.
5. Finally, students will formulate knowledgeable arguments grounded in scholarly research for their own views on the underpinnings of racial

inequality and how it should be addressed through public policy.

Assessment of these goals is accomplished through multiple methods, each requiring significant writing. Students must complete three take home exams corresponding to the three sections of the course, compose frequent in-class reaction papers, and prepare a 12-14 page policy brief relevant to the course material. These are described below.

Take-home Exams

The take-home exams assess students' mastery of the course material and their ability to critically assess various perspectives on the causes and consequences of enduring racial inequality in the U.S. For each exam, students choose one essay question out of two or three distributed to them approximately one week before the due date. They then compose a 3-4 page response to the question. Each of the potential questions requires students to integrate the material for the section of the course, weigh the relative merits of competing views, and discuss the public policy implications of these perspectives. For example, one potential question for the first section of the course asks the following:

Weighing the material we've reviewed thus far, assess the argument(s) that you find most compelling about why racial gaps persist in test scores, and discuss the policy implications that follow from the argument(s) that you select.

In-class Reaction Papers

In order to encourage preparation for each class, students complete unscheduled 5-minute reaction papers in response to questions that I pose from the readings. These are collected occasionally and scored on a simple plus/check/minus scale based on demonstrated review of the assigned reading for the class. These

in-class writing assignments serve two purposes. The first is to facilitate class discussion about the course material. Secondly, these assignments are meant to encourage students to write out preliminary ideas that can be re-worked and refined later as they prepare their take-home exams.

Policy Brief

The paper assignment represents a major portion of the course grade. The paper requires students to utilize their deepened understanding of the dynamics underpinning racial inequality to explore a topic of their choice. This allows them to explore their own views on racial inequality but within a scholarly context that transcends the emotional or rhetorical responses that many of us have to these issues. The completed paper takes the form of a public policy brief on an issue with racial/ethnic implications, e.g., residential segregation, the immigration debate, racial implications of the death penalty, affirmative action, educational equity, etc.

The paper assignment includes three incremental steps that are submitted during the quarter for feedback from students and/or from the instructor – a draft of the introduction, a first draft of the complete paper, and the final paper. These incremental assignments provide two opportunities for the instructor to assess directly students' writing. In addition, ongoing group workshops provide feedback to students from their peers for these incremental assignments as

well as others. For instance, students are asked to bring in a two-page discussion of competing views on their topic for feedback from others in their workshop groups.

Each of the writing components for this course can be linked directly to the course objectives. Moreover, each requires that students practice several strategies that I consider to be essential to writing well. First, I believe that the best writers also read extensively. To that end, the in-class reaction papers require that students prepare for class by reading scholarly material relevant to the study of racial inequality in the U.S. Through these reaction papers and ensuing discussion, we explicitly consider the effectiveness of various writing styles. Second, this course requires completion of draft material with subsequent revisions. This is most obvious with the incremental assignments required for the paper assignment. The in-class essays are also designed to facilitate completion of the take-home exams. Third, the in-class essays prompt students to write quickly without the opportunity to extensively edit as they write. This method may encourage students to flesh out ideas more fully, and may mitigate writers' block that can occur when staring at an empty computer screen. Finally, students are actively engaged in critiquing others' writing through the workshop sessions scheduled throughout the quarter as well as their evaluation of the required reading material.

