

INTRO TO SOCIAL LEGISLATION & POLICY COURSE

SOME STUDENTS FIND THIS COURSE UNUSUALLY DIFFICULT.

- The difficulty isn't for the usual reasons.
- It's not because the exams are particularly challenging or that you have research papers with especially demanding requirements.
- The difficulty for some students comes because of the character of this country's problems.
- This course requires you to take a hard look at the problems people in the United States are facing today.
- Many of our major institutions are in crisis or are failing altogether.
- We have:
 1. A pandemic
 2. An employment crisis
 3. Unaddressed racial injustice
 4. Large-scale poverty and decline of the middle-class
 5. A housing crisis
 6. A problem-ridden and failing public education system
 7. Seemingly continuous, unending war
 8. Poor, expensive, or virtually non-existent health care for millions
 9. An overloaded, often unfair, mistake-prone law enforcement and criminal justice system
 10. Disintegrating infrastructure, with increasing instances of collapsing bridges, ruptured water mains and sewers, pot-holed streets, etc.
 11. Endemic corporate and government corruption
- In other words, the course requires that you come to grips with an extraordinary and endless amount of depressing information.
- As if that isn't enough, the course repeatedly asks:
 1. What are *we* going to do about it?
 2. The question is not, what are the corporations and governments going to do about the crisis and failure of American institutions?
 3. We already know that the Congress and many state legislatures have been captured by and serve the special interests of the corporations and the wealthy.
 4. So the course questions, what are we professional social workers in this democracy going to do?

5. Milton Mayer, a journalist and social philosopher who lived in the first half of the last century, wrote:
 6. “I am sovereign here. I hold the highest office of the land, the office of *citizen*, with responsibilities to my country heavier, by virtue of my office, than those of any other officer, including the president. And I do not hold my office by election, but by inalienable right. If I try to abdicate it, to the general will, or to my representatives or to my ministers, I am guilty of betraying not only democracy but my nature as a person endowed with certain inalienable rights.”
- So as I said at the outset, some students find this course unusually difficult because it requires thinking about the difficult challenges we face, not only as police officers or social workers, but also as responsible citizens of a democracy in crisis.

THE WAY WE’RE GOING TO USE THE CLASSROOM TIME IN THIS COURSE MAY OR MAY NOT BE NEW TO YOU.

- Maybe the first thing that will be helpful for you to understand about how I’ll be teaching is that I view all of you not only as future *workers*, but as future *administrators, managers, and leaders in practice professions*.
- You may *not* be thinking about yourselves that way—I know it’s enough just to focus on getting through school.
- But the day-to-day work in criminal justice, social work, or allied professions, allows us to “monkey around”—if you’ll forgive the expression—with people’s lives.
 1. What you decide to do and how you decide to do it can and will at times make or break people’s lives.
 2. What you come to call a “*mistake*,” a client or citizen may experience as a lifelong “catastrophe.”
 3. But your mistakes can become disasters for you too, as you’ll learn if you study the law of professional *malpractice*.
 4. If at all possible, I want to help save your clients, the citizenry, and you from such disasters.
- I’m *not* especially interested in your ability to memorize information and master *recipe* knowledge and repeat it back to me.
 1. You know how a recipe works: You want a certain dish, so you get out the recipe, put the ingredients together, and cook up the desired result.
 2. But if you’ve had some practical professional experience, it may already be obvious to you that the situations you encounter in practice are *not* custom-tailored to fit the recipes you learn from textbooks and lectures.

- I'm *mainly* interested in your ability to *analyze, conceptualize, and exercise creative initiative* in professional practice
- Professional practice of any kind demands that you *analyze situations, conceptualize* what can be applied from what you've learned, and then *think strategically and tactically* about the most *creative* ways to apply your available resources.
- After you graduate, three particular skills will be critical in your professional success:
 1. Your ability to work collaboratively—that is, to work as a member of a team and to contribute to building and strengthening teams;
 2. Your ability to think analytically; and
 3. Your ability to communicate in spoken and written words.
- Your ability to think analytically may be tested as part of an employment interview before you get your first job.
 1. It's common practice in such interviews to ask the applicant how he or she would respond to a particularly difficult situation in professional practice—in law enforcement, social work, teaching, whatever.
 2. One possible way to answer such a question is by responding with what you think at the moment might be the best thing to do.
 3. But the better response is: I would quickly ask myself a number of questions and, depending on how I answered them, decide what action to take.
 4. In other words, you would be communicating to your employer that you can think analytically under pressure.
- Regardless of the situation, the ability to think analytically under pressure:
 1. Benefits you as a professional
 2. Benefits your teammates—that is, your professional colleagues
 3. Benefits the people you are working to help—that is, the citizens you're serving or your clients or the students you're teaching.
- Many students are used to an instructor who stands in front of the class and lectures, which the students replay in exams—effectively building a bank of recipe knowledge.
 1. I also lecture, but often I'll save you from the boredom of listening to my lectures by making them available on the class web page.
 2. Much of the time *I ask questions*, about the assigned reading, about videos and exercises, and about my lecturing.
 3. I'm going to ask a lot of questions in this class, which will press you to think *analytically, conceptually, and creatively*.
 4. Often there are *no single correct answers* to these questions—which confuses and frustrates some students.

- A few years ago (2008) I attended a workshop for faculty on the use of clickers in the classroom.
 1. How many of you have been in classes that used clickers?
 2. In the workshop I attended, it was made clear that the use of clickers has two primary purposes or benefits:
 - It allows faculty to present questions to students and to quickly solicit, graphically compare, and review their answers with the class.
 - It allows students to answer questions without risking rejection or ridicule for wrong or foolish answers.
 3. My objectives for this class are *precisely the opposite*:
 - I’m less interested in your ability to answer my questions than your ability to think analytically about the subject matter of my questions and to reply to them by *asking your own questions*.
 - I’m *not* interested in putting you at ease if you’re shy or reticent about speaking up in class, by allowing you to do so anonymously.
 - Instead I want to give you incentives to risk speaking up and, in doing so, to develop the self-confidence you’ll need in your professional work.
- Incidentally, when you come to class with questions, keep in mind that it’s *not* my job to play “answer man”—so often I’ll tell you that I simply don’t know the answer.
 1. Your questions are for *class discussion*—that is, they’re to be directed to the whole class, not just me.
 2. And, by the way, you have to make yourself heard by the whole class, not just me, and if you don’t I’ll ask you to speak up.
- Regarding the participation requirement for this class:
 1. Student opinions about the participation requirement include it’s a waste of time, stupid, and unfair.
 2. The objective is to challenge you to learn how to speak up with confidence when there’s a risk that you may be wrong and rejected.
 3. It’s aimed to get you out of your comfort zone.
 4. When you use a small, uncertain voice to express your opinions or questions, it creates a negative bias on the part of listeners against the *content* of what you’re saying.
 5. So I’m going to press you constantly to speak up so everyone in the class can hear you clearly—from one end of the room to the other.
- I consider your participation in class discussions at least as important as your ability to play back what you read in the textbook.

- As I've already said, often my questions are aimed to find out what questions *you* can ask to illuminate the subject we're talking about and to identify crucial issues that need to be addressed.
- *So as I see it, my job is not to teach you the basics of what you need to know—the textbook can do that, if you bother reading it, which of course is up to you.*
- *My job is to help teach you how to learn what is not yet known—which involves asking questions.*
- In regard to class discussion and the questions I'll raise, sometimes when I ask questions you may not have answers immediately.
 1. When that happens my usual response is to give people time to think.
 2. So we may have 30 seconds or even a minute of *silence* in the room.
 3. Some people find that very uncomfortable and seem to think it's some form of punishment for the class.
 4. Nothing of the sort—it's just giving you time to think about your experience or what you've otherwise learned, time to analyze your learning, time to draw some conclusions related to the question I'm asking, and time to think of your own follow-up questions.
 5. Don't let the silence throw you—use it to think.
- Incidentally, if I call on you in class but do *not* call you by name, be sure to say your name before you begin answering the question—otherwise you may not get credit for participating that day.
- As a practical matter, I'll usually begin each class by soliciting your questions and comments about the assigned reading.
 1. This class time gives you an opportunity to explore questions, concerns, opinions, etc. that the reading may have raised for you.
 2. It's also an opportunity to ensure that you earn participation points in virtually every class session.
 3. If you choose not to do the required reading, it's very likely you'll find it difficult to participate in class discussions.
- One of the things I've learned after teaching this class for many years is that the students who don't do the out-of-class reading assignments typically don't participate in class discussions.
 1. Of course, over the semester they earn very few participation points and generally end up with a poor grade in the course.
 2. But beyond the situation for individuals, we can use the classroom time in one of two ways.
 3. If most of you do the assigned out-of-class reading, we'll spend most of the time dealing with *your* questions and comments about the material—we'll spend the time dealing with what interests *you*.

4. If most of you don't do the out-of-class reading, we'll spend most of the time with me lecturing—which also means you won't be earning participation points.
5. I come to class prepared to lecture, but I would much prefer to see you asking and answering your own questions as a class.