

HON 205 / SOC 307: The Meritocracy Myth
Lasell University • Spring 2024
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What's this course about?: In a country that often preaches the idea that prosperity comes mostly from hard work and talent (AKA “meritocracy”), this course delves deep into the reality behind the myths.

The Meritocracy Myth examines the manifestations of classism, including prejudice, discrimination, and institutional inequality, and its intersections with race, gender, and immigration status. Through a critical lens, students will explore how classism impacts various facets of society, focusing on education, income, housing and health.

Course Learning Outcomes: Students will gain a nuanced, intersectional understanding of social class and classism, empowering them to critically analyze societal structures and advocate for a more just and equitable future.

By the end of this course, each student will be able to:

- Put their own life experience and hometown into the context of economic inequality in the US
- Understand and empathize with life experiences of Americans of varied classes
- Debunk the myths underlying the widespread perception that meritocracy and the American Dream are current realities
- Research and compare data on class indicators for specific locations
- Analyze the institutional dimensions of class, race and gender inequalities
- Speak up against classism and advocate for fairer economic rules

Texts & Materials:

McNamee, *The Meritocracy Myth*

All other readings and materials are available on Canvas or on hard-copy handouts.

Assignments

You will earn credit towards your final grade in a variety of ways: reading, writing, researching, presenting and class participation. For specifics, refer to individual assignment instructions on Canvas.

- **Class Attendance & Participation (up to 20 points):** This is a highly interactive class. Students are expected to attend class, actively listen, and participate in class discussions, exercises, and projects. Your grade will be determined by your attendance, participation in in-class activities and level of attention during class.

- **Reading Response Quizzes (12+ @ 3 points, up to 36+ points):** Reading (or video) review quizzes (in Canvas) for each reading provide students an opportunity to engage with the course materials. Students may respond to quiz questions #1 and #2 in writing or by posting self-recorded videos. Deadline before class time. Full credit for completing 12 of the 16 assigned Reading or Video Review Quizzes; extra credit for more.
- **Mini Presentations (4 @ 7 points = up to 28):** Where someone lives makes a big difference in their opportunities and resources. Together our class will research a variety of cities and towns in Massachusetts, including Newton. You will research data about two other communities (high income, middle-income or low-income). You will present what you learned about those towns in terms of income, education, housing and health, and together we will paint a picture of class inequality in Massachusetts.
- **Final Paper (16 points, due April 30):** Reviewing all your Reading Review responses, write an essay of 750 to 1500 words that answers these questions (in any order):
 - What's wrong with the meritocracy myth?
 - How is class inequality harming Americans' lives?
 - Give one or more examples of how classism is:
 - a. Interpersonal
 - b. Cultural
 - c. Institutional
 - d. Intersectional with other systems of oppression

Course Calendar of Class Sessions

The following is a general plan for the course; changes are likely, so rely on Canvas. At times, additional readings and/or short assignments may be announced in class and posted on Canvas in the weekly Modules and in the Assignment calendar.

Week 1	Welcome to the Meritocracy Myth class!	
1/18		
Week 2	<i>Theme: Experiencing community and inequality</i>	
T 1/23		
Th 1/25	Reading: Handout with class and classism definitions	
Week 3	<i>Theme: The Lived Experience of Class</i>	

T 1/30		
Th 2/1	Reading: <i>Class Lives</i> chapters – Please come to class prepared to summarize the class life experience of the person whose story you read	
Week 4	<i>Theme: The Myth of Meritocracy</i>	
T 2/6	McNamee Ch. 2	Reading Review Quiz
Th 2/8	Cineas, “ <u>Is Meritocracy a Myth?</u> ” Vox	Reading/Video Review Quiz
Week 5	<i>Theme: Income Inequality</i>	
2/13	Look over the tables in these 3 fact sheets: https://inequality.org/facts/income-inequality/ https://inequality.org/facts/wealth-inequality/ https://inequality.org/facts/racial-inequality/	Reading Review Quiz
2/15	Reading: McNamee, Ch 3 “The Silver Spoon”	Reading Review Quiz
Week 6	<i>Theme: Income Inequality</i>	
2/20	<i>Reading: Mathew Desmond, “Poverty by America”</i>	Reading Review Quiz
2/22	<i>Watch: Poverty isn't a lack of character; it's a lack of cash Rutger Bregman Tedx</i>	Video Review Quiz
Week 7	<i>Theme: Income and Education Inequality</i>	
2/27	Come to class prepared to present income data on your towns	Mini Presentations
2/29	McNamee Ch. 4 “Social and Cultural Capital”	Reading Review Quiz
Week 8	<i>Theme: Education Inequality</i>	
3/5	<i>Reading: Collins, The Wealthy Kids are Alright</i>	Reading Review Quiz
3/7	McNamee Ch. 5 “Making the Grade”	Reading Review Quiz
Week 9	Spring Break – No Class	
3/12	<i>Have a great break!</i>	
3/14		
Week 10	<i>Theme: Education Inequality</i>	

3/19	<u>Rosalsky, Affirmative action for rich kids</u>	Reading Review Quiz
3/21	Come to class prepared to present education data on your towns	Mini Presentations
Week 11	<i>Theme: Housing Inequality</i>	
3/26	<u>Riegel, Affordable Housing TEDx</u>	Video Review Quiz
3/28	Two readings: • Boston Globe article <u>“The Boston suburbs...”</u> ; and • pages 1 to 10 in Collins, <u>“Towering Excess”</u>	Reading Review Quiz
Week 12	<i>Theme: Housing Inequality</i>	
4/2	Watch <u>Why we need to rethink housing insecurity Precious Price TEDxAtlantaWomen</u> AND read Kendall, <i>Hood Feminism</i> , “Housing”	Reading & Video Review Quiz
4/4	Come to class prepared to present housing data for your towns	Video Review Quiz
Week 13	<i>Theme: Health Inequality</i>	
4/9	Shonkoff, <u>“Building a Foundation for Prosperity on the Science of Early Childhood Development,”</u> Pathways	Reading Review Quiz
4/11	<i>No reading</i>	
Week 14	<i>Theme: Health Inequality</i>	
4/16	Kendall, <i>Hood Feminism</i> , 2 chapters: “Hunger” and “Reproductive Justice, Eugenics and Maternal Mortality”	Reading Review Quiz
4/18	Come to class prepared to present data on health in your towns	Mini-Presentations
Week 15:	Symposium & Course Wrap Up	
4/23	Last day of class	
4/25	<i>No classes – Symposium – please attend</i>	

Course Policies

Classroom Conduct: Students are strongly encouraged to listen to each other, to challenge issues, not people, and to recognize the multiplicity of different perspectives, the products of one's lived experiences, exist within this classroom. Students are further requested to refrain from sharing outside of the classroom the ideas and opinions offered by fellow classmates. All language used in class discussions should be respectful and appropriate.

Student Opinions: Some assignments and class discussions require you to put forward opinions. Feel free to try out a stance new to you, or one you aren't sure you agree with. If you disagree with the professors or the author of a reading, you will not be graded more strictly for that; if you agree, you will not be graded more leniently. All positions you take will be evaluated only by whether you present evidence and whether you make a reasoned argument. Respectful dialogue among people with different views is at the heart of higher education.

Cheating is not ok! Academic Integrity Policy:

It is your responsibility to know the rules of citation. Plagiarized and fraudulent assignments will receive a grade of zero and will be reported to the Provost for possible further penalty. From the most recent Academic Catalog: "Students have a responsibility to maintain the highest level of academic integrity. They are expected to perform educational tasks with the highest moral and ethical conduct. Academic dishonesty, intentional or unintentional, is grounds for failure on any assignment or failure in the course, at the instructor's discretion. Academic dishonesty is also grounds for suspension from the university at the discretion of the Provost and may be subject to appropriate legal investigation and prosecution."

Policy on Artificial Intelligence (AI = apps such as Chat GPT): It is fine to get research assistance from AI as long as you put both your prompt and the resulting text as an appendix at the end of your paper, and list it in your reference list. Just as with any other source, if you use an AI bot's exact words, enclose them in quotes and put the citation in parentheses. You are expected to compose the sentences in your written assignments yourself, except for a small amount of well-cited quoting. Be cautious in using AI for research assistance, as all existing AI apps 'hallucinate' and supply false information; don't rely on AI for accurate information; always fact-check.