COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is an introduction to the sociological study of social problems. Throughout this course, we will attempt to understand the process by which different issues or conditions become defined as social problems and the sorts of solutions that are deemed possible by various types of social actors. At any given time, there are a limitless number of issues that could be defined as a social problem and we will focus on the process by which some issues are constructed by different actors as more important than others.

Because it would be impossible to spend equal time on every possible issue, we will focus on only a few selected issues and the general process by which they become constructed as a social problem. In doing so, we will focus on debates about the causes and potential solutions to these problems, and the importance of various social institutions and actors in the process.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS

READINGS*:

You are expected to read all of the material by the date assigned on the syllabus. If you find yourself falling behind, try to catch up as soon as possible and try not to leave all of the reading until right before the exams. There are five required books in this course:


These books have been placed on order at Food for Thought Books. You might be able to find cheaper or used copies online, but be sure to purchase your books as soon as possible so that you can start reading.

*Additional short readings may also be assigned throughout the course and will be made available through the course website

LECTURES:

This class meets twice a week from 8:00am and 8:50am on Tuesday and Thursday. You are expected to attend each lecture on time and actively participate with the material and instructor. I will try to create an interesting and interactive lecture environment, which will only be enhanced by students asking questions and interacting with me, and each other, during the lecture. Don’t be shy! At the same time, I will not tolerate disrespectful behavior in the classroom. Different viewpoints will be expressed and I expect everyone to treat each other with respect.

DISCUSSION SECTIONS:

You are required to attend your assigned discussion section each week. Attendance will be taken and active participation is required. Discussion sections are held during the following days and locations.
ASSIGNMENTS:

Exams. There will be three exams throughout the semester, each counting for 20% of your final grade. Everything covered in the readings and lectures is fair game. Make-up exams will not be given except under extreme and unavoidable circumstances. Oversleeping or missing because of work does not constitute an extreme condition. Do everything in your power to attend the exams. If you can’t attend the examinations when scheduled, it will be very difficult to pass the course.

Exam I: October 6, 2011
Exam II: November 8, 2011
Exam III: December 8, 2011

Homework Assignments. There are two homework assignments that will require outside work. They are not labor intensive, but will require you to search online or use library resources. You are expected to complete these on your own. They are due at the beginning of class on the dates listed below. Late assignments will be penalized.

HW I: October 13, 2011
HW II: November 17, 2011

Paper. There will be a final paper due at the end of the course. Please see the supplemental handout below, which describes the requirements for the paper. The paper is due on December 12, 2011. Final papers must be uploaded through Turnitin, which is on the course website. Late papers will be penalized.
**BREAKDOWN OF GRADING:**

- DISCUSSION SECTION 10%
- EXAMS (3) 60%
- FINAL PAPER 20%
- HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT (2) 10%

**OTHER INFORMATION**

**DISABILITY SERVICES:**
Students with a documented disability that need special accommodation to attend, participate, or complete the course requirements should inform me or the TA at the beginning of the course so that we can make arrangements with the office of disability services.

**ACADEMIC HONESTY:**
I take academic honesty very seriously. If you are caught turning in work that is not your own, you will fail the assignment and will be dealt with according to university policies. If you are unsure what the policies regarding academic honesty are, please see: [http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acad honesty/#policy](http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/#policy). You have been warned!

**WRITING CENTER:**
If you need help writing your paper please feel free to see your TA or me during our office hours. UMASS also has a writing center that provides writing assistance to students. Their website is: [http://www.umass.edu/writingcenter/](http://www.umass.edu/writingcenter/).
CLASS SCHEDULE

I. September 6, 8: Introduction
   • *Best*, ch. 1.
   • *Mills*, “The Promise” (available on course website)

II. September 13, 15: Defining Social Problems; Conditions vs. Problems
    • Best, ch. 2,
    • Shipler, Intro, Ch. 1

III. September 20, 22: Poverty; Claims
     • Best, ch. 3
     • Shipler, ch. 2-4

IV. September 27, 29: Poverty and Inequality, Claims-makers
    • Best, ch. 4
    • Shipler, ch. 5-7

V. October 4, 6: Poverty and Inequality; Policymaking Venues
    • Shipler, ch. 8-end
    • **EXAM I (October 6, 2011)**

VI. October 11, 13: Media and Social Problems
    **no class on tuesday, Oct. 11—follow monday schedule**
    • Best, ch. 5
    • **HOMEWORK I (October 13, 2011)**

VII. October 18, 20: The Politics of Food
    • Best, ch. 6 (skim)
    • Pollan, Intro, Part I

VIII. October 25, 27: Obesity as a Social Problem, Experts and Knowledge
    • Pollan, Part II
IX. November 1, 3: Obesity; Policymaking
   • Best, ch. 7
   • Pollan, Part III

X. November 8, 10: Access to Education; College Debt
   • EXAM II (November 8, 2011)
   • Draut, Intro-ch.3

XI. November 15, 17: Generational Change; Where are the Jobs?; Political Apathy
   • Draut, Ch. 4-7
   • HOMEWORK II (November 17, 2011)

XII. November 22, 24: Higher Education as a Social Problem
    **no class on November 24—Happy Thanksgiving!**
    • Arum and Roksa, ch. 1-3

XIII. November 29, December 1: Higher Education; Policy Outcomes
    • Best, Ch. 9
    • Arum and Roksa, ch. 4-5

XIV. December 6, 8: Imaging a Better World
    • Best, ch. 10-11.
    • EXAM III (December 8, 2011)
Final Paper Assignment

Sometimes conditions become social problems, and sometimes they don’t. People often try to promote particular conditions as social problems in order to offer their own solutions to them. It is relatively easy to see this process at work after a social problem emerges, but more difficult to imagine in advance what sorts of conditions could become problems and how. Your paper assignment is to use what you have learned in class to analyze the development of a contemporary social problem over this semester.

The bulk of your information should come from class materials and current newspapers and news magazines. Using material from events this semester, pick a condition that someone is trying to turn into a social problem. Discuss the facts of that condition, and then the stories that are offered to make that condition a problem—or to prevent that condition from becoming a problem. What sorts of actors are making claims? What kind of claims/frames are they using? What kinds of solutions are being offered? Using your best judgment about social problems in the United States, predict the likelihood of this social problem emerging visibly in American life. Be sure to back up your arguments. Finally, what does this case tell us about the process of creating and resolving social problems more generally?

An excellent paper will demonstrate your understanding of both a contemporary issue and the relevant materials learned throughout the semester. It will be well-organized and written in clear and concise prose. All outside material should be cited in an appropriate academic fashion. If you are caught plagiarizing whole sections of your paper from another source without properly citing it, you will get a 0 for the paper and will not pass this course. The paper should be approximately 7-9 double-spaced typed pages. Please use 12pt font (e.g., Times New Roman) with 1” margins all around. The paper is absolutely due on December 12. You must turn in your paper through Turnitin, which is on the course SPARK website. Late papers will lose a letter grade for each 24-hour period late. After two days, we will no longer accept the paper and you will receive a 0 for the assignment.

SOME TIPS ON HOW TO DO WELL:

1. Start Early!
2. Pay attention to current events. You are required to pick a contemporary topic that is developing this semester. I expect you to collect information on a topic from the news media during this semester. This does not mean that the issue is brand new, but your material will cover developments on an issue as it is currently progressing. If you need help picking an issue or finding source material, please see your TA for assistance.
3. **Use proper citation.** I expect students to use APA or ASA citation. Pick one and be consistent about using it throughout the paper. Also include a bibliography at the end of the paper. However, it is not enough to just provide the bibliography. The sources you use to make your arguments need to be clearly cited in the text of the paper. If you are unsure about how to do this, please ask your TA.

4. **Work on your writing!** If the writing is any good, it will be hard. Plan on revising and rewriting your paper regularly so that your arguments are sharp and well-constructed.

5. **Make backup copies.** Computers will crash and papers will be lost. It’s best to prevent this by regularly making backup copies and storing them in safe places.

6. **Pick a topic that interests you.** Pick a topic that you are interested in. The paper will be easier to complete and more fun if you actually like what you are working on.

7. **Wikipedia** is not an appropriate source for your paper. You are more than welcome to use online newspaper articles, but they must be from reliable sources.