

Honors 260.004: Reforming Justice, Reimagining Community (F19)

Instructor: Stacey L Houston, II, PhD
shousto@gmu.edu
Office: Enterprise 306
Office hours: Thursdays 10:30-11:45 & by appointment

TH 9:00 – 10:15 AM
Planetary Hall 126

COURSE OVERVIEW

The relationship between the American justice system and the communities in which they serve is one of the least harmonious relationships in society. There exists a tension between public safety and effective law enforcement that is embedded in the historical threads of this country. In this course, we will uncover the historical foundation of mass incarceration and the way in which it has contributed to the lack of legitimacy and trust in the justice system in American communities today. We will have a particular eye toward understanding how race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status have been central axes around which social control has been practiced by the justice system. At various points throughout the course, we will put ourselves in the shoes of justice system actors, community members, and reformers to understand the most important issues and envision a way forward. Whose responsibility is it to mend the relationship between the justice system and community? Should the goal of reform be equality or equity? Is there even a way forward? These are questions we will consider as the semester progresses. Students will leave the course with concrete ideas about what should be done, and by which stakeholders, to reform justice system-community relationships.

Over the course of the semester, you will critically engage a variety of texts, including summative texts, journalistic accounts, and original academic research. These texts will give you several lenses through which to view community-justice issues and the connections to other facets of society. Equally as important, you'll learn to apply systems thinking to see the big picture of justice-community issues more clearly. Lastly, you will learn to apply this type of thinking to defend positions about justice issues, defend or oppose existing practices, and pose new solutions.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Following every course session, and certainly following successful completion of this course, we will assess the extent to which we met several course objectives. Specifically, you should be able to:

1. Identify patterns of social inequality in the American justice system and its effects on communities;
2. Understand the connection between justice system inequality and other US social institutions;
3. Apply systems thinking to justice system inequality;
4. Articulate stances and perspectives regarding solutions to the problems of mass incarceration and community disruption;
5. Identify opportunities for improving justice-community experiences.

I encourage you to remain close to these goals throughout the course of the semester. Question the extent to which we meet one or more of these objectives in each course session. If at any point you are unclear about whether and how we are meeting these objectives, please ask for clarity. I also challenge you to consider and hold me accountable for meeting my overall teaching goal:

My goal in teaching is to have all students leave my classroom with the ability to analyze and evaluate the issues raised in class, drawing conclusions while maintaining and awareness of the social forces and context that shape those conclusions.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- Clear, Todd. *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* [Clear]
- Stroh, David. *Systems Thinking for Social Change* [Stroh]
- Watkins, D. *The Beast Side: Living and Dying While Black in America* [Watkins]
- Additional material shared via Blackboard/email [web]

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Grade Breakdown:

- (4) Response Papers: 20%
- Midterm Paper: 20%
- Final Group Project: 30%
- Session Discussion Leader (you will sign up for a date): 10%
- Participation: 10%

Grading Scale

- **A - Outstanding Work (90-100%).** Goes above and beyond the requirements of the assignment, above and beyond merely competent work. Outstanding effort, significant achievement, and mastery of the material of the course are clearly evident. Exceptional critical skills, creativity or originality is also evident. Consistently developed critical perspective. (90-92=A-)
- **B - Above Average (80-89%).** Fulfills all aspects of the assignment and goes bit beyond minimum competence to demonstrate a thorough and above average understanding of course material. Extra effort, extra achievement or extra improvement often evident. Clearly demonstrated critical perspective. (80-82=B-; 83-86=B)
- **C - Average (70-79%).** Fulfills all aspects of the assignment with obvious competence and grace. A thorough and satisfactory understanding of basic course material and incorporation of a critical perspective. If you do the assignment exactly as it is assigned, you will likely receive an average grade. (70-72=C-; 73-76=C)
- **D - Below Average (60-69%).** Represents marginally satisfactory understanding of basic course material. A “D” may indicate failure to follow directions, failure to implement specific recommendations, or failure to demonstrate personal effort and improvement. Often a “D” is given either because some aspect of the assignments has not been fulfilled, or because a preponderance of errors interferes with clear communication. (60-62=D-; 63-66=D)
- **F - Lack of demonstration of satisfactory understanding of basic course material.** Failure to grasp or apply a critical perspective. Not acceptable, either because you did not complete the assignment as directed, or because the level of writing skill is below an acceptable level for college work.

Participation Policy

This is a discussion-focused course. There is no substitute for the dialogue that takes place during a group discussion. Therefore, this course has a minimum participation policy. There are (28) classes in addition to the introductory class. You must attend and participate in (24) of them, not including the introductory

class, or you will receive a zero for participation. This means it will be very difficult for students who miss four sessions to get an A in the course. I will record participation each class session.

Good quality contributions to discussions are defined as thoughtful, appropriately frequent, and considerate input. Note that this course is an academic arena for exploration; you should feel comfortable to express opinions within the boundaries of basic respect and relevance.

I consider this to be a lenient policy. Therefore, I only count participation, not absences. There is no such thing as an “excused absence.” No participation credit is given for doctor’s notes or other emergencies, no matter how serious. Lastly, if you are more than 15 minutes late to class, you will not receive participation credit for the day.

A (VERY IMPORTANT) Note on Respect

So long as your answer is genuine, respectful, and relevant, it is worthy of respect by classmates and myself. We may have different perspectives and experiences, and I hope and expect that all students will express these disagreements openly and honestly. Listening is just as important as speaking. However, harassment of any kind or efforts to make other students uncomfortable is strictly prohibited. The topics we discuss in class are potentially controversial. We should be able to discuss opposing viewpoints within the context of social science evidence. At the same time, I will (and I hope everyone will) avoid deliberately provoking classmates.

Students who are uncomfortable talking about such topics do not have to participate in the discussion. I expect that you will avoid revealing information about yourself or other students that is personal, and we should also avoid inquiring into other peoples’ personal lives. We will talk about these issues in a hypothetical and abstract way in class to avoid distraction and potential embarrassment. If you are ever made angry or uncomfortable by anything in discussion, please feel free to speak up (politely), or to raise your concerns with me privately by email or in office hours.

TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Week 1 (8/27, 8/29): An Introduction to the Course and Systems Thinking

For Tuesday:

- Introductions
- 10 Things Every College Professor Hates

For Thursday:

- [no reading]

Week 2 (9/3, 9/5): Systems Thinking for Social Change

For Tuesday:

- **Stroh:** Chapters 1-4

For Thursday:

- **Web Reading**

Week 3 (9/10, 9/12): Historical Origins of Incarcerated Communities

For Tuesday:

- **Clear:** Chapter 1-2

For Thursday:

- **Clear:** Chapter 3
- ****Response Paper 1 Due****

Week 4 (9/17, 9/19): Imprisoning Communities in Practice

For Tuesday:

- **[No Class – No Reading]**

For Thursday:

- **Clear:** Chapter 4
- **Web Reading**

Week 5 (9/24, 9/26): Imprisoning Communities in Practice

For Tuesday:

- **Watkins:** Foreword – Gunplay is All I Know

For Thursday:

- **Watkins:** The School of Failure – Crimes of the Art
- ****Response Paper 2 Due****

Week 6 (10/1, 10/3): The Consequences of Imprisoning Communities

For Tuesday:

- **Clear:** Chapter 6
- **Watkins:** What to Eat? & What Do You Expect?

For Thursday:

- **Web Reading**

Week 7 (10/8, 10/10): The Consequences of Imprisoning Communities

For Tuesday:

- **Clear:** Chapter 7

For Thursday:

- **Web Reading**
- ****Mid Term Paper Due****

Week 8 (10/15, 10/17): The Consequences of Imprisoning Communities

For Tuesday:

- NO CLASS [FALL BREAK]

For Thursday:

- **Web Reading**

Week 9 (10/22, 10/24): Building a Foundation for Systems (Re)Thinking Justice

For Tuesday:

- **Stroh:** Chapters 5-6

For Thursday:

- **Web Reading**

Week 10 (10/29, 10/31): Building a Foundation for Systems (Re)Thinking Justice

For Tuesday:

- **Stroh:** Chapter 10 & Chapter 13

For Thursday:

- **Web Reading**
- ****Response Paper 3 Due****

Week 11 (11/5, 11/7): Reforming Justice, Reimagining Community

For Tuesday:

- **Clear:** Chapter 8

For Thursday:

- **Web Reading**

Week 12 (11/12, 11/14): Reforming Justice, Reimagining Community

For Tuesday:

- **Clear:** Appendix

For Thursday:

- **Watkins:** The Black Crisis Clergy – O-Ate-Obama
- ****Response Paper 4 Due****

Week 13 (11/19, 11/21): Reforming Justice, Reimagining Community

For Tuesday:

- **Web Reading**

For Thursday:

- **Web Reading**

Week 14 (11/26, 11/28): Proposing Solutions

For Tuesday:

- **No Reading**

For Thursday:

- No Class [Thanksgiving Break]

Week 15 (12/3, 12/5): Proposing Solutions

For Tuesday:

- **No Reading**
- Tentative Pitch Competition Date

For Thursday:

- **No Reading**
- ****Final Group Project Due****

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS

All assignments must be submitted electronically before class on the assigned due date

Response Papers: You will submit 4 brief response papers. The due dates are outlined in the course schedule. These are graded on a pass/fail basis.

Response papers should be comprised of the following: 1) a title page, 2) a one-page response to the prompt, and 3) reference page. See the assignment submission policy below and use this [style guide](#).

In order to receive a pass on your response paper, you must do the following: 1) Address the prompts thoroughly by making explicit connections to the readings, lectures, videos, discussions, and group activities, 2) Cite published articles using [APA 6th edition formatting](#), 3) NOT copy and paste the question you are answering. Instead, incorporate a strong topic sentence that signals which question(s) you are answering, and 3) NOT plagiarize.

Midterm Paper: The midterm is a 5-7 page paper. The instructions and grading rubric for the midterm will be circulated a few weeks into the course. Generally, you will be asked to respond to a prompt that addresses a central issue discussed in the course. It will require you to draw on class discussions and reading material. In addition, you will be asked to include three sources outside of the course material.

Final Group Project: The final assignment for this course will be a group project. In small groups, you will have to develop an social venture to address of the major issues we covered in the course. While additional details will be provided near the middle of the semester, as a group, you will be expected to develop a presentation to pitch your idea [we will actually hold a competition judged by external community leaders], submit the script for the presentation, and provide a 5 page write up of background on the topic.

In terms of grading, half of the grade for this assignment will come from the overall group grade. The other half will be an individual grade based on your group member's evaluations of your contribution. For example, if the project is worth 30 total points and your team receives 15 points for the overall project (maximum) but you do not participate to the project at all, you will receive 0 individual points and a 50% overall.

Session Discussion Leader: You will have the opportunity sign up for a day that you will lead course discussion. This does not mean you will be the professor for the day. However, it does mean that you will be expert in the assigned readings including, potentially linking the material to prior readings or readings outside of those assigned for the course. There is no particular format to which you must adhere. However, I ask that if you prepare a presentation of some sort, please let me know ahead of class so I can be sure to carve out the time. At minimum, you should come to class on the day you select with 3-5 discussion questions for the class to consider.

Your grade will be based on the extent to which you 1) demonstrate mastery of the assigned readings by critically engaging and highlighting connections and 2) provide strong prompts to elicit discussion from the class.

COURSE POLICIES

Communication Policy: Communication with me is important! It can only help you, and it will never hurt you. I want you all to do well in this class, and I want to hear from you if there is any problem. Use email. I tend to answer quickly. I also prefer email because it leaves a written record, which can always be

useful. When you type the message subject, be specific. Avoid generic subjects such as “Question” or “HNRS 260”. If *I write to you*, and a response or an acknowledgement of my email is requested (or obviously appropriate), *do write back without unreasonable delay*. Writing back days later with a message that starts with “I just saw your message” is unprofessional. It is in your best interest to visit the Blackboard course page frequently.

Assignment Submission Policy: To allow me to better track your progress through the semester, I ask that you submit all written materials through Blackboard on or before their due date. When submitting assignments, please name the file according to this system:

[Course Abbreviation]-[LastName][FirstInitial]-[AssignmentTitle] (example: HNRS260-HoustonS-ReadingResponse1)

Although you’re submitting materials electronically, they should still adhere to correct manuscript formatting: double-spaced, using twelve-point font (Times New Roman or equivalent) and one-inch margins. You should number your pages, and include your name at the top of the first page (you’d be amazed how many people forget to do that part). Logos, illustrations, and graphics do not count toward specified page limits. Please follow this [style guide](#). I will deduct points for incorrect formatting. The number of points I deduct will increase as we get deeper into the semester.

Late Assignment Policy: If you have major extenuating circumstances (severe illness, family emergency), you must contact me in advance to request an extension, and be prepared to provide documentation. Otherwise, you will not be allowed to turn in late assignments or make-up assignments. If you do not submit your response papers, midterm paper, or final project or lead discussion on the required date, you will receive a zero for that assignment. You may not substitute other work for any required assignments.

Electronics Policy: I am a huge proponent of the potential of digital learning. Therefore, laptops, tablets, and the like, are allowed and encouraged during class sessions. In fact, I will often ask students with laptops to look up information on the Internet and, as you know, I use polling mechanisms. When you use electronics, however, use them wisely. Texting, or any form of engagement with people outside the classroom, is not allowed and, if it becomes a distraction, I will ask you to leave and you will lose participation points.

Honor Code Policy: Available on the web at academicintegrity.gmu.edu. The Honor Code governs all work in this course. Since that text is very clear, I do not feel compelled to address the issue of plagiarism in class at all. Beware that “the instructor did not explain to us what plagiarism was” is an invalid argument to defend a case of plagiarism. So is the simpler “I didn’t know” defense. Materials readily available to you online ensure that you do know. I will state explicitly that recycling from another course is a violation of the honor code. I reserve the right to submit course work to plagiarism detectors.

Disability Accommodations: If you have a documented learning disability or other condition that may affect academic performance you should (1) make sure this documentation is on file with Office for Disability Services (SUB I, Rm. 4205; 993-2474; <http://ods.gmu.edu>) to determine the accommodations you need; and (2) talk with me to discuss your accommodation needs. I want to be helpful.