SOLVING PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY PROBLEMS:
POLITICS AND POWER IN DISEASE POLICY

TUNI 150 Honors Seminar, 1-credit
Spring 2019 / Mondays 1:40-2:35 pm / Performing Arts Center 263

Instructor: Erika Martin, PhD MPH
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Contact: emartin@albany.edu
Office Hours: Uptown: Mondays 2:45-4:00pm (Contact Office, Humanities B-16)
Downtown: Wednesdays 10:00-11:30am (Milne 300E)
By appointment

PREREQUISITES
There are no prerequisites, beyond membership in the Honors College. I assume that students come from diverse majors with varying knowledge of public health and public policy.

COURSE DESCRIPTION
Exotic diseases such as Ebola and Zika capture the headline news, while over half of deaths in the United States are attributable to chronic heart disease, cancer, or respiratory illnesses. Large advocacy groups successfully coalesced to lobby for programs and resources to combat HIV, yet the “silent epidemic” of hepatitis C kills more Americans than any other infectious disease. The policy response to the 1980s crack cocaine epidemic focused on mass incarceration, while the current response to the opioid overdose epidemic has shifted to treatment and a public health approach. Despite considerable scientific evidence on the cost-effectiveness of syringe exchange programs, there is a longstanding ban on using federal funding to purchase syringes. Why are some diseases more likely to get on the public agenda? How can we assess which jurisdictions and populations have higher needs for public health services? Why is it so hard to incorporate scientific evidence into health policy decisions? What public policy tools are available to target health conditions, and what are the legal constraints on public health intervention?

This seminar examines major political factors that shape public health policy decisions and the government response to various diseases. The seminar will address these issues by tracing the stages of the policy cycle: agenda setting, policy formulation, policy legitimation, policy implementation, policy and program evaluation, and policy change. As a short seminar, this course will not be an exhaustive introduction to public health policy, but an opportunity to explore how “disease” is defined by political factors.

Through a partnership with the Journal of Public Health Management and Practice, the major assignment is a commentary essay that students may submit directly to the journal to be considered for publication on its companion website, JPHMP Direct.
**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Students will be able to describe the policy process, explain political and social factors that influence how “disease” is defined and prioritized for attention, explain different viewpoints, and demonstrate improved skills in professional writing and reading scientific papers.

**Knowledge**: Students will be introduced to a variety of public health policy issues, the policy cycle, rationales underlying health policy interventions, and real-world political and bureaucratic influences on decision-making and policy implementation in public health.

**Skills**: Students will improve their skills in writing for professional audiences, including: conducting library research, using a structured writing and editing process, communicating complex ideas to a lay audience, and having clear argumentation. They will have greater confidence in searching for, reading, and synthesizing scientific articles.

**Traits**: Assignments and in-class activities will help students develop important traits necessary for being future leaders: articulating different perspectives, being critical consumers of information, and developing curiosity to think more critically about health issues.

**COURSE EXPECTATIONS AND SYLLABUS CONTRACT**

A general expectation for UAlbany courses is to devote three hours to each credit. As a one-credit seminar, plan to spend ~3 hours/week (1 hour/week in class, 2 hours/week outside of class to read and prepare assignments). If you are unable to commit that much time to the course, drop it or expect to receive a low grade. However, if you find yourself consistently spending more than two hours/week, see me and we can discuss strategies to complete your readings and assignments more efficiently.

You are responsible for reading this entire syllabus carefully and meeting all course requirements. I return, I will be prepared for class, return assignments in a timely fashion (typically in the following week), provide written comments to improve the quality of your work, and make myself available for office hours.

**REQUIRED READINGS**

All readings will be available in Blackboard. I limited readings to approximately 5-15 pages per week, so you have time to read them carefully. Be prepared to discuss them in class.

**CLASSROOM PROCEDURES**

This is not a lecture-dominated class; plan for active discussions and debates about the material. Some class sessions will also have time devoted to skills workshops.

**GRADING POLICY**

There are two major deliverables: (1) a 1,000 – 1,200 word commentary for a public health journal (~5 pages), and (2) short weekly reading assignments. The commentary will have numerous planning assignments throughout the semester to guide you through the process. The reading assignments will help you synthesize key points.
At the end of the semester, you will have an opportunity to submit your final commentary to the JPHMP Direct editors for consideration to be published on their website.

**Grading:** Grades will be determined based on a weighted average of points earned. There is no extra credit and your grade will not be rounded up when assigning final grades.

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<th>Grade</th>
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<td>A</td>
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**Participation:** You will be graded on whether you are a civil and active contributor to class, not on your ability to consistently provide the “right” answers. Come to class prepared and show enthusiasm when engaging in class discussions. If you are called on, you should be able to discuss the course material and readings. I value quality over quantity: a student offering occasional insightful comments will receive a higher participation score than a vocal student whose comments have little substance. Your participation score will be lowered if you are frequently unable to respond to questions, provide few comments in class discussions, provide personal opinions rather than thoughtful analysis, fail to participate in class exercises, are disrespectful to your classmates (e.g., talking while others are talking), or are otherwise not engaged. Attendance is required and will be reflected in your participation score. If you attend class 80% of the time, the maximum participation score you can receive is 80%.

**Reading assignments:** To help you synthesize the readings, you will complete a short weekly reading assignment that should take ~15 minutes to complete. For example, you may be asked to list some ideas related to a class discussion or summarize a reading. They will be graded on a check-plus (√+), check (√), and check-minus (√-) basis.

- √+ The assignment contains all requested items and it is clear that the student has completed the reading. The products have complete sentences and follow format instructions (e.g., if the assignment requests three sentences or five bullet points, then those instructions are followed). Worth an A (full credit, 100/100).
- √ The assignment meets basic expectations but there are errors in meeting the three criteria. Worth a B (85/100).
- √- There are numerous errors in meeting the three criteria. Worth a C- (70/100).

**Commentary:** Select a focused topic of interest related to health policy, which can be in the domestic or international context. Write a commentary of 1,000 to 1,200 words that is suitable for a professional health journal. Articulate an important health issue, explain some of the
complexities of solving the problem, and offer recommendations. A successful commentary communicates ideas clearly to a lay audience, while demonstrating the author’s expertise on the topic. At least 10 academic sources must be cited. Detailed instructions, sample commentaries, and grading rubrics will be distributed in class.

**Commentary planning assignments:** Five planning assignments will help you assemble your commentary proposal and receive early feedback. They encompass: a topic proposal, two bibliographies, an outline, and a draft visualization. They will be graded on a check-plus (✓+), check (✓), and check-minus (✗-) basis.

- **✓+** The assignment contains all requested items, demonstrate that the student has thoughtfully prepared the draft, and products look professional. For example, the bibliography contains the minimum number of references and they are relevant to the topic. Ideas in the topic proposal and outline are logical. The products have complete sentences, appropriate formatting (e.g., APA style for the bibliography, a meaningful title for the visualization). Worth an A (full credit, 100/100).
- **✓** The assignment meets basic expectations but there are errors in meeting the three criteria. Worth a B (85/100).
- **✗-** There are numerous errors in meeting the three criteria. Worth a C- (70/100).

**Revised commentary:** A revised version of your commentary will incorporate the professor’s feedback, include a visualization (chart or table) relevant to your arguments, and have a corresponding Tweet. This version will be posted online to a class website. On the last day of class, students will review each other’s commentaries to prepare for a class discussion on important themes in health policy, and strategies to foster change. Detailed instructions, sample commentaries, and grading rubrics will be distributed in class.

**Late assignments:** All assignments are due at the start of class. Late assignments lose 10 percentage points, or one full letter grade, for each day they are late (i.e., an 85 will be reduced to 75). Assignments submitted after class will be considered late. Computer crashes, printer failures, rush-hour traffic, or heavy workloads in other classes are not acceptable excuses for late assignments. Plan ahead to ensure your assignment is submitted on time. If you have an emergency, email me before class to demonstrate it was completed on time.

**Free pass for reading assignments/attendance:** You have one free pass to exempt you from that day’s participation (not attending and/or not submitting the reading assignment). You do not need to tell me your reason for taking a free pass. This is your insurance policy in case something unexpected happens, or you have a week with a high workload in other classes. The free pass only applies to the reading assignments and attendance/participation. If you take a free pass, the commentary and planning assignments are still due on schedule.

**OTHER CLASSROOM POLICIES**

**Tardiness:** Class starts at 1:40pm. Be respectful of me and your classmates and arrive on time. If you arrive late, you will receive half-credit for that day’s attendance. If you have a situation that will cause you to be consistently late, see me at the start of the semester.
Phones and email: Turn off your cell phones. If you are environmentally conscious and prefer to take electronic notes and save the Blackboard readings to your laptop or tablet, you may bring your e-gadget to class as long as you use it for course-related purposes. If you are texting, checking email, watching UTube videos, or surfing the internet during class, I will ask you to leave and you will not get credit for that day’s attendance and participation.

Excused absences and late assignments: I will not grant extensions on the written assignments. However, I do appreciate that you may experience truly extenuating circumstances which would prevent attending class or preparing an assignment by the deadline. If you have a legitimate excuse, speak with me as soon as possible, bring me written documentation, and we will make alternate arrangements. If you will be absent for more than one class, you must obtain a note from the Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education (Lecture Center 30, 442-3950). If you miss class due to illness, you must provide a doctor’s note. Out of fairness to all students, I will not grant excused absences or extensions without written documentation. Four or more unexcused absences will result in automatic failure from the course. University guidelines on excused absences are at:

https://www.albany.edu/undergraduateeducation/attendance.php

Incompletes: I will not grant an incomplete except in the case of truly extenuating circumstances with written documentation from the Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education. Be forewarned that if we mutually agree on an incomplete grade, I will likely still require you to attend class. If you need to request an incomplete, see me as soon as possible. University guidelines on incompletes are at:

https://www.albany.edu/undergraduateeducation/grading.php

Academic honesty: I take academic honesty very seriously, and cheating in any form will not be tolerated. You should be familiar with the University’s academic honesty policies (listed at the website below); ignorance is not an excuse for dishonest behavior. In all cases of cheating, a Violation of Academic Integrity Report (VAIR) will be filed with the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education. Additional penalties may include some combination of the following: revision and resubmission of the assignment, failure of the assignment, reduction of the course grade, failure of the course, filing of a case with the Office of Conflict Resolution and Civic Responsibility, or expulsion.

http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate_bulletin/regulations.html

Avoid plagiarism by properly acknowledging material and ideas taken from other sources. Paraphrase these ideas in your own words, or else put a quotation around original text. The university’s library offers useful tutorials on plagiarism and how to avoid it:

http://library.albany.edu/infolit/integrity
http://library.albany.edu/usered/plagiarism/index.html
https://libguides.library.albany.edu/citationhelp
Your reading assignments and commentaries must be your own work. I strongly encourage you to solicit feedback from your peers on your commentary and discuss the readings. However, your submitted work must be completed by you and written in your own words. If you collaborate with a classmate on the reading assignments, document on your submission who you worked with. Your commentary must not be part of an assignment in another class (i.e., duplicate assignment). If you choose a topic that you are writing about in another class, see me to discuss how to tailor it for this class. If a classmate provides you with feedback on your commentary, list your classmate’s name in your acknowledgements section.

**Grading and appeals for a grade change:** If you are dissatisfied with your grade, you may make a written appeal that outlines why you think your grade should be changed. This appeal should be at least one-half page in length (typed) and must be delivered to me (in person or by email) within 72 hours of receiving your assignment. Your grade may be lowered, increased, or remain the same. I will not consider a grade appeal that is delivered orally; you must type your appeal on a sheet of paper within 72 hours.

**Reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities:** Reasonable accommodations will be provided for students with documented physical, sensory, systemic, cognitive, learning and psychiatric disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring accommodation in this class, please notify the Director of the Disability Resource Center (Campus Center 130, 518-442-5490, DRC@albany.edu). That office will provide the course instructor with verification of your disability, and will recommend appropriate accommodations.

**Letters of recommendation:** I am happy to help you advance your professional goals, but it is a conflict of interest for me to write letters of recommendation during the semester, before I have assigned a final course grade. I will not write a letter of recommendation during the semester except in special circumstances, such as students who previously worked with me as a research assistant. If you anticipate wanting a letter of recommendation after the semester is over, see me sooner rather than later so you can tell me about your professional goals and experiences.

**Course feedback and ombudsperson:** I genuinely want to make this the best educational experience for you and future students. I am receptive to and grateful for all suggestions about the course. At the start of the semester, you will select a class ombudsperson who you can contact confidentially with course concerns that you do not feel comfortable sharing with me directly.
## COURSE SCHEDULE AT-A-GLANCE
Below is the schedule of topics and deliverables. All assignments are due at the start of class (exception: class survey). BB = Blackboard submission only; P = Print a hard copy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Class Topic</th>
<th>What’s Due at the Start of Class</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Module 1: Course Overview</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 1 Jan. 28</td>
<td>Course goals, introductions, and the policy cycle</td>
<td>Complete class survey (BB, due Fri. 2/1)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Module 2: Problem Definition and Agenda Setting</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 2 Feb. 4</td>
<td>Framing public health problems</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB)</td>
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<td>Week 3 Feb. 11</td>
<td>Skills workshop: professional communication, publishing tips, and conducting library research</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB) Commentary topic proposal (BB, P)</td>
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<td>Week 4 Feb. 18</td>
<td>Defining sickness, health, and “disease”</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB) Commentary outline (BB, P)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 5 Feb. 25</td>
<td>Quantifying disease burden and defining public health crises</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB) Commentary (BB, P)</td>
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<td><strong>Module 3: Policy Development</strong></td>
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<td>Week 6 March 4</td>
<td>Rationales for public health interventions, defining policy goals</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB) Commentary (BB)</td>
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<td>Week 7 March 11</td>
<td>Role of media and interest groups in shaping policy solutions</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB) Commentary (BB, P)</td>
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<td>Spring Break March 18</td>
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<td>Week 8 March 25</td>
<td>Stigma as a policy tool</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB)</td>
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<td><strong>Module 4: Policy Implementation</strong></td>
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<td>Week 9 April 1</td>
<td>Designing regulations in the absence of conclusive scientific evidence</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB)</td>
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<td>Week 10 April 8</td>
<td>Allocating scarce resources</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB) Commentary visualization (BB, P)</td>
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<td>Week 11 April 15</td>
<td>Navigating diverging federal, state, and local policies</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB)</td>
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<td><strong>Module 5: Policy Evaluation</strong></td>
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<td>Week 12 April 22</td>
<td>Assessing quality improvement</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 13 April 29</td>
<td>Updating evidence-based guidelines</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB) Revised commentary, with accompanying visualization and Tweet (BB, P, website)</td>
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<td><strong>Module 6: Semester Wrap-up</strong></td>
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<td>Week 14 May 6</td>
<td>Semester reflections and synthesis</td>
<td>Reading assignment (BB)</td>
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**COURSE READINGS**
All readings should be read *prior* to class- be prepared to discuss them!

**Week 2—Framing public health problems**

**Case study:** Implementing Philadelphia’s sugar-sweetened beverage tax

**Readings:**

**Week 3—Skills workshop**

**Skills:** Professional communication, publishing tips, conducting library research

**Readings:**
- Moore, J.B. (2016, November 11). *How can public health students make themselves competitive for employment?*

**Week 4—Defining sickness, health, and well-being**

**Case study:** Defining compulsive shopping and kleptomania as “diseases”

**Readings:**
Week 5—Quantifying disease burden and defining public health crises

**Case study:** Quantifying the number of deaths from Hurricane Maria

**Readings:**

Week 6—Rationales for government interventions, defining policy goals

**Case study:** Rationale for government intervention in obesity

**Readings:**

Week 7—Role of media and interest groups in shaping policy solutions

**Case study:** National recommendations for breast cancer screening

**Readings:**
- Video from US Preventive Services Task Force (~6 minutes)
- US Preventive Services Task Force. (2009). Screening for breast cancer: US Preventive Services Task Force recommendation statement. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 151(10), 716-726. *(SKIM ONLY: Scan the article to see what kind of information is included in these recommendations.)*

Week 8—Stigma as a policy tool

**Case study:** Using stigma for tobacco control

**Readings:**

Week 9—Designing regulations in the absence of conclusive scientific evidence

**Case study:** E-cigarettes and tobacco harm reduction

**Readings:**
### Week 10—Resource allocation and principles of equity

**Case study:** Allocating funding for HIV prevention and treatment

**Readings:**

### Week 11—Navigating diverging federal, state, and local policies

**Case study:** Safe injection facilities

**Readings:**

### Week 12: Assessing quality improvement

**Case study:** Quality improvement for newborn hearing screenings

**Readings:**

### Week 13: Updating evidence-based guidelines

**Case study:** Evolving dietary recommendations

**Readings:**
**Week 14: Semester reflections and synthesis**

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<tr>
<th>Activity:</th>
<th>Discuss student commentary topics</th>
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<tr>
<td>Readings:</td>
<td>Review class website. <strong>Skim the website</strong> to see the topics your colleagues have selected, and <strong>choose three</strong> to read in detail.</td>
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