

University of Wisconsin- Madison - Sociology

**Course Name:**

Educational Policies to Reduce Inequality: Deploying and Building Research in Wisconsin  
Sociology 496/901: Three credits

**Time/Location:**

Wednesdays, 2:25-4:55; Van Hise Building Rm 483

*Instructional mode: face to face*

Credit hours are met following the traditional [Carnegie definition](#)

**Instructor**

Eric Grodsky, Professor of Sociology and Educational Policy Studies

[grodsky@wisc.edu](mailto:grodsky@wisc.edu)

4454 Sewell Social Science Building

(608) 262-4896

Office hours: Tuesday 2:00-3:00 or by appointment

**Course Description**

Race/ethnicity and family income are related to average levels of educational success, whether measured by school readiness, achievement test scores, GPA, grade retention, truancy, disciplinary referrals, academic course taking, on-time high school graduation or college attendance. Our own community reflects these disparities. Wisconsin routinely ranks among the most unequal states in terms of black-white disparities in child poverty and high school graduation, among other things.

The purpose of this interdisciplinary seminar is to explore underlying causes of these inequalities and policy innovations that can reduce them. The seminar will be heavily informed by engagement with policy makers and researchers in Wisconsin, including the state Departments of Public Instruction and Children and Families, the Madison Metropolitan School District and the City of Madison. This seminar builds on relationships I have cultivated as co-director of the Madison Education Partnership, as PI on a sub-award from the Department of Public Instruction and as a member of the Department of Public Instruction's Wisconsin Educational Research Advisory Council. I anticipate that people from each of those entities will occasionally join the seminar and that you will work with those organizations in developing your projects.

**Required texts:** TBD

**Course format**

We will meet for 2 hours and 30 minutes each week, with a five-minute break somewhere in there. **Students will take an active role in creating this seminar.** Each student or group of students will 1) write a summary topic statement (1-2 paragraphs) and develop a reading list for his topic, 2) identify 80-120 pages of readings from that list to assign to the entire class, 3) email

the class at least 24 hours in advance of the seminar they will lead with 5-8 discussion questions and 4) lead the class discussion.

Below I provide a list of *possible* topic areas. I have developed these topics in conversations with my friends and colleagues at these agencies. However, my role will be as a facilitator and lead researcher more than as instructor. This seminar will be a collaborative effort in using social science to inform and shape public policy. This course is intended to engage advanced undergraduates and graduate students in sociology, economics, psychology, social work, health and education for the purpose of charting a path forward for policy makers in Wisconsin. We will use our substantive and methodological expertise to produce and/or summarize research on different potential policy levers for reducing disparities in educational opportunity and success and will share our findings with those charged with allocating public funds to improve the lives, of young people in Madison and in Wisconsin more broadly.

**Prerequisites:** Graduate students or junior standing; permission of instructor for undergraduates who have not attained junior standing.

**Learning outcomes**

- *Conduct Research and Analyze Data (quantitative or qualitative)*
- *Critically Evaluate Published Research*
- *Communicate Skillfully*
- *Critical Thinking about Society and Social Processes.*

**Evaluation**

You grade for this class will be calculated as follows:

General participation:	10%
Leading discussion:	10%
Term paper:	75%
Presentation:	5%

**Participation**

I will grade your participation as follows:

- 0 Didn't show up
- 1 Showed up and said little or nothing
- 2 Nominal participation (a few comments)
- 3 Active participation

**Leading discussion**

The discussion portion of your grade will be based on the quality of the questions you send to the rest of us in advance of class and your ability to facilitate a productive exchange of ideas in class.

## Term paper

Each participating student will produce an empirical paper or literature review summarizing the relevant theoretical and empirical literature in their area of inquiry, a one- to two-page executive summary of that review written for an educated lay person.

The 20-30 page (double-spaced) review must:

1) Begin with a clear statement of:

- a. how the focal resource (for example, child nutrition) is related to academic achievement
- b. how the focal resource is distributed across racial/ethnic groups and/or by level of income

These assertions should be empirically supported in the literature you cite or, if you prefer, by your own estimates from existing data sources.

2) Review how the resource impacts academic achievement. If relevant, consider how this impacts changes over the life course. For example, maternal nutrition during different phases of the gestational process may have different impact on fetal development, leading to varied challenges in the development of young children and contributing adversely to school readiness. Nutritional deficits in primary school may reduce children's ability to focus on academics in class, contribute to internalizing behavior and/or reduce children's ability to express their knowledge on (timed) assessments. Alternatively, you may choose to focus on a limited range of the life course to make the task more manageable.

3) Review policy interventions designed to equalize the distribution of the focal resource. Describe the breadth of the intervention and document the impacts on achievement, achievement disparities or (ideally) both. You may find little evidence that speaks to academic achievement disparities but instead evidence that speaks to proximal causes of academic achievement. For example, the extant literature might demonstrate a robust effect of nutritional deficits on internalizing behavior and a separate literature might highlight the negative impact of internalizing behavior on academic achievement. That's fine. Your job is to put these together.

4) Review the efficacy of the interventions and, to the extent you can based on the literature, their costs.

5) Conclude with your assessment of the power of equalizing the distribution of this resource for reducing achievement disparities. Be as precise as possible given the empirical literature available to you. The most desirable formulation might be something like "Insuring an adequate caloric intake for each child between birth and age four could reduce the reading readiness gap between African American and white children by 20% to 60%." That's a tall order. Somewhat less desirable would be:

Evidence suggests that differences in the incidence of internalizing behaviors accounts for 25% of the black-white gap in school readiness (CITES) and that nutritional deficits account for 35% of the difference in internalizing behaviors among African American and white preschool children (CITES). Since internalizing behaviors are only one way in which nutritional deficits

affect learning readiness, insuring adequate diets for all African American children could reduce gaps in reading readiness by eight to nine percentage points.

You get the idea. You may not be able to be this precise—that's O.K. Your job is to review what we know out your area of inquiry but also to illuminate what we DO NOT know. Put as many of the pieces together as you can but be clear about holes in the data. For example:

We know that a greater share of poor than non-poor children experience spells of food insecurity (CITES) and that nutritional deficits hinder brain development, intellectual focus and capacity to learn (CITES). We know far less, however, about how nutrition impacts achievement disparities.

## **Presentation**

Each student or group of students will make a 12-15 minute presentation an audience of policymakers and community members. The presentation will convey the question, approach and main findings of the review or analysis.

### Some possible topic areas

- A. Prenatal/maternal health
- B. Infant health
- C. Childhood health and disability [perhaps differentiated by age/developmental phase]
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Stress
  - Mental health
- D. Childcare quality
- E. School policies [each could probably be differentiated by primary/middle/secondary school levels]
  - The school schedule: time, calendar
  - Summer programming
  - After and before school care and activities
  - Instructional practice [I know- it's a big one]
  - Teacher education
  - Demographic matching: Teacher race/ethnicity, social class background
  - Health and nutrition services
  - Parent support
  - Truancy
  - Disciplinary policies and behavior modification
  - Assessment (time required, uses of, utility in improving outcomes)
- F. Middle school and beyond
  - Course selection (students, parents and teachers)
  - Post high school counseling
    - College
    - Labor market

Work during school  
G. The juvenile justice system  
H. Coordinating social services

### Structure

#### *Week 1*

Meet to discuss topics of research and common structure for papers

Allocate responsibility for papers

\* Homework: each student will identify a topic by the end of the first week of classes. Students further along in their thinking about a topic will take create a preliminary reading list for his/her topic area and select 3-5 readings to discuss in class.

#### *Week 2*

We will meet together to discuss the proposed readings in each topic, modifying the reading list as necessary given our varied backgrounds and areas of substantive expertise. We will also discuss local resources knowledgeable about each area. I will then create a syllabus based on this discussion, contact local experts both to get their input on our reading list and ask if they would be interested in joining us on the day we discuss their area of expertise, and put together a schedule for the seminar.

#### *Weeks 3-11*

Discussion of assigned readings led by student in charge of that topic.

#### *Weeks 12-13*

Author presentations of full papers (45 minutes each with Q&A)

#### *Week 14*

Author presentations of key points in preparation for presentation of results to policy makers (10 minutes each)

#### *Week 15*

Presentation to policy makers, place and time TBD