The Instructor: About me

Name: Neil Bruce

Bio: I am the Paul F. Glaser Professor of Economics and have been at UW since 1991. I received my Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1976. My field specialty is Public Finance and Public Policy. My current research interests are Social Security, retirement saving, and the economics of aging populations.

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Please note: I do not answer questions about course subject matter or assignments by email. You should come to my office hours with such questions. A discussion board has been set up on the class page where information and questions about the course subject matter and assignments can be discussed and exchanged. I will monitor the board and when possible provide input.

Classlist: econ450a_WI14@uw.edu

Classpage: https://catalyst.uw.edu/workspace/brucen/40173/

The Course: What You Will Learn

You will be evaluated on how well you achieve three learning goals.

- Assemble significant facts about the spending programs of governments in the United States including spending on national defense, highways, environmental regulation, welfare, social security, health, and education.

- Analyze the effects of these programs on the economy, including their effects on the level and distribution of economic welfare, using basic intermediate microeconomics.

- Develop an understanding of the political and economic reasons why different government spending programs exist, and the ability to evaluate these programs and their alternatives in terms of attaining specified economic and social objectives.

The Course: How Your Learning Will Be Assessed

Your course grade is based on two non-cumulative class tests. The first class test is on Wednesday February 5 and the second class test is on Wednesday March 12 (last day of class.) The tests must be taken on these days—I do not have the resources to offer make up tests.

There are also five optional, but highly recommended, assignments. Your assignments will be used to improve your grade, but not to lower it. The main reward for doing the assignment is preparation for the tests. But at my discretion,
I will count your average assignment grade for up to 20% of your total grade. Assignments are graded 4 (good), 3 (adequate) or 1 (thank you for handing something in.) If you do not do the assignments your grade will depend wholly on the tests. Assignments must be handed in hard copy in class on the due date, or earlier. Electronic submission is allowed with advance notice.

Tests and assignments are objective (no essays.) I do not curve grades.

**Policy on Academic Integrity**

I will enforce the policy of the Department of Economics on Academic Integrity.

*Academic integrity is the cornerstone of the Department’s rules for student conduct and evaluation of student learning. Students accused of academic misconduct will be referred directly to the Office of Community Standards and Student Conduct for disciplinary action pursuant to the Student Conduct Code and, if found guilty, will be subject to sanctions. Sanctions range from a disciplinary warning, to academic probation, to immediate dismissal for the Department and the University, depending on the seriousness of the misconduct. Dismissal can be, and has been, applied even for first offenses. Moreover, a grade of zero can be assigned by the instructor for the course.*

My preference is to respect you, treat you as responsible adults, and presume that you are honest. I ask that you return this respect by proving me right. If any academic dishonesty on tests is discovered, I will follow the appropriate institutional procedures. Cooperative learning on assignments is permitted, even encouraged.

**Lectures and Readings**

Lecture notes are available on the class page. These are *required reading*. The notes contain hyperlinks where more information is available to strengthen your learning, but these linked readings are not required. *Please read the upcoming topics before class and be prepared to discuss and ask questions. The lecture notes are not a perfect substitute for attending class.*

1. **Role of Government in the Economy**

   A) Topic 1 Spending by US Government. The “stylized facts” on government spending including how much the government spends, what it spends on, which level of government does the spending, and how such facts differ across countries and over time.

   B) **Topic 2 The Market Failure Theory of the Mixed Economy.** When markets are efficient, when they are not, and how government programs can (in principle) can benefit everyone by improving economic efficiency. Also, the demand for income redistribution.
II Public Goods

A) Topic 3 Economic Efficiency and Public Goods. The definition of a public good according to its properties (non-rival and non-excludable). The conditions for the efficient production of a public good are explained and compared to the efficient conditions for private goods.

B) Topic 4 Market Failure and Public Goods. The reasons why voluntary exchange in markets or voluntary contributions will fail to provide adequate quantities of public goods are explained. The Prisoner’s Dilemma and Free Rider problems described. Why government coercion, such as taxes, can make everyone better off.

C) Topic 5 Application to Congestible Public Goods. The efficient provision and use of congestible public infrastructure, such as roads, tunnels and bridges, is explained. How congestion tolls work, and why they are a good idea.

III Market Externalities

A) Topic 6 Externalities and Market Failure. Externality as a generalized form of market failure. What is and what is not an externality. Why pollution is a market failure, not a sin. The Coase Theorem and the true nature of externalities.

B) Topic 7 Government Policies to Correct for Externalities. Governments intervene in markets to correct for externalities in several ways. We compare command and control regulations to market based policies like cap and trade and individual fishing quota.

IV The Government Decision-Making Process

A) Topic 8 Government Decision-Making by Voting. How public choices are made through voting and other political actions. Main topics are the pocketbook voter and the median voter theorem.

V Government and the Distribution of Economic Well-Being

A) **TOPIC 10 GOVERNMENT AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF INCOME.** The government redistributes income for several reasons, including charity as a public good, social insurance (safety net), distributional justice (equity).

B) **TOPIC 11 HOW INEQUALITY AND POVERTY ARE MEASURED.** Methods of measuring inequality and poverty are described. Lorenz curve and Gini coefficient. Absolute and relative measures of poverty. The Orshansky method and other methods of measuring poverty.

VI Government Transfer Programs

A) **TOPIC 12 TRANSFERS TO PERSONS WITH LIMITED INCOMES.** What are the main means-tested (or welfare) programs? How much is spent and how the programs are structured. Payment standards and benefit reduction.

B) **TOPIC 13 THE EFFECTS OF WELFARE AND WELFARE REFORM.** How does means-testing affect the recipient’s behavior? Are transfers in cash better or worse than transfers in kind? Why is most welfare in-kind? What was welfare reform, and what were its effects?

C) **TOPIC 14 SOCIAL INSURANCE AND SOCIAL SECURITY.** Insurance market failure (because of moral hazard and adverse selection) as a reason for government social insurance type programs. How Social Security works in the US. Is there a Social Security solvency problem? What are the economic effects of Social Security?

D) **TOPIC 15 GOVERNMENT HEALTH CARE PROGRAMS.** What is the role of government in the health care sector in the US? How much is spent? How does the US compare with other countries? How do Medicare and Medicaid work? The Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) and its effects.

VII State and Local Government Spending

A) **TOPIC 16 STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT SPENDING.** Local public goods, Education spending, inter-jurisdictional spillovers, Community choice, Fiscal federalism and government-to-government grants.