Course Description

Although fewer than 1% of Americans have a degree from the country’s top 30 colleges and universities, 39% of Fortune 500 CEOs, 41% of federal judges, 44% of the writing and editorial staff at the New York Times, 64% of Davos attendees, and 100% of Supreme Court justices do. Is this a positive sign that the United States is governed by its most talented and capable members who have risen through hard work and equal opportunity? Or a negative one pointing to the power of a corrupt and self-selecting elite?

This course explores the theme of meritocracy – rule by the intelligent – in comparative perspective. We will look at both old and new arguments regarding the proper role and definition of merit in political society as well as take the measure of meritocracy in present-day Singapore, France, and the United States. The course concludes with a focus on the current debate over American meritocracy and inequality.

Readings

This course is a seminar. You will be reading 50-70 pp. per class session (although sometimes more) and discussing those readings in depth together. The level and amount of reading may be challenging but certainly not beyond any student’s capabilities. I expect all students to keep up with the readings during the semester and contribute constructively to class discussion.

These readings are contained in three books and a course reader in two (or three) parts. The books are:

1. Stuart Ritchie, Intelligence: All That Matters (2016)

You may pick up Part I of the reader at the Faculty House now. The Ritchie and Bourdieu books are available for purchase at the Williams Bookstore on Spring Street. Gumbel is only available in ebook format (unless you read French; it’s available in paperback as Élite academy: Enquête sur la France malade de ses grandes écoles). If you would like to purchase Gumbel through the College, please let me know ASAP and I will make arrangements. Of course, you can buy all these books through your favorite on-line retailer as well. Ritchie and Bourdieu will also be available on electronic reserve at Sawyer Library.
Course expectations

Our course is a seminar, not a lecture. That means I expect everyone to participate in class discussion, which will occupy the bulk of our time together each day.

In order for all of us to get the most out of this course, I expect all students to faithfully keep up with the readings throughout the entire term. Readings assigned for a particular class session will be the topic for that day’s discussion, and therefore you should complete them prior to class. Please come to each class prepared to discuss and to learn from one another.

Finally, regular attendance and participation is valued, expected, and essential for you to succeed both in this course and at Williams generally. Please notify me (preferably by email) if you will be missing class for any reason.

Course requirements

- **One long paper** — During the semester you will write one long (1700-2300 words excluding notes/bibliography) analytic paper responding to a prompt based on a large section of the course readings. Each student will write either the first assignment based on ‘Introduction to meritocracy’ or the second based on ‘Meritocracy in comparative perspective’. I will distribute prompts about ten days before the paper is due. All papers must have a cover page with title and word count, 1-in. margins, double-spacing, and 11-pt. font minimum. Due dates are as follows:
  1. ‘Introduction to meritocracy’ paper, due Monday, March 29, 5.00pm
  2. ‘Meritocracy in comparative perspective’ paper, due Wednesday, May 19, 5.00pm

- **One short paper** — During the semester you will write one short (1200-1500 words excluding notes/bibliography) reflection paper based on one of five short collections of course readings. Each student must write this paper outside the large section of readings that are the foundation of his/her long paper. Thus if you write your long paper on the ‘Introduction to meritocracy’ section of the course, you must write your short paper on the ‘Meritocracy in comparative perspective’ section, and vice versa. I will distribute no prompts for the short paper. You will choose your own original theme that synthesizes the readings, drawing out

A NOTE ON DEADLINES

Papers are due on the days and times specified in the syllabus. Early papers are always welcome; **late papers will be penalized one partial letter grade per 24 hours late** (e.g. from A to A- for 1-24 hours late, A to A-/B+ for 25-48 hours late, etc.).

This is a very mild penalty. If you find that you are unable to make a deadline due to forces under your control—which includes work in other classes—**please do not ask for an extension**. Take the late penalty and use the extra time to write the best paper you can. A poor paper turned in on time is rarely better than an excellent paper a day or two late.

Sometimes being late is simply part of leading a busy life. You are all adults and can make adult choices about how to budget your time. Weighing costs and benefits in a finite world is very much part of being an adult. I attach no stigma at all to late papers. However, I do attach a late penalty.
and evaluating interesting arguments, claims, and/or conclusions from the authors. All papers must have a cover page with title and word count, 1-in. margins, double-spacing, and 11-pt. font minimum. Due dates are as follows:

**Introduction to meritocracy**
1. ‘An aristocracy of talent,’ due Monday, March 8, 5.00pm
2. ‘An aristocracy of virtue,’ due Monday, March 22, 5.00pm

**Meritocracy in comparative perspective**
3. ‘Meritocracy in Singapore,’ due Friday, April 9, 5.00pm
4. ‘Meritocracy in France,’ due Monday, April 26, 5.00pm
5. ‘Meritocracy in America,’ Friday, May 14, 5.00pm

- **Take-home final exam** – At the end of the semester you will write a final exam. This will be an open-book take-home format completed over a 24-hour period of your choosing during the week May 20-28. The exam will emphasize the final ‘Meritocracy on the scales’ section of the course but will also ask you to draw upon the previous sections as well.

- **Discussion questions** – A minimum of twelve (12) times during the semester you will submit one or two insightful and/or interesting questions for discussion based on the assigned reading(s) for that day. Possible questions might explore unclear passages in the readings, point out notable gaps in an author’s discussion, or offer critiques of an author’s argument. The best questions will be framed by a brief (< 300 words) discussion. I will use these questions to guide class discussion each day, including calling on you in class based on your remarks. Use our course Glow page to submit them. Questions are due by 8.30am the day of class. *Glow will lock automatically at that time and will not accept any questions submitted after the deadline.* If you are a late riser, submit your questions the night before. I will grade questions on a check-plus/check/check-minus scale.

- **Class participation** – Regular attendance and contributions to discussion are important, valued and expected. You are allowed two free passes for missing class without an excuse. Excused absences include personal illness, family emergencies, religious holidays, job interviews, and the like. Three or more unexcused absences will result in a reduction in your class participation grade.

**Honor Code**

While you may consult your friends, classmates, professors, and printed sources regarding the ideas discussed in this class, all written work must be yours and yours alone. **On papers, be scrupulous in avoiding plagiarism.** Be sure to use quote marks when quoting directly and cite appropriately. **On the take-home final exam, do not consult any sources not assigned for class (this includes the internet) and do not discuss your ideas or your written work with anyone.**
Grades

I will determine your final course grade according to the following formula:

- Long paper: 30%
- Short paper: 20%
- Take-home final exam: 25%
- Discussion questions: 15%
- Class participation: 10%
Course calendar

AN INTRODUCTION TO MERITOCRACY

Friday
Feb. 19

Introduction to the class

• no readings

Monday
Feb. 22

The American meritocracy

• Daniel Bell, “On meritocracy and equality,” The Public Interest 29 (Fall 1972), 29-68.

Wednesday
Feb. 24

An aristocracy of talent I: Social mobility


Monday
March 1

An aristocracy of talent II: Social immobility

• Gregory Clark, The Son Also Rises (2014), chs. 1-3 & 6.
• Guglielmo Barone and Sauro Mocetti, “What’s your (sur)name? Intergenerational mobility over six centuries,” VoxEU, 17 May 2016.
• “The landlords are back,” The Economist, 19 September 2020.

Wednesday
March 3

An aristocracy of talent III: Intelligence

• Stuart Ritchie, Intelligence: All That Matters.

Monday
March 8

An aristocracy of virtue I: Ancient Greece

• Plato, The Republic (Cambridge UP, 2000), 50-64, 78, 92-95, 100-110.
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lecture Title</th>
<th>Authors/Books</th>
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<tr>
<td>March 15</td>
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<td>Wes Jackson, <em>Becoming Native to This Place</em> (1994), 1-5.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Reading period</td>
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<td>March 22</td>
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**MERITOCRACY IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

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<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Meritocracy in Singapore II</td>
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<td>• Nigel Li, “A ‘new mandate’ for Singapore’s government?” <em>The Diplomat</em>, 13 July 2020.</td>
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<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Meritocracy in Singapore III</td>
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<td>Monday</td>
<td>Meritocracy in Singapore IV</td>
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<td>April 5</td>
<td>• Dennis Kwek et al., “‘Bridges and ladders’: The paradox of equity in excellence in Singapore schools,” in Siao See Teng et al., <em>Equity in Excellence</em> (2019), 87-108.</td>
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<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Meritocracy in France I</td>
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<td>April 7</td>
<td>• Pierre Bourdieu, <em>The State Nobility</em>, Prologue &amp; Part I.</td>
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<td>Monday</td>
<td>Meritocracy in France II</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
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<td>April 14</td>
<td>• Pierre Bourdieu, <em>The State Nobility</em>, Parts IV-V.</td>
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Monday
April 19

**Meritocracy in France IV**

- Muriel Darmon, “State Nobility revisited: Elite education in France today,” [presentation], Columbia University, 3 November 2011. [see link on course Glow page]
- Peter Gumbel, France’s Got Talent.

Wednesday
April 21

**Break**

Monday
April 26

**Meritocracy in America I**

- Meredith C. Frey, “What we know, are still getting wrong, and have yet to learn about the relationships among the SAT, intelligence and achievement,” *Journal of Intelligence* 7, 26 (2019).
- UC Office of the President, “University of California Board of Regents unanimously approved changes to standardized testing requirement for undergraduates,” 21 May 2020.

Wednesday
April 28

**Meritocracy in America II**

Monday
May 3

**Meritocracy in America III**


Wednesday
May 5

**Meritocracy in America IV**


Monday
May 10

**Meritocracy in America V**


**MERITOCRACY ON THE SCALES**

Wednesday
May 12

**For meritocracy**

Monday May 17  

**Against meritocracy**


Wednesday May 19  

**Against higher education**