

Reconsidering Merit(ocracy) In K-12, Higher Education, and Beyond

Spring 1: Tuesday 1-4pm
2 credits

Nadirah Farah Foley, M.S.Ed
PhD student, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Office hours: Thursdays, 10am-12pm

Best way to contact me: email. Please note that I only check email between 9am and 5pm on weekdays and do not check email on weekends; emails received after 5pm will be responded to on the next weekday.

Course Description:

Meritocracy is America's national myth, and it manifests in education as much as anywhere else. Whether policymakers, practitioners, or researchers, those involved in the educational enterprise often share a foundational belief that students have (and develop) certain capabilities, those capabilities can be measured, and demonstrated capabilities should be rewarded in particular ways. As teachers, for example, we assign grades; as admissions officers, we assign slots in a highly-stratified university system. We understand these systems to be imperfect; we acknowledge how racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and more shape students' experiences and outcomes in unequal ways. Accordingly, we try to take into account myriad qualities — like perseverance, intelligence, creativity, ability to work with others, civic engagement — that we think of as constituting “merit.” We at times critique specific metrics of merit, like standardized test scores. But seldom do we step back to consider how our very ideas about merit, and not just our metrics of it, may perpetuate inequality.

In this class, which will be conducted as a seminar, we will engage with texts discussing various components of merit, like intelligence, possession of certain types of cultural capital, and performance on particular types of assessments. Situating those constructions of merit in historical, cultural, and social context, we will ultimately critically assess our understandings of what merit is and develop an understanding of how our conceptualizations of merit affect the work we do. This class will require students to be brave, introspective, and willing to work through discomfort as we, individually and collectively, reimagine what merit is and what it could mean.

Central Course Questions:

1. What is merit?
2. Who defines merit?
3. How do constructions of merit in education intersect with race, class, gender, and ability?
4. How is a critical understanding of merit relevant to the work of educational practitioners, researchers, and policymakers? How might our work look different if we conceptualized merit differently?

Course Goals:

I expect that, through this class, you will:

- Gain an understanding of how constructions of merit are not fixed, but contextually-bound
- Be able to articulate how constructions of merit are not neutral, but are instead related to dominant institutions
- Build comfort analyzing and engaging with scholarly literature and popular conversations about issues of meritocracy in education and society more broadly
- Learn to apply theoretical understandings of how merit works to real-world situations that might be encountered in professional settings
- Develop habits of self-reflective practice with regard to practical applications of constructions and evaluations of merit

Course Expectations and Assignments

We will use a variety of pedagogical techniques in class; sometimes I will offer a brief lecture to offer additional context, but much of the class will be student-focused, whether through whole-group discussion or small-group activities. There will be opportunities to apply readings to case studies and discuss current practical dilemmas in the field, to offer suggestions for practical or policy changes, and to engage in critical readings and discussions of texts.

For a seminar, preparation before class is essential. You are expected to have thoroughly read all assigned texts prior to coming to class, and to participate actively in class discussions. You are also required to post a reading response for 4 of the 7 weeks of the semester; it is also helpful if you skim your classmates' responses before class. Reading responses can be submitted in the form of a written memo or a brief recorded video. In addition, there will be two graded writing assignments, which are described below.

Because participation is so essential to this course, and because the course is only seven weeks long, consistent attendance is expected and required. Should you need to miss class, please email me in advance and propose an alternate way (an extended memo, for example) to contribute to that week's meeting. Of course, I understand that sometimes emergencies or other unexpected circumstances arise that make attendance that day impossible. If this is the case, please talk with me as soon as possible so we can make arrangements to get you caught up.

A note about grades:

Given that this course deals extensively with the subjectivity of assessments, I encourage students to take the class SAT/UNSAT. Focusing on grades and achievement is antithetical to the kind of grappling with subjectivity that I hope we can engage in as a class. However, I understand that some students may prefer a grade, in which case the option of taking the course for a letter grade is available. Regardless of which grading option you choose, I encourage you to focus more on the narrative feedback you'll receive from me, and the engagement you'll have with your peers, than on a grade. All assignments are meant to increase students' learning; the weights given below are indicators not of relative importance, but of the relative amounts of time and effort that each assignment requires. You'll note that preparation and participation factors heavily into the ultimate evaluation of student performance in the course.

For the ultimate determination of whether a student's performance merits a SAT or UNSAT, please note that, consistent with the norm that grades below a B- indicate work that is not of graduate-level quality, students will need to earn at least a B- to earn a SAT in the class.

A note about academic integrity

As scholars, our ideas are our most valuable property and also the currency in which we trade. It is essential that we cite our sources, being clear about where our ideas come from. In class and especially in writing, you are required to adhere to the highest standards of academic integrity, utilizing citations carefully to show what is your own thinking, what builds on or is derived from someone else's ideas, and what is someone else's idea entirely. You will also be expected to represent others' ideas accurately and fairly, and to treat others' ideas with respect.

For additional notes on disabilities/access, basic needs, and digital needs, please refer to the Canvas course site.

Assignment Breakdown

Class preparation and participation: 35%

Response memos: 20%

Response memos should be brief — 250-500 words. In addition to the guiding questions for each week, you will want to attend to at least one of the four questions below.

1. What was your most important takeaway from this week's readings?
2. Did you have a strong reaction to anything? What surprised you?
3. How convinced are you by the readings?
4. What lingering questions would you like to explore in class as a group?

You are required to post a response memo for **four out of the seven** weeks of the class.

Mid-semester reflective memo (**due at 5pm on Friday, February 22nd, 2019**): 15%

In a paper of 1200-1500 words, synthesize and build on your discussion posts to reflect on how your ideas about merit are taking shape over the course of our first few sessions. Where did you begin the semester? How had you thought about merit over the course of your lifetime and educational journey? Where is your thinking currently? What experiences, readings, or discussions have been most influential? You are encouraged to cite classmates' discussion posts and comments in class as important bodies of knowledge moving your own thinking forward.

Final paper (**due at 5pm on Friday, March 15th, 2019**): 30%

For the final paper (2500-3500 words), you have three options.

- 1) Critical book review
- 2) Project/policy proposal
- 3) Research proposal

1) For the book review, choose two texts, ideally from different weeks of the syllabus and read them in their entirety. Your review should offer a synthesis of the major arguments of each book, but should also go beyond synthesis to offer an analysis of each book and to put the two texts in conversation with one another. Where do their arguments converge and diverge? What does one illuminate that another leaves obscured? Does one offer a more compelling vision? Why and how?

2) For the project/policy proposal, you can select any issue related to policy or practice in education that is connected to an issue of merit. You may draw inspiration from your personal or professional background when choosing your topic. In the paper itself, you should offer an analysis of the problem at hand, connecting it back to questions and concerns about merit and meritocracy. You should then offer recommendations for productive next steps — an intervention, program, or practice change — on this problem. Your recommendations should reflect an understanding of the issue and potential consequences of your proposed action. The goal of the project proposal is to apply the knowledge from this class to an issue of educational policy or practice.

3) For the research proposal, you will first identify a question associated with how merit is conceived in education. You will address, drawing on extant literature, why that conceptualization needs to be challenged. The research proposal will then suggest a project that will assess an unanswered question about the relationship between conceptualizations of merit and education. The research proposal's goal will be to further our understanding of the role of merit in education.

All three assignments will be graded based on 1) how thoroughly you have read the relevant texts or background literature; 2) the cogency of your argument; and 3) the clarity of your writing.

Students are required to meet with the instructor by the end of Week 5 to discuss their proposed paper topic.

Late Assignment Policy

All assignments are due by the stated deadline unless prior arrangements have been made for an extension. Late assignments will have one-third of a letter grade deducted for each day late. Because I am sympathetic to the fact that life happens, you are granted one 48-hour extension, no questions asked.

Class Schedule

29 Jan 2019

WEEK 1: What is merit, anyway?

Guiding questions:

- What do we mean by “merit”?
- What does it look like to take a more critical lens on “merit”?

Readings

- Young, M. (1958). The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033. London: Thames & Hudson. Ch. 2 & 3, pp. 32-61.
- Allen, A. 2011. Michael Young's 'The Rise of the Meritocracy': A Philosophical Critique. *British Journal of Sociology*, 59(4): 367-382.
- Madan, A. 2007. Sociologising Merit. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(29): 3044–3050.
- Meroe, A. S. (2014). Democracy, Meritocracy, and the Uses of Education. *Journal of Negro Education*, 83(4): 485-498.
- Mijs, J. (2016). The Unfulfillable Promise of Meritocracy: Three Lessons and their Implications for Justice in Education. *Social Justice Research*, 29: 14-34.

5 Feb 2019

WEEK 2: Historical Perspectives on Merit

Guiding questions:

- How has merit been understood, historically?
- (How) have conceptualizations of merit changed or stayed the same? If they have changed, why did that happen?

Readings

- Littler, J. (2018). *Against Meritocracy: Culture, power, and myths of mobility*. New York: Routledge. (Intro & Ch 1.)
- Karabel, J. (2005). *The Chosen: The hidden history of admission and exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. (ch. 1: “Elite Education and the Protestant Ethos”)
- Lemann, N. (2000). *The Big Test*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (ch. 4: “The Natural Aristocracy”)
- Gaztambide-Fernandez, R. A. (2009). *The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School*. (Ch. 2 & 3)

12 Feb 2019

WEEK 3: “The best and brightest”: Merit, ability, and the question of intelligence

Guiding questions:

- What does it mean to be intelligent?
- How do we assess intelligence?
- What are the implications of those assessments for marginalized group?

Readings

- Sternberg, R. J. (2004). Culture and Intelligence. *American Psychologist*, 59(5): 325-338.
- Carson, J. (2018). *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750-1940*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Ch 5: American Psychology and the Seductions of IQ; pp. 159-194)
- Herrnstein, R. and Murray, C. A. (1996). *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks. (ch. 1 and ch. 13)
- Fischer, C.S., Sanchez-Jankowski, M.S., Hout, M., Lucas, S.R., Swidler, A., and Voss, K. (1996). *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth*. Princeton University Press. (ch. 1)
- Hatt, B. (2011). Smartness as a Cultural Practice in Schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 20(10): 1-23.

19 Feb 2019

WEEK 4: Affirmative action admits?: Race and merit in a “post-racial” society

Guiding questions:

- How does race intersect with constructions of merit?
- How do racial minorities experience and conceptualize merit differently?
- What implications do these differences have for educational equity or inequality?

Readings

- Lee, J. & Zhou, M. (2015). *The Asian-American Achievement Paradox*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. (ch. 1: “What is Cultural about Asian-American Achievement?”)
- Warikoo, N. K. (2016). *The Diversity Bargain: and other dilemmas of race, admissions, and meritocracy at elite universities*. University of Chicago Press. (ch. 1: “Beliefs about Meritocracy and Race” and ch. 4: “Merit and the Diversity Bargain”)
- Au, W. (2016). Meritocracy 2.0: High-stakes, standardized testing as a racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism. *Educational Policy*. 30(1), pp. 39-62.
- Bowman, N. A. & Bastedo, M. N. (2017). What Role May Admissions Office Diversity and Practices Play in Equitable Decisions? *Research in Higher Education*. 59(4), pp. 430-447. <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1007/s11162-017-9468-9>

OR

Crush Podcast Episode 17 — Michael Bastedo on the Bias of College Admissions Officers: <http://www.crushpodcast.com/michael-bastedo>

Recommended:

- Steele, C. M. and Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), pp. 797-811.
- Foley, N. F. (2018, Jan 28). “A Radical Plan to Combat Inequality in College Admissions.” *Pacific Standard*. <https://psmag.com/education/a-radical-plan-to-combat-inequality-in-college-admissions>
- Anderson, M. D. (2017, Jul 27). “Why the Myth of Meritocracy Hurts Kids of Color.” *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/07/internalizing-the-myth-of-meritocracy/535035/>

26 Feb 2019

WEEK 5: #GIRLBOSS: Gendered constructions and performances of merit

Guiding questions:

- Are constructions of merit gender-neutral?
- How does performing meritoriousness look different for people of different genders?
- How do constructions of merit, if gendered, shape opportunity and inequality for gender minorities?

Readings

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender and Society*. 4(2). pp 139-158.
- Kumra, S. (2014). Gendered Constructions of Merit and Impression Management within Professional Service Firms. In *The Oxford Handbook of Gender in Organizations* (Savita Kumra, Ruth Simpson, and Ronald J. Burke, Eds.) Oxford University Press.
- Buchmann, C., DiPrete, T., & McDaniel, A. (2008). Gender Inequalities in Education. *Annual Review of Sociology* 34, 319-337.

- Khan, S. R. (2011). *Privilege: The making of an adolescent elite at St. Paul's School*. Princeton University Press. (ch. 3: “The Ease of Privilege” and ch. 4: “Gender and the Performance of Privilege”)
- New York Times (2013). “Harvard Business School Case Study: Gender Equity.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/08/education/harvard-case-study-gender-equity.html?pagewanted=all>

5 Mar 2019

WEEK 6: From capital to merit: Merit, class, and the role of elites

Guiding questions:

- How does class intersect with conceptions of merit? What role does cultural capital play?
- How do people with privilege think about merit?
- How do institutions frame merit in ways that are class-biased?

Readings

- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. New York: Greenwood Press, p. 241-258.
- Johnson, H. B. (2014). *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth: Choosing Schools and Inheriting Inequality in the Land of Opportunity*. New York: Routledge. (ch. 2: “Meritocracy and Good Schools” and ch. 6: “Inequality and Ideology”)
- Calarco J. M. (2014). Coached for the Classroom: Parents’ Cultural Transmission and Children’s Reproduction of Educational Inequalities. *American Sociological Review*. 79(5). pp 1015-1037.
- Posecznick, A. (2017). *Selling Hope and College: Merit, Markets, and Recruitment in an Unranked School*. Cornell University Press. (ch. 4: “Being a Real College in America”)

12 Mar 2019

WEEK 7: Whither meritocracy?: Merit & the new economy

Guiding questions:

- How do conceptualizations of merit shape individuals’ participation beyond education — both in the labor market and broader society?
 - How might we move toward a more equitable framing of merit, or a more equitable economy?
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- Rivera, L. (2015). *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*. Princeton University Press. (ch. 1: “Entering the Elite”; ch 9 “Deliberating Merit”)
 - Reeves, R. (2017). *Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Middle Class is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why That Is a Problem, and What to Do About It*. Brookings Institute Press. (ch. 5: “Market Merit”)
 - Guinier, L. (2015). *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America*. Boston: Beacon Press. (Ch. 3: “From Testocratic Merit to Democratic Merit.”)
 - Cottom, T. M. (2017). *Lower ed: The troubling rise of for-profit colleges in the new economy*. The New Press. (“Introduction: The Education Gospel”)

- Sensoy, O. & DiAngelo, R. (2017). “We are all for diversity, but...”: How faculty hiring committees reproduce whiteness and practical suggestions for how they can change. *Harvard Educational Review*. 87(4), pp. 557-580. [SKIM THIS]

Recommended

- Subramaniam, A. (2015). Making Merit: The Indian Institutes of Technology and the Social Life of Caste. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 57(2), pp. 291-322.

N.B. This syllabus, like our course, should be seen as an evolving experience, and from time to time changes might become necessary. As instructor, I reserve the right to modify this syllabus, with the stipulation that any changes will be communicated to the entire class clearly and in writing.