**Higher Education**

Soc 595 Section 1  
Fall 2021  
Tu 11:30am-2:30pm, 3207 LSA

**Professor:** Elizabeth Popp Berman  
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**Office hours:** Tu 3-5pm (809 Weiser Hall or by Zoom), or email for appointment  
Sign up at: [https://calendly.com/epberman/office-hours](https://calendly.com/epberman/office-hours)

**Course Description**

Sociologists have cared about higher education for a long time. Colleges and universities are important sites for both reproducing inequality and creating mobility, as well as for producing and certifying knowledge. Although research in the sociology of higher education spans a number of different approaches, this class will emphasize two that I see as particularly generative right now: a longstanding framework that focuses on colleges as organizations, and a more recent one that approaches higher education (including private institutions) as a state-dependent sector that can be studied through a political economy lens. Inequalities—racial, economic, and inter-institutional—will also be a persistent theme throughout the class.

The course is organized into three main sections. First, we will spend some time introducing broad lenses for thinking about higher education: as made up of organizations operating in a larger field, as part of what Suzanne Mettler calls the “submerged state,” and as a source of social stratification and mobility. Next, we’ll move onto several weeks that focus on different types of higher ed organizations: the for-profit sector, “new universities” that serve large numbers of minoritized students, large research universities, and (more briefly) elite private institutions. Finally, we’ll look at some major changes in higher education in recent decades, including the political struggle over affirmative action, the rise of enrollment management, and the spread of rankings.

The course will be run as a seminar. I will do a modest amount of lecturing, but most of our time will be spent discussing the works we are reading. This means that keeping up with the reading and being prepared to contribute are critical not only to your personal success in the class, but to the success of the class as a whole. To this end, you will turn in a reading response before most weeks of class to help you reflect on the readings and articulate your reactions.

There is a ton of excellent work on higher education that I have left out, including some of my favorites. You will only get a small taste of the large body of work on higher education and social stratification. We are spending a single week on the knowledge-production side of the university, although this is a major topic. The class is entirely focused on the U.S. And I have downplayed the large body of research on elite institutions, which receive disproportionate attention in the literature. If these are your areas of interest, I am happy to recommend more readings and you can explore them in your final paper.

Finally, I recognize that the pandemic is not over and many if not most of us are still dealing with related challenges. I understand that students may need more flexibility now than during “normal” times, and expect to extend that if and when it turns out to be needed. In return, I hope that you will be similarly understanding if circumstances arise that cause bumps in the road this semester.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

We will be reading the following books, all of which are available in electronic form from the library, or can be purchased from your favorite bookseller. The exception is Bankers in the Ivory Tower, which is not yet published, and which will be shared electronically. All other readings will be posted to Canvas.


Grades will be based on a combination of reading responses, class participation, and a final paper.

Participation (25% of grade). A successful seminar requires active and informed participation by its members. You should come to class each week prepared to engage with the readings and with one another. I am much less concerned with the brilliance of what you say than with your active and honest attempt to grapple with the course material.

Ten reading responses (25% of grade). Most weeks, you will write a reflection memo on the week’s readings. These memos (typically about two double-spaced pages, or 750 words) should be posted to Canvas by 9pm Monday night. The format here is fairly flexible, but should not rely heavily on summarizing. Instead, you may want to consider what you think important takeaway messages of the readings are, how they relate to one another or to other class readings, what questions they raise for you, what you found interesting, challenging, or problematic about them, and/or what issues you think merit discussion in class. We have 13 weeks of class; since you cannot submit a memo the first week, this means you can take two weeks off from response-writing.

Research paper or proposal (50% of grade). Your main assignment will be a 15-20 pp. research paper on a relevant topic of your choice. This can be a research proposal, a substantive analysis of a question that interests you, or, if you already have some data you want to analyze, an empirical paper. A short (2-3 pp.) paper proposal will be due Friday, October 15 (just before fall break). The final paper will be due Tuesday, December 14 (a week after the last day of class).

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Week 1, August 31
Introduction to the class

**No class on September 7** (Rosh Hashanah)

If we were having class this week, it would be on the history of higher education in the U.S. I recommend David Labaree’s *A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Ascendancy of American Higher Education* (2017), for a very readable overview, although I find it too complacent about the status quo. For a useful counterpoint, try Adam Harris’s new book, *The State Must Provide: Why America’s Colleges Have Always Been Unequal—and How to Set Them Right* (2021), which covers the history of higher education for Black Americans.

**FRAMING WEEKS**

**Week 2, September 14**
The University as an Organization, Higher Ed as an Organizational Field


**Week 3, September 21**
The Political Economy of Higher Education


**Week 4, September 28**
Higher Education and Social Mobility/Social Stratification


ROAMING ACROSS THE LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Week 5, October 5
The For-Profit Sector


Week 6, October 12
“New Universities”


No class on October 19 (Fall Break)

Week 7, October 26
Research Universities


Week 8, November 2
A Comparative Analysis


CHANGES AND CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Week 9, November 9
The Political Struggle over Affirmative Action


Week 10, November 16
From Admissions to Enrollment Management, Part 1

**Week 11, November 23**  
From Admissions to Enrollment Management, Part 2


**Week 12, November 30**  
The Rise of Rankings


**Week 13, December 7**  
Flex week

I am leaving this week unscheduled in case of COVID contingencies. The plan, however, is not to leave it completely open but to choose reading(s) for this final day in consultation with the class.