Catalog Description

This course focuses on understanding the central psychological issues in the academic achievement gaps between different social groups in America. Although structural and cultural factors will be discussed, the primary focus is on psychological factors in gaps between higher and lower income children and between African American, Latino, Asian, and Caucasian students in terms of test and school performance and in policy and educational interventions shown to reduce achievement gaps. There will be an emphasis on African Americans and to some extent Latinos because the gap for these populations is so consequential and because there has been far more written about these groups.

Objectives

Students will be able to: (a) describe important facts and debates about the various achievement gaps in American education; (b) demonstrate knowledge of the proposed causes and social implications of the gaps, including psychological, social, and cultural factors; (c) contrast the different explanations for gender and ethnic gaps in performance; (d) demonstrate the ability to critically evaluate policy proposals that address the gaps; and (e) produce a genuine piece of work valuable to the larger community with relevance for closing gaps.

Course Structure

This is a lecture/seminar/experiential course designed not only to contrast and compare important concepts in the understanding of achievement gaps but also to develop your skills at evaluating research, thinking, writing, and speaking in an arena central to human achievement. Your role in this course is to become conversant in the general area of achievement gaps, particularly in the
psychological perspective. Each week, class time will be devoted to focused discussion of the week's readings. Students will also be expected to deliver oral reports from time to time.

You will also become the resident expert on one sub-area that is interesting to you. For example, my sub-area is the social psychology of achievement. That means I will be the resident expert on that topic and take a lead discussant role as we discuss how things like stereotypes, expectations, and group norms relates to the gap. Your job is to consult with me early on in the semester about what aspect of the psychology of the achievement gap you want to be the resident expert in. You will then be a lead discussant when topics related to your sub-area come up in class discussions. The achievement gap is such a broad and multifaceted phenomenon that the possibilities for your sub-area are almost endless. Let me give you a few examples:

1. Psychological interventions that help reduce the gap
2. Why girls seem to be less interested in math and science than boys and what we can do about it
3. Social policies and their effect on the gap (e.g., No Child Left Behind; Affirmative Action)
4. Charter schools or alternative schools

Each of you will need to do a lot of independent reading on your narrower specialty topic. In this way, each of you becomes a very important collaborator in creating the collective knowledge of the class. The key will be for you to find something that draws on your interests and talents and that can sustain your interest over time.

**Weekly Assignments**

Each week you will be asked to write a one-page paper connecting the week’s readings to the background readings (three books you will read early in the semester). On a few weeks we will visit schools that are successfully closing the gap and have meetings with the teachers/administration. We will also have a guest speaker. In at least one class session, you will lead a discussion on your area of expertise, which will require your doing some extra readings on top of the readings assigned for that week.

**Field Research Project**

Early in the semester, you will arrange a visit to a school that you have identified as an important context for understanding the achievement gap. You should begin this project immediately. You will record your observations in a paper that is at least five pages long. This paper is due by Thursday, November 15.
Final Research Project

Throughout the semester you will work towards creating an actionable, research-based project related to your sub-area of the psychology of the achievement gap. This project should reflect the wisdom you have gained from the semester, incorporating both the science you have learned from readings and your observations from the field. Your final project will be due on the last day of class, and you will give an oral presentation about it during finals week in lieu of exams.

Possible final projects can include but are not limited to:

1. A 10- to 15-page research proposal testing a hypothesis of interest to you about the achievement gap. This should be a highly refined distillation of your weekly writings over the semester modeled after a grant proposal, with background literature, description of your proposed methods, sampling considerations, and so on. This proposal should be real, suitable for submission for funding.

2. Conduct in depth analysis of an actual school, classroom teacher, or principal who is eliminating the achievement gap: write your voluminous notes into a magazine article to be submitted to a publication such as Education Leadership or Ed Week (Note: to receive a grade the article must be suitable for submission and hopefully submitted after I edit).

3. Interview or do study of someone discussed in the Thernstrom Book (No Excuses that deserves a second look/e.g., Gregory Hodge/Raif Esquith/ David Levin.

4. Write an Op Ed to be submitted to the New York Times on the Achievement Gap and an important consideration the next President must be aware of (Note: to receive a grade the Op Ed must be ready for submission and hopefully submitted).

5. Design an intervention in a school and propose it in an actual proposal to Spencer or National Science Foundation (Note: to receive a grade the Proposal must be suitable for submission).

6. Participate in conducting school based research. I can help you find a project--there are many available and describe in a brief paper the methods and results of the study (the study must be real)

7. Draw up a design for a charter school that will produce the most learning from all students. Justify the design by citing relevant research.

8. Write a book quality chapter (20 pages) describing an intervention (e.g. cooperative learning) its success rate for closing gaps along with instructions for teachers on how to implement it.

9. Propose your own “real” project.
**Grading**
Class attendance and participation = 30%
Weekly assignments = 20%
Final Oral Report = 15%
Final project = 35%

**Course readings**

**Required Books**

**Recommended Books for Background Reading**

*Additional required readings are listed on the Class Schedule.*
Class Schedule

September 6: Introductions

No Excuses, Class and Schools, and The Death and Life of the Great American School System

Watch Waiting for Superman

September 13: Psychology and the Achievement Gap (Part I)

No Excuses, Class and Schools, and The Death and Life of the Great American School System

September 20: Oral presentations by students about your interests, aspects of the gap that you are interested in, and your “burning questions.”

No Excuses, Class and Schools, and The Death and Life of the Great American School System

September 27: Psychology and the Achievement Gap (Part II)

Finish reading No Excuses, Class and Schools, and The Death and Life of the Great American School System

October 4: Charter School Visit 1: KIPP AMP
1224 Park Place, 4th Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11213 (Housed in M.S. 390/Maggie L. Walker Campus, corner of Sterling and Troy)
Meet at the school at 9:00 AM


October 11:
Part I: “Noncognitives” and the Achievement Gap

Part II: Identity and Motivation


Optional Readings for Further Study


**October 18: Psychological Interventions**


“About” section of AVID website: [http://www.avid.org/abo_whatisavid.html](http://www.avid.org/abo_whatisavid.html)


**Optional Readings for Further Study**


October 25: Charter School Visit 2: Excellence Boys Charter School of Bedford Stuyvesant
225 Patchen Avenue (between Macon and Macdonough Streets), Brooklyn, NY 11233
Meet at school at 9:00 AM

November 1: Alternative Schooling


November 8: Guest Lecture: Pedro Noguera


Sections of Noguera’s latest book (excerpts TBA)

November 15: School Culture


**November 22: NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING**

**November 29: Student Culture**

Reread relevant passages from *No Excuses, Class and Schools,* and *The Death and Life of the Great American School System.*


**December 6: Health and Nurture**

Review *Class and Schools,* chapters of *No Excuses* and *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* related to teacher quality and poverty.

Basch, C. E. (2010). Healthier students are better learners: A missing link in school reforms to close the achievement gap. *Equity Matters: Research Review No. 6.*


**December 13: Meaningful Work**

http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/feb08/vol65/num05/Project-Based_Learning.aspx

http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/nov94/vol52/num03/Project-Based_Learning@_Pursuits_with_a_Purpose.aspx


**FINAL DATE (TBD): Final oral reports and end-of-semester party**