

USP 515 - Economic Applications to Urban Studies: Course Syllabus

Instructor Information

- Instructor: Dr. Greg Schrock, Associate Professor, Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning
- Office Hours: Tues 2-3pm, Wed 12:30-1:30pm, other times by appointment, [self-schedule here](#)
- Preferred Contact Information: gschrock@pdx.edu
- Expected Response Time: Generally within 24 hours during the week; weekend response times based on urgency.

Course Information

- Fall 2026
- CRN: 13432
- Credits: 4
- Location and/or modality: In-person, URBN 250
 - Meeting times: Tues/Thurs 3:30-5:10pm (optional online review session: Friday 11am-noon)

Course Description

Economics offers us powerful theories about how actors – such as workers, households, firms, and public institutions – behave and make decisions in a world of unlimited wants but finite resources. At a societal level, we look to economics to help us understand how resources can be allocated in a manner that is most efficient, but at the same time how to understand and address inequalities generated by markets. And within the urban context, we look to economics to help us analyze patterns of human settlement and the built environment over time and across space. Certainly, economics does not tell all – politics, culture, custom and even historical accident each play a role – but it tells us a lot. In the United States and most advanced capitalist nations, decisions about resource allocation generally occur within markets, and not the realm of planners or agency bureaucrats. Yet as planners we start from the assumption that some (greater or lesser) public intervention in markets is necessary – and indeed desirable – to yield communities with safe, uncongested streets, robust natural areas, vital commercial districts, and broad-based economic opportunity. Both proponents - and often, opponents - of planning interventions will invariably resort to “economic thinking” as a way to analyze problems, and argue for proposed solutions. As future planners, it is imperative that you familiarize yourself with economic theory and concepts, and learn how to deploy them effectively in your own analyses and prescriptions, and to critique those of others.

Course Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for you in this course are as follows:

1. To learn and apply economic concepts of market function and market failure, which serve as an important basis for urban planning and policy interventions;
2. To learn and apply concepts and methods for analyzing the efficiency and equity impacts of planning and policy interventions in markets;
3. To learn and apply models and concepts to assess the market and institutional forces that underpin urban development processes and outcomes in the U.S. and elsewhere; and 4. To learn and apply models and concepts to assess the market and institutional forces that yield disparities and inequities, especially by race and class, in the urban environment. 5. To learn and assess the relationship between urbanization processes and environmental sustainability outcomes, and the role of planning in mediating that relationship. As a core course in the MURP program, the class articulates directly to the following Student Learning Outcomes that have been established for the program:

1. MURP students will apply knowledge and skills to create more equitable and just communities and planning outcomes.
2. MURP students will apply knowledge and skills to create more sustainable communities and planning outcomes.
5. MURP students will assess forces impacting human settlements and interconnections among systems.
7. MURP students will design planning processes, make plans, and create strategies for plan implementation.
8. MURP students will collect and analyze information relevant to plan making. 9. MURP students will communicate plans and planning knowledge effectively and persuasively. As a result, de-identified student work will be used by the MURP Executive Committee to assess progress in student learning related to those outcomes. This is not about assessing individual students, but rather to assure overall programmatic effectiveness in student learning.

Course Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites for this course, but having at least some introductory course in microeconomics at the undergraduate level is helpful. Students without a background in economics are strongly recommended to review the free Khan Academy [“Microeconomics”](#) course to help gain a foundational understanding of economic concepts to be discussed in the course.

Required Materials

There is one text for this course:

[*The Divided City: Poverty and Prosperity in Urban America*](#) by Alan Mallach (2018, Island Press). We will read several chapters out of this text and it is therefore required; PSU Library has licensed a digital copy for you to access.

Urban Economics by Arthur O'Sullivan is recommended as a reference but optional; we will begin to cover the related material in week 5. The most recent edition is the 9th edition (2018, McGraw-Hill); however, you may opt instead for the 8th edition (2012), 7th edition (2009) or 6th edition (2006), which can be obtained quite affordably through a variety of online outlets. The 7th edition is available at PSU Library on Course Reserve.

For the first portion of the course, there are no required texts. However, the lectures will draw upon microeconomic concepts that are covered in a variety of [basic economic texts](#). I will provide links on Canvas to videos from [Khan Academy](#), a free online resource.

In addition to these texts, there will be supplemental readings made available through the course's [Canvas site](#).

Major Assignments

Your grade for the course will be based upon six components. Further details and guidance about each assignment will be provided in class and on Canvas.

Assignment 1 (10%): Policy Analysis Memo

For this assignment, you will prepare and present (in class) a brief, professional-style group memorandum in which you will take a planning issue and assess the case for public intervention, alternative approaches to address the problem, and analyze the efficiency and equity of those approaches.

Due: **Thursday, October 22nd**, 12pm, to be submitted via Canvas.

Assignment 2 (15%): Urban Density Analysis

For a major metropolitan region (other than Portland) of your choosing, you will analyze tract-level changes in population density from 1980, 2000 and 2020, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Due: **Friday, November 13th**, 11:59pm, via Canvas.

Assignment 3 (20%): Urban Inequality Analysis

For the same chosen metropolitan region, you will analyze trends in poverty, household income, racial segregation and environmental injustice between 2000 and today, using Census data. Due: **Friday, December 4th**, 11:59pm, via Canvas.

Urbanization in Global Perspective (5%)

Once during the term, you will find a media report or case study pertaining to urban development outside of North America and post a brief (300-500 word) summary on the Canvas site about it. In addition, you will give a very brief (90 second) "report out" in class that week.

Due: Variable, with posts generally due on Thursdays from weeks 5-10.

Quizzes (20%)

There will be five online quizzes throughout the term, two covering the first section and three the second section of the class. Each quiz will be multiple-choice and contain 20 questions. The four

highest scores will be counted and an average taken. An option will be given for “replacing” up to two quiz scores by submitting written responses. See Canvas for further information.

Final Exam (30%)

There will be a final examination for the course, to be held during the Tuesday class time of exam week. The exam will be cumulative in nature, covering both segments of the course, and consist of short-answer questions. Details about the exam format will be provided later in the term.

Optional Exercise Sets

I will post to Canvas sets of exercises that are designed to reinforce the material discussed in class that week. These exercises are entirely optional but recommended, and I will not be grading them. Instead, at the end of each week I will post an answer key. The purpose of the exercises is to allow you to apply the concepts in a manner that will allow you to prepare for the final exam.

Grading Criteria

Late Submission Policy

Late submissions for assignments 1 through 3 will be accepted with a point-per-hour penalty (based on 100-point scale), with a maximum penalty of 50 points (i.e., half the assignment’s value). The first late submission will be assessed at 0.5 points per hour; subsequent late submissions 1.0 point per hour. Students may request additional time without penalty to complete assignments, as long as the request is submitted at least 24 hours ahead of the deadline and accompanied by a reasonable justification (to be determined by the instructor). A good rule of thumb is: if the reason could not have been anticipated in advance, then it is generally reasonable. Deadlines in other classes or at work generally do not meet this criterion. You will be given at least 2 weeks (usually more) to complete each assignment so plan ahead!

Grading Scale

Most written assignments will be graded on a 100-point scale, except where otherwise noted. Quizzes and the final exam will be scored based on the number of questions but curved to a 100-point basis for the purpose of final grades. Final course letter grades will be assigned based on 7/0/3 cutoffs - e.g., 87% for a B+, 90% for an A-, 93% for an A. Consistent with [PSU’s Grading System](#) for graduate courses, A grades are reserved for “Excellent” work; A-/B+ for “Good” work; B/B- for “Satisfactory” work; C-level grades are considered “Below Standard” and unacceptable for MURP students enrolled in the course. Wherever possible I will utilize rubrics when grading assignments to assess performance in relation to expectations.

Course Attendance Policy

Attendance and participation are not counted toward your grade. All class lectures will be recorded for later viewing on Canvas. Other than a few dates (presentation of your Policy Analysis Memo and your Urbanization in Global Perspective article), you do not necessarily need to show up in-person to succeed. But it is highly recommended!

Flexibility Statement

The instructor reserves the right to modify course content and/or substitute assignments and learning activities in response to institutional, weather, or class situations. *Please note that the readings are subject to change - please check Canvas for the most updated list.*

Course Calendar/Schedule

Week/Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments due
Intro (Sept 29)	Planning versus markets?	Klosterman, Richard E. 1985. “Arguments for and Against Planning.” <i>Town Planning Review</i> . Kvangraven, Ingrid Harvold, and Surbhi Kesar. 2020. “Why Do Economists Have Trouble Understanding Racialized Inequalities?” Institute for New Economic Thinking blog.	None
Unit 1 (Oct 1 & 6)	How Markets Work	[1.a] Khan Academy (KA), “Supply, Demand and Market Equilibrium” and “Elasticity.” [1.b] Stone, Deborah. 2002. “Efficiency,” in <i>Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making</i> . KA, “Consumer and producer surplus” and “Market interventions and deadweight loss”	None
Unit 2 (Oct 8 & 13)	How Markets Fail	[2.a] Stiglitz, Joseph. 2000. “Market Failure,” in <i>Economics of the Public Sector</i> . KA, “Market failure and the role of government” Rahman, K. Sabeel. 2017. “Losing and Gaining Public Goods,” in <i>Boston Review</i> . [2.b] Meltzer, Rachel and Alex Schwartz. “Devising Alternative Policy Options,” in <i>Policy Analysis as Problem Solving</i> . Davidson, Adam. 2013. “Should We Tax People for Being Annoying?” <i>NYT Magazine</i> .	Oct 9-12: Quiz 1

Unit 6 (Nov 10 & 12)	Transportation Economics	[6.a] Litman, Todd. 2011. "Socially Optimal Transport Prices and Markets." Victoria, BC: Victoria Transport Policy Institute. Manville, Michael, and Emily Goldman. 2018. "Would Congestion Pricing Harm the Poor? Do Free Roads Help the Poor?"	Nov 13: Assignment 2 due
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Week/Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments due
		[6.b] Walker, Jarrett. n.d. "The Transit Ridership Recipe." "Should Public Transit be Free?" 2022. Freakonomics podcast.	
Unit 7 (Nov 17 & 19)	Housing & Neighborhood Change	[7.a] Been, Vicki, Gould, Ingrid Ellen, and Katherine O'Regan. 2025. "Supply Skepticism Revisited" [7.b] Mallach, ch. 5, "Gentrification and Its Discontents" and ch. 6, "Sliding Downhill"	Nov 20-23: Quiz 4
Unit 8 (Nov 24)	Spatial Inequity & Local Government	Mallach, ch. 7, "The Other Postindustrial America" Cashin, Sheryll. 2021. "Opportunity Hoarding" in <i>White Space, Black Hood</i>.	Nov 27-30: Quiz 5
Unit 9 (Dec 1)	Urban Environmental Sustainability	UN-Habitat. 2016. "Just Environmental Sustainabilities"	None
Last class (Dec 3)	Wrap-up/ review		Dec 4: Assignment 3 due
Finals week (Dec 8)	Final exam	n/a	Dec 8: Final exam

PSU Policies and Resources

Academic Integrity & Grading Policies

It should go without saying that plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated, but I will say it anyway. “Academic dishonesty,” according to the [PSU Student Code of Conduct and Responsibility](#), refers to:

actual or attempted, fraud, deceit, unauthorized use of materials prohibited or inappropriate in the context of the academic assignment, or any act that aims to achieve an unfair academic advantage. Unless otherwise specified by the faculty member, all submissions, whether in draft or final form, must either be the Student’s own work, or must clearly acknowledge the source(s).

This encompasses both egregious acts of cheating like copying the answer to someone else’s exam, but also more mundane acts like lifting reference material from websites without attribution. This also includes the use of generative AI without documentation on the student’s part. Per university policy, instances of academic dishonesty may result in a zero grade for those assignment(s). Regardless of how the issue is resolved, any incident of academic dishonesty will be reported to the TSUSP School

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Director, MURP Program Director, and if necessary, CUPA Associate Dean; students committing repeated acts of academic dishonesty may be subject to sanctions within their respective academic programs.

Incomplete Grades will only be offered in cases that align with PSU’s [Incomplete Grades Policy](#).

[Access and Inclusion for Students with Disabilities](#)

PSU values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to fostering mutual respect and full participation for all students. My goal is to create a learning environment that is equitable, usable, inclusive, and welcoming. If any aspects of instruction or course design result in barriers to your inclusion or learning, please notify me. The [Disability Resource Center \(DRC\)](#) provides reasonable accommodations for students who encounter barriers in the learning environment. If you have, or think you may have, a disability that may affect your work in this class and feel you need accommodations, contact the Disability Resource Center to schedule an appointment and initiate a conversation about reasonable accommodations. If you already have accommodations, please contact me to make sure that I have received a faculty notification letter and discuss your accommodations.

[Title IX Reporting](#)

PSU is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of prohibited discrimination and sexual harassment ([sexual assault](#), domestic and dating violence, and gender or sex-based harassment and stalking). If you have experienced any form of gender or sex-based discrimination or sexual harassment, know that help and support are available. You may report any incident of discrimination or discriminatory harassment, including sexual harassment, to either the Office of Equity and Compliance or the Office of the Dean of Student Life.

Please be aware that as a faculty member, I have the responsibility to report any instances of sexual harassment, sexual violence and/or other forms of prohibited discrimination. This means that if you

tell me about a situation of sexual harassment or sexual violence that may have violated university policy or student code of conduct, I have to share the information with my supervisor, the University's Title IX Coordinator or the Office of the Dean of Student Life. However, the Title IX Coordinators will keep the information confidential and refer you to a confidential advocate.

Technology Usage

AI Usage

Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Claude or Gemini may be used on written assignments but only with clear citation and documentation of how it was used. **Any use** of AI tools during quizzes or exams is strictly prohibited.

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Recording Technology Notice

We will use technology for virtual meetings and recordings in this course, including [Zoom AI](#) features for transcriptions in this course. Our use of such technology is governed by FERPA, the [Acceptable Use Policy](#) and PSU's [Student Code of Conduct](#). A record of all meetings and recordings is kept and stored by PSU, in accordance with the Acceptable Use Policy and FERPA. I will not share recordings of your class activities outside of course participants. You may not share recordings or transcripts outside this course without explicit instructor permission. Doing so may result in disciplinary action.

Turnitin

Students agree that by taking this course all required papers may be subject to submission review for textual similarity for the purpose of detection of unoriginal writing, including plagiarism. All submitted papers will be included as source documents in the [Turnitin.com](#) reference database solely for the purpose of detecting unoriginal writing, including plagiarism of such papers. Use of the Turnitin.com service is subject to the Turnitin Acceptable Use posted on the Turnitin.com website.

