Rankings Systems and Higher Education
HED 4294
Winter, 2017
Tuesdays 4-7:20 pm
KRH 305

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Office Hours: Wednesdays, 11:30 am – 1:30 pm

SEMINAR DESCRIPTION

Each year, department chairs, deans, students, and college presidents hold their breath in anticipation for the release of college and program rankings. Will their academic unit/campus be given a more prominent place in the rankings? Will the efforts they have made to reshape campus life in the image of a prestigious institution pay off? Or will they be assigned a lower rank and, by default, lower status within the rankings? Called by scholars and academic leaders a “positional arms race” and a “zero sum game,” the rankings fill the hearts and minds of many with hope, despair, pride and shame (Winston, 2000).

This seminar examines how ranking systems such as U.S. News and World Report shape higher education structures and cultures. We explore the history of rankings while unpacking and critiquing the metrics used within these systems. We debate whether rankings disadvantage or benefit particular individuals or institutions, and if they reify the status quo or improve the quality of higher education and its ability to support diverse communities and students while strengthening democratic life.

Note: The design of this seminar borrows heavily and is indebted to one taught by Dr. KerryAnn O’Meara, Professor of Higher Education at the University of Maryland.

SEMINAR OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this seminar students will be able to:

1. Describe the history, purpose, evolution and influence of media and governmental rankings systems in higher education.
2. Analyze the effects of rankings systems on individuals and institutions within higher education.
3. Describe and critique the criteria used in mainstream and alternative rankings systems.
4. Design a ranking system and apply it to 10 higher education institutions. Defend the criteria, methods, and consequences of their ranking system using social science research on higher education and make a persuasive argument for why their ranking system improves on key aspects of current ranking systems.
5. Understand how rankings systems support or impede the ability of higher education institutions to promote educational equity, dismantle systemic oppression, and embody their public purposes.

STATEMENT OF TEACHING

As an instructor, I seek to co-create with students a classroom space that honors the principles of Inclusive Excellence in which all participants feel inclined to bring their expertise, identities, learning, and experience to bear on the topics we are considering in class. I care deeply about your learning and development as a scholar and practitioner. I have been strongly influenced by Paulo Friere’s work Pedagogy of the Oppressed (http://www.pedagogyoftheoppressed.com/author/) and bell hooks’s work Teaching to Transgress (https://academictrap.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/bell-hooks-teaching-to-transgress.pdf), and have a desire to
create a classroom space that is liberatory, challenging, and inclusive of the diverse experiences, identities, and expertise students bring to the course. I am interested in helping students cultivate the skills, efficacies and expertise necessary for engaging in research and leadership within higher education so that they may enact their roles effectively while dismantling systemic oppression and promoting the public purposes of higher education.

I do not think of myself as the sole expert in the course or as a sage on the stage. Instead, I view myself as a guide on the side helping to facilitate the learning of those enrolled in the class. I firmly believe that I have as much to learn from students as I have to teach them, and that students have much to teach and learn from one another. In these ways, I view our course as a co-owned and co-created learning experience. I seek and welcome student feedback about how the course is going and incorporate this feedback into the course. To that end, I make available an online, anonymous survey that students may use to offer feedback and make suggestions. This survey link will be posted to Canvas the Monday of Week 2 and will remain open for the duration of the course.

ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

This seminar is discussion-based wherein participants will share, collaborate, provide feedback, and contribute to the development of each other’s learning. Discussions will take place in person and online (on Canvas). I expect that you will be critical and creative in how you present your work and expertise. I have chosen readings intentionally to guide our discussions and time together. All class sessions will involve discussion of assigned readings; I expect that you be prepared to share in this discussion and have completed readings in advance. Please arrive with 3-5 questions, insights and observations about the readings. It may be useful for you to jot down notes that capture your 3-5 points.

Group work will be a large component of this course. Each student is expected to participate in group discussions, activities, and projects. You will be evaluated on the professionalism and integrity with which you engage your group members. Additionally, you will be evaluated on your tangible contributions to your group, and the care and attention you put into producing high-quality artifacts. Group members will be given an opportunity to evaluate one another, so it behooves you to make high-quality contributions to your group.

Formal writing activities (e.g., papers) should follow the most recent American Psychological Association (APA) style guide. Informal writing activities (e.g., Canvas discussions) can be written in a style of students’ discretion. The DU writing center is available as a writing resource for students. Information about the writing center is included at the end of this syllabus.

I am available to meet and answer questions in-person, online through Zoom, Canvas, email, or over the phone as needed to assist students in meeting the expectations described herein. Please feel free to send me questions, join office hours, or request an appointment as needed.

REQUIRED READINGS

All readings will be available in PDF format on Canvas or as links within the syllabus.

Readings Key: SoC refers to resources contributed by Scholar(s) of Color. As a course striving to embody inclusive excellence through the incorporation of diverse perspectives, 48% of course readings are by Scholars of Color, and 10% are from feminist scholars. If you are aware of resources written by folks holding diverse perspectives (including sexual orientation, gender nonconforming, ability status, immigrant status, class background and other identities) that relate to rankings systems, please contact me and I will include them in our course readings.
### Week 1
**Introducing Rankings Systems**

**January 3, 2017**  
**Agenda:**
- Seminar and syllabus overview.  
- Introduction to the rankings.  
- Rankings Group Meeting Time.

**Reading:**

### Week 2
**History and Evolution of Rankings Systems**

**January 10, 2017**  
**Agenda:**
- Trio Reflective Discussion Meeting Time.  
- Discussion of the history and evolution of rankings systems.

**Guiding Pre-Reflection Questions** – Post to Canvas by 11:59 pm on January 8th, 2017.

1. What, if anything, surprises you about the way in which the rankings are calculated?  
2. Why do you think rankings systems are appealing for many higher education stakeholders and prospective college students?  
3. Why might admissions selectivity be a good measure of an institution’s quality? Why might admissions selectivity not be a good measure of an institution’s quality?

**Reading:**

### Week 3

**Theories that Explain the Influence and Appeal of Ranking Systems**

**January 17, 2017**

**Agenda:**
- Rankings Group Meeting Time.
- Discussion of the theories that might be used to explain the influence and appeal of rankings systems.

**Guiding Pre-Reflection Questions** – Post to Canvas by 11:59 pm on January 15th, 2017.
1. Which of the theories from this week do you find most compelling as you consider the influence and appeal of rankings systems? What is it about the theory that you find compelling?
2. Is there a theory you are aware of that better explains the influence and appeal of rankings systems? If so, what is the theory and why is it better suited to explaining rankings systems?
3. How will theory inform the creation of your group’s rankings system?

**Reading:**

### Week 4

**Rankings Systems and the Pursuit of Prestige**

**January 24, 2017**

**Agenda:**
- Rankings Group Meeting Time.
- Trio-Led Reflective Class Discussion.
- Guest speaker (invited): Dr. KerryAnn O’Meara, Professor, Higher Education, University of Maryland.
- Discussion of rankings systems and the pursuit of prestige.
- **DUE:** 3 page double space proposal for your rankings system.
### Guiding Pre-Reflection Questions – Post to Canvas by 11:59 pm on January 22nd, 2017.

1. Have you observed an institution striving for prestige? What did this striving look like? Did it involve advancing in the rankings?
2. How do educational access goals for higher education interact with institutional prestige-seeking and pursuit of higher rank?
3. How might your group’s rankings system encourage institutional striving to achieve an important goal or value for higher education?
4. What theory/theories from Week 3 might we use to understand the phenomena described in the readings this week? Why is this theory/are these theories helpful?

### Reading:

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### Week 5

**Rankings Systems and Student Admissions and College Choice**

**January 31, 2017**

**Agenda:**
- Rankings Group Meeting Time. Dr. Orphan meets with each group to offer verbal and written feedback of their proposal.
- Trio-Led Reflective Class Discussion.
- Discussion of rankings systems and student admissions and college choice processes.

### Guiding Pre-Reflection Questions – Post to Canvas by 11:59 pm on January 29th, 2017.

1. How do rankings systems shape admissions processes for programs and colleges and universities? Have you seen evidence of rankings systems at work in the admissions decisions of institutions you have been affiliated with? How might the rankings system your group is creating shape admissions decisions at colleges and universities?
2. Did you use a rankings system when making your decision about where to apply to college? If so, which one(s) did you use, and how did it/they influence your decision making process?
3. What signals and messages are institutions trying to send to external audiences when they elevate admissions standards? Have you been affiliated with an institution/program that elevated admissions standards? What did this decision making process look like?

4. What theory/theories from Week 3 might we use to understand the phenomena described in the readings this week? Why is this theory/are these theories helpful?

**Reading:**

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**Week 6**

*Rankings Systems and Faculty Life*

February 7, 2017

*Agenda:*
- Rankings Group Meeting Time.
- Trio-Led Reflective Class Discussion.
- Guest Speaker: Dr. Leslie Gonzales, Assistant Professor, Higher, Adult and Lifelong Learning, Michigan State University.
- Discussion about how rankings systems influence faculty life.
- **DUE:** Brief, 5-7 minute description/presentation of preliminary rankings system; Students offer advice and feedback that groups may consider in the design of their final system.

**Guiding Pre-Reflection Questions – Post to Canvas by 11:59 pm on February 5th, 2017.**

1. What, if anything, surprised you about the influence of the rankings on faculty life? Have you observed the phenomena described by the scholars we considered this week in institutions you have been affiliated with?
2. How might an institution’s impulse to strive for higher rank shape life for underrepresented faculty? Faculty in general? How would your rankings system shape faculty life?
3. How might an institution’s impulse to strive for higher rank shape the type of scholarship valued within tenure and promotion decisions? Specifically, how might these tendencies shape the value placed on publicly engaged scholarship? How might your rankings system shape faculty scholarship?
4. What theory/theories from Week 3 might we use to understand the phenomena described in the readings this week? Why is this theory/are these theories helpful?
**Reading:**

**Week 7**

**Rankings Systems and Institutional Diversity**

**February 14, 2017**

**Agenda:**
- Rankings Group Meeting Time.
- Trio-Led Reflective Class Discussion.
- Discussion of how rankings systems influence institutional diversity.
- Guest speaker: Dr. George L. Mehaffy, Vice President, Academic Leadership and Change, American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

**Guiding Pre-Reflection Questions** – Post to Canvas by 11:59 pm on February 12th, 2017.
1. What theory/theories from Week 3 might we use to understand the phenomena described in the readings this week? Why is this theory/are these theories helpful?
2. How do rankings systems influence the diversity of missions and institutional types within higher education?
3. How might the rankings system your group is creating influence institutional diversity within higher education?
4. The DiMaggio and Rowan article was published before the creation of *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings system. Imagine the article was published in 2016. What might DiMaggio and Rowan say about the use of rankings systems to assess the quality of higher education institutions?

**Reading:**
- Pusser, B. & Marginson, S. (2013). University rankings in critical perspective,
Week 8
Rankings Systems and Educational Opportunity and Equity

February 21, 2017

Agenda:
- Rankings Group Meeting Time.
- Trio-Led Reflective Class Discussion.
- Discussion of how rankings systems promote and/or impede the ability of colleges and universities to dismantle systemic oppression and advance the public purposes of higher education.

Guiding Pre-Reflection Questions – Post to Canvas by 11:59 pm on February 19th, 2017.
1. How, if at all, do rankings systems support the dismantling of systemic oppression within higher education? How, if at all, do rankings systems reinforce systemic oppression within higher education?
2. How are rankings systems used by employers to determine whom to hire? How might these uses affect underrepresented and marginalized college graduates?
3. How will your rankings system assist colleges and universities in advancing educational equity and the public purposes of higher education?
4. What theory/theories from Week 3 might we use to understand the phenomena described in the readings this week? Why is this theory/are these theories helpful?

Reading:
- College rankings discourage minority outreach, unfairly denigrate Black colleges, and neglect information important to African Americans. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 53, 35-38. (SoC)
- Why college rankings are harmful for African Americans. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 24, 13-14. (SoC)

Week 9
Rankings Systems and the Globalization of Higher Education

February 28, 2017

Agenda:
- Class meeting: 5:00-6:00 pm.
- Guest Speaker: Dr. Gerardo Blanco-Ramírez, Assistant Professor, Higher Education, University of Massachusetts at Boston.
- Starving the Beast film screening 6-8:20 pm in KRH Commons.

Guiding Pre-Reflection Questions – Post to Canvas by 11:59 pm on February 26th,
2017.
1. How are rankings systems situated within the global context for higher education? How do rankings systems increase the globalization efforts taking place on college campuses throughout the world?
2. How do international rankings systems influence public policy decision making?
3. Why do you think it is that senior policymakers within countries are preoccupied by their country’s rank in comparison with other countries?
4. What theory/theories from Week 3 might we use to understand the phenomena described in the readings this week? Why is this theory/are these theories helpful?

Reading:
- Safón, V. (2013). What do global university rankings really measure? The search for the x factor and the x entity. *Scientometrics, 97*, 223-244. (SoC)

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**Week 10**

*Alternative Rankings Systems*

**March 7, 2017**

Agenda:
- Group Presentations of Rankings Models.
- Discussion of alternative rankings systems.
- **DUE:** Presentation of Rankings System for Higher Education.

Reading:
- Shahjahan, R., Blanco Ramírez, G. & de Olivera Andreotti, V. D. (in press – do not cite without the authors’ permission). Attempting to imagine the unimaginable: a decolonial reading of global university rankings (GURs). *Comparative Education, 61*(2). (SoC)
COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

There are three (3) assignments required for this course.

1. Participation in online and in-person discussions: **Online discussion contributions are due at 11:59 pm Sunday and Friday evenings of Weeks 2-9.**
   Because this is a seminar, a large portion of your grade will be assessed based on your participation in online and in-person discussions. *As such, if you have to miss a seminar meeting, please contact Dr. Orphan ASAP and notify her of your absence. She will assign you an alternative assignment to make up for your absence. Also be sure to contribute to the online discussion even if you are unable to attend class in person.* Your participation in the seminar will be evaluated in three ways: your contributions to the Canvas discussions weeks 2-9, your contributions to in-class discussion each week, and the evidence you show of having completed and carefully thought about the readings. In order to earn in-class participation points each week, it will behoove you to mention the readings you have completed by author or title, and relate them to current events, the guiding theories presented in week 3, or your understanding of higher education.

In order to earn online participation points each week, you are required to do the following:

1. **Due at 11:59 pm Sunday weeks 2-9:** Post responses to the guiding pre-reflection questions listed in the syllabus and online each week (150-200 words in length).  
2. **Due at 11:59 pm Friday weeks 2-9:** Respond to reflection posts left by at least two of their peers. These responses should be 50-75 words in length.

2. **Trio-Led Facilitation of Reflective Class Discussion: Due Weeks 3-8.**
   Students are required to work in trios to lead a 45-minute reflective discussion of their assigned week’s readings. Students may use the “guiding pre-reflection questions” as a guide for structuring this conversation, however they are also expected to pose new questions, insights and observations that build on these questions. They are also encouraged to add new insights or questions that are unrelated to the “guiding pre-reflection questions” but relevant to the themes and content of the course and that week’s readings. Each trio is asked to read the reflections and responses posted on Canvas and incorporate these responses into the discussion they lead.

When leading reflective discussions, students are also urged to consider ways in which rankings systems relate to the readings considered each week. Students will be evaluated on their ability to create a thoughtful, creative and informative discussion that pushes the thinking of all involved (including the instructor), and advances our understanding of rankings systems in higher education. Students will also be evaluated on their efforts to encourage a variety of viewpoints and contributions to the discussion. In the past, students have led a variety of exercises including a debate, design thinking exercises, and a jeopardy game. Students are also welcome to incorporate media coverage of the rankings within their Reflective Class Discussions.

**Note:** If you are leading a discussion during a particular week, you are not required to post reflections or responses on Canvas.

3. **Rankings System for Higher Education**
   The culminating project for the seminar will be the creation of an original ranking system, using criteria identified within each group. Each group should use the rankings system to provide the following within the format of a 20-page double spaced final paper and 20-minute final presentation that achieves the following:

- Provides a ranking of 10 institutions using publicly available data.
- Clearly identifies criteria, weights, and methods of their ranking system.
Uses class readings and other research to substantiate the importance of criteria and methods chosen.
Provides a rationale for this ranking system.
Discuss the striving and organizational behavior this ranking system might catalyze: What kinds of institutional, faculty, or student behavior is it likely to catalyze? What kind of reputation is the ranking system intended to imbue?
Differentiates characteristics of the ranking system you have designed from those of other ranking systems and explain the implications of these differences.
Argues persuasively as to why this ranking system is superior. Which stakeholders will it serve and how? How might this system promote or impede educational opportunity and equity? How might this rankings systems strengthen the public purposes of higher education?
Discusses the limitations of this system.
Uses APA, be double spaced, normal margins, 12-point font, Times New Roman.
Is a minimum of 20 pages double spaced plus references and appendix.
In addition to the 20 page paper, individual group members are required to submit to Dr. Orphan a 150-200 word evaluation of each of their group member’s contributions to final project.

Final group projects will be comprised of four parts:
1. **DUE: January 24th.** 3 page, double spaced proposal for rankings system. Each group will receive written and verbal feedback on a proposal for the project in-class on Tuesday, January 31. The feedback will focus on the key ideas, criteria, sources of data, and system proposed.
2. **DUE: February 7:** Brief (5-7 minute) discussion/preliminary presentation about each rankings system to which students will offer advice and feedback that groups may consider in the design of their final system.
3. **DUE: March 7:** 20 minute class presentation of the ranking system.
4. **DUE: March 10:** 20 page final paper.

**Please note:** The final presentation is due before the final paper. As such, each group is urged to consider the feedback and questions made by classmates and the instructor in the formulation of their final paper.

Examples of Alternative Rankings Systems are described below. I urge you to carefully consider these rankings systems and discuss with your group the affordances they make as well as potential shortcomings you see with them. These rankings models are an example of what is possible in alternative rankings systems. The rankings systems you create are expected to be wholly unique and different from these, although they may be informed by elements of one or many of these rankings systems.

### Alternative Rankings Systems

- Department of Education College Scorecard: [https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/](https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/)
- Corbin Campbell’s project: College Educational Quality: [http://collegeedquality.weebly.com/](http://collegeedquality.weebly.com/)
GRADING POLICY

Grades are based on the following criteria:

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<tr>
<th>Grading Criteria for Final Papers</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Organization, structure, and clarity of writing.</td>
<td>5 points</td>
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<td>• Employment of higher education research to justify criteria, methods and system.</td>
<td>5 points</td>
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<td>• Quality of critical analysis and reasoning for chosen criteria.</td>
<td>7.5 points</td>
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<td>• Effectiveness of comparison and contrast with extant ranking systems.</td>
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<td>• Evidence of effective use of class and instructor feedback to improve the final product.</td>
<td>2.5 points</td>
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<td>• Creativity, innovation, and significance to the public purposes of higher education.</td>
<td>5 points</td>
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<td>TOTAL possible points</td>
<td>25 points</td>
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<tr>
<th>Grading Criteria for Final Grade</th>
<th>Percentages/Points</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participation in Class Discussions (on Canvas and in person)</td>
<td>20% (20 points)</td>
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<td>Facilitation of Reflective Class Discussion</td>
<td>30% (30 points)</td>
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<td>Ranking System for Higher Education</td>
<td>50% (50 points)</td>
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<td>• 3-page proposal (5 points)</td>
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<td>• 5-7 minute discussion/preliminary presentation of rankings system (5 points)</td>
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<td>• 20-page group paper (25 points, see points allocation above)</td>
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<td>• 20 minute final presentation (15 points)</td>
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<td>TOTAL possible points</td>
<td>100% (100 points)</td>
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Note: All written assignments should be posted to Canvas.

GRADING SCALE

A: 4.0 = 93-100
A-: 3.7 = 90-92
B+: 3.3 = 87-89
B: 3.0 = 83-86
B-: 2.7 = 80-82
C+: 2.3 = 77-79
C: 2.0 = 73-76
C-: 1.7 = 70-72
D+: 1.3: = 67-69
D: 1.0: = 63-66
D-: 0.7 = 60-62
F: 0.0 = 59 & below
STUDENTS WITH (DIS)ABILITIES/MEDICAL ISSUES

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protects anyone with a (dis)ability from being excluded or discriminated against in the classroom. If you have a documented disability, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can set up the best learning environment for you. By law I cannot ask you if you have a disability. If you qualify for academic accommodations because of a disability or medical issue please submit a Faculty Letter to me from Disability Services Program (DSP) in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. DSP is located on the 4th floor of Ruffatto Hall; 1999 E. Evans Ave. 303.871. / 2372 / 2278/ 7432. Information is also available on line at http://www.du.edu/disability/dsp; see the Handbook for Students with Disabilities.

UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER

The University Writing Center provides online writing support for any student who is enrolled in an online course, traveling on DU business, or studying abroad. To make an appointment, call 303-871-7456, or go to MyWeb / Student / Writing Center.

Like our face-to-face consultations, these free, 40-minute online sessions are collaborative and non-evaluative, meaning that the consultants’ goals are to work with you to see your writing clearly and develop new strategies and habits for improving as a writer in light of your specific assignments, goals, and needs. These sessions are synchronous: you and the consultant will work in an online Google Doc, using the highlighting, commenting, and chat features to communicate. Please note that online consultants do not pre-read papers, proofread, or correct citations for you.

Online appointments are available during our regular hours (Sunday-Monday, including evening hours on many days, from the first day of classes through the second day of finals). Please visit our website at www.du.edu/writing/writingcenter/ for hours and additional information.

INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

In this class, we will work together to develop a learning community that is inclusive and respectful. Our diversity may be reflected by differences in race, culture, age, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, and myriad other social identities and life experiences. The goal of inclusiveness, in a diverse community, encourages and appreciates expressions of different ideas, opinions, and beliefs, so that conversations and interactions that could potentially be divisive turn instead into opportunities for intellectual and personal enrichment.

A dedication to inclusiveness requires respecting what others say, their right to say it, and the thoughtful consideration of others’ communication. Both speaking up and listening are valuable tools for furthering thoughtful, enlightening dialogue. Respecting one another’s individual differences is critical in transforming a collection of diverse individuals into an inclusive, collaborative and excellent learning community. Our core commitment shapes our core expectation for behavior inside and outside of the classroom.

This course supports self-identification of gender pronouns. As the course includes group work and in-class facilitation, it is vitally important to us to create an educational environment of inclusion and mutual respect.

TITLE IX

Gender violence can happen to anyone regardless of race, class, age, appearance, gender identity, or sexual orientation. The University of Denver is committed to providing an environment free of discrimination on the basis of sex (gender), including sexual misconduct, sexual assault, relationship violence, and stalking. The Center for Advocacy, Prevention and Empowerment (CAPE) provides programs and resources to help promote
healthy relationships, teach non-violence and equality, and foster a respectful and safe environment for all members of the University of Denver community. All services are confidential and free of charge.

For assistance during business hours, call 303-871-3853 and ask to speak to the Director of CAPE. After hours, please call the Emergency & Crisis Dispatch Line at 303-871-3000 and ask to speak to the CAPE advocate on call.

HONOR CODE/ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

All work submitted in this course must be your own and produced exclusively for this course. The use of sources (ideas, quotations, paraphrases) must be properly acknowledged and documented. For the consequences of violating the Academic Misconduct policy, refer to the University of Denver website on the Honor Code (www.du.edu/honorcode). See also http://www.du.edu/studentconduct for general information about conduct expectations from the Office of Student Conduct.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS ACCOMMODATION

University policy grants students excused absences from class or other organized activities or observance of religious holy days, unless the accommodation would create an undue hardship. You must notify me by the end of the first week of classes if you have any conflicts that may require an absence. It is your responsibility to make arrangements with me in advance to make up any missed work or in-class material.