PA 309.5: Introduction to Health Policy and Healthcare Management

Introduction to the Topic

Why is healthcare so expensive? Why do health and access to healthcare differ across people and places? How do we know whether a health policy works? This course explores these questions through a broad introduction to the institutions and ideas that shape health policy and healthcare management. Students will learn how healthcare systems work, what shapes patient and provider decisions, and how to use evidence to evaluate policies. Along the way, they will build and practice data literacy skills: reading graphs, interpreting research findings, considering different explanations for patterns in the data, and recognizing what the evidence can and cannot support. No prior background in economics, management, or data analysis is required; students will learn the key concepts through real-world examples in health and healthcare policy throughout this course.

Course Content Overview

The course begins with the U.S. healthcare system: how health insurance works (Medicare, Medicaid, private insurance, and the Affordable Care Act), how healthcare is paid for, the roles of hospitals and physicians, and the development and pricing of medical treatments and drugs. We then explore how socio-economic and environmental factors affect health, compare international healthcare systems, and examine challenges in global health. The course concludes with contemporary issues such as the opioid crisis and recent trends in how physicians and hospitals organize and deliver care. Throughout, students will use basic economic ideas about incentives and tradeoffs to understand healthcare decisions and evaluate policy proposals.

By the end of the course, students will be able to explain how the U.S. healthcare system works and how it compares with other countries. They will also be able to assess evidence behind policy claims, identify what further evidence is needed, and communicate policy recommendations that explain any tradeoffs.