

Justice and Civil Society, Spring 2026

Dr. Thad Williamson, twillia9@richmond.edu, Jepson Hall 132

Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond

Course Meeting Time: Tuesdays/Thursdays, 3:00-4:15.

Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 4:30-5:30, or by appointment.

Aims of the Course

Justice and Civil Society engages fundamental questions of social justice at both the theoretical and practical level, taking as our context the present-day United States.

This semester, our focus will be fourfold:

- Examination of various theoretical perspectives on justice and what a just society entails, drawing on both historical and contemporary texts;
- Examination of the socio-economic structure of the present-day United States, including economic inequality, poverty, racial disparities, and systems of power;
- Consideration of how both theories of justice and examination of socio-economic structures relate to present-day conditions in Richmond, Virginia;
- Consideration of different perspectives on how to advance justice within the context of contemporary American society.

We engage these questions against a backdrop of profound crisis: long-term trends of growing wealth and income inequality; climate change and its consequences; a resurgence of ideologies of white supremacy in response to widespread protests against racial disparities and racism; and major questions about the present and future of democratic institutions in the United States. Indeed, reflections on the promise and contradictions of “democracy in America” 250 years after the Declaration of Independence will be an organizing theme for the semester.

The readings and associated material are intended to provide students with a rich theoretical lens for understanding current events; but equally important, help students develop a sense of individual and collective agency in responding to these events in constructive ways. Creative response to profound crisis, in turn, exemplifies the positive ideal of *leadership*.

Community engagement is a major part of this course. This semester, this section will partner with Overby-Sheppard Elementary School on the Northside of Richmond to provide academic and mentoring support to the school’s 5th grade cohort. Once your background check is completed, Justice and Civil Society students are expected to participate in weekly shifts (approximately 90 minutes or longer) at Overby-Sheppard *every week until the last week of class*. Students are expected to approach this engagement in a spirit of respect and professionalism.

This class asks a lot of students: Academically, it involves **a lot of thoughtful reading**, a willingness to consider challenging perspectives, debate between distinct points of view, and intelligent writing. Personally, it means taking the risk of becoming invested in the serious

problems of our society and taking responsibility for your own agency: as a member of this society, and as a person who by virtue of being part of this university community has privilege relative to many or most others in our society. Interpersonally, it means being committed to listening to, respecting, learning from, and sometimes allowing yourself to be changed by the viewpoints and experiences of others (be it an author, a character in a reading, a classmate, or a community member).

You will get as much out of this course as you put into it. Because the issues being discussed are so serious—life and death, justice and injustice—my expectation is that if you are enrolled in the course, you are taking the course seriously and committing to an appropriate level of effort.

Course Requirements

1. Attendance at every class session. No unexcused absences are acceptable. Each unexcused absence will lead to a 1% deduction from your final course grade.
2. Complete reading and come to class prepared to participate; actively participate in class. Bring your book to class. Additional copies of required texts are available for loan to students as needed.
3. Complete weekly engagement on-site at Overby-Sheppard Elementary School. You are expected to engage weekly from the completion of the background check through the last week of classes, with no missed weeks (barring illness). You will sign in at the school to document your hours.
4. Attend at least one approved community event in the City of Richmond, either through the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement or on your own. This can be a School Board or City Council meeting, a budget hearing, or other event in which matters of public concern are being discussed. (It should not be a service event.) Submit a one-page Event Reflection within 72 hours of attending the event.
5. In-class essay, focused on Paine, Allen I, Lincoln, and Douglas, February 12.
6. In-class essay, focused on DuBois, Dewey, and Niebuhr, March 24.
7. Final in-class written exam, Thursday April 30. The exam will primarily focus on King, Anderson, and Allen II, but will also require you to engage thinkers, readings, and ideas from the entire course.
8. Keep a semester-long notebook concerning observations about your community engagement experiences as they relate to the course material. The notebook is to be scanned and turned in at the end of the semester and will contribute to your participation and engagement grade.
9. Write a final Reflection Paper, length 10 pages (minimum 8, maximum 12), focused on educational and economic inequalities in Richmond, drawing on class readings as well as your experience working with Overby-Sheppard students. More specific instructions for this paper will be sent approximately one month prior to the end of the course. The paper is due **Saturday May 2 at noon.**

Components of Course Grade

In-class Essay #1	20%
In-class Essay #2	20%
Final exam	20%

Overby-Sheppard Reflection Paper, 8-10 pages, due May 2.

30%

In-class Participation and Engagement (including Notebook and Event Reflections): 10%

Developing Thinking, Reading and Writing Skills

Learning to Read for College

Reading must be the fundamental default activity of all college students. When you are not doing anything else, you should be reading. This class will require that you do a lot of reading.

We live in a culture that has devalued deep reading and thinking. Why then read books, as opposed to just a series of short articles or excerpts? Because books are still the best technology we have for allowing a sophisticated train of thought—or body of knowledge—to be communicated from one human mind to another. A book allows the author to explore an event, person, or question in sustained depth, to present a sustained argument supported by evidence, to make connections between different events or phenomena, or to explore all sides of a disputed question thoroughly. Or a book may simply expand or stimulate our imaginations, our moral consciences, our sense of what is possible in human life. To read an interesting, important, or imagination-expanding book is one of life's great pleasures—but it is a pleasure it takes effort to cultivate. Think of reading a book as engaging your mind with someone else's mind in an extended, in-depth conversation. If your reading takes the form of a thoughtful, internal conversation with the author, when it comes time to write your papers—your actual chance to “talk back” to the author and his or her ideas—you won't be struggling to generate material from scratch; instead you will simply be transcribing and refining the conversation you've already had in your brain. Good writing is fundamentally a result of good thinking, and good thinking comes about via the practice and habit of being in conversation with good thinkers—such as the authors we will be reading this semester.

But how then to read thoughtfully?

- **First, cut out the distractions.** Turn off social media, the Internet, and anything else that might tempt you to turn your mind away from what you are reading. Find a quiet space where you can concentrate fully on the text.
- **Second, set yourself an attainable goal** for how long you will concentrate fully on reading the text. Whether it's thirty minutes, an hour, or two hours, set a goal, and stick to that goal, with the aim of increasing it over time. If you can learn how to sit in the library or somewhere for three consecutive hours, reading for 45-50 minutes at a time, then taking 10-15 minute breaks each hour, you will over the course of the week get a lot done—and more importantly, have a lot of fruitful conversations with great thinkers and writers.
- **Third, take notes as you go**—either in the text margins, or in a notebook. This is helpful in keeping track of the author's train of thought, and will help you remember arguments and key points when you go back to review or re-read.
- **Fourth, when you are done reading a section, write down a few key points the author made**, or alternatively some questions you have about the author's arguments.
- **Fifth, as you are reading, think not just about the face value arguments of the text, but also about the author's intended audience and purpose.** Why and for whom was this book written? Being able to answer that question often is very helpful in understanding the text as a whole.

- **Sixth**—and this is the most advanced skill, and one that will take time to master—**think critically about what you are reading**. Even the most brilliant texts, texts that have impeccable internal logic and that will make you smarter simply by reading them, have limitations of perspective and purpose. What does a text written in the 1960s have to say that is of enduring value to *us* today? John Rawls can't answer that question—it is our job as students to answer that question ourselves.

General Grading Standards:

- A range grades are given for truly outstanding written work that not only meets the basic requirements of the given assignment but also demonstrates exceptional insight, clarity, and depth of thought. For instance, an A-range essay will not simply forward a coherent argument, but also anticipate and attempt to answer likely objections to the argument, and/or acknowledge points at which one's argument might be vulnerable. Such papers will also be very well-organized and well-written, and gracefully presented.
- B range grades are given for good and very good written work which amply meets all the basic requirements of the given assignment and reflects substantial effort and engagement with the material. Such work is generally well-written and well-organized, shows good understanding of the course material, and avoids major substantive or logical errors.
- C range grades are given for work which attempts to fulfill the requirements of the assignment but which falls short in some substantial way, with respect to organization, writing quality, understanding of the material, or argumentative logic.

Other Classroom Guidelines

1. Arrive 5 minutes early so we can start on time. Do not pack up until the end of class.
2. Use the bathroom prior to class. Do not excuse yourself during class unless it is an emergency.
3. Beverages consumed quietly are permitted in class, food is not.
4. **Power off mobile devices upon entering the classroom and keep them off, in your bag or backpack, during class. You will be asked to leave the classroom if you use your phone in class and be assigned an unexcused absence.** If there is an urgent reason you must be reachable by phone during a particular class, let the instructor know in advance.
5. Use of laptops in class is not permitted unless necessitated by an academic accommodation. Use a notebook to take written notes.
6. Maintain eye contact with the instructor and with other students when they are speaking. Your sole focus during class should be on what is being said in class.
7. Do not schedule other obligations (like job interviews) during class time.

Expected Learning Outcomes

1. Students will become familiar with alternative philosophical and theoretical perspectives on social justice, including both competing definitions of social justice and competing conceptualizations about how it can be realized in practice.
2. Students will gain a deeper understanding of present-day dynamics of poverty, racial inequality, gendered inequalities and systemic inequality, as well as the linkages between these dynamics on broad historical forces such as white supremacy, capitalism, and the evolution of democracy.
3. Students will observe and consider how questions of social justice and social injustice impact specific human lives through community service in Richmond Public Schools and related reading and discussion.
4. Students will begin to consider the question of how a greater degree of justice can be achieved in challenging real-world contexts, with primary reference to the context of the present-day U.S.

Power, Equity, Identity and Culture (PEIC) Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will analyze the origins and dynamics of structural inequities and power imbalances in specific societal contexts.
2. Students will analyze how attitudes, experiences, and/or beliefs are shaped both by context and/or cultural identity.
3. Students will demonstrate knowledge of the effects of inequities and power imbalances on a society, and the historical or current efforts, successful and unsuccessful, used to reduce such effects.

Academic Resources: If you experience difficulties in this course, do not hesitate to consult with me. There are also other resources that can support you in your efforts to meet course requirements:

1. **Academic Skills Center** (asc.richmond.edu): Academic coaches assist students in assessing and developing their academic and life-skills (e.g., critical reading and thinking, information conceptualization, concentration, test preparation, time management, stress management, etc.). Peer tutors offer assistance in specific subject areas (e.g., calculus, chemistry, accounting, etc.) and will be available for appointments in-person and virtually. Peer tutors are listed on the ASC website. **Email [Roger Mancastroppa \(rmancast@richmond.edu\)](mailto:Rmancast@richmond.edu) and [Hope Walton \(hw Walton@richmond.edu\)](mailto:hw Walton@richmond.edu) for coaching appointments in academic and life skills.**
2. **Boatwright Library Research Librarians:** (library.richmond.edu/help/ask/ or 289-8876): Research librarians help students with all steps of their research, from identifying or narrowing a topic, to locating, accessing, evaluating, and citing information resources. Librarians support students in their classes across the curriculum and provide individual appointments, class library instruction, tutorials, and [research guides](http://libguides.richmond.edu) (libguides.richmond.edu). Students can [contact an individual librarian](http://library.richmond.edu/help/liaison-librarians.html) (library.richmond.edu/help/liaison-librarians.html) or ASK a librarian for help via email (library@richmond.edu), text (804-277-9ASK), or [chat](http://library.richmond.edu/chat.html) (library.richmond.edu/chat.html).
3. **Career Services:** (careerservices.richmond.edu or 289-8547): Can assist you in exploring your interests and abilities, choosing a major or course of study, connecting with internships and jobs, and investigating graduate and professional school options. We encourage you to schedule an appointment with a career advisor early in your time at UR.
4. **Counseling and Psychological Services** (caps.richmond.edu or 289-8119): Assists currently enrolled, full-time, degree-seeking students in improving their mental health and well-being, and

in handling challenges that may impede their growth and development. Services include brief consultations, short-term counseling and psychotherapy, skills-building classes, crisis intervention, psychiatric consultation, and related services.

5. **Disability Services** (disability.richmond.edu) The Office of Disability Services works to ensure that qualified students with a disability (whether incoming or current) are provided with reasonable accommodations that enable students to participate fully in activities, programs, services and benefits provided to all students. Please let your professors know as soon as possible if you have an accommodation that requires academic coordination and planning.
6. **Speech Center** (speech.richmond.edu or 287-6409): Assists with preparation and practice in the pursuit of excellence in public expression. Recording, playback, coaching and critique sessions offered by teams of student consultants trained to assist in developing ideas, arranging key points for more effective organization, improving style and delivery, and handling multimedia aids for individual and group presentations. Remote practice sessions can be arranged; we look forward to meeting your public speaking needs.
7. **Writing Center** (writing.richmond.edu or 289-8263): Assists writers at all levels of experience, across all majors. Students can schedule appointments with trained writing consultants who offer friendly critiques of written work.

Jepson and Course-Specific Policies

Awarding of Credit

To be successful in this course, a student should expect to devote 10-14 hours each week, including class time and time spent on course-related activities.

registrar.richmond.edu/services/policies/academic-credit.html

Honor System

The Jepson School supports the provisions of the Honor System. The shortened version of the honor pledge is: "I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work."

studentdevelopment.richmond.edu/student-handbook/honor/the-honor-code.html

Artificial Intelligence

Use of Artificial Intelligence software, websites, devices and so forth is strictly prohibited in work for this course. This is a blanket prohibition on use of AI in any form for any written assignment, including preparing notes for in-class essays.

Addressing Microaggressions on Campus/Encouraging Constructive Classroom Discussion

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. All students are encouraged and expected to be both respectful of all other students and self-aware when engaging in classroom discussions.

Professor Peter Levine (Tufts University) helpfully provides these criteria for constructive classroom engagement in a university setting. Strive to develop these habits of positive engagement.

- Being responsive to other students. (Responsiveness needn't always be immediate, verbal, or occur within the class discussion itself.)
- Building on others' contributions, and sometimes making links among different people's contributions or between what they have said and the text.
- Demonstrating genuine respect for the others, where respect does not require agreement. (In fact, sometimes respect requires explicit *disagreement* because you take the other person's ideas seriously.)

- Focusing on the topic and the texts, which does not preclude drawing unexpected connections beyond them.
- Taking risks, trying out ideas that you don't necessarily endorse, and asking questions that might be perceived as naive or uninformed.
- Seeking truth or clarity or insight (instead of other objectives).
- Exercising freedom of speech along with a degree of tact and concern for the other people.
- Demonstrating responsibility for the other students' learning in what you say (and occasionally by a decision not to speak).

Course Policy on Offensive Language

This class in its course of study addresses or references numerous difficult and painful topics, including racism, sexual violence, and oppression and violence more generally. Some assigned texts (including multimedia materials shown in class) may use or mention specific derogatory terms widely regarded as offensive, unacceptable, and inconsistent with inclusive academic learning. It will be our class policy not to repeat these terms in class verbally in our discussions; if there is need to reference these terms as part of a conversation, we will follow the convention of using the first letter of a given word to do so.

Course of Study

Week 1—January 13-15

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

Week 2. January 20-22

Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration*

Week 3. January 27-January 29

Allen, *Our Declaration*

Week 4. February 3—February 5

Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, speeches: Douglass: “My Slave Experience in Maryland,” “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Lincoln: “Address to the Young Men’s Lyceum,” “A House Divided.”

Week 5. February 10-February 12

Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, speeches. Lincoln: “First Inaugural Address,” “Emancipation Proclamation,” “Gettysburg Address,” “Second Inaugural Address.” Douglass: “What the Black Man Wants,” “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln.”

February 12: In-Class Essay #1

Week 6. February 17-February 19.

W.E.B DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Week 7. February 24-26

John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*

Week 8. March 3-5

Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*

Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*

Week 9. **March 17-19**

Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*

Week 10. **March 24-26**

March 24: In-class Essay #2

March 26: Martin Luther King, Jr. The Trumpet of Conscience

Week 11. **March 31-April 2.**

Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*

Week 12. **April 7-April 9**

Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*

Danielle Allen, *Justice by Means of Democracy*

Week 13. **April 14-16**

Allen, *Democracy by Means of Justice*

Week 14. **April 21-23**

Allen, *Democracy by Means of Justice*; Williamson, "What College Students Need to Learn if American Democracy is to Survive and Thrive"

Final Exam, April 30, 2 pm.

Final Paper Due, May 2, noon.