Valuation is a pervasive feature of contemporary life. Professors, universities, hotels, markets, movies, user experience, intelligence: almost everything is subject to some form of review, rating, or ranking these days. This course examines valuation as a key techno-scientific practice and asks how value is established, maintained, compared, subverted, resisted, and institutionalized in a range of different settings. Through a mix of reading, writing, and practical exercises, we shall engage with theoretical, historical, and ethnographic studies of (e)valuation in science & technology studies, but also draw on related areas like economic sociology, the sociology of evaluation, accounting studies, anthropology, and information science.

Learning objectives

Upon completion of this course, you will be able to:

- Understand and apply key concepts and methods from the growing field of valuation studies, including science & technology studies, sociology, and anthropology;
- Challenge and unpack entrenched assumptions about valuation with a particular focus on information technology;
- Design and conduct innovative and effective programs of research into technologies of valuation;
- Write concise and effective literature reviews and reports of original research.

Course requirements

This class is all about problematizing practices of (e)valuation. As a consequence, the following course requirements will be useful to facilitate our conversations.

Weekly reading response 20%
Group preparation and seminar leadership 20%
Class project 20%
Final project report and presentation 40%
**Weekly reading response:** You will be expected to produce a 2 to 3-page reading response each week that engages key arguments, insights, and findings from the readings. While some will use these to produce concise summaries, others will explore specific thoughts, questions, or concerns. Reading notes are **due 6pm the day before class.** Please post them to the discussion section on Blackboard. Feel free to review the notes of other students before the seminar.

**Group preparation and seminar leadership:** Each student (working in groups of 2-3) will be responsible for introducing and opening discussion of **two** of the weekly reading sets. Groups will have three primary responsibilities:

1. Post on Blackboard a 2-3 page thought piece that pulls out what you as a group find most interesting, useful, noteworthy, or provocative about the readings. These shouldn’t be a mere summary; rather, there should be some organizing principle(s) or question(s) that can ground, guide, and provoke our group discussions. The thought piece should be posted, along with your questions, to Blackboard no later than 6 pm the day before class;
2. Post on Blackboard a set of questions and keywords around the weekly readings that will help guide our discussions;
3. Introduce the readings and topics in class, drawing on the questions and the thought piece. You will be **strictly limited** to 15 minutes for this. The goal is to spark an engaging discussion.

**Note:** Discussion leads do NOT produce a reading response in addition to the thought piece.

**Class project:** You will develop a project to investigate a **technology of valuation.** By technology of valuation I mean a system, method, scheme, practice, device, object, artifact, instrument, or indicator that is deployed in valuation. Over the course of the semester, you will be expected to submit three progress reports (at least five pages each), describing in greater and greater detail the features of that technology as revealed in your explorations.

Each progress report should include:

- Analytic findings at each stage of investigation
- Ethics and values at issue
- Tie-ins with readings and class discussion
- Comments on the process of discovery
- A list of references consulted
- An annotated bibliography

Students should decide on their technology of valuation by the second meeting of class (Feb 3). Progress reports shall be posted on Blackboard by 5 p.m. on the following three Fridays: Feb 19, Mar 5, and Mar 25. Depending on class size, we may split up in two groups and alternate weeks.

**Final project report:** You will be required to produce a 15-20 page (double-spaced) final project report on your class project that engages with theoretical and/or methodological themes from the course. By Apr 15, I’d like to see a formal paper proposal, including a 1-2 paragraph description of the main argument or question; an outline of the anticipated structure of the paper;
a description of the empirical evidence (if any) you plan to use; and a list of 5-10 published sources you plan to cite or draw on in making your argument.

In addition to my comments, you’ll be asked to submit your proposal to three other students for peer feedback. You’ll get (and give) feedback on the proposals in a class workshop on April 20. Finally, you will be invited to pre-circulate a draft of your paper and required to prepare a 10-15 minute presentation of your project sometime in the final two class meetings of the term.

Final project reports will be due, in both paper and electronic form, 5pm on Friday, May 20. Per standard university guidelines governing plagiarism and academic honesty, all work for the course is expected to be original or appropriately acknowledged.

**General seminar participation:** This is a demanding graduate research seminar with a significant reading load. If you are struggling with that, let me know. I’ll try to provide some reading tips and strategies. If you know in advance that you won’t be able to attend a session, please let me know, too. If you’re struggling with the course in any other way, please come see me as early as possible and we’ll talk about strategies, workarounds, and possible accommodations to help you.

**Acknowledgments**

This seminar is drawing on two other excellent seminars: Steve Jackson’s *Information Technology and Society* (Cornell) and Martha Lampland & Susan Leigh Star’s *Standardization and Quantification* (UC San Diego). Thanks to Stefan Beljean, Mike Lynch, and Steve Jackson for valuable feedback and advice.
Schedule

**Session 1: What’s Valuable? (Jan 27)**

No readings today. We’ll familiarize ourselves with the key themes and concerns of the seminar, discuss course mechanics, and start thinking about what’s valuable.

**Session 2: Value, Values, Valuation (Feb 3)**


*In this session, we will also discuss your ideas for technologies of valuation to explore as your class project. Please bring ideas and be ready to share them.*

**Session 3: Economies of Worth (Feb 10)**


Session 4: Accounting and Organization (Feb 17)


[DEADLINE: Progress report I due Fri, Feb 19, 5pm]

Session 5: Audit and Accountability (Feb 24)


Session 6: Measurement and Metrics (Mar 2)


[DEADLINE: Progress report II due Fri, Mar 5, 5pm]

**Session 7: Comparison and commensuration (Mar 9)**


**Session 8: Automation and Delegation (Mar 16)**


**Session 9: Reviewers and Critics (Mar 23)**


[DEADLINE: Progress report III due Fri, Mar 25, 5pm]

— NO CLASS: SPRING BREAK (MAR 30) —

Session 10: TBD (Apr 6)

Reserved for check-ins, catch-ups, and left-overs.

Session 11: Taste and Tasting (Apr 13)


*We will conduct a chocolate tasting in class.*

[DEADLINE: Report proposal due Fri, Apr 15, 5pm]

Session 12: Peer Review (Apr 20)


*Plus: Peer review workshop in class.*

**Session 13: Compliments and Prizes (Apr 27)**


**Session 14: Project Presentations (May 4)**

No readings, except for pre-circulated drafts.

**Session 15: Project Presentations (May 11)**

No readings, except for pre-circulated drafts.

**DEADLINE: Final papers due (electronically): 5pm on Friday, May 20, 2015.**