



The University of Western Ontario

Department of Sociology

SOCIOLOGY 4455F-001

Challenging the Law

Fall 2026

Delivery Method - In-Person

Instructor: Dr. Dale Ballucci, Associate Professor

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Course Description:

This course examines law as a social institution, exploring both classical and contemporary understandings of the law. By examining empirical examples, we examine different explanations of how the law operates and affects social relations.

Course Focus: In this seminar, we will examine law as a social institution shaped by social action, organizations, power, inequality, interpretation, and everyday practice. Rather than assuming that law is neutral or that changing legal rules necessarily produces social change, we will ask how law operates in practice, whose interests and experiences it recognizes, where discretion enters legal processes, and what it means to challenge law. The course draws on a range of socio-legal perspectives, including feminist, critical race, intersectional, and critical approaches to colonialism and inequality. Across different legal problems and jurisdictions, students will consider multiple forms of challenge: exposing unequal effects, reinterpreting legal concepts, including excluded perspectives, reforming legal rules and institutions, resisting legal authority, and questioning the limits of law itself.

Pre-requisite(s): Registration in third year or above in any Department of Sociology module, or fourth year in any module.

Unless you have either the requisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enroll in it, you may be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. This decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

Anti-requisite(s): None

Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Analyze law as a social institution shaped by social action, organizations, power, inequality, and discretion.
- Compare and apply multiple socio-legal perspectives to question assumptions about law's neutrality, universality, and capacity to produce social change.
- Evaluate how legal rules and practices can produce different consequences across social locations and institutional contexts.

- Distinguish between law on the books and law in action by analyzing cases, policies, decisions, institutional practices, and empirical evidence.
- Develop and defend evidence-based arguments about whether and how a law or legal practice should be challenged, reinterpreted, reformed, resisted, or replaced.
- Assess the possibilities and limits of using law as an instrument of social change.

Course Material:

All required readings and Law Challenge materials will be made available through the course OWL Brightspace site. There is no required textbook. Students should bring the assigned readings and materials to class electronically or in hard copy. Approximate required material cost: \$0.

Communication:

Students are responsible for reviewing the course OWL Brightspace site regularly for news and updates. This is the primary method by which information will be disseminated to all students enrolled in the course.

I can be contacted by email at dballucc@uwo.ca. Please include an appropriate salutation, your name, and the course number in your message. I will normally respond to course-related email within 24 hours on weekdays; responses may be less frequent on weekends. Questions about course content and routine course procedures should ordinarily be raised in class, unless there is a personal circumstance that requires earlier contact or you wish to arrange an appointment.

Course Schedule and Readings:

The reading list and weekly schedule are available on the course OWL Brightspace site.

Each week, students will complete assigned academic readings and a short Challenge Source posted on Brightspace. Most Challenge Sources will use Canadian examples; selected examples from the United States or other jurisdictions may be used when they provide particularly useful opportunities to examine law, inequality, power, and social change. Students are not expected to have prior legal knowledge. Any legal or policy background required for an activity will be provided.

Method of Evaluation:

The evaluation methods described in the course outline are essential requirements.

Assessment Summary:

1. Law Challenge Labs - 20% (group work; best 5 of 7)
2. a. Challenge the Law Project Proposal - 5% (pairs)
 - b. Challenge the Law Final Project - 40% (pairs)
3. Integrative In-Class Writing Assessment - 35% (individual)

1. Law Challenge Labs - 20%

Seven graded in-class Law Challenge Labs will be completed during the term. Only the highest five Lab grades will count toward the final course grade. The first class will include an ungraded practice Challenge to help students become familiar with the format before graded Labs begin. Labs require students to use the assigned readings and instructor-provided Challenge materials to analyze a case, policy, legal decision, institutional practice, or socio-legal problem. Activities will vary and may include case analysis, policy revision, competing judgments, stakeholder analysis, mapping discretion, public inquiry, or reconsideration after new evidence is introduced.

Students will work in small groups and each group will submit one brief Law Challenge Record. To keep the focus on analysis rather than formal writing, the Record is not graded for writing quality. Each group receives a single Lab score based on three criteria: use of the assigned course material, quality of socio-legal analysis, and the strength of the group's response to the Challenge. The scoring scale is 3 = Strong, 2 = Satisfactory, 1 = Limited, and 0 = Incomplete/no meaningful participation. The highest five scores are converted to the 20% course weight. Group members normally receive the same Lab grade; the instructor may adjust an individual student's grade where there is clear evidence of substantially limited participation.

Because only the best 5 of 7 Labs count, two missed Labs are automatically excluded from the calculation of the final grade. Academic consideration will not normally be granted for these two missed elements. If more than two Labs are missed, a grade of zero will be assigned to each additional missed Lab unless academic consideration is approved in accordance with University policy.

2. Challenge the Law Project - 45%

Students will work in pairs to investigate and challenge one specific law, legal policy, legal decision, institutional practice, or legally regulated social problem. Topics must be sufficiently focused for detailed socio-legal analysis; broad topics such as "policing," "abortion," or "immigration" must be narrowed to a particular law, policy, decision, or practice. Canadian topics are encouraged, but pairs may examine the United States or another jurisdiction provided the jurisdiction is identified clearly and the topic is appropriate for the course.

Independent Project Workshop - Thursday, October 8: There will be no in-person class. Students will use the scheduled class period to develop their project topic, identify a primary legal or policy source, begin locating scholarly literature, formulate the socio-legal question they intend to investigate, and begin planning the division of work with their partner. Instructions and research guidance will be posted on Brightspace. Nothing is due on October 8.

The project has two graded components:

- Project Proposal - 5%: One proposal per pair, approximately 300-400 words, due Thursday, October 22 at 11:55 p.m. on Brightspace. The proposal must identify the topic and jurisdiction, explain the socio-legal question the pair intends to investigate, identify one relevant primary legal/policy source, and list at least two preliminary academic sources. The proposal is used to confirm that the topic is manageable and appropriate before the final project is completed.

• **Final Challenge the Law Project - 40%**

One project per pair, approximately 3,000-3,500 words, due Thursday, December 3 at 11:55 p.m. on Brightspace. The project must address: (1) The Challenge - what specific law, policy, decision, practice, or legally regulated problem is being examined? (2) Purpose - what is it intended to accomplish? (3) Assumptions - what assumptions are built into it? (4) Law in Practice - how does it operate in the real world? (5) Power and Inequality - who benefits, who is burdened, and who has discretion or authority? (6) The Challenge - should it be defended, reformed, reinterpreted, resisted, or replaced, and why? (7) Proposed Change - what specifically should happen and why?

The Final Challenge the Law Project must use at least five scholarly academic sources, including at least two sources beyond the assigned course readings, and at least one primary legal or policy source such as legislation, a court or tribunal decision, an official policy, regulation, or government document. News reports, NGO reports, public inquiries, audits, statistics, and other credible materials may be used as supplementary evidence but do not replace the academic-source requirement. Both partners are expected to contribute meaningfully to the research, analysis, and preparation of the final submission. Partners normally receive the same project grade; the instructor may adjust an individual student's grade where there is clear evidence of substantially unequal participation. Detailed citation, formatting, and partnership instructions will be posted on Brightspace.

Flexible deadline: The Project Proposal and Final Challenge the Law Project each include a 48-hour grace period. Work submitted within 48 hours after the stated deadline will not receive a late penalty. After the grace period, a late penalty of 5% of the assignment grade per day will apply unless academic consideration has been approved. Because this built-in flexibility is available, requests for academic consideration for work submitted within the grace period will not normally be granted.

3. Integrative In-Class Writing Assessment - 35%

Thursday, November 12, 2026, in class. Students will complete an individual two-hour written assessment that draws together key concepts, theories, and debates from across the course. Students will respond to a critical socio-legal question, case, short reading, or scenario and develop a structured, evidence-based argument. The expected length is approximately 1,000-1,200 words. Students may use their own handwritten or printed course notes and assigned readings, but no electronic devices will be permitted unless required by an approved accommodation. The assessment must be completed in class. This assessment is designated as the one-course assessment requiring supporting documentation to receive academic consideration for an absence. Students with approved academic consideration will complete a make-up assessment; the format, duration, and question(s) may differ from the original assessment.

The written components of the Project Proposal, Final Challenge the Law Project, and Integrative In-Class Writing Assessment together exceed the Department of Sociology

requirement for senior-level essay courses, which requires a minimum total of 2,500 words of assessed written work across the term.

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI):

All assignments must be completed independently, without the aid of artificial intelligence (AI), unless the instructor explicitly indicates otherwise for a specific activity.

Electronic Devices:

Electronic devices may be used in class to access course readings, take notes, and complete activities when appropriate. Students are expected to use devices in ways that support the learning environment. No electronic devices will be permitted during the Integrative In-Class Writing Assessment unless an approved accommodation requires their use.

Course Policies:

The course is organized as an interactive senior-level seminar. Students are expected to attend having completed the assigned readings and to contribute substantively to Law Challenge activities and class discussion. The quality of engagement is more important than the quantity of speaking. Students should refer to one another respectfully and engage critically with ideas while maintaining a professional classroom environment.

A separate document titled “Academic Policies” contains the policy information required by Senate and will be posted on the course OWL Brightspace site.



Department of Sociology
Effective September 1, 2026.

Academic Policies

Scholastic Offences: Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the [Scholastic Offences](https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_offences.pdf) Policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_offences.pdf.

Plagiarism: Students must write their assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major scholastic offence.

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between Western University and Turnitin.com

Students are expected to retain all research notes, rough drafts, essay outlines, and other materials used in preparing assignments. In the unlikely event of concerns being raised about the authenticity of any assignment, your instructor may ask you to produce these materials; an inability to do so may weigh heavily against you.

Computer-marked multiple-choice tests and/or exams may be subject to submission for similarity review by software that will check for unusual coincidences in answer patterns that may indicate cheating.

Prior to any examination, students must turn their cellphones off and store them in their bags/coat at the front of the room. The use (or possession) of cellphones or other communications technologies during examinations is strictly prohibited. Those caught using a cell phone or other communication technologies, or even the physical possession of these technologies during an examination, will result in a zero on the examination in question. Similarly, the use (or possession) of these technologies during examination breaks (bathroom breaks during an exam) will also result in a zero. Intent does not matter. Forgetting to put away your cellphone or other communication technologies, whether during the examination or on examination breaks (bathroom breaks), are not justifications. It will result in a zero on the examination in question. In sum, your cellphones should never be seen or heard during an examination and should always be stored in your bags/coats at the front of the room.

Copyright: Students may not record or distribute any class activity, including conversations during office hours, without written permission from the instructor, except as necessary as part of approved accommodations for students with disabilities. Any approved recordings may only be used for the student's own private use.

Code of Student Conduct: Every student is expected to comply with the provisions of the Code of Student Conduct. Sanctions for non-compliance range from a warning or reprimand to expulsion from the University. It is the responsibility of every student to read the Code and familiarize themselves with its contents. The Code is available at http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/code_of_conduct.pdf.

Student Responsibility: Students in a degree program must select courses in accordance with the published requirements. Students are responsible for ensuring that their selection of courses is appropriate and accurately recorded. Students must ensure course prerequisites have been completed successfully or special permission from the Dean is obtained. Students who fail to do so will be removed from the course without adjustments to fees. The decision may not be appealed.

Student Responsibility for Course Selection:

https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/general/academic_counselling.pdf

Registration and Progression:

https://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/registration_progression_grad/registration_progression.pdf

Graduation Requirements:

https://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/registration_progression_grad/graduation.pdf

Absence from Course Commitments: Students must familiarize themselves with the [Policy on Academic Consideration](#) – Undergraduate Students in First Entry Programs
https://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/academic_consideration_Sep24.pdf.

Students missing regularly scheduled course work for medical, compassionate or extenuating circumstances can request academic consideration by completing a request using the Student Absence Portal (SAP) https://registrar.uwo.ca/academics/academic_considerations/index.html. Students are permitted one academic consideration request per course per term without supporting documentation. **Note that supporting documentation is always required for academic consideration requests for examinations scheduled by the office of the registrar (e.g. December and April exams)** and for practical laboratory and performance tests typically scheduled during the last week of the term. Students should also note that the instructor may designate one assessment per course per term that requires supporting documentation. This designated assessment is described in the course outline. Supporting documentation for academic considerations for absences due to illness must include the completed Western Student Medical Certificate (SMC) https://registrar.uwo.ca/academics/pdfs/student-medical_certificate.pdf or, where that is not possible, equivalent documentation by a health care practitioner. Students must request academic consideration as soon as possible and no later than 48 hours after the missed assessment.

Procedure on makeup assessments for Social Science students and for courses offered by the Faculty of Social Science (Effective September 1, 2026):

If academic consideration is granted, students should consult the course outline for information regarding how the missed assessment will be addressed and follow any instructions provided by the instructor. At the instructor's discretion, the weight of a missed test/quiz or mid-term may be transferred to another assessment in the course, including the final exam, rather than requiring a makeup assessment. Reweighting is not available for missed final exams.

Students are entitled to **one makeup assessment opportunity** for a missed test/quiz, mid-term, or final exam supported by approved academic consideration. **No additional makeup opportunities will be provided.** Makeup assessments represent the final opportunity to complete a missed course assessment. The course instructor or teaching assistant(s) may not be available to respond to questions during the makeup test/exam. Students should be aware that the make-up test/exam will not necessarily be in the same format, be of the same duration, or cover the same material as the original test/exam.

What happens if I miss a makeup assessment as a Social Science student or in a course offered by the Faculty of Social Science?

Students who miss a makeup assessment are not eligible for an additional makeup opportunity. Depending on their circumstances, they may:

1. Remain enrolled in the course and accept a grade of zero on the missed makeup assessment. Students should consult the course outline and calculate whether they can still achieve a passing grade in the course.
2. Withdraw from the course through [Student Center](#) before the [published drop deadline](#). A course dropped before the deadline will result in a withdrawal (WDN) without academic penalty. Part-time students should consult the Registrar's Office [refund schedule](#) to determine whether a tuition refund is available. Students enrolled full-time in 4.0-5.0 courses are generally not eligible for tuition refunds when a course is dropped.
3. If the published drop deadline has passed and the missed makeup assessment is supported by appropriate documentation, students may submit their documentation through the [Student Absence Portal](#) to request a **WDN (withdrawal without academic penalty)**. Approval is not automatic and remains subject to Faculty review. Requests for a second makeup assessment will not be considered.

Students are encouraged to carefully consider their ability to complete a makeup assessment as scheduled, as no further opportunities to complete the missed work will be available.

Note: missed work can only be excused through one of the mechanisms above. Being asked not to attend an in-person course requirement due to potential COVID-19 symptoms is not sufficient on its own. Students should check the Western website to see what directives for Covid are to be followed. Western has been and will continue to follow directives established by the Middlesex-London Health Unit. That directive will state whether students should or should not come to campus/class and any other requirements (e.g., masks are mandatory). Please check on your own and do not email the instructor, the Department Undergraduate Advisor/Coordinator or the Faculty Academic Advising Office.

Contingency plan for an in-person class pivoting to 100% online learning: In the event of a COVID-19 resurgence during the course that necessitates the course delivery moving away from face-to-face interaction, affected course content will be delivered entirely online, either synchronously (i.e., at the times indicated in the timetable) or asynchronously (e.g., posted on OWL Brightspace for students to view at their convenience). The grading scheme will **not** change. Any remaining assessments will also be conducted online as determined by the course instructor.

Guidelines for Grades/Marks: The Department of Sociology has grade distribution guidelines that all instructors are expected to follow. Generally, and with few exceptions, this means that the number of A's in a course cannot exceed the number of B's, and class means are expected to fall within a prescribed percentage range. This means that your final grade depends on your ranking relative to your peers. Courses with grades falling outside this range may be adjusted, up or down. These guidelines do not prohibit a student achieving 95% or higher in all their courses, but it does mean that an entire course cannot be made up of students receiving 95%. This policy combats grade inflation, contributing to higher standards, and ensuring uniformity across all courses of the same level. Motivated and hard-working students receive grades well above the course averages. The use of grade guidelines, including any adjustments of grades, either up or down for this purpose, cannot be used as the basis of an appeal.

Sociology 1000-Level

A's not to exceed B's

Means in the range of 68-72%

Sociology 2000-Level

A's not to exceed B's

Means in the range of 70-75%

Sociology 3000-Level

Means in the range of 73-80%

Sociology 4000-Level

Means in the range of 78-82%

Support Services:

- **Office of the Registrar Services** <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>
- **Faculty Academic Advising** - Please visit your Home Faculty Academic advising webpage for information regarding adding/dropping courses, important dates, academic considerations for absences, appeals, exam conflicts, and many other academic related matters
https://registrar.uwo.ca/faculty_academic_counselling.html .
- **USC services** – information available regarding student health/dental plan, LTC bus pass, food support services, Peer support Centre etc <http://westernusc.ca/services/> .
- **Mental health** – Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to [Mental Health@Western](#) <https://www.uwo.ca/health/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

- **Health & Wellness Services** – Registered part-time and full-time students can book a physical health appointment at <https://www.uwo.ca/health/shs/index.html>.
- **Accessible Education** provides support and services to students with disabilities at Western, in all programs and faculties. Students with disabilities or accessibility challenges should work with Accessible Education (formerly SSD) http://academicsupport.uwo.ca/accessible_education/index.html, which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing.
- **Gender-Based and Sexual Violence** – Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experience GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts on the Wellness and Wellbeing website <https://www.uwo.ca/health/gbsv/index.html>. To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca.
- **Western Libraries** – Visit the many library locations on campus. Western Libraries provide access to material in physical and digital formats <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/catalogue/index.html>. Research support is also available <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/research/index.html>.
- **Writing Support Centre** – Online writing resources, writing support and writing modules are available to undergraduate students <https://writing.uwo.ca/undergrads/>.
- **Bookstore:** Search for Textbook/course material availability and cost <https://bookstore.uwo.ca/course-materials-textbooks/course-materials-and-textbooks>.