

Big Business

Students follow the complex relationship of commerce and government.

"The business of America is business," insisted Calvin Coolidge, and as far as professor **Colleen Dunlavy** is concerned, he wasn't far off. Dunlavy teaches History 247: The History of American Business, and in her view, the story of America can't be separated from the story of business.

Although the class has been part of the UW curriculum for more than twenty years, it's particularly relevant to students in spring 2009, as the nation faces what President Barack Obama described as "the most profound economic emergency since the Great Depression." As U.S. leaders look to historical examples to find a way out of the financial crisis, Dunlavy's students do, too.

"Did anyone tune in to the president's press conference last night?" she asked her class at the start of a lecture. "Did you hear him mention the transcontinental railroad? So it seems the president has some historical literacy."

Taught in a traditional lecture-and-discussion format, the class covers the whole of U.S. history, from the colonial period to modern times, tracing the rise of American commerce. Over the course of the semester, students see the progress of the United States through the lens of the pursuit of wealth. But unlike most economic history courses, which rely heavily on mathematical analysis, this class looks instead at the ways in which technology, business, and governmental practices converge to shape society.

"When you look at the development of American capitalism, there are really a couple of themes that emerge," she says.

"One is the role of government — how our legal and political structure has shaped the development of American business. The other is the social world that American business created."

In her twice-weekly lectures, Dunlavy gives students the broad narrative of American capitalism, highlighting important companies and personalities. In the weekly discussion sections, T.A. **Ryan Quintana MA'05, PhDx'10** helps smaller groups

of students explore issues in greater detail.

In a lecture on the mobilization for World War II, Dunlavy noted that the same economic policies that helped win the war also created the modern military-industrial complex. In the following day's discussion sections, Quintana talked about ways in which today's governmental involvement in finance echoes and differs from the New Deal and wartime policies.

The popular press is also noticing Dunlavy's expertise. When the federal government announced a \$700 billion financial bailout, some journalists worried that the plan represented unprec-

edented interference. Dunlavy responded with a blog pointing out the long history of federal support for financial markets. "I didn't think anyone had read it," she says, "and then it was picked up by [New York's] *Newsday*."

In her class, she emphasizes that the role of the historian is not to say what the country *should* do, but rather to try to understand what has been done. "History cannot be used to predict the future," she notes, "but understanding the historical processes by which we arrived at our current state will help (a bit) in making sense of the changes going on around us today."

John Allen



Students in History 247 focus on how government policies have shaped American business through boom times and depressions — a timely topic for students set to graduate during an economic crisis.