L32-3002: Research Methods for the Social Sciences

This course provides an introduction to qualitative and quantitative research methods in the social sciences. Topics address issues related to both theory building (e.g., case studies and formal models) and theory testing (e.g., observational studies, experiments, and simulations). The central focus of this course is on theoretical and practical issues regarding the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to original research. The goals of this course are: 1) to enable students to critically analyze scholarly articles with particular attention to issues arising from the research design; and 2) to guide students in the construction of an optimal research design for a project they will or might complete in subsequent semesters (such as a senior honors thesis or an independent research project).

EXPECTATIONS/REQUIREMENTS:

Students are expected to come to each class having read the assignments for that day ahead of time and to participate in the class discussions. All students must submit their assignments on time. Powerpoint slides will be made available to students.

READINGS

Reading assignments include two types: (1) methodological readings, and (2) applied readings in the social sciences. The applied readings initially specified on this syllabus will be replaced by ones chosen to match the interests of the participants in the class.

WRITTEN REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:

The course requires the submission of the following papers by the class Sessions indicated. They will be weighted in the final grade as indicated:

A. Problem Statement (1-2 pages): Session 2 0%
B. Background Paper (2-3 pages): Session 4 5%
C. Bibliography (1-2 pages): Session 6 5%
D. Critique of One Article (1-2 pages): Session 8 10%
E. Literature Review (5-6 new pages): Session 10 25%
F. Research Design, General (1-2 pages): Session 12 15%
G. Research Design, Complete (3-4 new pages): End of Semester 30%

OR

D. Literature Review (6-8 pages) Session 8 15%
E. Research Design, Complete (6-8 pages) Session 11 25%
F. Data Analysis, Draft (5-10 pages) Session 14 15%
G. Research Paper, Complete End of Semester 25%

Participation will account for the remaining 10% of the grade.
NOTE: Readings on this syllabus are tentative, and largely drawn from the exceptional syllabus developed by Prof. Dawn Brascati for Political Science 495 for the Spring 2011 semester. As the semester unfolds, the readings may change, but the topics will not, and the over-all reading load will not increase materially.

**Session 1: RESEARCH METHODS: PURPOSE AND GOALS**

**Topics/Questions:** What is methodology? Why does it matter? How does the method we use shape the answers that we get? Is there a best method? What is the scientific method?

**Method Readings:**

**Session 2: RESEARCH TOPIC/QUESTION SELECTION**

**Topics/Questions:** What is the difference between a research question and a research puzzle? What makes a good topic? How to find a good topic? What are the differences between problem-driven versus method-driven approaches? Which is superior?

**Method Readings:**
- **Steven I Jackson, Doing Research Right (Rough Draft), Chapters 3, 4, and 8**

**Applied Readings:**
- **Gilbert Thomas Stephenson, “Racial Distinctions in Southern Law,” The American Political Science Review, (1,1), Nov. 1906.**

**Session 3: CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT**

**Topics/Questions:** What is the difference between a concept and a measure? What is concept overstretching? When is a measure valid?

**Method Readings:**
- **Steven I Jackson, Doing Research Right (Rough Draft), Chapter 5**

**Applied Readings:**
Session 4: CAUSALITY

Topics/Questions: What is causality? Can we demonstrate it in social science research and how? What are the following terms: tautology, spuriousness and endogeneity?

Method Readings:
***Steven I Jackson, Doing Research Right (Rough Draft), Chapter 6.

Applied Readings:

Session 5: FORMAL MODELS/GAME THEORY

Topics/Questions: What are the assumptions of rational choice theory? Are these assumptions realistic? Does it matter if they are not? When are formal models most/least effective?

Method Readings:
***Steven I Jackson, Doing Research Right (Rough Draft), Chapter 7

Applied Readings:

Session 6: CASE STUDY METHODS

Topics/Questions: How are qualitative methods and case studies useful? What are their limitations? What is the best case study method?

Method Readings:
***Steven I Jackson, Doing Research Right (Rough Draft), Chapters 11-12

Applied Readings:
Session 7: CASE SELECTION, SELECTION BIAS AND COUNTERFACTUALS

Topics/Questions: What are the best principals to follow when choosing case studies to examine? What does the term selection bias mean and what problems arise from it? What is a counterfactual? What purpose can counterfactuals serve in research? When are counterfactuals useful and what constitutes a good counterfactual?

Method Readings:

Applied Readings:

Session 8: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS, INTERVIEWS AND FIELD RESEARCH

Topics/Questions: Why do IRBs exist? What kind of research will they approve? What kind of research does not need IRB approval? Why interview people? How should I structure and approach an interview so that it is most effective? How to obtain interviews?


Method Readings:
***Lilleker, Darren G.. 2003 “Interviewing the Political Elite: Navigating a Potential Minefield”. Politics. 23(3), 207–214

Applied Readings:

Session 9: OBSERVATIONAL STUDIES

Topics/Questions: What are the advantages of observational studies and when are they appropriate? To what does the term generalizability refer? What are the shortcomings of observational studies and how can they be overcome?

Method Readings:

Applied Readings:
Session 10: CONTENT ANALYSIS

Topics/Questions: What is content analysis? When is it appropriate? What are its benefits and shortcomings? What are the advantages and disadvantages of computer-aided content analysis?

Method Readings:

Applied Readings:

Session 11: SURVEYS AND LABORATORY/SURVEY EXPERIMENTS

Topics/Questions: What kinds of things can you learn from surveys that you cannot learn from other methods? How to effect design a survey from the instrument design to sampling and response rates? How can lab/survey experiments be applied to political science? How to experiments allow researchers to establish causality? What is external validity?

Method Readings:

Applied Readings:

Session 12: NATURAL AND FIELD EXPERIMENTS

Topics/Questions: How to natural/field experiments differ from lab experiments? What are their advantages and disadvantages compared to lab experiments? How can they natural/field experiments be applied to political science?

Method Readings:

Applied Readings:
Session 13: SIMULATIONS

Method Readings
***Steven I Jackson, Doing Research Right (Rough Draft), chapter 14

Applied Readings:

Session 14: CONCLUSION: COMPARISON OF RESEARCH METHODS

No Readings Assigned

Presentation and Discussion of Research Designs and/or Research Results