OVERVIEW

This course focuses on the design of social science research. The main goal is to enhance students' understanding of how to fashion high quality studies related to public policy and administration. A secondary goal is to familiarize students with a number of different research approaches, including their potential pitfalls.

PPA 205 is not primarily a course on data analysis; another core course, PPA 207, focuses on that topic. However, we will give some attention to the types of data that may be used in the various approaches we will consider. We will also draw from real world studies that use quantitative and qualitative analysis to illustrate points about research design principles central to this class.

SPECIFIC LEARNING GOALS

At the end of PPA 205 it is expected that students will:

1. Appreciate the importance of the “front end” of research (i.e., research design).

2. Appreciate specific design principles that are common to a number of different types of research, such as the critical role of theories, hypotheses, and comparisons.

3. Appreciate the importance of thinking systematically about establishing causality.

4. Understand how to proceed from a concept to a means of measuring the concept.
5. Understand the attributes, advantages, and limitations of various types of data collection methods, including: a) experiments; b) surveys; c) field research; d) accessing electronic data archives; and e) conducting historical analysis.

6. Appreciate how to use simple data analysis techniques to draw tentative conclusions.

7. Understand how to write an effective research proposal.

8. Appreciate some of the ethical considerations applicable to applied social science research.

**CONDUCT OF THE COURSE**

This course differs from traditional research methods courses in that a relatively heavy emphasis is placed on classroom discussion. In my judgment it is not enough for students to listen carefully to a lecture; instead, the concepts must be used to analyze real-world studies and information. Accordingly, a typical class may include discussion topics, some of which are specified in the syllabus. Many class sessions will also use exercises, either of my own device or drawn from the main text used in class (Approaches to Social Research). It is therefore imperative that you read the syllabus carefully to be prepared for class and that to the extent possible you complete the readings before class.

**READINGS**

The following books are required and may be purchased at the Hornet Bookstore.


Additionally, shorter readings will be available from the library reserve room in hard copy and/or through the electronic collection, or otherwise made available to students by the instructor.
SUMMARY OF ASSIGNMENTS

The most important class assignment is the development of an individual research prospectus for a potential study. Such a prospectus might later be developed into a PPA thesis/project, at the student’s option. Detailed guidelines for the prospectus will be distributed during the semester. The prospectus will be due on December 17, the last day of the final exam period. A short proposal summary will be due on November 2 and aimed at helping me determine if you are “on track.” However, I strongly urge you to set up an appointment to discuss your prospectus before the proposal summary is due.

Additionally, there will be one group assignment. Specific topics and group composition will be determined in class. Further guidelines for that assignment will be provided in the course of the semester. It is expected that reflection on the group assignment will help students to develop an individual prospectus.

Students will also be required to take an in-class, open book examination and complete a short paper on conceptualizing an applied social science topic. Dates for these assignments are specified in the course schedule.

Class participation will be considered in your final grade. In assessing participation I will take into account class attendance, quality of comments in class discussion, extent to which connections are made to course readings and concepts, and frequency of involvement.

Finally, each student will be required to submit one reading reaction paper during the course of the semester. That paper should address one of the weekly set of discussion questions or complete one of the exercises identified in the syllabus. Reading reaction papers should be no more than two double spaced pages and are due in hard copy on the day we discuss the reading.

SPECIAL NEEDS RELATED TO DISABILITIES

Should you need assistance with portions of class due to disabilities, please let me know as soon as possible. The University offers services to student with disabilities and I would be glad to refer you to the appropriate campus unit.

ACADEMIC HONESTY

I take issues of academic honesty (including avoiding plagiarism) seriously and you should as well. If you are unfamiliar with the specifics of University policy in this area I recommend you review the appropriate section of the on-line University Policy
LATE ASSIGNMENTS AND MISSED CLASSES

I will accept late assignments (or allow for a make-up examination) only in highly unusual circumstances. At my discretion, a student who misses a deadline may be given a make-up assignment. Whether or not a penalty will be assessed depends on the reason (e.g., a family emergency constitutes a good reason; a competing requirement for another course does not).

I expect students to attend all class sessions unless they have a compelling reason not to do so. You should notify me in advance if you need to miss a class. A student with more than one unexcused absence from class will be penalized one full class participation grade. A student who misses more than three classes for any reason should drop the course.

GRADING WEIGHTS

Final class grades will be determined in accordance with the following weights:

- Case study prospectus: 30%
- In-class examination: 20%
- Group project: 15%
- Causality paper: 10%
- Reading reaction paper: 10%
- Class participation: 10%
- Prospectus proposal: 5%
CLASS SCHEDULE

August 31: The Crucial Importance of a Good Research Design

**Readings**
*Approaches to Social Research*, chapter 1

**Exercise and Discussion**
Toward the beginning of today’s session I will divide the class into small groups to work on an exercise related to the alleged connection between vaccines and autism. The exercise is self contained and I prefer you *not* make an effort to familiarize yourself with the academic literature in this area prior to class. However, you *should* read the Park article before our August 31 session to obtain a general sense of the controversy and relevant considerations.

September 7: The Scientific Method and Critiques of that Method

**Readings**
*Approaches to Social Research*, chapter 2
Scott O. Lilienfeld, Steven Jay Lynn, John Ruscio, and Barry L. Beyerstein, *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology: Shattering Widespread Myths about Human Behavior* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), pp. 1-19

**Exercises and Discussion**
Complete exercises 1-3 on pages 44-45 in *Approaches* and be prepared to discuss your answers in class.

What does the selection from Lilienfeld et al. suggest about why a scientific approach to social questions may be desirable?

Consider the postmodernist critique of science: what is it, what can we learn from postmodernists, and where do they get wrong?

In light of criticisms from postmodernists and others, what can we reasonably expect from the scientific approach?
September 14: Elements of Research Design

Readings
*Approaches to Social Research*, chapter 4 (but only skim the section on the nature of causal relationships; we'll come back to that on Sept. 24)
*Final Solutions*, introduction & chapter 1

Exercises and Discussion
Identify the unit of analysis, dependent variable, and key independent variables considered in *Final Solutions*. Why does Valentino focus on “mass killing” rather than “genocide”?

Complete exercise 2 on pages 112-113 in *Approaches* and be prepared to discuss your answers in class.

September 21: Thinking about Causality

Causal Paper Due

Readings
*Approaches to Social Research*, pp. 96-107

Exercises and Discussion
Think carefully about Brady’s short article about the Florida results in the 2000 presidential election. What may we miss by moving right to regression analysis and ignoring the logic of causal processes?

Be prepared to discuss your assignment in class

September 28: Measurement and Sampling

Reading
*Approaches to Social Research*, chapters 5-6

Exercises and Discussion
Complete exercises 4 and 5 on page 148 in *Approaches* and be prepared to discuss your answers in class.
October 5: Experimental Research

Readings
Approaches to Social Research, chapters 7-8

Discussion

Why is an experimental approach probably the only one that could be used to draw valid causal inferences about political misperceptions of the type that Concern Nyhan and Reifler? What are the implications of their findings for the principles of sound research we emphasize in PPA 205?

October 12: Surveys and Survey Design

Readings
Approaches to Social Research, chapters 9-10

Exercise and Discussion
Consider Krosnick’s argument about the Harris Poll. Were the problems he identified the result of poor survey methodology or poor interpretation of survey results, or both?

Complete exercise 3 on p. 308 and exercise 2 on pp. 351-352 and be prepared to discuss your answers in class

October 19: Mid-Term Exam and Group Projects

Reading
“Food for Thought”, PPA 205 group project paper, fall 2009

Groups and group project topics to be determined today

October 26: Field Research

Readings
Approaches to Social Research, chapter 11
Discussion
Why did Fenno choose a field work approach to examine how congressional representatives view their constituencies? What did he learn from this approach that he probably could not have learned from statistical analysis of available data? What were the weaknesses of his approach?

November 2: Using Existing Data, Part One- Electronic Data Archives

Prospectus proposal due

Note: the second part of this class session will be reserved for group meetings

Reading
Approaches to Social Research, pp. 393-412

Web Site to Visit
Come to class having perused the Web site for the Inter-University Consortium on Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan: www.icpsr.umich.edu. I will be expecting you to be able to conduct searches and access data from this site.

November 9: Using Existing Data, Part Two- Historical Analysis

Reading
Final Solutions, chapters 2-3, 5, conclusion (skim remainder)
Approaches to Social Research, pp. 413-430

Discussion
Think carefully about how Valentino draws causal inferences about what factors are or are not significant in promoting mass killing, and be prepared to discuss these inferences during class

November 16: Evaluation Research and Elementary Data Analysis

Readings
Nancy Shulock and Colleen Moore, “Rules of the Game: How State Policy Creates Barriers to Completion and Impedes Student Success in the California Community Colleges” (Sacramento: Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy, 2007)
Approaches to Social Research, chapters 14 and 15
**Guest Speaker**  
Nancy Shulock

**Discussion**  
What standards should be used to judge the success of programs such as DARE?

How convincing is the statistical evidence presented in “Rules of the Game”? Why?

**November 23:** No Class (Thanksgiving week break)

**On-line exercise**  
Details will be forthcoming

**November 30:** Ethics and Key Course Themes

**Readings**  
*Approaches to Social Research*, chapter 3

**Exercise and Discussion**  
Complete exercises 1a-1c on pages 75-76 in *Approaches* and be prepared to discuss them in class.

**December 7:** Group Presentations

*Important reminder:* Your research prospectus is due at 4:00 p.m. on December 17!