

Department of Sociology
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

RESEARCH METHODS: THE MODES AND LOGIC OF SOCIAL INQUIRY
(Officially: “Advanced Social Research Methods”)

Spring 2016

Course Information:

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|----------------|------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Course Number: | SOCI 463/863 | Instructor: | Professor David Warner |
| Credits: | 3 Hours | Office: | 726 Oldfather Hall |
| Seminar Times: | T/R 2:00-3:15 pm | E-mail: | dwarner3 [at] unl [dot] edu |
| Seminar Room: | 707 Oldfather Hall | Office Hours: | T/R 3:30 pm – 4:30 pm |
| Prerequisites: | Permission (see below) | | or by appointment |

“‘Method’ has to do, first of all, with how to ask and answer questions with some assurance that the answers are more or less durable. ‘Theory’ has to do, above all, with paying close attention to the words one is using, especially their degree of generality and their logical relations. The primary purpose of both is clarity of conception and economy of procedure, and most importantly just now, the release, rather than the restriction of the sociological imagination.”

—C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (2000 [1959]: 120)

“Statistical estimation methods should serve as the handmaiden to theory and research design, not the other way around. ...Those who worship at the altar of complex methods are prone to the error of thinking that technical sophistication can substitute for knowledge of the subject matter, careful theorizing, and appropriate research design.”

—Glenn Firebaugh, *Seven Rules for Social Research* (2008:207-208)

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

As the above two quotes—written nearly a half century apart—make clear, social research is about analyzing social phenomena or “facts” and involves both rigorous techniques for the examination (i.e., the modes) of *and* systematic reasoning about (i.e., the logic) the relationships between these facts. That is, research methods have primarily to do with thinking about how best to ask and answer questions. This course will accordingly provide an overview of the major quantitative research designs and techniques used in contemporary empirical inquiry into social phenomena, including experimental and quasi-experimental designs, archival designs, and survey and observational designs. The diversity of research strategies used by sociologists means that we will emphasize the general logic of social inquiry across modes rather than the mechanical aspects of any one approach. However, given their pervasiveness, significant attention will be devoted to understanding both the logic and procedures of survey and observational designs. Throughout the course, we will be concerned with the perennial issues of causality (so as to make inferences), sampling (so as to apply our inferences to the social world), and conceptualization (to be sure that we have appropriate representations of the social facts about which we wish to infer).

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

The overarching objective of this course is to provide students the opportunity to develop an operational understanding of the major quantitative sociological research methods, such that they have the ability to *evaluate* published social research and to *plan* their own research projects. To this end, students successfully completing this course will:

- Articulate the logic of social scientific inquiry;
- Describe the basic premises of common quantitative research designs;
- Identify the relative strengths and weaknesses of these designs;
- Critically evaluate the methodological approach of sociological research studies;
- Understand the debates surrounding causality in quantitative research;
- Design, write, and evaluate research proposals; and
- Appreciate the iterative process of social research (Hopefully!).

Methodological expertise results from completion of more specialized courses and the repeated practical application of such specialized techniques, and therefore develops gradually across one's career. This course will provide the opportunity to develop the foundational skills necessary to pursue such expertise in further coursework and practice.

PREREQUISITES:

A course in statistics that provided coverage of linear regression (SOCI 462/862 typically satisfies this requirement). An undergraduate social research methods course is recommended.

COURSE READINGS:

As required part of the Sociology Graduate Curriculum, this course is designed to provide you with the foundational training necessary to complete independent research projects, including your M.A. thesis and doctoral dissertation, successfully. As such, you will be required to read select scientific articles, book chapters, and complete monographs as specified in the Topic Plan at the end of this syllabus. Articles and books chapters are available in the Required Readings area on Blackboard. Students are required to purchase the following six monographs/books:

- Becker, Howard S. 1986/2007. [*Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*](#). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carmines, Edward G. and Richard A. Zeller. 1979. [*Reliability and Validity Assessment*](#). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Firebaugh, Glenn. 2008. [*Seven Rules for Social Research*](#). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kalton, Graham. 1983. [*Introduction to Survey Sampling*](#). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Menard, Scott. 2002. [*Longitudinal Research \(Second Edition\)*](#). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Spector, Paul E. 1992. [*Summated Rating Scale Construction: An Introduction*](#). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

There are four additional **recommended** monographs/books. Although we will not read the entirety of these texts, several chapters from each are assigned and they are excellent additions to any sociologist's library:

- Allison, Paul D. 2002. [*Missing Data*](#). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Becker, Howard S. 1998. [*Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing It*](#). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Converse, Jean M. and Stanley Presser. 1986. [*Survey Questions: Handcrafting the Standardized Questionnaire*](#). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Lieberman, Stanley. 1985. [*Making It Count: The Improvement of Social Research and Theory*](#). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

I recognize that it is a significant financial investment for you to purchase all of these books. However, each of these texts will undoubtedly become staple reference materials throughout your graduate career (and beyond), so I strongly encourage you to obtain personal copies of all the texts.

For your benefit, I have also included the citations for other sources recommended for further reading on each topic. You are not expected to be familiar with these readings for this course. However, these sources will undoubtedly be valuable as you pursue further graduate study, including in your preparation for your comprehensive examinations.

➤ *All required readings are denoted by a checkbox in the accompanying Topic Plan.* ◀

COURSE FORMAT AND ATTENDANCE:

Class meetings will be a mix of lecture, discussion, and small-group activities. This format is successful only insofar as participants take the opportunity to read assigned readings carefully and critically, and come prepared to discuss them along with their own ideas, reactions, and questions about those readings. Consequently, regular attendance is required: Three (3) unexcused absences will result in a 5% final grade penalty; four or more (≥ 4) unexcused absences increases the penalty to 10% (one full letter grade).

Excused absences *may* be granted in the case of documented (1) illness / medical issue, (2) death of a family member, (3) athletic/extra-curricular activities, or (4) religious observances. For an exception to be granted due to athletic/extra-curricular activities or religious holidays, you must notify me via email in advance of your absence. For all types of absences, you must submit documentation—either directly or indirectly through the University Health Center, a family physician, or the Students Affairs Office— verifying the reason you will be or were absent.

Laptop computers and/or iPads/tablets may be used for course related purposes, but cell phones, MP3 players, pagers, or other personal communication devices should be turned off and put away at all times during class. Misuse of technology during class will result in revocation of this privilege and lower class participation scores.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Students successfully completing this course will critically analyze the readings, carefully integrate the sometimes disparate course material, and apply this material in novel ways. Students are expected and will be required to do more than simply memorize the material. I will use the following methods of evaluation to measure your careful analysis, integration, and application of the course material.

1) Class Participation & Department Colloquia Attendance

You are expected to demonstrate your proficiency with the assigned readings through regular and relevant class participation, as determined at the end of the course, consistent with the demands of a graduate-level seminar. To facilitate the highest level of participation, you should **complete the assigned readings no later than the Monday** of the week we are scheduled to cover the material (as listed in the Topic plan), as this timeframe will allow adequate cognitive incubation.

Please note that in the interest of maintaining classroom discussion and equitable “airtime” among participants, I will call on students in class. Students who demonstrate that they have not devoted sufficient time to preparing for class will be penalized.

You are also required to attend all Department Research Colloquia during the semester. The exact number of colloquia to be held has not been finalized, but you should reserve 12:30-1:30pm each Friday so that you may attend these as they are announced. The Colloquia will expose you to a variety of methods and present an opportunity to think critically about research designs.

You will earn **15%** of your final grade based on the quantity and quality of your Class Participation and your Attendance at Department Colloquia. Students who do not demonstrate *regular and relevant* participation will earn a grade no higher than a B in this course (and indeed may earn a lower grade).

2) Short Written Exercises

You will complete seven (7) short written exercises over the course of the semester (see [Schedule of Assignments](#) below). These exercises will have you apply the concepts presented in the weekly assigned readings and class discussion to a specific problem and allow you the opportunity to develop your methodological thinking further. The details of each exercise will be distributed via the assignments tab on Blackboard prior to the due date. All assignments must follow the Writing Guidelines found on the course Blackboard site.

You will earn a total **50%** of your final grade based on these Short Written Exercises; please note that all exercises are not of equal weight.

3) Research Proposal

You will develop an independent empirical research proposal on a topic of your choice (in

consultation with me). You should approach the research proposal as an opportunity to get a strong start on your M.A. thesis or dissertation proposal. The completed research proposal serves the purpose of a final course examination. There are two options for the proposal.

- a. The first (and preferred option) is to design a research project using secondary analysis of *publicly-available survey data*. You may select from among any number of probability samples, many of which are available through ICPSR (www.icpsr.umich.edu). Exercise #1 will give you some practice finding data through ICPSR and provide the class some exposure to a handful of appropriate datasets. The preference that research proposals employ secondary analyses of publicly-available data reflects—in part—the pervasiveness of such research in sociology (and hence our emphasis on the survey and observation designs in this course). More about this will be discussed in class.
- b. The second option is to design a research project using “primary” data, which includes data you propose to collect as well as data that have been collected by others but is proprietary and/or not in the public domain (i.e., not available through ICPSR or another data repository; “restricted” survey data is usually considered secondary data). If you select this option, you will need to tackle two additional requirements. First, you will need to justify the need for primary data by describing the lack of existing data for analysis. This justification must show how specific existing datasets are wholly insufficient (not just “less than ideal.”). Second, you must provide additional detailed documentation as to how you will collect data to address your aims. Such documentation might include a plan for respondent recruitment and compensation, a projected enrollment table, a budget, draft interview protocols, and preliminary coding schemes. This additional documentation will be submitted in an appendix should you choose this option.

While the content will vary depending on the topic, the organization of your proposal will roughly follow the guidelines for an NIH small-grant proposal (e.g., R03)—although in abbreviated format. You can find a detailed Research Proposal Guide under the “Course Documents” tab on Blackboard.

Research Proposals will be a maximum of 14 double-spaced pages, divided between Specific Aims (2 double-spaced pages) and Research Strategy (Significance & Innovation, Approach, and Timeline; 12 double-spaced pages). References and any appendices do not count toward the page limit. Additional instructions on how to organize your proposal are available on the course Blackboard site.

You will complete your Research Proposal in six steps (see [Schedule of Assignments](#) below):

Step 1. Submit a “Proposal Ideas Notebook” sketching the outline of four (4) substantially *different* research ideas. I will evaluate your ideas and we will meet during office hours in week 5 to decide on which topic you will pursue for your proposal. Details on the format of the Proposal Ideas Notebook can be found on Blackboard.

Steps 2-4. Submit complete—but not unedited—drafts of the two major sections of the proposal—Specific Aims and Research Design. As you must “sell” your idea in the limited space

of the Specifics Aims page, we will devote extra attention to this portion of the proposal. You will submit a first draft of your Specific Aims page for feedback (Step 2) and then, based on the feedback you receive, you will submit a second revision of the Specific Aims page—which we will “workshop” as a group in class (Step 3). You will then subsequently submit a further revised Specific Aims section and a draft of the Research Design section (i.e., a full draft proposal) for feedback (Step 4). You will submit drafts of any appendices at the time of the full draft proposal.

Step 5. Receive two peer-reviews of your complete draft Research Proposal

Step 6. Submit a final, revised and edited, Research Proposal.

The final research proposal is worth 35% of your final grade. You will not receive a “grade” for each of the preliminary draft submissions; these are opportunity to use the feedback provided to revise your proposal in furtherance of a logical and well-designed plan for your research study.

SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS:

| Assignment | Due Date |
|---|-----------------|
| Exercise #1: Secondary Data Profile | M 1/18 |
| Proposal Ideas Notebook | M 2/1 |
| Exercise #2: Quasi-Experimental Design | M 2/15 |
| Proposal Specific Aims Page | M 2/22 |
| Exercise #3: Elaboration | M 2/29 |
| Exercise #4: Sampling | M 3/7 |
| Proposal Specific Aims Page (Revision) | W 3/16 |
| Exercise #5: Measurement | M 3/28 |
| Full Research Proposal Draft (Specific Aims, Research Strategy, Appendices) | M 4/4 |
| Exercise #6: Proposal Peer Review | M 4/11 |
| Exercise #7: Article Critique | W 4/27 |
| Final Research Proposal | T 5/3 |

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:

You will submit all written work in this course as a PDF through the Blackboard Assignments tab. Follow the file naming conventions described there.

All assignments must be submitted by 3:00 pm on the due date.

I will not accept late Short-Written Exercises under any circumstances. If you do not submit an Exercise on time, you will receive a score of zero on that assignment. Given their cumulative nature, I will accept late submission for the various late Research Paper components—however, for each day or part thereof that a component is submitted late you will incur a 3% penalty off your final grade. The final draft of your Research Proposal must be submitted on-time and no late submissions will be accepted.

EVALUATION OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE:

Evaluating written assignments is inherently subjective. I use a letter-based grading system reflecting the overall content and quality of each assignment. I will not provide point-based “deductions” tied to specific criteria. Letter grades will be associated with corresponding numeric percentages as follows: A=95%; B=85%; C=75%; D=65%; and F= 50%. Plus/minus designations will also be used. A designation of + adds 3 percentage points and a designation of – subtracts 3 percentage points. For example, a grade of B⁺ corresponds to 88%, while a grade of B⁻ corresponds to 82%. I may award truly exceptional assignments that demonstrate a depth of knowledge and integration of material at the highest level and otherwise free from error a grade of A⁺⁺ and a score of 100%. Other letter grade combinations are possible and correspond to the percentage midway between the constituent letter grades (e.g., A⁻/B⁺ = 90%, A/A⁻=93.5%).

Occasionally, if you have made a serious error in an assignment, I will instruct you to “revise & resubmit” the assignment within one week of return. Your revised assignment will then be evaluated and earn a score no higher than an “A-/B+” (90%).

You will earn your final grade in this course based on your total weighted performance on each of the course requirements described above. Final course grades will be calculated as follows:

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|----------------|---|-----|----------------|---|-----|
| A ⁺ | = | 97% | C ⁺ | = | 77% |
| A | = | 93% | C | = | 73% |
| A ⁻ | = | 90% | C ⁻ | = | 70% |
| B ⁺ | = | 87% | D ⁺ | = | 67% |
| B | = | 83% | D | = | 63% |
| B ⁻ | = | 80% | D ⁻ | = | 60% |

Students with an average weighted performance of < 60% will have earned a grade of F.

You will note that the percentage cutoffs for the final grades in the course are more lenient than those associated with the grades used for the course assignments. You must earn the average weighted percentage listed for each grade; I will not “round-up” final grades. Yes, it is possible for you to earn lower than a B in this course.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

It is the policy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to provide flexible and individualized accommodation to students with documented disabilities that may affect their ability to participate fully in course activities or to meet course requirements. To receive accommodation services, students must be registered with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office, 132 Canfield Administration, 472-3787 voice or TTY.

Students with documented disabilities should contact the Professor via [email](#) to set up an appointment for a confidential discussion of individual needs for academic accommodation.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

“The maintenance of academic honesty and integrity is a vital concern of the University community. Any student found guilty of academic dishonesty shall be subject to both academic and disciplinary sanctions. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, the following: . . . Cheating; Fabrication or Falsification; Plagiarism; Abuse of Academic Materials; Complicity in Academic Dishonesty; Falsifying Grade Reports; [and] Misrepresentation to Avoid Academic Work.” (from the UNL *Student Code of Conduct*, <http://stuafs.unl.edu/dos/code>).

I strongly encourage students to familiarize themselves with the entirety of the University’s Academic Integrity Policy, including what constitutes an academic integrity violation under each of the categories listed above. Consistent with the Disciplinary Procedures described in the *Student Code of Conduct*, it is my policy that any student found committing acts of academic dishonesty will receive a failing grade in this course and will be reported to the Chair of the Department of Sociology and the University Judicial Officer.

RIGHT OF REVISION:

I reserve the right to modify any aspect of this syllabus at any time as need be. All changes will be announced in class and posted on Blackboard.

TOPIC OUTLINE & ASSIGNED READINGS (Distributed Separately)