A little learning is a dangerous thing;  
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.  

-Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

Public Policy Studies 295-02  
Fall 2014  
Wednesdays 1:10 – 3:40 p.m.  
Commons Center 320

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The goal of this seminar is for each student to think deeply about a public policy topic of interest and successfully complete a public policy research paper within the student’s policy track. This research paper is the capstone to the Public Policy Studies major. Although this is primarily an individual undertaking, you will regularly provide feedback in the form of peer review: recommendations, encouragement, and criticism to each other at each stage of the course.

We will conduct our seminar in the same way that one would approach and prepare for a professional conference where one makes a research presentation to one’s peers. You will propose a research topic early in the semester and you will spend the semester formulating your research paper. You will each present your paper (your research and
findings) to the class at the end of the term and you will each serve as a discussant for another student’s paper. Many of you will go on to advanced degree programs where this conference process is the norm for your continuing education.

The seminar will not meet formally every week. Instead we will schedule sessions to conform with due dates for various stages of paper development. Prior to each of those sessions, I will expect that students will have made their work available to their seminar colleagues via OAK or hard copy. Thus, after the first couple of sessions, and again at the end when each student presents their final paper, seminar sessions will focus on providing each student with feedback. Each student will have specific responsibilities for being the primary respondent to the work of another seminar participant, based on mutual areas of policy focus. I will also provide direction and reaction as student papers progress. In addition to seminar sessions, I anticipate regular individual meetings with you to monitor progress and discuss any problems as work on the papers proceeds.

Aside from active participation in the seminar sessions and completing a research paper, I expect students in the seminar to meet all of the deadlines for completion of the stages in the development of their respective papers. Certain sections of the paper will be graded as incentive to keep up with the paper deadlines. I will only allow extensions beyond scheduled due dates under extraordinary circumstances and with prior approval.

In crafting a research paper, it is essential that one cite the work of others whenever it is used. We will discuss appropriate citation methods. When in doubt about whether or not to cite a source, one should always err in the direction of citing the source. Any factual assertion on your part that is not an extreme form of common knowledge (e.g. the earth is round) must be cited. It is not uncommon for every sentence in certain sections of research papers to end in a parenthetical citation. Like all other courses at Vanderbilt, The Vanderbilt Honor Code is in effect.

Stages of the Research Paper:

1. Question formulation- The most important step in producing a first rate research paper is in having a good question (hypothesis) that one wants to investigate/test. A good question makes all the other steps easier: from knowing what literature is relevant, to knowing what data and information to collect, to organizing what one finds, to reaching meaningful conclusions. So it is important that students spend considerable effort and thought in developing their research questions. Developing a good question requires that one have some familiarity with the existing research on the topic as well as a sense of
the scope of one’s undertaking. **You do not want to have a paper that just summarizes what others already have found. That is not “research.” You want to add to knowledge.** A major problem that students face is that they tend to make their questions too broad. Remember you have only one semester to complete the paper. Accordingly, your paper topic needs to be a feasible one. Thus, one might desire to write a paper on improving public education in the United States. Certainly, that is an important topic, but it is not one you will be able to complete and produce meaningful results in a single semester. You might, however, be able to examine the effectiveness of teacher salary bonuses in Nashville as a means of improving student performance. Your question must be one that there is no right or wrong answer to already. It must be “falsifiable.” Your goal is to take an issue within Public Policy studies and take a stab at bringing light to it, fleshing it out; promoting a unique answer that comes from your own research and analysis and convincing others of the legitimacy of your argument.

2. **Literature Review**- Obviously, some of the literature review work goes hand-in-hand with question formulation. But it needs to continue as your paper develops. One has to be aware of existing research and how your research speaks to/works in dialogue with the existing literature. Good research is often written in reaction to what has been said before. Inserting your voice in the academy is the hallmark of successful research. Moreover, your paper must to be grounded in some broader policy context both substantively and theoretically. After the introduction of your paper in which you: 1) set forth the question that you will be addressing and 2) provide the reader with a roadmap for how the paper will proceed, **a discussion of the relevant literature should comprise the first substantive section of the paper.** This literature review must convince the reader that others in the academy are concerned with similar questions or issues.

3. **Data, Information, and Methods** - To address your question, you will undoubtedly have to collect data (quantitative and/or qualitative) that provides you the ability to conduct meaningful tests of the question/hypothesis that is the focus of your paper. **You cannot rely solely on data that others have collected and simply reinterpret it.** You need to find your own unique data or bring together lots of data sets to answer your unique question. Common forms of data are qualitative: e.g., interviews with practitioners in the field, content analysis of campaign speeches. Or quantitative: e.g., the number of votes cast by Congress members in favor of certain policies, the number of patients whose diabetes abates after time spent in yoga classes, aggregate public opinion poll data, etc. You will need to discuss the data that you are using and why it is relevant to your question and the methods that you will use to analyze that data. Then, obviously you have to do a sound job of analyzing the data. This can be through statistical computer programs, simple descriptive statistics, descriptive analysis, etc.
4. Findings- This is the central part of the paper. Based on the analysis of the data that you have conducted, what do your findings tell you and the reader? In what ways do they address the initial question on which you have based your research and how do your findings fit with the existing literature? In addition, it is appropriate for one to discuss the limitations of the findings.

5. Conclusions- Finally, you should draw and discuss some broader implications of your research. Even if you are only dealing with a small segment of some broader issue, how do your findings inform research on the broader issue? Do your findings change the direction you think future research on the subject should take? It may even be appropriate to discuss some normative issues on which your research impinges. **You must convince the reader that he/she should care about this issue/that this issue actually matters.**

Students are appropriately concerned with how long their research papers should be. There is no fixed answer. Much depends on the nature of the question one decides to research and the materials that are available. But it is hard to imagine that one could do a thorough job in less than twenty-five to thirty pages. Depending on the number of tables and figures one includes, papers could be considerably longer. Think of your paper in pieces or sections. The introduction might be 2-3 pages. The discussion of the literature might run 3-5 pages or longer. The data and methodology section may be another 3-5 page chunk. The analysis and findings (which is always the most important section) could be 15-20 pages; in fact, it might have several sub-sections within it as you investigate different aspects or tests of your question. And then a conclusion might be another 3-5 pages. These, however, might be the average for similar papers, and there would be a good deal of variance.

**Grading Scale and Assessment:**

Your grade in this course will be determined by:

15 % Class Participation

15 % Written Assignments (Article Summaries, Research Question, Introduction, Annotated Bibliography, Outline of Data and Methods section, Data and Methods Section)

20 % Oral Presentation

50 % Final Paper
A Note on Grading: An “A” grade given on any assignment or as a final cumulative grade signifies “excellent” work (reserved for those students who have not only demonstrated an excellent understanding of the material, but who have also shown an excellent ability to analyze the material); a “B” signifies “good” work (a “good” understanding of and ability to analyze the material); a “C” signifies “satisfactory” work (a “satisfactory” understanding of and ability to analyze the material); a “D” signifies “passing” work (a “passing” understanding of and ability to analyze the material); and an “F” signifies “failing” work (an inability to understand or analyze the material).

Grading Scale for the Course: A = 100% - 95%; A- = 94% - 90%; B+ = 89% - 86%; B = 85% - 83%; B- = 82% - 80%; C+ = 79% - 76%; C = 75% - 73%; C- = 72% - 70%; D+ = 69% - 66%; D = 65% - 63%; D- = 62% - 60%; F = 59% & below

Disclaimer Statement: I reserve the right to make necessary changes to the syllabus should the need arise. In such case, every effort will be made to announce changes to the syllabus in a timely fashion.

If you need course accommodations due to a disability, or if you have emergency medical information to share with me, please make an appointment to see me as soon as possible.

Class Schedule and Due Dates:

August 20: Meet and Greet; go over syllabus and goals for the class. Talk in general about Public Policy interest areas. Choose partners. **Homework:** 1) Read the two articles posted on OAK as “First Homework Assignment.” Summarize those articles (each should receive at least half a page of treatment to be turned in on January 15.) Make note of who publishes the journal? Who edits and reviews the articles? What is the stated goal of the journal itself? This will take outside research effort on your part. Then pay attention to the layout of the articles themselves and citation style. How does the author present his/her research question? How long is their literature review? What data do they analyze and how do they analyze it? 2) Start thinking about and create a rough draft of your research question. In addition, please read Chapters One, Two and Three of "Proposals That Work.”
August 27: Discuss the Homework articles and the chapters from Proposals that Work. **Homework:** 1) Find two academic journals dedicated to your area of Public Policy interest. Read then summarize those articles (each should receive a half a page treatment to be turned in on September 3. Again, make note of who publishes the journal? Who edits and reviews the articles? What is the stated goal of the journal itself? Then pay attention to the layout of the articles and citation style. How does the author present his/her research question? How long is their literature review? What data do they analyze and how do they analyze it? 2) Everyone Read Chapter Four of “Proposals that Work.” 3) If you anticipate conducting a qualitative study or a mixed-methods study (which will be the case for most of you), read chapters five and six of “Proposals that Work.” 4) Draft a hard copy of your research question and a proposal for the type of literature you will review, the data you will gather and the methods you will use to analyze the data. These written assignments will be graded.

September 3: Meet and discuss each other’s articles, summaries and proposed research questions. We will critique each other’s research questions for originality, feasibility and clarity—provide constructive criticism based on: the Public Policy articles you have read and summarized and the chapters from Proposals that work. **Homework:** Read Chapter Seven of “Proposals that Work.” Write a 3-5 page paper proposal/statement of your question and how you think you might answer it which will be due in hard copy on September 10.

September 10: Paper proposals due in hard copy in class. Class discussion of paper topics and Chapter Seven. Constructive criticism and peer review of all topics and papers. Brainstorming in class about data that will be necessary for papers. **Homework:** 1) Reformulate your proposal into an official “Introduction” for your paper and 2) begin your literature review. Look at the articles you read in your Public Policy journals for further guidance – how did the authors craft their literature review? Also re-read chapter Four of “Proposals that Work” for guidance on the Literature Review.
September 17: We will not meet as a class today. Continue work on/polish your literature review. **Homework:** You will turn in 1) your new Introduction, 2) an annotated bibliography (that can be modified into a literature review) and 3) an Outline of your plan for gathering the information and data that will be the basis of your analysis for your paper. Examples: Interviews, vote counts, content analysis, incident reports, data sets available online or in hard copy, survey data, quantitative metrics, public opinion polls, your own survey to be introduced to 100 level courses, etc. These assignments will be graded.

September 24: We will meet with a representative of the Vanderbilt Institutional Review Board. **Homework:** draft your “Data, Information and Methods” section of your paper as well as the methodology you plan to employ in the interpretation of the data. This will be due in hard copy on October 1. Will you be interviewing public officials? Will you conduct a statistical analysis of votes cast by Congress members? How do you plan on analyzing the information you gather? All of this information should be included in this section of your paper. This assignment will be graded.

October 1: The week you will be meeting outside of class with Drew Engelhardt at a time that works for most of you. We will set this time up early in the semester. You will meet in the PSCI computer lab. Drew will give a brief tutorial in Stata. **Homework:** Begin the analysis section of your paper. A draft of the analysis and a detailed paper outline will be due on October 8.

October 8: Class discussion and Peer review of analysis and preliminary findings of papers. **Homework:** work on the remainder of your paper and your presentations. The next time we meet as
a group will be to make our final presentations. Draw for spots for final presentations.

November 5: Meet with your partner in the library. This is really important. Present your work to each other and constructively criticize each other’s work: the content of the research and the presentation of the research itself. 10 - 15 minute Power point presentations are the norm for the research. Your partner will read your paper. When we conduct our final presentations in class, your partner will serve as the discussant for your paper. Discussants normally comment for 5 minutes. Then the floor will be open to all questions. **Homework:** Finalize/polish your presentation. See the article posted on OAK for guidance in your role as a discussant.

November 12: First half of student presentations

November 19: Second half of student presentations

**Homework:** Polish those papers!

December 3: Final Papers Due – Summary session – location tbd

**Thank you for a great semester!**

**Congratulations on graduating!**

**Make the world a better place!**