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PSC 502.01: Research Methods

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Political Science 502
RESEARCH METHODS

Professor Tompkins
Fall Semester 1995

Office: LA 352 (243-2721)
Office Hours: Almost any time

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course covers the essential ingredients for successfully designing and carrying out social science and applied research. These ingredients include defining the problem, reviewing the literature, formulating hypotheses and research questions, operationalizing variables, and choosing appropriate methods for gathering data and analyzing results. Special attention is given to the scientific method as a way of knowing.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

To further develop:

1. research skills
2. problem-solving skills
3. writing and organizational skills
4. team-building skills

REQUIRED TEXTS

Chava Frankfort-Nachmias and David Nachmias, Research Methods in the Social Sciences (New York: St. Martins, 1992).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students are required to read all reading assignments, be prepared to discuss them in class, complete several out-of-class assignments, write a research design, and take one in-class examination.

MA Students

MA students will write two versions of a thesis prospectus. The first will be three pages in length and will contain the elements set out in the handout entitled "Research Project Prospectus." It will propose a case study or similar design that the student can reasonable complete as an MA thesis. The second will be 8-12 pages and will contain the elements set out in the attached "Scoresheet for Evaluating Research Designs." It will propose a full-blown social science design not constrained by resource considerations.

MPA Students

MPA students will write a 8-12 page social science research design containing the elements set out in the attached "Scoresheet for Evaluating Research Designs."

GRADING

Grades will be determined as follows:

Weekly assignments	20%
First half of Design	20%
First draft of whole Design	20%
Final Draft of Design	20%
Examination	20%

Research Designs will be graded based on the Scoresheet and evidence that the student has read and understood the reading assignments. Each design will comprise three sections: I. Statement of the Research Problem; II. Research Hypotheses; III. Methodology.

NOTE: Assignments submitted late will be reduced in score by one-half grade per day.

READING ASSIGNMENTS

Sept. 11 Elements of an Effective Research Design

Assignments for next week: 1) research your group research topic and submit an annotated bibliography of empirical studies relating to it; 2) begin thinking of a social science research project for which you can write a research design; 3) read chapters 1 and 2.

Sept. 18 The Scientific Method

Assignments for next week: 1) each student is to submit a 2-3 page "Statement of the Research Problem" section for your assigned group topic, defining the research problem and citing the research literature as appropriate; 2) read chapter 3.

Sept. 25 Concepts, Variables, Hypotheses, and Causal Models

Assignment for next week: make an appointment to talk to me about your individual social science research design.

Oct. 2 Operationalizing Variables: Constructs and Indicators

Assignments for next week: 1) each student is to submit a 2-3 page "Research Hypotheses" section for your assigned group topic, including hypotheses, rationales for hypotheses, and causal models with variables identified; 2) read chapters 5 and 6.

Oct. 9 Types of Research Designs

Assignments for next week: 1) each student is to submit a 2-3 page "Methodology" section for your assigned group topic; 2) read chapters 7 and 8.

Oct. 16 Measurement and Sampling

Assignment for next week: prepare for in-class exam.

Oct. 23 ****In-Class Exam****

Assignment for next week: work on first two sections of individual research design.

Oct. 30 ****Discussion of Exam and Research Design Assignment****

Assignments for next week: 1) submit the first two sections of individual research design (4-7 pages); and 2) read chapters 10 and 11.

Nov. 6 Survey Research and Questionnaire Construction

Assignment for next week: read chapters 9, 12, and 13.

Nov. 13 Data Collection Methods

Assignment: submit full draft of individual research design, including all three sections by Friday, November 17.

Nov. 20 ****No class: Drop by my office Tuesday (Nov. 21) to pick up Designs****

Assignment: bring two copies of rewritten research designs to class Nov. 27.

Nov. 27 Evaluating Students' Research Designs

****Bring two copies of your rewritten research design to class; they will be evaluated by fellow students in class****

Dec. 4 - Dec. 18 Student Presentations

Each student will make a 10 minute formal presentation of his or her research design, clearly laying out the research problem, the hypotheses, and methodology. Other class members will then offer constructive comments for 5-10 minutes.

NOTE: The professor will grade either the version of the design submitted on November 27 or one submitted by December 20, at the student's option.

SCORE SHEET FOR EVALUATING RESEARCH DESIGNS

The research design describes the steps that will be taken in completing a research project. Its purpose is to guide the researcher in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. Your research design should be organized according to the major headings below.

Instructions to evaluators:

Score the design on each of the dimensions identified below using the following five-point scale:

Excellent 5 4 3 2 1 Poor

Author: _____

Title: _____

I. STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

_____ 1. The design presents a clear, concise overview of the problem to be addressed by research.

_____ 2. The design presents a clear statement of the purpose(s) of the proposed research.

_____ 3. The significance of the research problem is clearly established with reference to one or more of the following:

a) results will help policymakers address a societal or organizational problem that holds serious consequences;

b) results will help fill a significant research gap, i.e., a gap in our substantive knowledge.

c) results will help build theoretical knowledge regarding the relationships among important variables.

d) results will clarify problems in ways that will facilitate further research and exploration.

_____ 4. The research literature is cited, where appropriate, to demonstrate the relationship of the proposed research to the previous research and/or to place the proposed research in the context of a larger theoretical framework.

II. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

- _____ 5. Hypotheses to be tested are clearly stated and their rationales clearly explained.
- _____ 6. The proposed research is limited in scope to goals that can be achieved realistically.
- _____ 7. Independent and dependent variables are identified and the hypothesized relationship between them is described and/or illustrated.
- _____ 8. Key concepts/variables are operationally defined in a way that allows for their accurate measurement.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- _____ 9. The research population is defined and the method of collecting data is clearly explained.
- _____ 10. The research is designed in a way to maximize the validity of study results.
- _____ 11. Data collection methods are appropriate to stated research objectives.
- _____ 12. Methods for analyzing the data and presenting results are clearly explained and are appropriate to testing research hypotheses.
- _____ 13. Limitations of the methodology and/or potential threats to validity are discussed, along with possible strategies for overcoming design problems.

Comments: