

Course Syllabus for Sociology 30902

Research Methods in Sociology (Undergraduates)

Fall 2019

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Time and Place	Debartolo 231, MW 2:00 PM-3:15 PM
Office Hours	MW 3:30-4:30 and by appointment. I am generally very accessible via phone, email, Zoom, and Skype. I may set up extra office hours right before exams and projects are due.

Course objectives

Sociology 30902 is designed to provide an overview of research methods in the social sciences. Topics covered include (1) hypothesis formulation and theory construction (2) the measurement of sociological variables (3) data collection techniques - experimental, survey, electronic, and observational.

Course Web Page/ Required Readings

Course Web Page (Check it often). Online readings, discussion questions and other links of interest will be available on the course web page:

<http://www3.nd.edu/~rwilliam/xsoc30902/>

Online Readings Packet and Discussion Questions for Sociology 30902. I have decided to go with an all-online packet this year. It will include required or optional links to textbook-type entries. Most of the other online readings are designed to illustrate the application of research principles and strategies; hence, you should understand the major points contained in each reading, but you do not have to be concerned with memorizing every little detail.

Format, Policies, Assignments, Exams and Grading – Short Version

Read this even if you skip everything else!

- There will be one take-home exam during the semester, two projects, and a take-home final. These are each worth 22% of your grade. Short assignments/class participation/attendance will account for the other 12%. *Do not underestimate the importance of the latter!* Some students have lost as much as a full grade because they skipped classes or didn't complete short assignments

- We will use a variety of learning styles in this class – I will lecture some but much of the class will be taught seminar style, including small-group discussions and end-of-year student presentations. Readings and classroom discussion are critical – you will often be required to hand in notes on the readings before class discussions.
- You are encouraged to make contact with me outside of class, either in-person or electronically.
- Regular attendance & punctuality are expected!!! Attendance will be taken each class. If absences are excessive, University policy allows me to give you a D or F after providing written notice.
- Using electronic devices in class is allowed but strongly discouraged. I reserve the right to bar them altogether if they get to be too much of a distraction. Use of phones especially seems unnecessary during class.
- Check your ND email regularly, preferably every day. You may not use email much but I do, and I frequently send messages about upcoming readings and discussion topics.
- Do not lose your work – use some sort of Cloud backup service.
- Honor code and non-discrimination policies are in effect.

Format & Policies – Long Version

Classroom format. We will use a variety of learning styles in this class. Often I will do lectures and/or PowerPoint presentations, usually asking questions or inviting comments as I talk. We will have one or two videos and/or guest speakers. You will often break down into small groups. At the end of the semester you get to present on one of your projects.

Readings and classroom discussion are critical!!! The course web page has discussion questions that will help you to focus your reading and prepare for class discussion. While not identical, *the discussion questions tend to be very similar to the exam questions*. Hence, if you keep up with the readings and prepare notes on the discussion questions, you should be well prepared for the exams and projects. As noted below, when we have small group discussions, you will be required to turn your notes in before class.

Regular attendance & punctuality are expected. While I will often lecture, much of the class will be taught seminar-style. I therefore expect everyone to attend class regularly and to arrive on time; *more than three absences and/or excessive lateness will severely hurt your class participation grade*. Attendance will be taken each class. If absences are excessive, University policy allows me to give you a D or F after providing written notice. If there is some compelling reason you can't make it to class on time, let me know. Otherwise I will expect everyone to be punctual.

Using electronic devices in class is allowed but generally discouraged. I know from personal experience that the urge to check an iPhone or laptop can be irresistible at times. I also know it can be incredibly annoying for everyone when someone is frantically typing away and it isn't about the class. Perhaps even more critically, from your standpoint, studies have found that “students who use their mobile phones during class lectures tend to write down less information, recall less information, and perform worse on a multiple-choice test than those students who abstain from using their mobile phones during class.” (<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching->

professor-blog/the-age-of-distraction-getting-students-to-put-away-their-phones-and-focus-on-learning/) However I am also aware that some people benefit from or even need to use a laptop or tablet (see https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/when-you-talk-about-banning-laptops-you-throw-disabled_us_5a1ccb4ee4b07bcab2c6997d). Therefore, so long as no one abuses the policy, the use of electronic devices in class is allowed but generally discouraged. Phones are especially discouraged, as I doubt that you can do many useful things with them in class.

Check your Notre Dame email regularly. I have increasingly found that students don't use email as often as they used to. But I do. Check your email at least once a day to keep up on any classroom updates on what we will be covering and my expectations of you for coming classes.

Use Dropbox, Google Drive, or some other sort of Cloud backup service. With online backup systems like Dropbox or Google Drive or whatever there is really no good excuse for not having a saved copy of your work. If you don't back up and disaster strikes you will just have to retype everything from scratch.

Honor Code. Entering Notre Dame you were required to study the on-line edition of the Academic Code of Honor, to pass a quiz on it, and to sign a pledge to abide by it. The full Code is available at <https://honorcode.nd.edu/>. I reserve the right to use University-approved mechanisms if I suspect plagiarism or cheating. Note: I am ok with students going to Notre Dame's Writing Center so long as they don't get help with the actual content of their work.

Non-Discrimination/ Inclusion Statement. The University of Notre Dame is committed to social justice. I concur with that commitment and strive to maintain a positive learning environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. In this class we will not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment will be appreciated and given serious consideration. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate, please advise me and we will work with the Office for Students with Disabilities to make appropriate arrangements. (My thanks to Kevin Barry for the suggested wording of this.)

Assignments, Exams, Grading – Long Version

- **Grade components**
 - There will be one take-home exam during the semester, two projects, and a take-home final. These are each worth 22% of your grade.
 - Short assignments/class participation/attendance will account for the other 12%.
- **Submitting materials**
 - The projects and take-home exams should be submitted in both printed and electronic (emailed) form. Make sure you keep a copy for yourself; you are responsible for producing another one if for some reason I can't find the original you submitted. *Please send actual attachments of Word or PDF files, not links to files.*
 - When required, your answers to the discussion questions should be emailed to me before class.

- **Projects**
 - The two projects (attached) are designed to give you the opportunity to apply the principles you have learned to real or hypothetical problems.
 - I have found that *students who talk with me outside of class are less likely to make major mistakes on their projects*. (This seems to be especially true for the first project on experiments.) I encourage you to meet with me whenever you have questions about the homework or the course. We can use whatever means is mutually convenient, e.g. meet in person, talk on the phone, use Zoom or Skype, or exchange emails as needed.
 - At the end of the semester you will give a 12 to 15 minute presentation on the project of your choice.

- **Exams**
 - Both exams will consist of short answer problems and 2-3 essay questions. The final will emphasize material from the second half of the course but will also give you a chance to apply principles that were learned earlier in the semester.
 - One of the things that will be most important on the exams will be your ability to incorporate material from the readings. *The best exams will go beyond what was said in class and will cite specific facts, opinions, authors and articles*. They will be like short research papers, incorporating information from a variety of sources, except I have provided you with the readings in advance.

- **Short assignments/class participation**
 - I expect this to have a fairly neutral impact on most people's grades; but, *missed classes and assignments do sometimes lower final grades substantially*. I think these will help you to understand the material better, produce better papers and exams, and improve the overall quality of the classroom experience.
 - I will let you know in advance when we are breaking down into small groups (probably 4 to 6 times during the semester). To make sure that everyone is familiar with the material and has something to contribute, *I want you to jot down about a dozen notes from the readings that you think are especially important*, any thoughts of your own on the subject, and questions which you would like to see discussed. (It is a good idea to always do this but it is especially critical to do so on discussion days.) In general, you should be prepared to make at least a few points about every major discussion question asked. *You should email me a copy of your notes before each small group discussion*. I will mostly grade these on a present/absent basis but I do expect to see evidence that you have thought about the points and gone over the readings. *Failure to hand in all the required notes will hurt your participation grade*.

Key Dates

Sep 30	First project due by 5 p.m.
Oct 14	Take home midterm exam due by 5 p.m.
Nov 4	Second Project due by 5 p.m.
Nov 25, Dec 2, 4, 9	In-class presentations (about 12-15 minutes each)
Dec 18 (Wednesday)	Take home final exam due by 6:15 p.m.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE
Sociology 30902-01
Research Methods in Sociology (Undergraduates)
Fall 2019

Aug 28, Sep 2 - Introduction.

Readings Packet, "Introduction"

Sep 4 thru Sept 23 (6 classes) – Formulating Hypotheses; Threats to Causal Inference; Experimentation. Advantages and disadvantages of experiments, threats to internal and external validity, Experimental design, Lab vs. field experiments, quasi-experiments, how to conduct an experiment. While experimentation is the first research design we focus on, principles concerning causality that are presented here are applied throughout the semester.

Readings Packet, "Experimentation."

Sept. 25, 30, Oct 2 - Measurement. Levels of measurement, validity, reliability, random vs. nonrandom error; Scaling, questionnaire construction; Sensitive topics

Readings Packet, "Measurement."

Sept 30 - First project due by 5:00

October 7 - Survey Research I. NOTE: This will not be on the first exam, although we will get started on the topic.

October 9 – Catch up; Review for first exam; take home exam will be handed out

Oct 14 – Take Home Exam due by 5:00. No class.

October 16, 28, 30 – Survey Research II. Reasons for surveys, types of surveys, sample vs. population, types of samples, probability vs. nonprobability sampling, examples of surveys, longitudinal designs, methods for administering surveys. The readings packet includes a study I did that may help you with project 2.

Readings Packet, "Surveys."

Nov 4 - Second project due by 5:00

Nov 4, 6 – Qualitative Methods; Case study research; Unobtrusive research. Introduction to case study research, qualitative methods, Content analysis, unobtrusive measures, secondary analysis.

Readings Packet, "Content Analysis"

Nov 11, 13, 18 - Observational research. Participant observation, field studies.

Readings Packet, "Observational Research."

Nov 20 - Research ethics.

Readings Packet, "Ethics."

Nov 25, Dec 2, 4, 9 – In-class presentations of projects. As a courtesy to your fellow students, I expect everyone to be there on those days. We may shorten or extend this by a day depending on final class enrollment.

Dec 11 – Course wrap-up and review; Take home final handed out

Readings Packet, "Semester in Review."

Dec 18 (Wednesday) – Take Home Final due by 6:15. You do not need to show up in class. I am not allowed to give incompletes and I only have a few days to get my grades in, so make sure you are done on time.

FIRST PROJECT: EXPERIMENTS
Sociology 30902
Due September 30, 2019

In this project, you will formulate a hypothesis and design a lab or a field experiment to test it.

(1) Develop a hypothesis on a topic that is interesting to you. Briefly explain why you think it would be important and worthwhile to test your hypothesis. Also explain why you think your hypothesis is plausible. For example, you might note how your hypothesis can be inferred from some sociological theory, how the hypothesis is consistent with your own personal observations, etc. Try to show that you have given some thought to the problem before blindly going out to investigate it.

(2) Design either a lab or a field experiment to test your hypothesis. Ideally, the experiment will be something that could reasonably be conducted by a researcher with a small grant (or even by a student such as you).

(3) Discuss the following:

(a) How would you set the stage? What “cover story” (if any) would you use? That is, if your experiment uses deception, how would you keep subjects from becoming suspicious of the true nature of the experiment? Also, be sure to note just who your subjects would be (e.g., college students, riders on a subway, etc.), and where the experiment would take place.

(b) Explain how you would construct the treatment and manipulate the independent variables. Be very explicit as to what the treatment would be, and explain why you think the treatment is appropriate given your hypothesis. Also explain how you would go about controlling for extraneous influences - for example, would you use random assignment to groups? If you didn't (or couldn't) use random assignment, what would you do to safeguard against threats to internal validity?

(c) Discuss how you would measure the dependent variable. Again, be very explicit as to what the dependent variable is, and why you think it is appropriate. Note whether you would rely on the respondent's own reports, or whether you would rely on observations of his/her actions.

(4) Critique your experiment. Note how well or how poorly it deals with threats to internal and external validity. Be sure to note the advantages and disadvantages of the type of setting you have chosen. Point out any problems you think you may encounter. Most research is not perfect, and good researchers recognize and acknowledge the limitations of their work.

(5) Not including tables or figures, the paper should be typed, double-spaced, and approximately 5 to 8 pages long.

HINTS:

(1) When looking for inspiration for your hypothesis, you may find it helpful to refer to some of the other coursework you have had in sociology or other fields. It is not essential, but doing a little bit of research on the topic you are interested in (and briefly reviewing that research in your paper) could be tremendously helpful.

(2) It is permissible to use one of the course readings as a source of inspiration for your hypothesis. However, your experiment(s) should be radically different, i.e. don't just make one or two little changes.

(3) When grading, I will be primarily interested in how well the paper illustrates your understanding of lab and field experiments and your appreciation for threats to internal and external validity. Beyond that, I will consider such things as how innovative and original the experiment is, the complexity of the experiment, how well you have thought out the issues you wish to address, how feasible it would be to actually conduct the experiment, and your appreciation for problems researchers are likely to encounter.

(4) People often make serious mistakes on this project – mistakes that could have been avoided if they had talked to me for 15 minutes or so first. For example, their proposal may not really be an experiment, but the basic idea could be reworked so it was an experiment. Or, some part of the proposal comes across as highly implausible, but with some brainstorming it could be fixed. In short, it is highly recommended with this project that you run your ideas by me first.

Sociology 30902
Second project: Surveys and Measurement
Due November 4, 2019

Using Census Data (including the American Community Survey) or other statistical information available on the World Wide Web or elsewhere, do a statistical profile of your home town or community, and compare and contrast it with one or more other areas (e.g. the entire US; a very different community that you are very familiar with) and/or look at changes within your community across time. (In practice, you probably want to examine the county or MSA you are from – but if you want, you could even examine the census tract your family lives in.) Some of the topics your profile could include (but you are welcome to choose others) are

1. The racial composition of your community compared to the entire U.S. (Or, if you prefer, you might choose a nearby community that is different from yours. Past students have often remarked on how different their community is from communities that are just a few minutes away, or from areas that they have done service work in.)
2. How your community compares economically to the U.S. Is your home town relatively poorer or richer? Is there relatively more poverty where you live, or less?
3. How did the racial and economic composition of your community change across time, e.g. between 2000 or 2010 and today?
4. Based on what you know about the area you are from, offer any insights you may have about why it differs from the United States as a whole, e.g. what are some of the historical and economic factors that have made your community what it is? You can also discuss the possible causes of any changes, e.g. were there factors that attracted many immigrants to your area, were there changes in schools or industry that attracted or drove people away? Anybody could do a demographic profile of your area, but you have a lot of personal knowledge that won't be obvious from the data, and you should try to share those insights.
5. Whatever you focus on, begin by telling a little bit about your community. Where is it located? Is it a small town out in the middle of nowhere? A rich suburb of a large city? Or what?

Not including tables or figures, the paper should be typed, double-spaced, and approximately 5 to 8 pages long. Charts and figures may help. They can be hand-drawn, but this would be a great time to learn how to use Excel or some other program for such a purpose if you don't know how already.

Resources. The course web page will include links to several useful Census (and other) web sites. The best strategy, I think, is just to play around with these sites a bit and find out what information they have to offer. In general, you can usually find fairly detailed information, right down to the census tract level. The readings packet includes a paper I did several years ago examining one of South Bend's neighborhoods which may give you some ideas.

Options for Foreign Students. Foreign students are welcome to choose the neighborhood they live in now or lived in in the past for Project 2. However, they are also welcome to compare, say, their country with the US, or some other country, or the entire world. You could, for example, compare countries on literacy rates, educational attainment, women in the labor force and other gender-related variables, birth rates, population growth, use of contraception, health and mortality, income. Actually, there are a lot of interesting variables in international data sets that you don't find in the US Census. See the course web page.