

## **PS2904: Dissertation Seminar**

Fall 2019

Th 10:00-12:30

Political science conference room

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### **Overview**

This year-long course is intended for third year PhD students in the political science department. The purpose is to take students from a point at which they have general ideas about their dissertation topic through the development of a solid motivation, structure, and research strategy. The main objective is for students to have defensible dissertation proposals by the end of their third year in the program.

In the fall semester students will produce concept papers outlining key features of their dissertation which will then be discussed in class. Students are then expected to revise their concept notes over the course of the fall term and submit a revised strategy by the end of the semester. The chief task for the spring term is to build on the concept paper to draft a complete dissertation proposal, including motivation, lit review, theory/hypotheses, data, and research strategy. These components will be the subject of class discussion over the course of the spring semester.

In addition to advancing individual research projects, this course aims to be a resource for students as they prepare to implement their dissertations. Thus, starting in week 3, each session will begin with a 30-minute discussion of a topic or question related to the dissertation proposal or dissertation process. Possible topics include: how to identify a research question; write dissertation funding proposals; obtain IRB approval; prepare pre-analysis plans; anticipate questions about research ethics and data transparency; do literature reviews, etc. We will finalize the list of discussion topics in consultation with students in the first week of the course (see Appendix A for a list of possible topics).

### **Goals and Expectations**

The main goal of this course is to provide students with structure and support as they prepare to defend their dissertation proposals at the end of their third year. We recognize, however, that this is not always a linear process—ideas that initially seem promising might prove they need to be revisited. (At least one of your professors entirely changed course due to her own dissertation proposal seminar!) It is also likely that students will progress at different paces. We therefore aim to keep the overall structure of the course flexible enough that it can accommodate students' individual needs and projects while ensuring overall forward progress.

The success of this class will depend on the extent to which we can build a community of researchers who are willing and able to support each other in the development of research plans over the coming

year. To do so we will require that students think hard throughout the course not only about their own projects but also about those of their colleagues. A strength and challenge of this course will be that research projects will come from different subfields; in some cases, active engagement will involve thinking about issues far from your own specialties. This is not an excuse for not participating—being able to think about and comment on a diversity of topics and research approaches is an important career skill. To help bring others up to speed on your topic (or empirical method) of interest, we recommend that students in the fall semester also provide a key article on the topic from their subfield that will help other students get up to speed on that section of the literature.

A further goal of this course is to help students anticipate what they will need to do to implement their proposed dissertations, which often helps to shape the proposal itself. This could include things like obtaining IRB approval, implementing surveys, securing research funding, locating and accessing data, etc. We aim to be a resource for students as they undertake these tasks. Topics of broad interest will be addressed in the weekly discussions; students seeking individualized guidance or support (i.e. on their own IRB applications or funding proposals) are encouraged to work with the professors (and their committee members) outside of the classroom.

Finally, we emphasize that this seminar is not meant to substitute for regular meetings with your committee members. Students should plan on starting to form their committees (talking with at least one faculty member) in the fall semester. Committee member(s) will be invited to attend class discussions on v2 of student concept notes. This is not meant to simulate a defense but rather to facilitate a group discussion on the project. Students will also be required to report on feedback from their committee members at the end of the semester in the final session.

## **COURSE ASSIGNMENTS**

### **Short summary of thoughts**

In week 1 you should hand in a 1 to 2-page description of your thesis thoughts as they currently stand. This should describe briefly (a) the general question (b) why the question is important (c) what literatures it most closely connects with and (d) what approach you expect to use to tackle the question.

### **Paired Team Assignments**

In our experience, few students have actually seen a dissertation proposal (or a successful dissertation) before they are asked to write their own. To address this, week 2 will be devoted to a discussion of up to 4 “model” dissertations. Some of these dissertations have won awards and prizes or have been signaled out as being of outstanding quality. With few exceptions these are all dissertations that have been produced in the last few years. The listing is given in Appendix B of this syllabus. Instructions on how to access these are provided below. Where possible we have also obtained the proposals themselves so that students can both see what a dissertation proposal looks like and get a sense of how projects evolve over time.

All students should read the introductory chapters of the four dissertations selected. In addition, teams of 2-3 students will be asked to give a presentation on a dissertation that they select (we will aim for representativeness of different subfields and book versus article-based dissertations). These presentations should report: (a) what the overall purpose and strategy of the dissertation; where appropriate identify the key dependent and independent variables and the universe of rival explanations (b) in what consists the originality or genius of this dissertation, (c) backwards engineering: if you were to undertake this research project from scratch, what would a research strategy look like.

### **Concept Paper v1 (weeks 3-8)**

In weeks 3-8, two students will present their concept memos each week. Students should consult Appendix C below for guidelines on the elements of a good proposal. We will have about 45 minutes to discuss each memo. Presenters should turn in their memos (about 7 pages) by Sunday evening prior to their session. In addition, presenters can assign one article length background reading. Students do not need to prepare a formal presentation in their week; it is required that all students read all memos and articles and think about them prior to the class meetings.

### **Concept Paper v2 (weeks 9-12)**

In weeks 9-12, two students will present their updated concept memos each session. The second version of the memo (7-10 pages) should take care to incorporate the feedback that you received from v1 (or be prepared to explain why you decided not to do so). Your committee members(s) will be invited to attend this session and participate in the discussion. This is not meant to be a defense but rather an opportunity to get collective and constructive feedback in a group setting. Whether or not your committee members are available to attend, you are encouraged to share this draft with your committee and to meet with them privately. In our final session on December 5 you will be asked to report on feedback received from your committee and how you propose to address it.

### **Final presentations/roadmap for spring**

For the final session of the semester, students should submit a 1 to 2-page memo that summarizes the state of their project, their priorities going forward, and how they plan to address those priorities going into the break. We will have about 20 minutes per student to discuss the status of each project in class. Students can update v2 of their memos if they'd like to focus their time on certain sections that need particular attention. This is primarily an opportunity to take stock and get final advice heading into the break.

## SCHEDULE

[Week 1]	Aug 29	APSA, no class
[Week 2]	Sep 05	Intro session (general introductions, course description, assign pairs for week 3, assign term slots, brainstorm discussion topics, initial discussion of what to look for in a good dissertation) *One-pagers due
[Week 3]	Sep 12	Paired team assignment <i>Discussion topic:</i> How to pick a research question
[Week 4]	Sep 19	Concept note v1 (Students 1 and 2) <i>Discussion topic:</i> How to approach a research proposal
[Week 5]	Sep 26	Concept note v1 (Students 3 and 4) <i>Suggested discussion topic:</i> The role of a dissertation committee and how to form yours.
[Week 6]	Oct 03	Concept note v1 (Students 5 and 6) <i>Discussion topic:</i>
[Week 7]	Oct 10	Class TBD – Paler at conference
[Week 8]	Oct 17	Concept note v1 (Students 7 and 8) <i>Discussion topic:</i>
[Week 9]	Oct 24	Concept note v2 (Students 1 and 2) (committee members invited) <i>Discussion topic:</i>
[Week 10]	Oct 31	Concept note v2 (Students 3 and 4) (committee members invited) <i>Discussion topic:</i>
[Week 11]	Nov 04	Concept note v2 (Students 5 and 6) (committee members invited) <i>Discussion topic:</i>
[Week 12]	Nov 14	Concept note v2 (Students 7 and 8) (committee members invited) <i>Discussion topic:</i>
[Week 13]	Nov 21	Thanksgiving, no class
[Week 14]	Dec 05	Final presentations/roadmap for next semester <i>Suggested discussion topic:</i> How to do a dissertation proposal timeline
[Week 15]	Dec 12	Extra session if needed

## **APPENDIX A: POSSIBLE WEEKLY TOPICS**

The below is a list of possible topics for weekly discussion. Please decide which you think might be most beneficial to you and come prepared to make your recommendations on the first session. Or, if we have missed a topic, please add to the list.

- Picking a research question/dissertation topic
- Writing a good research proposal
- Selecting a dissertation committee
- Obtaining research funding (external and internal)
- Obtaining IRB approval
- Preparing for a pre-analysis plans
- Anticipating research ethics and data transparency questions
- Organizing your data and code (in anticipation of replication)
- Decide between using existing data or collecting original data
- Collecting original data
- Doing field work
- Doing preliminary qualitative research
- Time management and staying on task
- Deciding between a monograph or three article dissertation
- Framing your contribution
- Thinking ahead about how to “sell” your dissertation on the job market

## APPENDIX B: DISSERTATIONS FOR PAIRED ASSIGNMENTS

In week 2, students will work in teams of 2 to 3 to prepare presentations on successful dissertations. Your team should rank order three dissertations from the list below. We will then select in order to get representation across subfields and article versus book dissertations. Where possible, we have also located the dissertation proposals for the completed projects so that you can both see what a dissertation proposal looks like *and* get a sense of how projects evolve. Below we list several dissertations, there are additional dissertations in Box. Please review and come to the first session (September 5) prepared to rank order your top three choices.

### Comparative Politics

- Gwyneth McClendon. 2013. “The Politics of Envy and Esteem in Two Democracies” Princeton University, Department of Politics – winner of the 2013 Gabriel A. Almond Award (dissertation proposal and dissertation in Box).
- Noam Lupu. 2012. “Party Brands in Crisis: Partisanship, Brand Dilutions and the Breakdown of Political Parties in Latin America” Princeton University, Department of Politics – winner of the 2012 Gabriel A. Almond Award (dissertation proposal and dissertation in Box).
- Laura Paler. 2012. “How Revenue and Information Shape Citizen Behavior” Columbia University, Department of Political Science (initial dissertation proposal, revised dissertation proposal, final dissertation are in Box).
- Pavi Suryanarayan. 2018. “Hollowing out the State: Essays on Status Inequality, Fiscal Capacity, and Right-Wing Voting in India” Columbia University, Department of Political Science – winner of the 2018 Mancur Olson award for best political economy dissertation (dissertation in Box).
- David Szakonyi. 2016. “Renting Elected Office: Why Businesspeople Become Politicians in Russia” Columbia University, Department of Political Science (dissertation in Box).

### International Relations

- Cameron Ballard-Rosa. 2014. “Regime-Contingent Biases and the politics of sovereign default” Yale University (dissertation in Box).
- Anita Gohdes. 2014. “Repression in the Digital Age: Communication Technology and the Politics of State Violence” Mannheim (dissertation in Box, published chapters available here <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0022343314551398> (chapter 7) and in Box (chapter 8)).

- Connor Huff. 2019. “Why Rebels Reject Peace.” Harvard University, Department of Government (dissertation and proposal in Box).
- Megan Stewart. 2016. “Civil War as State-Building: The Determinants of Insurgent Public Goods Provision” Georgetown University (dissertation and proposal in Box).
- Rochelle Terman. 2016. “Backlash: Defiance, Human Rights and the Politics of Shame” University of California-Berkeley, Department of Political Science (dissertation in Box).
- Kaitlyn Webster. 2017. “Rethinking Civil War” Duke University, Department of Political Science (dissertation and proposal in Box).

### **American Politics**

- Patricia Kirkland. 2017. “America’s Mayors: Who Serves and How Mayors Shape Policy” *Columbia University, Department of Political Science* (saved to Box).
- Michael Nelson. 2014. “Crafting Law on State Courts” *Washington University at St. Louis* (saved to Box).
- Emily West. 2017. “The Psychological Implications of Identity Politics in the United States” *New York University, Department of Political Science* (saved to Box).

## APPENDIX C: GUIDELINES FOR CONCEPT MEMOS

### Overview

Your initial dissertation presentation should be brief, about 5-8 pages in length. The main task is to provide information on the structure of the project, so that we can give comments and feedback on the dissertation as a whole. Your presentation should provide the following bits of information:

- What is your research question?
- What literature already exists on this research question and what are its weaknesses?
- What strategy do you propose to use for answering the research question?
- What is your preliminary argument (or working research hypothesis)?
- An outline of projected chapters/papers

### Research Question/Description of the Puzzle

What is the overall question you are trying to answer? This can be either a thematic (“Why are small states more likely to liberalize?”) or a “historical” question (“Why are there so few international wars in Africa?). The phrasing of your question is quite important since it already points to the universe of possible answers. “Is” or “Does” questions often admit Yes/No answers and are more closed than “Why does”, “when does”, and “how does” questions. Avoid “what” questions of the form “What is the relationship between A and B.” In any event, the form of the question determines a universe of possible answers. In some cases, the overarching question is phrased in terms of dependent and independent variables. A question tied to dependent variable (what explains X?) is typically more manageable than a question tied to an independent variable (what does X explain?).

In formulating the research question, it is important to go beyond simply pointing to a general area of interest or a set of broadly connected themes. You need to try and formulate a clear and specific question (or set of questions) that this dissertation is designed to answer. Of course, in order to be adequately answered, all of these research questions would need to be disaggregated into a range of sub-questions. But thinking of the task as oriented to answering a broad and general question in this way will help you to narrow your focus and to formulate a more precise plan for disaggregating and attacking the sub-questions.

In presenting your research question, you will want to explain to the reader in clear and jargon free prose why it is an interesting and meaningful topic. This can be hard to do early in the dissertation process, but it is important to try to be accessible and easy to follow—if nothing else, it will help you organize your thoughts. Also, in explaining why the topic is interesting and important, it is not enough merely to offer some citations to other scholars who have written about it before; instead, you need to make the case yourself.

### Literature Review

This should be quite brief. You will want to indicate who the major figures working on your question are, and (if you know this already) perhaps indicate in the briefest outline what the two or three most important positions are. Indeed, one of the main purposes of a literature review is to enumerate what the

set of possible answers might look like. Your review of the literature should be included only insofar as it helps shed light on past attempts to answer the question. Literature reviews should never be used just to show you have read stuff.

Your literature review should also illuminate what motivates you to intervene in the debate. Tell us why you care. It is useful to provide motivations driven both by substantive and disciplinary concerns. For disciplinary motivations the goal is to link the question to wider agendas: how will this make us rethink things we thought we knew. The worst motivation is “to fill a gap in the literature.” Filling a gap might be a necessary condition for an interesting topic but it is certainly not a sufficient one. Of course, perhaps no one is writing on your topic. If that is the case, you will want to say that as well, and justify why someone should write about it.

Your literature review does not have to be long during the concept memo stage, but it should reflect that you have a good grasp of the available literature so that you can make the case that what you are doing is innovative.

### **Preliminary Argument or Research Hypothesis**

You will most likely have an “angle” on the question that you are considering defending—an early version of your argument—although many of its details have yet to be nailed down. You will want to present your hypothesis, and also outline some of the possible challenges to it. You may not be able to answer all the potential objections at this stage, but you will want to think about what they might be. It will be important to respond to alternative theories as you develop your argument, and thinking about this early may help you to develop an overall structure for the dissertation.

### **Strategies for Answering the Research Question**

Describe the methods you expect to use. What are the cases? What is the key source of variation? What is your identification strategy? What method will you use: interviews, archives, formal, experimental, field experimental, other... Make a case for why this method is appropriate to the question that you seek to answer. If you use multiple methods explain how these will complement each other. Identify now what skills you will need but do not yet have! Keep in mind though that the process of honing the research question and devising the methods is often an iterative process as you find the best match between your interests and empirical skills/abilities.

### **Chapter or Paper Outline**

You should present a brief annotated table of contents (book dissertation) or paper outline (article dissertation). Do not just provide chapter or article titles; tell us what you envision doing in each chapter/paper. You may want to cite the relevant sources, literature, or data that will need to be discussed in the chapter. You will want to say enough to justify to the reader why you saw fit to divide the task up in this way and to provide a sense of how the whole project will hang together.

## APPENDIX D: USEFUL RESOURCES

### General books on dissertation writing:

- Joan Bolker Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis (<https://www.amazon.com/Writing-Your-Dissertation-Fifteen-Minutes/dp/080504891X>)
- Kjell Erik Rudestam, Rae R. Newton Surviving Your Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process (<https://www.amazon.com/Surviving-Your-Dissertation-Comprehensive-Content/dp/1452260974>) or excerpts here: <http://web.archive.org/web/20030203011257/www.citationonline.net/survdis.htm>

### Additional bits of useful advice:

- <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/dissertations/>
- <https://www.cs.purdue.edu/homes/dec/essay.dissertation.html>
- <https://polisci.as.uky.edu/writing-dissertation>
- <https://www.niu.edu/wac/archives/files/psdiss.html>