SW838 Doctoral Seminar

Empirical Research on Nonprofit Organizations & Voluntary Action (NOVA)

Winter Term, 2012, Thursdays, 2-5pm
School of Social Work Building, Room 1794

Instructor’s Contact Information:
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Course Description:

Nonprofit organizations play an increasingly important role in the provision of health, educational, and social services, cultural development, and the promotion of advocacy, civil rights, and civil society, in the U.S. and also abroad. They also provide fascinating examples of mission-driven organizations that engender theoretical and empirical questions of interest to students of organizations coming from various disciplines. Their voluntary aspects raise further questions of interest to social scientists and practitioners (such as motivation, satisfaction, and retention of volunteers, as well as development of social capital). The growing interest in nonprofits and the dedication of pioneering scholars has spurred increased empirical research to better understand and document its parameters, components and dynamics.

This course, offered for the second time\(^1\), seeks to enhance graduate student interest, expertise, and scholarly productivity in empirical nonprofit research. It will present:

\(^1\) *This course is supported by a grant from the U-M Office of the Vice President for Research for Distinguished Faculty and Graduate Student Seminars, 2011-12.*
(1) an overview of the nonprofit sector in the United States and abroad, and a survey of major research and policy issues;

(2) current research via sessions with leading scholars in the field, as well as reading and discussion of pertinent scholarly literature, drawn primarily from sociology, psychology, applied economics, organizational studies, public policy, and interdisciplinary inquiry;2 and,

(3) exposure to new research opportunities utilizing existing data resources.

These datasets will include:
- Various large-scale U.S. social surveys that include relevant NOVA variables not analyzed by past investigators. (Most of these datasets are archived at the Institute for Social Research’s Inter-University Consortium on Political and Social Research); and
- Newly available computerized databases, including such sources as the U.S. Internal Revenue Service’s information on tax-exempt entities, and other datasets examining the nonprofit sector in the U.S. and around the world.

The intended audience of this course is doctoral and other research-oriented graduate students interested in such theoretical and empirical NOVA topics. Ultimately, the course seeks to encourage new research initiatives and studies, and to develop interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration among students and faculty from different academic units who share a mutual interest in some aspect of nonprofit organizations and voluntary action.

Since this course is offered through the School of Social Work, special note will be taken of issues of multiculturalism, diversity, and social justice, and the contribution of NOVA, and especially charitable and advocacy nonprofits, to enhanced individual and social wellbeing through prevention, promotion, treatment and rehabilitation.

**Course Objectives:**
As a result of completing this course, students should be able to demonstrate the following knowledge and skills:
(1) Familiarity with and ability to discuss in an informed manner the general characteristics, parameters, and types of nonprofit organizations found in the United States, and comparatively, to at least some countries abroad.

(2) Familiarity with and ability to discuss in an informed manner the various types of NOVA social science research covered in this course and some of the key theories and questions that have been raised and investigated empirically in this field in the last five decades.

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2 While there is a rich and growing research literature on NOVA conducted by historians, time limitations do not permit our closely examining it in this course.
(3) Ability to demonstrate competent planning and writing of an interesting and informative research proposal utilizing NOVA-relevant data that is currently or potentially available, and according to usual professional and social science standards.

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**Primary Texts:**


2. Choice of one book using qualitative research to study nonprofit organizations and voluntary action.

3. C-tools site for SW838.


♦ **Assignments:**

There are several short assignments and one long assignment for this course, as described below.

**Three initial short “Think pieces” (45% of final grade)**

The purpose of these assignments is to encourage you to read and critically explore the current literature on NOVA, integrate it with other knowledge you have gained in this course, and to begin to formulate interesting research questions in this area.

(1) **Enlarging upon assigned readings:**
This assignment will also give you practice for writing book reviews in the future!

(a) After reading the assigned readings for one of the sessions, find one more article or chapter related to the session’s topic in a research journal or research handbook of your choice.

(b) Write a 2-4 page paper that presents your perspective on the questions below and post it on the c-tools site (or send as an attachment) to me and the members of the class two days before class meets (Tuesdays by 2pm).

(c) You will be responsible to present to the class on this think piece for 10-15 minutes following a general discussion of the required readings.

1. Compare the perspectives of the authors on the particular topic of the session—are they generally the same or different? How so?
2. Which do you find most interesting or informative? Why?
3. Do you have any criticism of any of the articles you’re discussing?
4. Think of at least one way in which one or more of these readings integrates, illuminates, contrasts, or contradicts something else you have read in this course.
5. What research applications, question(s), hypotheses, or at least research direction(s) do these reading suggest to you?

Feel free to consult with me regarding your search.

This assignment is due the week of the chosen topic session.

(2) Qualitative Research Approach to NOVA topics
This assignment will expose all of us to qualitative research that is being done in the area of NOVA research.

(a) Choose a qualitative research book on a NOVA topic. An initial list appears below.


(b) Write a book review of this volume
- Summarize its topic and the methodology that was used.
- State whether you agree or disagree with the critique.
- State what you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the study.
- State for what uses this book might be used (general background on NOVA, specialized seminars, particular classes to which it could be added, etc.)
(3) **In-depth study of one subsector.** This assignment lets you explore a particular subarea of nonprofit organizations of your interest.

a. Choose and read one of the following chapters from Lester M. Salamon (Ed.). *The State of Nonprofit America: Education & Training; Social Services; Arts and Culture; Housing and Community Development; International Assistance; Religious congregations; or Civic Participation and Advocacy.*

b. Find three recent newspaper articles or articles from more popular nonprofit or professional sources (Stanford Social Innovation Review, The Nonprofit Quarterly, Foundation News) that deal with this subsector. Do they reflect the issues that were salient at the beginning of the decade you read about in *The State of Nonprofit America?* Or has the focus shifted? Why do you think this is?

c. Write a 2-3 paper summarizing the articles’ concerns and recent changes or continuities in this subsector.

**Research Proposal (55% of final grade)**

A major purpose of this class is to encourage the development of new NOVA empirical research. Toward that goal, the major assignment for the course is the submission of a research proposal. In order to give students experience in seeking funding for such research, we will be using an adapted version of the Aspen Institute’s Nonprofit Sector Research Fund’s guidelines. Topics can include research examining the overarching characteristics and impact of nonprofit organizations, voluntary action, and philanthropy. This includes the basic legal framework for nonprofit organizations and foundations; the distinct contributions—if any—that nonprofits, philanthropy, and philanthropic institutions make to society; and, a comparison of the functions that the philanthropic, nonprofit, governmental, and business sectors perform separately and collaboratively. Your proposal can focus on nonprofits in a circumscribed geographical area, in a particular subsector (e.g., arts, human services, and ecology), those providing a particular function (service provision, advocacy).

Students are not required to develop a budget or submit institutional information required in a formal submission for funding). Students are encouraged to use databases that have been discussed in the course.

Proposals will include:

1. A relevant, but not necessarily exhaustive literature review,
2. Hypotheses or research questions to be investigated,
3. Description of the population or data being investigated, reliability of measures to be used,
4. Proposed method of investigation and statistical analysis, and,
5. Potential contribution to knowledge or practice in the field.

Further details of the assignment will be provided later in class.

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Aspen Institute’s Nonprofit Sector Research Fund’s guidelines—Frequently Asked Questions:

Are there any length requirements for a proposal to the Fund?
Proposals must be double-spaced, in a 12 point font, and should not exceed 10 pages. Proposals that exceed this length limit will not be removed from the process, but as this limit is designed to preserve the sanity of reviewers, we strongly recommend that a proposal be as close to the 10 page limit as possible.

You require a one page summary. What are you looking for in the summary?
This should be a clear, concise, and readable explanation of the project, written so that someone wholly unfamiliar with the details of your discipline or work would be able to understand it. It should also make a good case for the importance of the topic, and clearly indicate who will benefit from the results of the research. The Fund is particularly interested in projects that inform practice or policymaking.

How should I present my research questions?
Following your summary, you should clearly lay out your central research hypothesis (or hypotheses). Avoid presenting a lengthy laundry list of every possible question relating to the topic, as reviewers view this as a sign of a project that is unfocused. Also, be sure to clearly define the key terms you use in your study. Reviewers may not be familiar with them.

In what way should I describe the methods I’ll be using?
You should be as specific as possible in this section, as this is what tells reviewers how you intend to answer your research questions. For example, if case studies are planned, the proposal should state why those particular organizations (or types of organizations) were selected. If surveys are planned, the proposal should say who will be surveyed and why. If possible, random sampling should be used.

Be sure to link your methods to the research questions you pose. It should be clear to reviewers that the research you are undertaking is specifically designed to answer those questions.

All proposals must explicitly state the types of organizations or populations targeted by the research and indicate, as appropriate, the impact of demographic factors—race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, disability, etc.—on the questions being studied.

You ask for a statement of the project's relevance to people and institutions interested in the field. What does that entail?
Simply put, we want to know who will be interested in the results of your project. Will the final product of your study be of interest to a broad constituency, or will only a few individuals be affected? How generalizable is it?

♦ Due Date: Proposal Papers and Presentations due at the last session of the class, April 12, 2012.
Calendar and Readings

PRELIMINARY VERSION, January 5, 2012

NONPROFIT FUNDAMENTALS

1. Jan. 5, 2012 - Introduction
   - Introductions, your interests in this course
   - Nonprofit Databases
     - Guidestar
     - Foundation Directory
     - National Center on Charitable Statistics
   - Other Databases for secondary or original analysis

2. Jan. 12. Historical Background

   → Analyze and compare the different perspectives and insights this sociologist and this historian above bring to the study of nonprofits and their history.

   1. TEXT, Ch. 3, Concepts, 37-62

→ IN CLASS: Visit of IUCPSR Representative to explain the use of Consortium data.

1. TEXT, Ch. 4, Dimensions I – Overview, 63-94; Ch. 5, Dimensions II – Specific Fields, 95-110.

5. Feb. 2. Theoretical Approaches to the Nonprofit Sector

1. TEXT, Ch. 6, Theoretical Approaches, 113-138

6. Feb. 9 Organizational Theory & Structure Relevant to the Nonprofit Sector

1. TEXT, Ch. 7. Organizational Theory & Structure, 139-170.

Managing Nonprofit Organizations


1. TEXT, Ch. 8, Nonprofit Behavior & Performance, 173-202.

8. Feb. 23. Resourcing Nonprofits: Money, Staff, Volunteers

1. TEXT, Ch. 9, Resourcing Nonprofits, 203-224.

9. Mar. 1 Spring Break
1. TEXT, Ch. 10, Stakeholders, Government, & Accountability, 225-241

11. Mar. 15. Management I – Models, Tools & Special Topics
1. TEXT, Ch. 11, Management I – Models, 242-255; TEXT, Ch. 12, Management II – Tools & Special Topics

POLICY & SPECIAL TOPICS

1. TEXT, Ch. 13, State-Nonprofit Relations, 281-300.

1. TEXT, Ch 14, Foundations, 301-327.

1. TEXT, Ch. 15, International Issues & Globalization

15. April 12. Policy Issues & Developments
1. TEXT, Ch. 16 Policy Issues and Developments, 359-380.
2. Campbell, David. (2011, February). Reconsidering the implementation strategy in faith-based policy initiatives. NVSQ.

→ IN CLASS: Presentation of Research Proposals