Course Description

The purpose of this course is to guide the political science graduate student to completion of the dissertation prospectus in one semester. This goal is intended to impose efficiency and expedience on a task that often results in neither, in part because the task is one that is alien to graduate student experience. As a result, the prospectus process has a tendency to be unnecessarily prolonged, sometimes lasting for a year or more, and in doing so wastes time perfecting the prospectus rather than embarking on the dissertation itself.

Here, we seek to solve the twin issues of efficiency and expedience by breaking the prospectus task into two phases: (1) the proposal; and (2) the prospectus. The proposal identifies the questions/puzzles of central interest to the dissertation; the state of the field on said questions/puzzles; the value of undertaking such an inquiry; and speculation about a general strategy for addressing the questions/puzzles at hand. To do so, the proposal stage is designed to get the student communicating with its dissertation committee on a regular basis, as well as establishing a well thought out trajectory for the dissertation project before a single keystroke is struck in the name of research design, data, measurement, and so forth. Put differently, the proposal has nothing to do with data and there is no mention of data in the proposal phase. We will aim to complete the proposal phase, which we will accomplish incrementally, by week 8 of the semester (just prior to spring break.) At this time the student’s dissertation committee will approve the proposal.

The prospectus, or “plan,” is the detailed roadmap for executing the inquiry into the question/puzzles set out in the proposal. As such, the prospectus identifies the shape or structure of the dissertation (i.e., book or article format); the flow of the dissertation (i.e., the order and purpose of each chapter); and specifies the components of each chapter (i.e., specific question/puzzle to be addressed, theory employed, research design, and so forth.) An important quality of the prospectus is that it provides sufficient detail to serve as a guide for moving forward, but enough generality to accommodate adjustments in course given new information revealed as the dissertation is written. We will aim to complete the prospectus, again doing so incrementally, by week 15 of the semester, at which time the student will seek approval, i.e., defend, the prospectus in front to its dissertation committee.
Student Responsibilities

Weekly Seminar Meetings

The weekly meetings are designed to facilitate discussion of some element of the proposal or prospectus upon which the students are working. Each week students will present their progress on a component and then the group will think it over collectively. The goal for each seminar student is to participate in a constructive manner, raising questions and seeking to solve problems in their colleagues’ projects, thereby propelling along completion of the proposal or prospectus. Additionally, this “chewing over things” is intended to make the individual student fluent, or comfortable with, all of the components of the dissertation project, thereby providing a foundation for the ultimate purpose of the dissertation: conveying the study’s conclusion to the broader social scientific community.

Weekly Meetings with Dissertation Adviser

Each graduate student must undertake a weekly one-hour meeting with their dissertation adviser. Doing so accomplishes two things. First, regular meetings remove the anxiety of communicating with your advisor; in short, it removes often episodic nature of such meetings and it establishes the working relationship that is important for a productive dissertation project. Second, weekly meetings enable you and your advisor to tackle various issues in your proposal and prospectus that require your advisor’s expertise and judgement (something that I will often be unable to provide.) Last, as you will come to find out, some problems are not easily answered and must be mulled over by you and your adviser. This process of “thinking, solving and agreeing” avoids the problems that might arise in later stages in the dissertation when key decisions are revealed and questioned, thereby jeopardizing the entire project.

Dropbox

So that I can better understand your projects and the claims and decisions therein, I will be setting up a shared Dropbox folder, “Practicum,” as well as sub-folders by seminar participant last name. Students are requested to upload clean PDFs of the key sources that they are using to formulate the proposal and prospectus. Use of file names that are informative and uniform is appreciated (e.g., “Enterline-JOP-2005-Beacons of Hope.pdf”).

Instructor Office Hours

Seminar students are welcome to visit the instructor during his office hours (W, 3:30–6:30) to discuss anything related to the proposal and prospectus phases, or the seminar more generally.

Communication

Email communication will be done exclusively through Blackboard’s email function (not to be confused with any Blackboard internal “messaging”), which flags your incoming mail accordingly. The Blackboard email link is located in the left-hand portion
of the screen. Save for emergencies, please avoid alternative methods of communicating electronically, as they are likely to become lost in the stream of email minutiae in Enterline’s inbox.

Phases

Proposal

The proposal is a pitch to your dissertation committee. The pitch consists of a documenting outlining the questions/puzzles that you intend to focus on in the dissertation project. Because the history of graduate programs is littered with efforts to develop dissertations that can politely termed, “aft first” (e.g., hypothesis tests underway before a clear research question is determined, theory formulated, and so forth), the proposal is designed to encourage the student to first identify a project. Doing so consists of identifying a research question/puzzle, demonstrating said question/puzzle is insufficiently addressed by current social science, speculating about a fruitful strategy for answering said questions or solving said puzzles, and make a claim regarding the value of such an inquiry for social science. Thus, the proposal is designed to force the student and its dissertation committee to agree on the acceptability of the “big purpose” of the proposed project, and to achieve this agreement before investment is made in the many details associated with the prospectus (e.g., how will be operationalized.)

The proposal consists of approximately a 12-15–page, double-spaced document (excluding references) that addresses the following issues in sequence:

1. *Research Question(s)/Puzzle(s).* What research question/puzzle is of central interest to you? From where do the questions and puzzles originate? Did you arrive at said questions/puzzles by reading research, observing the empirical world, a though experiment, or some other way? Discuss this process of discovery. If there are multiple questions, how do the questions fit together? If you have a puzzle at hand (e.g., the absence of war between democracies), what questions and implications does the puzzle suggest for your subfield?

2. *Existing Research.* What does existing social science, broadly defined, tell us about your question/puzzle? Are any sciences outside of political science involved in research that is relevant to your questions/puzzles (e.g., IR scholars and anthropologists both study warfare, but rarely talk.) Has any social science tackled your question/puzzle head on? If so, why is extant research unsatisfying to you in terms of the question or puzzle? What are the strong and weak points? What is missing? Perhaps something in the causal connections?

3. *Value.* What is the value of your proposed inquiry for social science? Will it aid in solving larger issues under the purview of social science? If so, how so? How will your inquiry contribute to the improvement of society? Human kind?

4. *Preliminary Strategy.* What do you believe will be a fruitful strategy for answering your research questions or solving your puzzles? Are there one or more
theoretical angles for doing so? What existing theories or ideas might provide a fruitful point of departure for thinking about the problem?

The general style of the Proposal (e.g., title page, citations, headings/sub-headings) should follow Enterline’s Guide, which will be posted on Blackboard Course Content. The student’s dissertation committee should be listed on the title page of any document submitted to Blackboard.

Prospectus

As discussed above, the dissertation Proposal sets out the research questions and puzzles to be addressed in the dissertation. In short, the Proposal identifies the “big target” of project, how previous research bears on this target, the value of the project for social science and humanity, and the preliminary statement of the strategy for addressing this target. Sans Proposal, discussion of Prospectus, or “plan,” for carrying out the dissertation is not possible (or, if pursued, likely to be incomplete.)

But, Proposal crafted and approved by the student’s dissertation committee, the student can move on to Phase 2 of the Practicum seminar, the writing of the Prospectus. The text of the Prospectus can be appended to the existing Proposal document (specifically, following the final section of the Proposal, but before the reference list, insert a new title page labeled “Prospectus”.)

The Prospectus contains three components: (1) the structure, or format, of the dissertation; (2) the contents of the chapters; and (3) the work calendar. These components are elaborated as follows:

1. Structure of the Dissertation. The structure of the dissertation is the key initial decision to be made by the student in consultation with its dissertation committee. In general, dissertations take two formats: (1) the book; or (2) the article. The book format resembles a book in that each chapters of this dissertation takes up a distinct task in the dissertation project. For example, there is usually an introductory chapter that announces the research questions and puzzles; a chapter that covers previous research on said questions and puzzles; a chapter formulating theoretical expectations, and so forth.

The advantages of the book format is that it provides the author with a foundation to, at some future date, publish a book. However, the disadvantages are, in my opinion, manifold. In particular, each chapters requires expertise and experience that are likely unique and new to the author. For example, crafting a 50-page theory chapter is not something that the student has heretofore accomplished; as such, such a task is difficult, and more important, never repeated in the dissertation. Furthermore, the book-like document that is produced is not a book that anyone (save for your dissertation committee) wants to read and therefore in most cases it must be rewritten to make it suitable for publication as a book. Last, although the eventual publication of a book may be envisioned, peer reviewed articles are usually recommended before a book during the tenure process. The book format arguably slows down the parcelling out of article-length
portions for review following the dissertation defense, because elements of each chapter must be distilled into a free-standing, 40-page manuscript.

Conversely, the article format envisions a document that consist of three article-length chapters sandwiched in between short introductory and concluding chapters. In this format, three chapters (hereafter, “article(s)”), contain thematically related, but free-standing studies that conform to the standards of peer reviewed articles of approximately 40-pages that are submitted to professional journals. That is, each article sets out a research question or puzzle, discussed relevant research, formulates expectations, formulates a research design, and so forth.

The advantage of the article format is that it is specifically designed to expedite the crafting of scholarly articles that are the coin of the realm in social science. Indeed, given that these articles are free-standing, they can be sent out for review prior to the completion of the dissertation. Additionally, the article format affords some flexibility—e.g., as the inquiry unfolds and discoveries are made, the directions of subsequent chapters can be modified. These advantages notwithstanding, the paramount advantage of the article format is repetition, or Fordism, of tasks—i.e., the student builds experience in writing each component of the first article and this experience brings valuable experience to the writing of the second and third articles, thereby expediting the process and allowing for a more rapid completion of the dissertation project.

In the article format, the introductory chapter and concluding chapters are not free-standing articles. Rather, these two “chapters” of the dissertation support the dissertation document; that is, they enable the reader to understand how the three articles are organized, why they are organized in said fashion, as well as broader issues (e.g., import, future research.) That said, some elements of the introduction and conclusion can easily be imported into the articles before submission to peer-review. Specifically, the introduction chapter sets out the broader goals of the project, the rationale for chapters and their organization; the concluding chapters sums the collective implications of the research and identifies paths for future research. The disadvantages of the article format are that it eschews lengthy contemplation of the dissertation elements and therefore the student is too easily satisfied with superficial inquiries. Additionally, the package of three thematically related articles may not amount to the collective wisdom contained in a more deeply thought out book format dissertation.

The strengths and weakness of the two formats duly noted, the first step in the Prospectus phase of the practicum is the student’s determination of the desired dissertation format. To do so, it is necessary that the graduate student meet with its dissertation committee chair, weighing the strengths and advantages of the book and article formats, given the student’s abilities, the nature of the project identified in the Proposal, personal preferences, professional goals, and other relevant factors.
The rationale for choosing one format over another should be addressed in the first two pages of the Prospectus component. This writing should address the following questions:

(a) What reasoning underlies the select format?

(b) Why this format as opposed to the alternative(s)?

(c) Given the selected format, how is the dissertation to be organized and why? Literally, what chapters/articles are envisioned? Why is this organization superior to alternatives?

2. Contents of the Articles or Chapters. The purpose and contents of the chapters are elaborated in individual sections (in the Course Calendar, below, the chapters are referred to as “Article #1, Article #2, and Article #3, but the student selecting the book format may envision “Theory Chapter,” and so forth). The discussion of the are elaborated in the following manner:

(a) Article Purpose. Statement of the purpose, or goal, of the chapter. What is the chapter designed to accomplish? How does this chapter fit within the broader goal of the project? For example, what specific questions, expectations, or causal mechanisms will be central to the chapter and why? Why is this article sufficient to constitute a freestanding article?

(b) Relevant Literature. Identification of the social scientific literature relevant to the inquiry specific to the questions/puzzles central to this article. What contributions to the extant literature are central to the inquiry carried out the chapter? This literature is summarized briefly. In what ways will the student’s article add to this literature in terms of scientific knowledge?;

(c) Theoretical Approach. Preliminary identification the theoretical approach and expectations to be employed in the chapter. Specifically, the theoretical expectations (in preliminary form) are identified to the degree that a research design can be identified (also in preliminary form); and

(d) Research Design. Identification of the sample, units of analysis, preliminary operationalization of the dependent variable, preliminary operationalization of the independent variables necessary to test the aforementioned expectations, and hypothesis testing method must be established. What is the reasoning underlying the proposed variable operationalizations? If data must be collected, what is the procedure for doing so? If original collection is necessary, what is the time/cost necessary to accomplish this collection? If time/cost turn out to be insurmountable for whatever reasons, what alternative, or backup, data sources are available? Last, what hypothesis testing methods will be employed? Why the proposed methods rather than alternatives?
3. Work Calendar. The final component of the Prospectus is the work calendar. Much like the “Course Calendar” contained in the Practicum syllabus, the work calendar sets out monthly targets of completion for the dissertation project. Although it is convenient to suggest that dissertations unfold linearly, this may be not the case for manifold reasons. For example, the student and its dissertation advisor may foresee that some tasks, e.g., data collection of a key variable, are necessary before any of the three articles can be finished. As such, the key task may be scheduled at the front of the calendar. Additionally, student and adviser may decide that one article takes precedence over the others, given assessment that the student must “stake claim” to the idea before some other social scientist does. Last, and related the first point, the student may wish to submit a grant application, the due date for which is on the front end of the dissertation project (e.g., the National Science Foundation’s Political Science Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grants (PS DDRIG), and time must be made for said application before embarking on the dissertation project proper. Additionally, the completion of the dissertation components should be synchronized with the broader targets for the job market. The Work Calendar should take the form of the Course Calendar. Although some advisers will subscribe to the motto of “go forth and write your project...alone”, it is advisable to build into the calendar regular meetings, either in person or virtually, such that one does not lose one’s way.

Final Product & Defense

Together, Phases 1 and 2 of the Practicum comprise the document that is then formally defended by the graduate student before dissertation committee. As noted, the combined document is sometimes referred to as the “Dissertation Proposal” or the “Dissertation Prospectus” by faculty. In the Practicum, we embrace the literal definition of each term—proposal and prospectus—considering the proposal to be the “big idea/question/puzzle” and the prospectus to be the plan for investigating said ideas/questions/puzzles. The final document, i.e., the one that is defended, may be refined to suit the student and advisor’s needs and preferences. The final document is in the 25-30-page range, and should be defended in mid-May, before the summer term gets fully under way.

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1At this writing [April 2016], the PS DDRIG documentation, or solicitation, is located here: [http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2015/nsf15571/nsf15571.pdf](http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2015/nsf15571/nsf15571.pdf)
Course Calendar

The components of the Proposal and Prospectus identified in the right-hand column of the calendar are due in draft form by upload to the appropriate Turnitin dropbox in Blackboard Course Content. For example, “Week 4 (2/8) Proposal: Questions/Puzzles” means that the student should upload a draft of this component to Blackboard by 2/8 noon.

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Winter Weather

As winter weather approaches in late November and December, please monitor your Blackboard and MyUNT email accounts for messages from me regarding seminar. Due to commuting hazards (me riding a motorcycle from my home in Fort Worth), I may cancel seminar given poor weather and prior to any declaration by the UNT Registrar.