GOVT 490 DL1: Data for Policy and Advocacy

Syllabus

Spring 2021

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Description:

Some in the public policy world lament that we have entered a post-fact era where objective facts have become less influential in shaping the public discourse than appeals to emotion, expressions of personal belief, and dis-information. To assist in counteracting the spread of rumors, innuendo, and falsehoods, we can become skilled at understanding the sources and uses of a wide range of social and economic data that inform the policymaking process. This course is designed to introduce students to data available from public sources covering demographic, social, health, and economic topics. Students will gain an understanding of the strengths and limitations of secondary data addressing issues of economic performance, labor force characteristics, demographic data, housing, and information on special populations. In keeping with the university’s mission of addressing the complexity of issues in equity and opportunity, we will work on data skills that will allow students to be well-informed and able to effectively communicate accurate data on complex and challenging social issues.

The focus of this course will be on data from US federal and state government agencies; however, international data and widely available private data sources may also be covered. The course will include techniques and tips for effective data searches. Students will be introduced to applied data analytic techniques as tools for describing and understanding economic and human conditions in communities. Through class discussions and assignments, students will explore what the data can tell us about communities, which will require the ability to synthesize the learning you have gained throughout your academic and professional careers. Students will also receive instruction and practice in presenting data, especially to non-technical audiences.

GOVT 490.DL1 fulfills all or in part the writing-intensive requirement for the Government and International Politics and Public Administration majors.

Expected outcomes:

1. Students will be able to effectively search and retrieve data from any one of several US and state government agencies such as the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Agriculture, the Federal Reserve System, the Virginia Department of Finance, Virginia Workforce Connection, and international sources such as the World Bank and other agencies/sources.
2. Students will understand how to interpret data from these sources by understanding the methods used to obtain the data, the sources of the data, and have a practical understanding of measurement error and its effect on data accuracy.

3. Students will be able to apply basic descriptive analytic techniques used in regional community and economic research. These include understanding basic descriptive statistics (this is not a stats course) and other techniques used in applied community research.

4. Students will gain, through practice-driven exercises, the ability to write clear, concise messages/briefs/reports that convey the meaning of descriptive data. Demonstrating understanding of the implications of descriptive data requires the student to synthesize their previous learning across the range of university disciplines. Moreover, describing a particular feature of a region’s population, economy, or infrastructure will require multiple data elements synthesized from the catalog of publicly available data.

5. Given a specified geographic area, students will be able to access data and provide a comprehensive description of socio-economic characteristics and trends in a community and understand the strengths and limitations of that description.

**Grading:**
Grading will be based on brief weekly writing assignments (25%), two briefing papers (short, technical papers, 30% total), semester project (30%), and class participation (15%).

**Semester Project:** The semester project will be a comprehensive economic, social, and demographic description of a student-selected region. The selected region will be used throughout the semester. In many ways, the semester project will be the culmination of all homework assignments. The paper created as part of the Semester Project will include succinct, but illuminating discussions of the presented data. The instructor must approve the selected region.

**Weekly writing assignments:** Each week the lesson will present data representing a particular regional characteristic (demographic, economic, other). Students will write a 100-word summary of that data and what it may represent for the community for submission. This will be a timed exercise. Examples will be posted to the class website. Students can think of this as short blog postings. Student submissions will be graded and returned with feedback. There will be 10 of these assignments.

**Briefing Papers:** At specified intervals during the semester, students will be asked to prepare two (2) 1,500-word (a little over 2 pages using 12 point font and single spacing) briefing papers offering a detailed examination of regional characteristics that have previously been covered in class. Students will have flexibility in choosing which data elements to be the focus areas of their paper, but should be of sufficient breadth to have something to write about. Check with the instructor if you have questions. Examples will be available on the class website. Submissions will be reviewed and returned to students for revision and final submission.

**Class Participation:** Class participation includes participating in discussions through the designated online forum.
**Weekly Video Lessons:**
For class each week there will be a recorded video as required viewing. The video will present information of that week’s data source(s), special issues related to the data, and a hands-on demonstration of how to access the data covered through an agency data portal.

**Help Sessions:**
On a varying schedule, the instructor or his support staff, will host on-line help sessions for students that need a bit of extra guidance in navigating the websites of our data sources. These sessions will be scheduled and announced through online course tools. Students may also request additional engagement for assistance and we will do our best to accommodate these requests.

**Class Schedule:**
This is a course topical outline. We may change some topics and dates if the need arises.

Our course week will begin on Monday of each week.

**Assignment Schedule:**

Weekly Writing Assignments: These are timed exercises that must be completed by end of day Sunday each week. (You will have 15 minutes to do the assignment, but you have flexibility within each week of when you do this assignment.

Discussions: When a class discussion is included in the weekly assignments, your initial post should be submitted by 11:59 pm on Wednesday. Responses to other student posts should be initiated no later than Friday evening. The discussion will close Sunday night. Full credit on discussion posts requires thoughtful, respectful and substantive submissions that are timely.

Other Assignments: As posted in the syllabus or online course calendar.

**Introduction**
2/1 Descriptive statistics. Geographies.

**Demographics (people)**
2/15 The way we live. Housing/Homelessness
2/20 The way we live. Commuting/Traveling.
2/22 The way we live. Health
3/1 Education.
3/8 Working: Jobs/Occupations
Late assignments will not be accepted without prior authorization.

Please use your Mason Live email account or Blackboard email system to communicate with me. To make sure I stay in compliance with state and federal regulations, I will not respond to messages sent from or send messages to a student using a non-Mason email address regarding class-related matters.

Academic Integrity

The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. Mason has an Honor Code with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. Three fundamental and rather simple principles to follow at all times are that: (1) all work submitted be your own; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the ground rules on a particular assignment, ask for clarification. No grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct. Plagiarism means using the exact words, opinions, or factual information from another person without giving the person credit. Writers give credit through accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes. Paraphrased material must also be cited, using MLA or APA format. A simple listing of books or articles is not sufficient. Plagiarism is the equivalent of intellectual robbery and cannot be tolerated in the academic setting. If you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism, please see me.

As in many classes, a number of projects in this class are designed to be completed within your study group. With collaborative work, names of all the participants should appear on the work. Collaborative projects may be divided up so that individual group members complete portions of the whole, provided that group members take sufficient steps to ensure that the pieces conceptually fit together in the end product. Other projects are designed to be undertaken independently. In the latter case, you may discuss your ideas with others and conference with peers on drafts of the work; however, it is not appropriate to give your paper to someone else to revise. You are responsible for making certain that there is no question that the work you hand in
is your own. If only your name appears on an assignment, your professor has the right to expect that you have done the work yourself, fully and independently.

Mason is an Honor Code university; please see the Office for Academic Integrity for a full description of the code and the honor committee process. The principle of academic integrity is taken very seriously and violations are treated gravely. What does academic integrity mean in this course? Essentially this: when you are responsible for a task, you will perform that task. When you rely on someone else’s work in an aspect of the performance of that task, you will give full credit in the proper, accepted form. Another aspect of academic integrity is the free play of ideas. Vigorous discussion and debate are encouraged in this course, with the firm expectation that all aspects of the class will be conducted with civility and respect for differing ideas, perspectives, and traditions. When in doubt (of any kind) please ask for guidance and clarification.

Submitted assignments, quizzes and exams must be your own work. Any exceptions to this rule may be a violation of academic integrity. Faculty in the Schar School have zero tolerance for academic dishonesty and will strictly enforce GMU’s honor code.

**Statement on Special Needs of Students:**

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit http://ds.gmu.edu/ for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474

**In designing this course, I have tried to make the content as accessible as possible. If you have difficulty with any of this material, please let me know in a timely manner. I am happy to work out a reasonable accommodation to address any accessibility challenges with course materials.**

**Sexual Harassment, Sexual Misconduct and Interpersonal Violence**

- George Mason University is committed to providing a learning, living and working environment that is free from discrimination and a campus that is free of sexual misconduct and other acts of interpersonal violence in order to promote community well-being and student success. We encourage students who believe that they have been sexually harassed, assaulted or subjected to sexual misconduct to seek assistance and support. [University Policy 1202: Sexual Harassment and Misconduct](https://ds.gmu.edu/sexual-misconduct) speaks to the specifics of Mason’s process, the
resources, and the options available to students. As a faculty member, you may wish to include information about this on your syllabus. In addition to using any of the above language, consider including the following:

- **As a faculty member and designated “Responsible Employee,” I am required to report all disclosures of sexual assault, interpersonal violence, and stalking to Mason’s Title IX Coordinator per university policy 1412.** If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact the Student Support and Advocacy Center (703-380-1434) or Counseling and Psychological Services (703-993-2380). You may also seek assistance from Mason’s Title IX Coordinator (703-993-8730; titleix@gmu.edu).

- **These policies include harassing behavior in an online environment. Threatening behavior is not limited to physical threats.**