Welcome to Capstone I. This course will focus on the preparation of projects, including research design and presentation. Much of the work will be on your projects for completing the MPA degree, but we will also cover other material that will be important to you as you conduct research and prepare reports in the future.

Specific Objectives

Each graduate of the UNO MPA program will have produced and successfully defended a thesis or project. Capstone I is intended as a major step toward that goal. To complete this course, students (acting individually or in groups) will:

- Select an appropriate topic
- Review and analyze relevant literature
- Select one or a few researchable questions
- Design the research they will conduct
- Read and critique the work of other students
- Select and get approval for a faculty committee
- Write a research proposal, which will normally comprise the first three or so chapters of the thesis or project
- Plan how to manage the research project
- Obtain committee approval of the proposal
- Obtain IRB approval, if necessary, for human subjects research (explained below)
- Submit an Application for Candidacy
- Make an oral presentation on the research proposal

The projects are to be finished during Capstone II in the spring.

What are theses and projects? They are independent works that demonstrate the ability to define a problem or question, draw upon relevant knowledge from the MPA course work, find other relevant information, design and conduct research, write a formal document using standard English and citation methods, accept and utilize criticism, and defend the product, all according to an established schedule. These skills are important for administrators in public and nonprofit organizations; indeed, the higher one goes, the more important they will become.

The difference between a thesis and a project is primarily one of focus. A thesis draws its question from the academic literature and seeks to contribute to that literature by answering the question. A project starts with a “real world” problem and draws upon relevant literature to help in finding a solution. Both require an application of the
literature and both require independent research. Typically, students who intend to pursue a PHD write a thesis and those who are, or will become, practitioners do a project. Upon completing Capstone I, thesis students will take PADM 7000, Thesis Research, and project students will take Capstone II.

Let me stress that completing the research design during the fall semester is essential if you wish to graduate in the spring. You do not have to confine yourself to the design, however. If have approval from your committee chair and can start on the actual research before the end of the term, by all means do so. Because of deadlines for masters’ examinations (project/thesis defenses), you will not have the full spring semester to complete your project. It’s important to get as much done as you can in the fall.

Preparing a Project or Thesis

Both theses and projects differ from course papers in several ways. They are longer and represent substantially more effort. They involve independent research. Most importantly, the final product must meet UNO standards for research and writing. Often the document will go through multiple drafts, each one receiving critiques from the faculty chair or the full committee. A course paper is like a race: you go the distance, get the results, and move on. A thesis or project is more like a pole vault. You have to clear the bar, whether you do it on the first try or after many efforts.

We will use a structured approach. Having seen over 30 years’ worth of MPA projects, conducted numerous site visits at other universities, and discussed the issue with many colleagues, I have concluded that many students benefit from structure in what is probably their first major project of this sort. For this reason, the MPA program encourages group projects under close faculty supervision. I have already emailed you about faculty research interests that might form the basis of a group project. You don’t have to choose a project from those interests, but you do need to pick one that can get faculty approval and support. You may also do an individual project, but to do so you should already have a well thought-out topic and an idea about a faculty advisor.

You should all have taken PADM 6001, Research Methods, or the equivalent, and PADM 6201, Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation. Please review your text and notes to refresh your memory on research standards and the variety of techniques available. Most research methods texts concentrate on quantitative methods. There are other choices, including case studies, meta-analyses, and what I call “reform studies.” (I’ll explain that last one a little later.) The choice of methods should be based on your topic and the specific research questions you choose. One of the reasons for reviewing literature is to learn what methods others are using in your topic area.

The quality of your writing is very important. It represents you to the world. Poorly written documents indicate that the author is not fully literate or does not care enough to do competent work. I will grade for grammar as well as for substance. Also, I will pick examples of grammatical errors, if there are any, from your weekly work and discuss them in class (without revealing who submitted them).
Proper citations are also important. This is not just a matter of giving credit and avoiding plagiarism. An essential feature of good research is reproducibility. Someone else should be able to follow both your independent research and your literature review. You will see examples in which authors give references to whole documents. That is acceptable practice only if one is referring to the basic conclusion of the whole work. Otherwise, give page references. **If you are using a direct quote, you must give the page reference.**

The default options for citation styles are Chicago and APA author-date systems.

**Grading**

The requirements of the course and grading are as follows:
- Written critique of projects – 10%
- Practice literature reviews – 20%
- Obtaining IRB approval – 5%
- Progress reports – 10%
- Presentation – 20%
- Final paper – 35%

Most of the weekly assignments will be progress reports. You will be reading literature, taking notes, developing your reference list, and, most importantly, thinking and making decisions about your project. These reports will allow me to track your progress and to make suggestions. A few other assignments will be factored into your weekly assignment grade, such as progress toward selecting a committee.

**Group Projects**

In 2008 year the MPA faculty approved the option of a group project. Under this option students will work together under close faculty supervision on a topic chosen by the faculty member. The choice of topics is based on relevance, opportunity, and the faculty member’s expertise. We, the faculty, can be more helpful to you if you are working in an area in which we have expertise.

Earlier I was asked if students have a choice in the subject of a group project. The answer is a qualified yes. If you can form a group, settle on a topic, and get a faculty advisor (me or someone else) who has adequate expertise in the area, then you may pursue that project. If not, I will assign you to an ongoing faculty project.

**Academic Integrity**

Academicians, like other professionals, share a commitment to integrity. I strongly support the UNO policy on academic honesty and will apply it in this class. For a full statement of the policy and implementation procedures see: [http://www.studentaffairs.uno.edu/studentpolicies/policymanual/judicial_code_pt1.cfm](http://www.studentaffairs.uno.edu/studentpolicies/policymanual/judicial_code_pt1.cfm).

This policy is not to be interpreted, however, as forbidding you to help each other in appropriate ways. You should, for example, offer critiques and suggestions to each other.
as often as you can.

**Disabilities**
Student who need accommodations for disabilities should register with the Office of Disability Services and follow their procedures for obtaining assistance. Also, please let me know if you have problems, even if you do not qualify for disability services.

**Resources**
What follows is a list of reading sources that I know of at this time. As you move into your topics, you will select more sources.

**Text:**
Research Methods for Public Administrators (any edition) by Elizabethann O’Sullivan, Gary R. Rassel and Maureen Berner or an equivalent methods book approved by the instructor. I have not ordered copies for the bookstore because you should already have a methods book. If you do not, please consult with me about what to get.


**Prior Projects (available on Moodle):**

**Montjoy’s Methods Musings on Moodle:**
- “Research Design Paper”
- “Applied Research Techniques”
- “Comments on Literature Reviews”

**Style Guides.**
Purdue Online Writing Lab (for APA style). Available at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/.


**Course Schedule**
The following dates and assignments are designed to provide structure and keep us all on course. But most of the work will be done individually and in groups, thus requiring initiative and self-discipline. The assigned readings are intended to get you started. You
must search further as you refine your topics. Demonstrating the ability to locate, analyze, and synthesize relevant literature is one of the requirements for an MPA degree.

8/28 1. Introduction.
- Class will not meet because of conflict with the American Political Science Association annual conference in Chicago.
- Review in whatever research methods book you used the section(s) on research design. In O’Sullivan, Rassel, and Berner that Chapters 1-3.
- Prepare a written statement of your research question and a general idea of how you would go about answering it. Don’t worry; you may change your plans later. My goal is to force everyone to give an initial statement of a plan. Do not turn in a statement to the effect that you have no plans yet. If you do, I will proceed to assign you a topic. Email the statement to me by 5:00 p.m. September 3.

9/4 2. Elements of Research Design.
- Montjoy, “Research Design Paper”

9/11 3. Review of Prior Projects
- Akingbola et al (2012)
- Robinson (2013)
- Stillings (2011)
- Submit a 4-6 page review in which you summarize and compare the approaches used in these projects. That’s 4-6 pages all together, not per paper.

9/18 4. Literature Review I
- Class will not meet in person.
- Read Montjoy, “Comments on Literature Reviews.”
- Send me by 9 p.m. on this date a revised statement of your research question and a review of at least three sources in which you critique their methods and synthesize their contribution to answering your question.

9/25 5. Project Management
- Shields (2010)

10/2 6. Literature Review II
- Based on the feedback from Literature Review I and your further research, submit a review of at least six sources (including the earlier three) in which you critique their methods and synthesize their contribution to answering your question.

- Read the UNO policy on “Use of Human and Animal Subjects in Research” at http://orsp.uno.edu/policies.regulations/human.animal.cfm. Follow the links to Institutional Review Board Human Subjects>Online Human Subjects Training. Take the training. (It should take about three hours, but you don’t have to do it all
in one sitting.) Upon successful completion you will receive a certificate. Forward an electronic copy of the certificate to me by class time in order to receive credit for this assignment.

10/16  8. Methods
- Submit a description of the research method(s) you intend to use, including statements on how you expect the method to answer your research question and any challenges you expect in applying the method, e.g. access to data or interview subjects.

10/23  9. Progress Report I. This should include a tentative outline of your entire paper and a list of tasks necessary to complete it. Describe the tasks in enough detail so that I can tell what you plan to do. Submit a brief (1-2 paragraphs) description of your project for IRB approval if you plan to interview or survey human subjects or review any sensitive documents.

10/30  10. Progress Report II. Submit a list of all data sources you will need for your final project and confirm that you have checked and will have access to them.

11/6   11. Progress Report III. Here you update your outline and task list, if necessary, and describe your progress on completing the tasks.

11/13  12. Draft Research Designs due. Please submit them electronically so that I can grade and return them to you in the same way.


11/27  14. Progress Report V. Submit the names of your project committee and a work plan with dates for completing your final project in the spring semester. The deadline for examination reports will be April 25. You will have to have completed the project, submitted it to your committee with enough time for them to read it, defend the project, and make any necessary changes by that date.

12/4   15. Oral Presentations of Research Designs

12/11  Research design due. Submit them electronically.