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COMX 460.01: Research Methods

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COMMUNICATION STUDIES 460, COMMUNICATION RESEARCH METHODS

Spring, 2018

INSTRUCTOR

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Office hours: Wed. 3:30-5, Fri. 1-3, or by appointment (please use email to make appointments)

TEXT

Baxter, L. A. & Babbie, E. (2004). *The basics of communication research*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will introduce you to the process of doing social research. Class members will learn how to gather, analyze, and report research data. A variety of methods used in communication research will be introduced, including surveys, experiments, and content analysis. Although both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in communication research, this course will be primarily concerned with quantitative methods. To get practical experience, you will form a research team with other class members and pursue your own research project.

CO-REQUISITES

A course in statistics is required as a prerequisite for this class. The second half of the course assumes basic knowledge of statistical concepts.

COMM 461 (Research Seminar) must be taken for 1 credit as a co-requisite to COMM 460. COMM 461 is the lab for COMM 460 and will be devoted to group research projects.

COMM 461 MEETS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE 258

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To understand the reasoning behind social and communication research.
- To learn to phrase questions so that they can be answered through research.
- To understand ethical issues in conducting research.

- To acquire a repertoire of data-gathering techniques and knowledge of how to use them appropriately.
- To learn to apply basic statistical concepts to the interpretation of data.
- To learn how to use computer software for data analysis.
- To learn how to report findings accurately and effectively.
- To become more appreciative and critical readers of research.
- To execute your own study and produce a report that provides useful information.

SEQUENCE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

Exam 1 Readings:

Foundations of social research	chapters 1, 2 (p. 32-43), 4
Research ethics	chapter 5
Measurement	chapter 6 (p. 107-121)
Questionnaire construction	chapter 8 (p.166-187)

Exam 2 Readings:

Reliability and validity	chapter 6 (p. 121-128)
Sampling	chapter 7 (p.132-140; 148-163)
Survey design	chapter 8 (p.187-200)
Qualitative research	chapter 13-14

Exam 3 Readings:

Data analysis/Statistics	chapters 7 (p. 141-147), 11, 12
Content analysis	chapter 10
Experiments	chapter 9

REQUIREMENTS

There will be three exams on the lectures and readings and a group project. The exams will be non-cumulative and will cover lectures and the readings in the textbook. In addition, class members will carry out a research project in small groups. Groups will present their project to the rest of the class at the end of the semester. A written report of the project is due during final exam week. An individual grade will be assigned for group project work based on the quality of the project and anonymous evaluations of your work from other group members.

You will receive a separate grade for COMM 460 and COMM 461. Grades will be will be assigned using the +/- system and will be computed based on the following formula:

COMM 460:

- exam #1 = 100 points
- exam #2 = 100 points
- exam #3 = 100 points
- group project work = 100 points
- attendance/participation = 40 points

COMM 461:

group project work and attendance = 100%

Consistent and prompt attendance is essential in COMM 461 so that groups can get project work done. **Your grade will go down if you miss classes or come late.** Groups will also have one weekly out-of-class meeting to work on projects. Again, consistent and prompt attendance is essential at these meetings and will be evaluated based on group evaluations.

DISABILITY MODIFICATIONS

The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction through collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors, and Disability Services for Students. If you think you may have a disability adversely affecting your academic performance, and you have not already registered with Disability Services, please contact Disability Services in Lommasson Center 154 or call 406.243.2243. I will work with you and Disability Services to provide an appropriate modification.

ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT

Academic misconduct includes cheating, plagiarism, and fabrication of research. In this course, there have been rare instances of students fabricating data for projects (e.g., filling out the questionnaires rather than collecting responses from research participants). This represents a very serious form of academic misconduct. Depending on the severity of the violation, academic misconduct will result in an "F" on the assignment, failure of the course, and/or recommendation of a University sanction.

DATES AND DEADLINES

Date	Assignment
Mon., Fe. 12	Partial project prospectus due
Wed., Fe. 21	Exam 1
Mon., Mar 5	Full prospectus due (first half of report – "introduction and methods")
Wed., Mar. 14	Revised prospectus due
Wed., Mar. 21	Exam 2
Wed., Ap. 25	Exam 3
Wed., May 2	Second half of report due ("results" and "conclusions")
Fri., May 5	Group reports begin
Thurs., May 10 (10:10)	Group reports conclude
Thurs., May 10	Final, revised report due (submit electronic copy to my email address)

RESEARCH PROJECT POSSIBILITIES

The research project is an essential part of this course because it allows us to learn through experience. You can undertake any type of study you like (e.g., a survey, experiment or content analysis) as long as it involves some form of quantitative analysis (i.e., you have to perform some formal measurement). Please see the course Moodle page for examples of projects completed by past students in this course.

I have in mind two types of projects, although you can propose other options.

1. Public opinion or awareness survey. Locate a non-profit organization (e.g., charity, community service organization, University group, or public agency) that needs information from the people they serve or the people within the organization. Develop and administer a survey designed to address these information needs and produce a report for their benefit. If you choose this option you will work with a representative of the organization to identify objectives for the survey and work with me to design methods that will achieve these objectives. The purpose should be gather information about the perceptions and opinions of a carefully defined population of individuals (usually either clients, potential clients, or members of the organization). This should not be confused with publicity, fundraising, membership drives, etc. where you directly promote the organization's goals. The project should assist a nonprofit agency and thereby serve the public interest. Such agencies are often appreciative of your assistance because they operate on restrictive budgets and cannot afford to commission a professional survey.
2. Replication/extension. Find an area of communication research that interests you and identify a study or set of studies that provide a useful model. Plan a new study replicating parts of the previous research but with modifications that extend or clarify the original study. The purpose of a replication is to determine whether the results of an earlier study stand up under repeated testing. Replications usually include strategic modifications to address issues raised by the earlier study or to extend the research in useful new directions. You should select a study that is interesting but fairly straightforward. I suggest that you start by generating several possible studies and then looking up the original articles that contain detailed descriptions of the research. I can help advise you about which studies involve procedures or statistics that are too complicated for our purposes (some studies can be modified and we will invariably simplify the statistical analyses). In some cases I can help you obtain the necessary research tools, such as questionnaires.