

FALL 2026 COURSE SYLLABUS

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Introduction to Course

This course serves as the Master of Science in Public Policy (MSPP) capstone research paper (PUBP 6801), structured as an applied independent study, prepared for a government or public affairs client.

Course Objectives

- Apply an appropriate conceptual framework (exploration, description, gauging, decision-making, or explanation) to structure applied policy inquiry.
- Produce a professional research report that synthesizes secondary source material and analyzes primary source material.

Conceptual Frameworks and Methodology

For this applied research paper, the student will select an appropriate conceptual framework from among the core pragmatic models to structure the inquiry: exploratory, descriptive, gauging (practical ideal type), decision-making, or explanation. An exploratory framework utilizes working hypotheses to investigate emerging issues and organize qualitative inquiry where existing theory is preliminary. A descriptive framework employs structured categories to systematically classify, map, and summarize characteristics across different state programs. A gauging framework uses a practical ideal type based on recognized standards or best practices to assess and rate existing policy allocation models against normative criteria. A decision-making framework uses models of operations research such as benefit-cost models to guide policy selection. The explanatory framework uses methods of causal inference to test formal hypotheses.

Readings

Casula, M., Rangarajan, N., & Shields, P. (2021). The potential of working hypotheses for deductive exploratory research. *Quality & Quantity*, 55(5), 1703–1725. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-020-01072-9>

Shields, P. M., Casula, M., & Rangarajan, N. (2025). The case for gauging as a research purpose in public administration: Connecting purpose, frameworks, design, and norms in applied research. *Administration & Society*, 57(2), 281–309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997241303932>

Shields, P. M., & Whetsell, T. A. (2017). Public administration methodology: A pragmatic perspective. In J. C. N. Raadschelders & R. J. Stillman II (Eds.), *Foundations of public administration* (pp. 75–92). Melvin & Leigh, Publishers.

Assignments

Grading

Final averages are rounded to the nearest whole number. A = 90–100, B = 80–89, C = 70–79, D = 60–69, and F = below 60. Georgia Tech does NOT use plus/minus grades.

I like to keep things simple. Every assignment is graded on a percentage basis, 0-100%, and every assignment contributes a certain amount to the overall percentage for the final grade (see breakdown below). Canvas is somewhat clunky and likes points. To facilitate this translation, every assignment thus has 100 points. For the correspondence between percentage to letter grade, I follow the general guidelines set by the institute. Lastly, I do rounding. For example, 89.5 will be rounded up to an A.

- Consultations & Research Progress: 10%
- Working Drafts (2): 40%
- Final Research Paper: 50%

Working Drafts

The working drafts correspond to the first and second halves of the final paper. The first half includes the introduction and literature review. The second half includes the methods, results, recommendations, and conclusion.

Final Research Paper

The final deliverable is a comprehensive research report. The paper should include the following elements.

- Introduction/Executive Summary
 - Provides a compelling argument for the public problem
 - Specifies a research purpose, conceptual framework, and prefaces the study for the reader
- Background and Policy Instruments
 - Sub-section: Background of case
 - Sub-section: Literature review of secondary source material

- Usually follows the elements of the conceptual framework
 - Summary table of elements of conceptual framework
- Methodology
 - Explains the selected conceptual framework
 - Explains how the research will be executed, types of evidence, e.g. documents, interviews, etc. The focus is primary source material.
- Results section
 - Provides the analysis of the primary sources in light of the conceptual framework
 - Includes a summary table of results
- Policy Recommendations & Limitations
 - Actionable recommendations for the GA DCA and the Georgia Legislature
 - Includes explanation of potential limits of policy instrument implementation
- Conclusion
 - Succinctly summarizes the entire paper.

The paper is 15-25 pages (length depends on quality) double spaced, 10–12-point font (not including references, figures, title page). Must use high-quality secondary source (including peer reviewed academic source material identified via Web of Science) material in the lit review, and high-quality primary source material for the results. The paper must adhere to APA citation and bibliographic style.

Policies

Integrity and Plagiarism

Students are expected to follow the Georgia Tech Honor Code and Student-Faculty Expectations Agreement. On plagiarism, presenting another source's words, ideas, or substantially similar material as your own without appropriate attribution may violate the Academic Honor Code. Suspected violations will be reported to the Office of Student Integrity. Use appropriate attribution practices when in doubt, including quotation marks, paraphrasing, in-text citations, and bibliographic entries, as appropriate to the chosen citation style.

AI Policy

Students are expected to follow the AI policy guidance established by Georgia Tech. AI tools may support information searches, brainstorming, and learning, but submitted assignments must reflect the student's own reasoning, analysis, organization, and writing. Presenting AI-generated or AI-rewritten work as one's own may constitute a violation of the Georgia Tech Academic Honor Code and will be reported to the Office of Student Integrity.

Course specific AI exception. In this course AI tools may be used for programming support for R and Python. You remain responsible for understanding, testing, and validating any AI-assisted code. Document substantive AI assistance by identifying the tool, its purpose, and how its suggestions were incorporated or revised.

Late Assignments, Absences, and Attendance

Late submissions will be handled on a case-by-case basis but generally will be deducted a letter grade if there is no justification for the late submission. If you miss an exam, makeup exams generally occur in my office (for ODS clients see Accommodations section on makeup exams). If you will miss an exam, email as soon as possible. Attendance in class is crucial. Aside from excused absences, absences will be counted in the attendance grade. The preferred method is to go through the institute approved system for submitting "proof" for excused absences, via the Dean of Student's website. This avoids populating my inbox with, for example, your medical records.

Institute Approved Absences

Students who miss class because of approved Institute activities (such as field trips, professional conferences, and athletic events) will be permitted to make up the work missed during their absences. Institute-approved absence requests are reviewed by a faculty committee, and the student receives an official letter from the Office of the Registrar as documentation of an approval.

Verification of Participation

For ALL undergraduate and graduate classes that are for credit, billable, and gradable (this includes 7000 and 9000 level thesis hour courses for graduate students), instructors must report to the Registrar's Office and the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid whether they have students enrolled in their classes who are not engaged with the course. This is a Federal Verification of participation and a Federal Title IV requirement.

Incomplete Grades

An incomplete (I) grade will be considered only when, for non-academic reasons beyond the student's control, the student becomes unable to complete the course requirements, has satisfactory academic performance, has made significant progress in completing course assignments, and the remaining work is appropriate for an I grade. If these conditions do not apply, the student will be counseled about other available options.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you require special accommodations contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) to obtain an accommodations letter, which they will deliver to me. If you require accommodations, contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) and provide me with the Faculty Notification Letter through the

ODS process. I will implement the accommodations specified in the letter. If you plan to take exams through ODS, follow ODS scheduling procedures and notify me so that I can complete the required testing agreement and submit the exam materials. If you miss a scheduled ODS exam, contact me and ODS promptly; any makeup will be arranged consistently with your accommodations and ODS procedures. If an emergency prevents you from taking the final examination, an incomplete may be assigned only if the Institute's incomplete-grade requirements are met.

Other Information

Communication Preferences

In person, emails, and video conferences are fine. I generally try to make office hours convenient for you by having them before or after class meeting time depending on when the class takes place. I am generally responsive to emails and attempt to respond in less than 24 hours. If it is the weekend, I may not respond until Monday. I will be logging into canvas frequently throughout the semester to monitor course progress. I will make my best effort to grade submitted assignments one week after the deadline. I will also communicate to you frequently through canvas announcements.

Electronic Devices

The use of laptops, tablets, or other mobile devices is permitted only for class-related work. Please mute all electronic devices during class. In the event of virtual sessions, keep your microphone muted when not speaking; camera use is encouraged but not required. Do not record class participants without permission, except as authorized through an approved accommodation.

Canvas

I will be using Canvas to distribute information about the course. I try to keep things simple here. The course will progress on a weekly basis with modules mapped to the schedule opening on the Monday of the week. I will also be posting a lot of PDFs and other things like R tutorials to Canvas modules. Aside from instances where holidays interrupt my flow, I like to do lectures on the first class day of the week and tutorials/activities on the second day of the week.

Syllabus Revision

The syllabus may be revised when circumstances require. Changes will be communicated through Canvas with reasonable time for students to adjust and will not be applied retroactively.