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Objectives: As a required course in the Master's program (M.S. in Social Research), this class offers hands-on experience with computer-aided empirical research. As the use of computers has increased tremendously in the last decade and as average computer skills have increased, the contents of this course has changed significantly. Ten years ago, the main function of this course was to provide operating knowledge of basic software, primarily word processing and statistical analysis software, but also spreadsheets and data base management programs such as WordPerfect, MS
Given the rise of the Internet, the objectives of this course have changed to provide students with proficiency in using these new tools -- also moving away from just technical instruction to actually doing substantive research and presenting the result of this research meeting professional standards. This course is designed to reflect the belief that the best way to learn any particular technical skills (especially computer and information related skills) is to work on a specific substantive task.

This class will explore uses of the World Wide Web, for social research. Special emphasis will be given to innovative ways in the retrieval and analysis of public opinion and census data and to the collection of textual data (archival research). The Internet offers a great opportunity to bring two research approaches -- the quantitative analysis of survey, census, and similar data and the qualitative analysis of existing (“available”) documents -- closer together.

**Approach:** We will explore the research potential of the Internet in an exemplary manner, focusing on a select number of specific substantive problems. Each student will work on a specific project dealing with the interplay of factual information, public opinion, and public policies related to a specific topic. Four such topics will be selected and an approximately equal number of students will be assigned to each of them. While students are encouraged to share basic information about good sources and to help each other with technical problems, each student will have to document and present his/her research in an individual paper. There are no group projects in this course.

Topics to be considered include:

- Same Sex Marriage/Civil Rights
- Government and Health/Healthcare (e.g. SCHIP, insurance reform, bans on smoking or transfats, legislation and civil rights regarding breastfeeding)
- Gun Rights
- Affirmative Action/School Desegregation

Additional suggestions are welcome and may be posted on the discussion board of the course web site so that other students have a chance to think about them. We will discuss possible topics during the first class on January 26, 2009 and will conduct a preference poll online. The final selection of the three or four topics and the
assignment of students to these topics will be made taking student preferences into account. However, we will avoid long standing topics where there is already a large body of literature providing comprehensive assessments like abortion in general or welfare reform and pick topics where there has been rather recent debate and/or where there have been new developments (like pending federal legislation, new laws, etc.). The topics selected for the spring 2008 class were:

- Criminal Justice Reform
- Federal Finance Reform
- Education Policy
- Consumer Protection
- Environmental Issues

Given the fact that these topics were covered so recently by your peers, they will not be considered for this year’s class.

For the assigned topic, you are supposed to look for both public opinion data and documents reflecting public policies in a wide sense including legislative bills (both passed and proposed), policy proposals, court cases and decisions, referenda (propositions), position papers (by relevant organizations), evaluations of implemented measures, etc., etc. If relevant for the topic, you should also include demographic information (census data). Your main focus should be the current state of the public debate of the topic. However, this needs to be put in proper 'historical' perspective describing the genesis of the topic and milestones in the public debate. To get a better a grip on past events, proposals, etc. you should look for traditional sources (like scholarly books or articles in scholarly journals) -- though using new online access to such resources (full-text data bases of articles from scholarly journals).

In sum, your assignment is to produce a fact based and balanced summary of the current public debate on the assigned social issue. Based on a careful consideration of all facts, you are also expected to offer a professional opinion (as a social scientist) about the likely outcome of the debate (e.g., will Congress pass immigration legislation this year and, if so, which will be the main features). On the other hand, your personal preference with respect to the issue (e.g., what kind of immigration reform you personally favor), shall be left out and shall not bias your presentation (to the extent possible). This is not an essay assignment or an exercise in persuasion. Rather the focus is on impartial (non-partisan)
fact gathering and presentation. More specific guidelines will be provided. This is a highly structured assignment which requires a lot of nitty-gritty research and very careful documentation of your sources. This paper cannot be written in a "heroic weekend effort". Gathering facts and documenting sources is a time consuming process and even superb creative writing skills cannot compensate for a lack of "foot work". You will receive your topic assignment by Feb 2, 2009, and you should start working on the assignment without delay.

Prerequisites: The course requires basic computer literacy (mouse operation, basic Windows OS, word processing, use of web browser, basic e-mail). We will be using a lab with stations running under Win XP. However, you may use whatever operating system (Mac, Linux) you prefer for your work (assignments, paper) as long as you submit your work in the required format. You are also free to use whatever software you prefer (e.g., WordPerfect rather than MS Word, or Firefox rather than MS Internet Explorer), but I may not be able to give you specific assistance if you use alternative software. So, the prerequisites listed here refer to the ability to perform certain tasks not to being familiar with specific pieces of software. Do not take this course if you don't have basic computer skills already. This is not a remedial course in computer/Internet literacy.

Requirements: You must attend all sessions and must hand in all assignments by the deadline specified to get credit. Beyond class time, you should be prepared to spend several hours a week deepening your comprehension of the material covered in class as well as working on the skill assignments and -- of course -- the assigned project. Just showing up once a week for class will not be sufficient -- even if you have good computer/Internet skills already.

If you do not have access to a work station with full Internet access elsewhere (home, work, public library, etc.), you need to reconcile your schedule with the availability of computer labs at Hunter. Unfortunately, access to Hunter labs in the evenings and over the weekend is limited. Convenient access to a computer with Internet connection is crucial; without it it will be extremely difficult to do well in this class.

The course grade will be based on three components:

- various technical skills assignments (20%)
- in-class skills test (20%)
- project/paper (60% total; 15% for first draft, 25% final)
In addition, to obtain a passing grade for the course (C as a minimum), you must obtain a passing grade for the paper. As a matter of principle, I do not give "incompletes".

**Skills Assignments:** The skills assignments have been designed to help you build your final paper and presentation gradually through the semester. Completing them on time and thoroughly will serve you well as you create your first and final drafts.

Generally, skills assignments will not be accepted past the due date deadline. However, each student is allowed one "pass" when it comes to this rule, with the following guidelines:

1. You must let me know by email at least 24 hours before the deadline that you will be taking advantage of the extension. In other words, you will be required to have some foresight and plan ahead, and definitely do not ask for the extension after the deadline has already passed.

2. Each student will be granted one extension, but you are not required to use it. Feel free to turn all your work in on time.

3. The extension will allow you an extra 48 hours past the original deadline to turn in the work. So if an assignment is due Friday at 11 PM, the extension will give you until Sunday at 11 PM to turn in the work.

4. The single extension is only for the skills assignments. No extensions will be granted for the first or final paper drafts, the in class skills test, or the presentation.

**Project/Paper:** Details of the assignment will be discussed in class. A first draft will be required and it will be graded. Both first draft and final paper must be in HTML format including embedded links to the sources used. However, content is by far more important than format. Only basic mastery of HTML will be needed. The emphasis in this class is on social research not on web document design.

Both first drafts and final papers will be posted on the course web site for all students to view and critique. (This part of the course web site will not be accessible to guests; only enrolled students
have access to such "secure" areas.)

**Textbook:** There is no strictly required textbook for this class. Rather, students should pick supporting literature as it best fits their current skill level. In addition, there are plenty of guides and manuals available for free on the Web and specific guidance will be provided during the semester. However, I do recommend the following title:


Among quite a few similar titles, this is probably the only one worth the money.

In addition, especially if you have had limited experience with writing research papers (as an undergraduate) -- and there is a big difference between writing a research paper and writing essays and creative pieces -- you may want to think about getting a general text on (academic) writing. Here are two books both authored by a now retired Hunter College English professor:


Both texts also contain chapters on making use of the Internet for research and deal extensively with the tricky issue of (unintended) plagiarism. They may not be what you remember from your old ENGL 120 class textbook. So, take a look before you dismiss these outright.

**Contents/Schedule:** The exact schedule for this class will depend on the technical skills students bring to this class. The weekly schedule is outlined in an accompanying document; this schedule is tentative and likely to change.

In the first half, we will cover the technical skills essential for carrying out the project: online access to literature databases, use of bibliographic software, effective web browsing (use of general search engines, specialized data bases, useful starting points for
finding sources for scholarly research, evaluating web sources, proper attribution), basic HTML authoring. As time permits and as student interest warrants, we can cover some more advanced Internet-related issues in addition (possibly later in the semester). We will also explore several innovative ways of making use of quantitative data (census data, public opinion data) available via the Web. These include access to census data and to the General Social Survey, e.g. as offered by the University of California at Berkeley. An in-class skills test (requiring online work) where you will have to demonstrate that can perform efficiently, i.e., under time constraint, concludes this phase of the course.

In the second half, the course will take on a genuine "workshop" format. First, we will discuss students' work in progress (based on the first drafts and the peer review process) and supplement skills instruction as needed. Then, students will make short presentations of their work -- speaking freely, not reading from a manuscript, and using visual aids ("slides"), e.g. in form of a Powerpoint presentation (but use of this specific software is not required).

A Note About Blackboard

This class makes extensive use of a Blackboard (Bb) course web site, and students need to visit this Bb course site at least twice a week. There will be no paper handouts, all course materials will be distributed via the Bb course site.

This course will be run on Bb8. To access Bb8 and older classes on Bb6, use this link: http://bb.hunter.cuny.edu/

This link will also provide access to help files on obtaining a CUNY Portal user name and password. Students in this class must register with the CUNY Portal as the CUNY Portal user name and password provide full access to the Bb course site. Large parts of the Bb course site are also available to "guests", but guest access is not sufficient for students enrolled in this course.