Seminar overview
During the course of your PhD studies, a number of hurdles pop up along the way. Learning to understand and work with theory, methods training, candidacy exams, conducting fieldwork, writing up your dissertation… each hurdle is an obstacle that can trip you up if you’re unprepared, or an inflection point where you enhance your professional development and advance in exciting new directions. Writing research proposals is one of the most daunting and under-appreciated challenges along the way: preparing, presenting and defending your dissertation proposal is a core element of the candidacy exam; and conducting fieldwork often requires obtaining competitive research funding. A successful proposal is thus an essential component and determining factor in your progression to the PhD. However, most programs have traditionally offered limited or no training in proposal writing, and if it is offered, it will typically get folded into a research design course – and thus given short shrift in relation to broader questions of methodology and methods. The proposal often becomes what Michael Watts describes as a ‘holy grail’: an elusive and undefined goal that you pursue alone largely by feeling out the way as you go.

This seminar is designed to help you clear this major hurdle in a supportive and collaborative environment. It is a practicum in research proposal writing. We will therefore emphasize writing rather than reading. We are assuming that everyone enters the seminar with a firm idea of a clearly defined dissertation research topic. Our meetings will proceed as proposal writing workshops structured by a peer review process. That is, we will participate equally in critiquing and evaluating each other’s writing. Everyone should come prepared to write, rewrite, and rewrite again and to help each other in the process by providing constructive feedback. There will be a modicum of technical reading. We will use a few of the many excellent how-to guides on grant proposal and academic writing. The gold standard for social science research funding in all three of our department’s disciplines is the National Science Foundation. Therefore the NSF’s Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement (DDRI) grant program will serve as our model for writing our research proposals. The logistics of NSF proposal preparation can be found at https://www.nsf.gov/funding/preparing/ and https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/policydocs/pappg17_1/nsf17_1.pdf (as well as the discipline specific links listed below). Once you have your research ideas articulated in the “long form” of the DDRI it can later be readily modified and adapted to other purposes, including the five-page short form you must submit for your dissertation proposal defense.

Learning Outcomes
You will become familiar with the basic conventions of research proposals in the social sciences. You will have a complete draft of a research proposal for your dissertation that can be used for both the pursuit of external funding and the dissertation proposal defense that is this department’s gateway to doctoral candidacy. Completion of the seminar should be a significant step in your development as an independent scholar and social scientist. Ideally, you will be expert in your particular research topic at the conclusion of the semester. You will have the opportunity to deliver an oral presentation of your proposal and receive constructive feedback. Finally, you will become familiar with the various funding sources in your fields and their differing application requirements.

A Few Considerations:

1. It’s All About You
This seminar is designed to develop your particular research project. Independent, original research is the basis of the doctoral degree in social science. Your dissertation research will define you professionally, regardless of your post-doctoral career trajectory. At this point in your doctoral
program you should have clear ideas of your research interests, as developed with your dissertation committee chair and members. Indeed, you should consult regularly with your dissertation advisor as you develop your proposal over the course of this seminar. There is a certain amount of background preparation on your topic that you should have conducted and will continue to conduct independently of our classroom activities. The process of developing cutting-edge doctoral dissertation research—the only kind that gets funded—is founded on your mastery of the current state of knowledge in your specialized area of investigation. Presumably you are already thoroughly familiar with what has been published on your topic.

One of the most up-to-date sources for current knowledge is not published articles and books, which are the final product of a process covering many months and years. Rather it is the most recently funded proposals and the most recently completed doctoral dissertations that will provide an immediate snapshot of the current status and future direction of knowledge. Realize that the people reviewing your proposals for funding are the same people who have supervised these dissertations and evaluated the latest funded proposals. There is no shortcut to demonstrating to them that you have mastered your topic. There are two key sources. One is the Dissertation Abstracts, found on the FIU library website under Research Tools, A-Z Databases and Resources List (http://libguides.fiu.edu/research). The other is NSF’s abstracts of recently funded DDRI proposals. These can be found at the websites for each of the three disciplines:

NSF Sociology DDRI http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=505118

You should also use these web links to familiarize yourselves with the procedures, protocols, and deadlines of your target discipline. It would not hurt to have a look at all three of them given the fluidity and permeability of disciplinary boundaries.

2. It’s All About Writing

Graduate students are expected to have above average, if not outstanding, verbal skills. The goal of the critical peer reviews as well as my evaluation and comments are not meant to fix spelling, grammar, and syntax. I will let you know when writing is not up to standard, but I will not rewrite for you. If your writing is not up to standard, it is your responsibility to fix it. Get tutoring help, join a writing workshop, hire an editor, or do all three.

The Conduct of Seminar Conduct

There will be three types of materials for reading: 1) proposal-writing guides in various formats and media; 2) examples of successful (i.e., funded) social science dissertation proposals, mostly DDRIs; 3) the written products of seminar participants. We will alternate seminar meetings between learning about how to write proposal components and writing our proposal components. In other words, there will be reading weeks and writing weeks. Both types of weeks will require participants’ critical, constructive contributions to discussion. At the end of the seminar, we will peer review the final, complete research proposal and the associated oral presentations.

During reading weeks, we will read and discuss the writing guides and the proposal examples. All participants are required to read each proposal example and come prepared to analyze and critically discuss the particular component for that week (e.g., methods, theoretical framework). During writing weeks, participants will produce the assigned proposal component and come prepared to discuss and critically evaluate their peers’ written products. All participants will have their written work peer reviewed during the seminar sessions in writing weeks. Each participant will be assigned the writing of two peers to review. I will rotate assignments so that everyone will have the benefit of the entire seminar memberships’ attention.

Seminar Requirements

This is a graduate writing seminar, which means: 1) that the writing requirements are extensive and often challenging; and 2) that learning will be a collective process as we share our individual insights and constructively critique each other’s writing. In other words, we are going to write and rewrite a lot and learn from each other through written and oral exchanges. Here is how the course grade is portioned out.
Participation constitutes a significant part of the seminar grade. We will be operating as a workshop, with everyone involved in critiquing each other’s work in a collective effort to improve each proposal. Just as you will benefit from your colleagues’ peer review comments, others will benefit from yours. Everyone is required to complete the reading assignments prior to the meetings and to participate in the discussions. I will call on individuals directly to take the lead in discussions. One excused absence is allowed. More than one absence will negatively affect the participation score. Note well that participation is 30% of the course grade. Not participating in class discussions or not attending sessions—even if all written assignments are appropriate—could result in 0%, which would give you at most a C- mark for the seminar—which is not a passing grade. Attendance and participation are necessary for passing this seminar.

Periodic Writing Assignments
The writing assignments will be of two types. One will be the various components of the proposal. Participants must post these on the seminar’s Google Drive folder no later than 5:00 pm on the Monday before the meeting in which they will be discussed. After receiving one’s critical feedback, all participants will redraft that component in preparation to moving on to the next. Thus in the second writing week you will submit the revised component one and the first draft of component two. In the third writing week, revised components one and two and the first draft of three, and so on will be combined until we have complete proposal drafts. The other writing assignment is peer reviews of the various components of the proposal. For each component, all participants will be assigned two peers to whom they will provide a written critique of their product. Thus all participants will receive two critiques in addition to my written comments. These will generally be a paragraph or two and should be delivered via email to the author and me by 5:00 p.m. the day before the seminar meeting. The critiques should give attention to form and style as necessary but focus primarily on substantive issues. The Golden Rule should govern the critiques. That is, provide your peers with the kind of feedback you would find helpful to your own work. Neither empty praise nor mean or sarcastic comments are useful.

Final Proposal
This will be a complete proposal written in the NSF format as detailed in their guidelines. I will adhere strictly to their guidelines, including page length, in evaluating the proposals.

Oral Presentation
Most professional career paths—but especially academia—demand that one be able to communicate and defend one’s ideas and research orally to an audience of peers. One’s oral presentation of the dissertation proposal is a milestone event in one’s professionalization. During the last two weeks of the seminar all participants will deliver 10-minute oral presentations of their research proposals and answer questions about them.

Policy on Plagiarism
Plagiarism is theft, cheating, and pointless if our intention is to learn and make our own contribution to the advancement of social science. The disciplinary action that will be taken in the case of plagiarism is explained in the section on “Academic Misconduct” in the FIU Student Handbook. If you are uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism, check out the websites: “Plagiarism: What It is and How to Recognize and Avoid It (Indiana University)” at http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml or “Paraphrase: Write it in Your Own
Words” at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/619/01/. This last site also has many other links, including how to identify and avoid plagiarism.

**Required Readings**

- The proposal examples and various essays, articles, pamphlets, etc. (all available online or in the course Google Drive folder).

**Weekly Schedule**

**Week 1: January 10**

Orientation and introductions, no readings

**Week 2: January 17**

Discussion Topic: Proposal writing overview: style, content and audience

Readings
- Punch: 1-21
- Schimel: 1-25; 145-157
- *Overview Readings* folder contents in Google Drive, including “Watts, The holy grail,” “Orwell on writing,” “Proposal checklist,” “SSRC Art writing Proposals,” “Style,” “Penn State Writing Proposals.”

**Week 3: January 24**

Discussion Topic: Introduction/Problem Statement

Readings
- Schimel: 26-66
- Appropriate sections in the proposal examples.

**Week 4: January 31**

Written Product: Introduction/Problem Statement

- *Submit Intro/Problem Statement by 5:00pm Mon., Jan 29*
- *Email peer reviews by 5:00pm Tues., Jan 30*

**Week 5: February 7**

Discussion Topic: Questions/Hypotheses

- Punch: 21-32
- Appropriate sections in the proposal examples.
- *Nuts and Bolts* folder in Google Drive, “Question”
Week 6: February 14
Written Product: Questions/Hypotheses
- Submit Intro/Problem Statement by 5:00pm Mon., Feb 12
- Email peer reviews by 5:00pm Tues., Feb 13

Week 7: February 21
Discussion Topic: Theoretical framework
Readings
- Punch: 34-48
- Appropriate sections in the proposal examples.
- Nuts and Bolts folder in Google Drive, “Theory” and “Concepts and Terms”

Week 8: February 28
Written Product: Theoretical framework
- Submit Intro/Problem Statement by 5:00pm Mon., Feb 26
- Email peer reviews by 5:00pm Tues., Feb 27

Week 9: March 7
Discussion Topic: Background/context/location/history
Readings
- Nuts and Bolts folder in Google Drive, “Background and history”
- Appropriate sections in the proposal examples.

Week 10: March 14
SPRING BREAK

Week 11: March 21
Written Product: Background/context/location/history
- Submit Intro/Problem Statement by 5:00pm Mon., Mar 19
- Email peer reviews by 5:00pm Tues., Mar 20

Week 12: March 28
Discussion Topic: Design, Methods and Ethics
Readings
- Punch: 50-63 (design and methods), 22-44 (ethics)
- Appropriate sections in the proposal examples.
- Nuts and Bolts folder in Google Drive, “Design” and “Timeline”
Week 13: April 4

Written Product: Design, Methods and Ethics

- Submit Intro/Problem Statement by 5:00pm Mon., Apr 2
- Email peer reviews by 5:00pm Tues., Apr 3

Week 14: April 11

NO SESSION – AAG WEEK

Week 15: April 18

Oral Presentations, Part I

Discussion Topic: Budgets and Putting it all Together

Readings

- Punch: 65-78
- Appropriate sections in the proposal examples.
- *Nuts and Bolts* folder in Google Drive, “Budgeting”
- NSF proposal guidelines

Week 16: April 25

Oral Presentations, Part II

Discussion Topic: Writing tactics

Readings

- Punch: 79-83