A primary element of organizational theory is, of course, the organization. The purpose of this class is to introduce you to some of the foundational theories about the internal life of organizations: how they work, how people and groups behave within them, why they change and why they sometimes do not change when they should, etc. We will cover some of the classics (e.g., Weber; March and Simon) as well as delve into examples of contemporary research. Each week is organized around a specific topic. Usually I will include a foundational paper or two as well as contemporary empirical research related to that topic.

By the end of this class, you will have been exposed to many of the core concepts of the field. To be an organizational theorist, a scholar needs to understand the basic-building blocks – the concepts and mechanisms – that we use to assemble explanations for why organizations behave as they do. Because this is a class about organizations, our focus will primarily be on the organization as the locus of action, although we will draw extensively from sociology and social psychology as well.

My hope is that by the end of class you will also develop a greater appreciation for how organizational research is done. Theory is not an end in itself. Rather we use theory as a way to explain the world, and in turn, we use empirical research to extend theory and develop a more complete picture of that world. Organizational theory is broad and covers more topics that we could delve into in a single class, and so I have tried to pick what I think are some of the most important and relevant topics in contemporary organizational analysis. I have also picked readings that cover a range of methodological approaches.

**Grading**

I base your grades on three criteria: discussion questions, memos, and a research proposal.

Discussion questions (20% of grade) - 50 points

Memos (40% of grade) – 100 points

Research proposal (40% of grade) – 100 points

Discussion questions

For each class I want you to think of two questions you would like to discuss in class. You will then post them to the course’s discussion board (on the BLACKBOARD site) the night before class. You should even submit questions if you plan on missing class. I will use those questions
to aid our class discussion that day. You do NOT need to submit discussion questions the first week of class.

A good discussion question is thought-provoking. Try to avoid questions that would simply require someone in the class to summarize something from the reading. “Why” or “how” questions are good. You might also try to make connections between the current reading and something we’ve discussed in an earlier class. I think you’ll get the idea as we go along.

**Memos**

On the first day of class each student will choose *two readings* on which he or she will write memos. Memos are one to two pages long and provide an opportunity for the student to concisely discuss an interesting implication of the reading and to develop theory further. I suggest the following format for a memo. 1) Begin by stating a theoretical proposition from the article/chapter. A proposition is a statement about a causal relationship between two concepts. A very specific proposition is a hypothesis. 2) Discuss how that proposition might be extended or applied to a different case, another context, or a different theoretical perspective. By choosing a new context, you are attempting to stretch the viability of the theory – see how far you can take it without breaking the theory. You might talk about how a theory might not apply to certain situations. You might also talk about how a different theoretical perspective makes us question the original proposition. 3) Talk about the implications of extending the proposition. Does a different context challenge the premises of the theory? Can you build on the proposition and make it more general/more specific? What interesting implications does this have for a different theory? In an excellent memo you will come up with a new proposition/hypothesis to test.

You **should not** treat memos as summaries of the readings. The point of doing memos is to force you to think creatively. Rather than learning theories and spitting them out in summaries, the purpose of the memo is to challenge you to think beyond what you read and try to create something new. Ideally, you will use the memos as sounding boards for ideas that you might explore further in a research project.

In addition to writing the memos, you will present and discuss them in class. Bring copies of the memo for each person in the seminar. The class is invited to comment on your ideas. I hope that students will feel free to openly question and make suggestions to the memo writer. In other words, ideas presented in a memo are open to challenge. The discussion part of the memo writing is intended to give you feedback and help you to sharpen your analytical and theory-building skills. After students have given you feedback in class, you can revise the memo and submit the final version of it to me by Thursday.

**Research proposal**

At the end of the seminar each student should finish a 10-12 page research proposal. The research proposal should be more than just an essay. You should seek to advance theory in the
proposal and come up with a plan for carrying out an empirical analysis. The ideal proposal would suggest new hypotheses or come up with new theoretical propositions, and, more generally, refine our theoretical understanding of organizational theory. Moreover, you should use the proposal to develop an empirical test of your theoretical argument. Although I don’t require you to gather data or do an actual analysis, I expect you to think seriously about the kind of data you need, about operationalizing constructs, and about the kind of evidence you need to substantiate your argument.

You should not use the research proposal to summarize the material covered in class. Lay out your theoretical argument in the first 5-7 pages of the proposal, and then spend the rest of the proposal discussing details of how you plan to conduct a research project. In the readings for the class you will notice that I include both purely theoretical pieces and empirical studies that test hypotheses. These serve as good examples as you craft your own research ideas.

On the last day of the seminar we will talk about your research proposals. Each student will have time to discuss their proposal and field questions from the class.

**Topics to cover and readings:**

*January 7: Introduction to Theories of Organizations and Behavior*


*January 14: Bureaucracy and organizational structure*


January 23: Bounded Rationality and Organizational Attention


January 28: Organizational Learning


February 4: Routines and Capabilities


February 11: Organizational Categories and Identities


February 18: Organizational Values, Practices, and Culture


February 25: Social networks


March 4: Power, authority, and the politics of change


March 11: Social Movements


