

Syllabus

PUBM 5900: Capstone in Public Service

Instructor: Professor Chengxin Xu

Seattle University

Fall 2025

Course Information:

Class Hours: Tuesday 6:00-8:40pm

Classroom: Pigott Building 107

Meeting Days: 9/30, 10/14, 10/28, 11/18

Presentation Date: 12/6

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1 Course Description

Welcome to PUBM 5900. This course serves as the capstone course for the Master of Public Administration program at Seattle University. The capstone course for the MPA degree integrates knowledge and skills from required course work in the analysis of a policy or management problem.

The primary objective for the course is to thoroughly research and analyze a problem or issue faced by a client organization in the public or nonprofit sectors, and to make recommendations for improvement. To ensure you have an accurate understanding of the issue being analyzed, you are required to conduct and analyze a series of interviews in preparation for their final report. You will work independently, with support from me and your peers, to select a client, identify a policy or organizational issue that impacts that client, research and analyze that issue, and make a final recommendation to your client. At the end of the quarter, you will submit a written report and present your findings and recommendations in a 10-12-minute oral presentation to a public audience.

You will work both individually and with community stakeholders to define a problem and formulate research questions. You will then examine the scholarly literature to identify theory to help guide your inquiry. You will then collect and analyze appropriate empirical data to help address the stated research questions. Finally, you will propose prospective courses of action.

Key questions that you will seek to address include:

- What is the public policy or management problem or issue?
- Who are the actors involved?
- What does the literature tell us about this problem?
- What do stakeholders have to say about this problem?
- What are the barriers to addressing this problem (i.e. what policy, implementation, or management barriers are preventing resolution)?
- How might these barriers be overcome?

This course requires you to apply the knowledge you have gained in this MPA program by analyzing a policy or organizational issue for a client in a public agency or nonprofit organization. You will:

- Select/Think of a client in either a public agency or a nonprofit organization.
- Identify a policy or management problem and formulate a research question that is relevant to the needs of that client.
- Design research: Design an appropriate research approach to examine the issue and answer your central question(s). Most projects will involve mixed methods, such as literature reviews and interviews. Most students will be encouraged to engage in interviews, though, in special circumstances, alternative methods such as surveys, cost-benefit analyses, or evaluation techniques may be employed.
- Review the literature: What is known about this problem? What does the academic literature say? What do think tanks say? Other thought-leaders?
- Collect data: Conduct thorough research on the issue, typically through interviews.
- Analyze data: Analyze findings with criteria relevant to your client; formulate themes of findings.
- Provide recommendations: Formulate alternative solutions, approaches and a course of action that is likely to resolve the problem for the agency or organization in question.
- Write a comprehensive paper.
- Present your work and defend your recommendations to a public audience.

Your learning is my primary concern in this course, so I may modify the schedule if, for instance, we discover we need to spend time on a certain topic and less on another.

2 Student Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Work with community stakeholders to clearly define problems and develop prospective courses of action.
2. Design appropriate research strategies to support empirical research objectives.
3. Use theories to guide inquiry and possible solutions.
4. Conduct original research with the intention of creating more equitable and inclusive communities.
5. Effectively communicate written and oral research findings on public issues to diverse populations.

3 Books and Materials

Books that will help you:

Book for Method: *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*.
[[Amazon](#)]

Book for Writing: *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*.
[[Amazon](#)]

Book for Writing: *Writing for Busy Readers: Communicate More Effectively in the Real World*.
[[Amazon](#)]

4 Course Evaluation

Students are expected to keep up with assigned readings and to participate actively in class discussions. There will be four projects and a final exam. Grades will be based on the following:

- Prospectus/Topic Worksheet — 5%
- IRB Form — 5%
- Literature Review Draft and Outline — 10 %
- Interview Protocol — 10%
- Interviews and Analysis — 10%
- Final Report — 40%
- Final Presentation — 20%

Prospectus/Topic Worksheet and IRB Form: In preparation for the final paper, you are expected to submit a one-page worksheet (on Canvas) proposing a paper topic. This worksheet incorporates several critical papers components including: a problem statement, evidence of the problem, research questions, purpose of the project, audience for the project, significance of the project, and methods. Take care to frame this issue in the form of a problem, or puzzle that warrants investigation. This assignment will be used to facilitate small group discussions about paper topic proposals. Additionally, you are required to submit a one-page worksheet that will be submitted to the Institutional Review Board at Seattle University to assess the potential impact of the research on human subjects.

Literature Review Draft: To ensure that you are relying on ideas and concepts learned in this program, you are expected to submit a brief literature review that establishes legitimacy and demonstrates competency on the chosen topic. Concepts included in the literature review should relate to the administrative, policy, or management processes derived from scholarly literature.

This literature review should include 9-11 scholarly references and conclude with several propositions or hypothesis that will guide your analysis. Papers should be 7-8 pages in length (following APA style formatting) and include the first several sections of the final paper, i.e., introduction, relevance and literature review. An outline of the remainder of the paper should also be included.

Interview Protocol and Interviewee List: This assignment requires that data be collected and analyzed. Due to the condensed nature of a 10-week quarter, most students will conduct and analyze interviews to serve as their primary sources of data. You will be required to conduct 9-11 interviews by mid-way through the quarter (see the syllabus for a due date). Prior to conducting these interviews, you are required to develop an interview protocol. These questions should be developed from both the background of the issue and as a result of the literature review. Additionally, you should develop a roster of interviewees, with a brief description of each actor and your rationale for including this individual in your analysis.

In certain cases, you may elect to use a different data source, such as content analysis, survey administration, secondary data analysis, evaluative techniques, policy analysis techniques, or social network analysis.

Interview Analysis: After your interviews are conducted, you will be required to analyze these interviews in a systematic manner. We will discuss methods for analyzing interviews during one of our course meetings. Regardless of your analytic method, you should identify and explain several themes that emerged from your analysis. Your analysis of interviews should be 3-4 pages in length.

Final Report: You will prepare a final paper corresponding to their selected topic. The paper will include several components: (1) an introduction to the topic, including some overarching research questions; (2) the contemporary relevance of the topic; (3) a brief review of the relevant administrative, policy or management to the selected issue (ideas for papers will be provided early in the course); (4) a description of the interview protocol and selection of questions (5) an analysis of findings (6) a discussion of lessons learned (7) recommendations, and (8) a concluding section summarizes, synthesizes, and consideration of the importance of your findings, followed by a discussion of future challenges in this issue area. The paper will be approximately 25 pages in length and should include 9-11 references from scholarly and academic journals. A suggested outline and rubric for this assignment will be provided.

Final Presentation: You are expected to prepare a final professional presentation of their research problems, questions, analysis, findings and recommendations. A draft of the presentation is expected to be submitted several days prior to the presentation. Presentations will be approximately 10-12 minutes in length, with additional time for questions reserved.

APA (see a [guidance](#) here) is required in terms of writing style of your assignments. In-text citations are preferred to footnotes or endnotes. Writing clarity and quality are considered in grading. Please use a standard font such as Arial, Calibri, or Times New Roman. Pages should use 1-inch margins, double-spaced, with 12 point fonts. If you think you need help with your writing, talk to the professor. There are resources on campus to help you. Also feel free to seek for services of the [Writing Center at Seattle University](#).

Due dates of all assignments are listed on the Course Schedule and your Canvas Calendar.

5 Grading Policy

Students' final grades will be calculated as follows:

A	94-100	A-	90-93	B+	87-89	B	83-86
B-	80-82	C+	77-79	C	73-76	C-	70-72
D+	67-69	D	63-66	D-	60-62	F	59 or less

Any students who want to challenge their course grade shall follow the Academic Grading Grievance Policy at Seattle University. The detail of the policy can be found [here](#). An agreement to receive an Incomplete (I) grade may be negotiated if your circumstances do not allow you to finish the course on time. The Incomplete Grades Policy of the university is available on the Office of the Registrar [website](#).

6 Course Policies

General Expectations: This is a graduate-level course and so students are expected to be motivated to read and study the assigned textbooks and other materials carefully before class. This includes doing exercises from the textbook on your own to test your understanding of key concepts and methods. Regular attendance and keeping up with all readings and assignments is essential to doing well in this course.

Submitting Assignments: Assignments should be submitted via Canvas rather than e-mailed unless being required by the professor. Canvas optimizes the grading process and student-professor communication.

Late Submission: It is very important in this course to keep up with assignments and to hand them in on time. Grades will be reduced for late assignments, and the later the assignment, the greater the grade reduction. Students should expect a penalty for late assignments (not be graded higher than 8.5/10). Assignments that are submitted two or more weeks late will only be accepted for credit at the discretion of the professor and will not be graded higher than 7.5/10.

If you find that you are unable to complete an assignment on time, please communicate with me in advance. I do understand that life happens and can sometimes get in the way. I'll do my best to be flexible; for that to happen, we need to keep in dialogue so that I know where you are in your learning and how I can best support you.

Revising and Resubmitting Assignments: Students who receive a grade of less than 8/10 for an assignment AND who hand in the original assignment ON TIME will be given an opportunity to revise and resubmit the assignment. A change of grade will be made only for assignments that demonstrate a significant improvement through the student's own effort (making only minor corrections or edits in response to the professor's written feedback on the initial assignment will not be sufficient for a change of grade).

***IMPORTANT:** When resubmitting an assignment, students must attach a copy of the original assignment and grade sheet to the revised assignment. Resubmissions must be made within one week after the initial graded assignment has been returned to the student. The maximum grade possible for a resubmission is 8.5/10.

Keeping Your Assignments: Students should keep all of their completed assignments, including those graded and handed back, until well past the end of the term. Your original assignment with the grade on it is your evidence that you completed the assignment and received the grade that you earned.

The syllabus serves as a general outline. I reserve the right to deviate from any part of the plan as necessary. Students will be notified of any such modifications.

7 Academic Integrity Policy

Students must follow the school's [integrity policy](#). Please be aware that plagiarism and any forms of cheating will never be excused under any circumstances – **I will check each assignment carefully using plagiarism detection software**. Violation of these policies leads to immediate failure of the course. If you are not familiar or clear about the school's academic integrity policy, please refer to the tutorial [here](#).

7.1 The Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The use of the work or intellectual property of other persons or the outputs of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) programs (e.g., ChatGPT, DALL-E, Github Copilot) presented as one's own work without appropriate citation or acknowledgment is now considered as plagiarism by the university policy. The use of AI tools is encouraged in this class, but please notice at the end of the assignment how AI has helped you to finish your work. Appropriate use of AI includes brainstorming, literature search and review, and language polishing.

8 Disability Services

Seattle University is committed to providing students with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in its classes and activities. This goal is fundamental to its belief in social justice. To achieve this goal, faculty and staff work together to remove barriers in physical access, communication, attitudes, and policies that can prevent students from taking part in programs. In addition, the University provides supplemental support services through the Disability Services Office.

Students who are requesting academic, housing, and meal plan accommodations for the first time are required to complete the new student application via the myDS New Student Application link and meet with [Disability Services](#) **before receiving services**. During the intake meeting, the student will discuss their goals at Seattle University, the assistance they may need in reaching them, and the creation of a personalized accommodations plan. Students must also provide documentation from a qualified diagnostician that:

- Establishes the nature of their disability.

- Provides evaluative data with test names and scores supporting their current need for specific accommodations.
- May list services recommended for the student.

Documentation is confidential and will not be released or discussed with the student's permission. For more information, please see the Documentation page and Requirements for Documentation of Disabilities.

If the student needs, or expects to need, an accommodation not supported by their documentation, the student should discuss options for additional evaluation with DS Staff.

For more information regarding disability services, please see [here](#).

9 Statement of Diversity

Seattle University celebrates educational excellence achieved through diversity. In the meanwhile, diversity is a central topic in the field of public and nonprofit administration. In this class, we will frequently face opportunities and challenges of diversity, equity, and inclusion. We will have discussion of the normative and pragmatic value of diversity and learn how to embrace it.

Students are encouraged to honor the uniqueness of themselves and peers, and to appreciate the opportunities we have to learn from each other. In particular, students are welcomed to share their personal experience regarding diversity policies and management. Students have to demonstrate respect to others' opinions and refrain from personal attacks, hatred language, and personal judgments.

10 Policy on Religious Accommodations

Consistent with Washington State law (RCW 28.10.039), it is the policy of Seattle University to reasonably accommodate students who, due to the observance of religious holidays, expect to be absent or endure a significant hardship during certain days of their academic course or program.

A student seeking accommodations under this policy must provide a written request to the student's faculty member: (i) within fourteen (14) calendar days from the first day of classes of the academic quarter in which the student is requesting accommodations; and (ii) identifying the specific dates the student requests accommodations.

For more details about the policy on religious accommodations for students, please see [here](#).

Please see the course schedule at the next page.

11 Course Schedule

Week 01, 09/29 - 10/03: Course Overview: Defining Problems

Readings:

- Rochefort and Cobb (1993)
- Crosby (1991)
- Susskind and Thomas-Larmer (1999) - SKIM

To Do:

- Reach out to community partners/clients and sharpen problem statement

Week 02, 10/06 - 10/10: No Class Meeting; Schedule 1-on-1 Meeting

To Do:

- Schedule 1-on-1 meeting with instructor this week to discuss prospectus/worksheet.
- Complete Topic Worksheet and IRB Form
- Start literature review.

Week 03, 10/13 - 10/17: Conducting Literature Review

Readings:

- Aberbach and Rockman (2002)
- Rowley (2012)
- Reed et al. (2009) - SKIM

To Do:

- Begin reviewing the literature

Week 04, 10/20 - 10/24: No Class Meeting

To Do:

- Submit literature review draft

Week 05, 10/27 - 10/31: Interview Workshop

To Do:

- Bring your draft interview questions to the class
- Complete interview protocol, informed consent, and interviewee list after the class.

Week 06, 11/03 - 11/07: No Class Meeting*To Do:*

- Conduct interviews

Week 07, 11/10 - 11/14: No Class Meeting*To Do:*

- Conduct interviews

Week 08, 11/17 - 11/21: Interview Analysis and Coding*Readings:*

- Sample Interview Analyses on Canvas

To Do:

- Analyze interview data

Week 09, 11/24 - 11/28: No Class Meeting; Schedule 1-on-1 Meeting*To Do:*

- Schedule 1-on-1 meeting with instructor this week or next.
- Submit interview analysis.
- Last-minute check-in before presentations.

Dec 6, 2025: Presentation & Celebration