NYU | ROBERT F. WAGNER GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE

PADM-GP 2165

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES:
How Plans, Policies and Projects are Put into Action

Spring 2021

Wednesdays, 6:45 to 8:25PM
This course meets online

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Prerequisites:
Management & Leadership (all students), Introduction to Public Policy (PNP) or History and Theory of Planning (MUP). Students in other programs, departments, or schools should have comparable experience or background.

Undergraduates can enroll with the permission of the instructor.

Course Description:
This course examines how government agencies implement plans, policies, and projects under real-world constraints. Government agencies are some of the largest and most consequential organizations shaping contemporary life, especially for the poor. Their importance is even more evident now, as governments around the world continue to mishandle the pandemic, slide towards authoritarianism, and abuse the rights of vulnerable people.

Surprisingly, their importance is rarely matched by an equivalent amount of attention. Government agencies are under-examined and often misunderstood. Worse, they are frequently dismissed as broken beyond repair.

In contrast to this defeatist view, this course draws from a mix of theory and case studies to examine why government agencies (and their agents) do what they do. First and foremost, it aims to provide students with the concepts and theories they need to make sense of bureaucratic behavior. In turn, these insights will empower students to devise plans, policies, and projects that are more likely to be implemented.

This Course in Context:
This course sits at the intersection of multiple groups within Wagner, including the management, policy, and advocacy specializations, the urban planning program, and the

cross-cutting international specialization. It is recommended to all students who consider working for public sector organizations or who care about their ability to implement plans, policies, and projects, both in the US and abroad.

Students who are pursuing the management specialization should know that this course strives to complement the required management courses (i.e. Strategic Management; Human Resources; and Performance Measurement), as well as various electives. While the latter impart general management skills that can be useful across multiple settings, this course emphasizes those concepts and analytical skills that are tailored towards understanding government agencies.

Learning Objectives
At the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Recognize how public sector organizations face challenges that are intrinsically distinct from those faced by private or even not-for-profit organizations;
2. Identify some of the key variables that affect the behavior of frontline government agents;
3. Understand the main constraints and opportunities that managers face when trying to direct their subordinates;
4. Suggest changes to plans, policies and projects so they are more likely to be properly implemented.

Assignments and Evaluation
Grades will be based on a baseline reflection (10%), synchronous class participation (10%), four short assignments (20%), a midterm (20%), and a final paper (40%).

All written assignments should be double-spaced, with 1 inch margins, and 12 font.

- The baseline reflection (10%) consists of a short and informal document (about two pages) in which students examine their encounters with (or impressions of) government agencies and articulate their personal theories explaining why these particular agencies operate the way they do. The reflection is supposed to draw from personal experience and it does not require additional research. It is due before the first class.

- Class participation (10%) hinges on engagement in live classroom activities over the entire course.

- Short assignments (20%) consists of four short documents (about a page or two) that students have to submit before designated sessions and that will help structure the corresponding classroom discussion. These assignments will be graded on a pass-fail basis.

- The midterm (20%) consists of a longer document (about four to five pages) in which students re-examine the impressions of public sector organizations that they recorded in the baseline reflection, but now drawing from the materials covered in class. It is due before the eight session.

- The final paper (40%) consists of a research paper, personal reflection, OR a book review. It should be five to ten pages long, including title, bibliography and footnotes. It is due one week after the last class.

  ◦ The research paper examines a topic of the student's choice and that connects directly with the themes discussed in class. Ideally, the paper is anchored on a compelling, open-ended question or puzzle, which is then answered through empirical research.

  ◦ The reflection is a first-person essay in which students draws from the concepts and theories discussed in class to reassess their ideas about government agencies. It can be a revised and extended version of the baseline and midterm.

  ◦ The book review summarizes the argument put forth by the author(s) and examines how the concepts and theories examined in class can explain the facts described in the book (i.e. if the book was going to be assigned in the course, where would it go and what point would it illustrate?). The review can also go the opposite direction and draw from the book to refine, extend, or challenge the themes discussed in class (i.e. how should the course be modified so this book could be included, and why?). Students interested in writing the book review must submit the title of the book to the instructor for permission first.

Course Outline

1   Feb 3   Priors about public sector organizations – **baseline is due**

2   Feb 10 Can the government be reinvented?

3   Feb 17 How are government agencies different? – **short assn is due**

4   Feb 24   How are government agencies different? (part II)

5   Mar 3 Situational imperatives

6   Mar 10   Peer-pressure and professionalism

7   Mar 17   Discretion and innovation

8   Mar 24   Midterm discussion – **midterm is due**

9   Mar 31   Decision-making in complex organizations - **short assn is due**

10   Apr 7   Managerial authority and control

11   Apr 14 Inter-agency coordination – **short assn is due**

12   Apr 21 Controlling corruption

13   Apr 28   Designing for implementation – **short assn is due**

14   May 5 Wrap-up

     May 12   **Final assignment is due**

Course Plan

1 – Priors about public sector organizations

Everyone comes to a class like this with some theories on what government agencies (and their agents) do and why they do it. What are your theories and what are the experiences that led you to develop them?

<u>Read</u>:

There are no required readings. Students can read (or skim) the recommended articles below, which paint a rather bleak picture of public sector performance around the world:

> Chaudhury et al (2006) Missing in Action: Teacher and Health Worker Absence in Developing Countries, Journal of Economic Perspectives. Vol 20, No 1
>
> Das et al (2008) The Quality of Medical Advice in Low Income Countries. Journal of Economic Perspectives. Vol 22, No 2. Pp 93-114
>
> Bold et al (2017) Enrollment without Learning: Teacher Effort, Knowledge, and Skill in Primary Schools in Africa, Journal of Economic Perspectives. Vol 31, No 4

<u>Do:</u>

This class will revolve around students' <u>baseline reflection</u>. These reflections are supposed to be informal, personal and short (about two pages). They should describe a memorable encounter (or encounters) with any government agency and explain why this agency (and its agents) behaved the way they did. <u>The baseline reflection is due before class.</u>

2 – Can the government be reinvented?

There are a lot of enticing ideas out there on how the government can be reinvented: digital technologies, privatization, clear goals coupled with strong incentives, enlightened leadership. How good are these ideas?

<u>Read:</u>

Saxe, Shoshanna (2019), I'm an Engineer, and I'm Not Buying Into 'Smart' Cities, New York Times

Joy, Tara (2018) The Problem with Private Prisons, The Justice Policy Institute

Aviv, Rachel (2014) Wrong Answer. The New Yorker

Ruderman, Wendy (2012) Crime Report Manipulation Is Common Among New York Police, Study Finds, New York Times

Do:

There is no assignment.

3 – How are government agencies different? (part I: criteria & constraints)

This course is premised on the idea that government agencies are intrinsically different from private or even not-for-profit organizations. To help us see these differences, we will write our own case study of a peculiar event: the renovation of the Wollman Rink in New York City.

Read:

Kauffman, Herbert (1977) Red Tape: Its Origins, Uses, and Abuses, Brookings Classic, reissued 2015

Do:

The Wollman is a skating rink located in Central Park. In the late 1970s it fell in disrepair. The city government tried to fix it but somehow got entangled in its own red tape. As the government stumbled, an ambitious real estate developer took over the project and finished it promptly, with plenty of fanfare.

Please conduct research on some aspects of the Wollman Rink story and bring your findings to class. We are interested mostly on historical facts, including political, organizational, legal, budgetary, or engineering details. I'd rather you go narrow & deep into one aspect of the story than be shallow and wide. In class, we will collate the facts into a coherent story and try to draw lessons relevant to the course.

There are plenty of original news stories about this saga available online (ex: New York Times archives, other local media). Entrepreneurial students can probably find official city reports, budgets, relevant laws, contracts, and local news. I suppose some of the people are still around and might be open to an interview. Please submit your short assignment before class.

4 – How are government agencies different? (part II: goals)

In this session, we will continue examining how government agencies can be intrinsically different from private or not-for-profit organizations.

Read:

Thrush, Glenn (2018) Ben Carson of HUD on His Vexing Reign: Brain Surgery Was Easier Than This, New York Times

Duhigg, Charles (2017) For Trump's nominees, a billionaire's guide to running the government, New York Times

Gordon, Akka (2000) Taking Liberties

Blumenthal WM (1979) Candid Reflections of a Businessman in Washington, Fortune Magazine, Jan 29. Pp. 36-49.

Do:

There is no assignment.

5 – Situational imperatives

A large number of government agents are in direct contact with citizens, and this proximity can have a profound effect on what the agents do.

Read:

Zacka, Bernardo (2017) What I Learned When I Became a Bureaucrat, Salon

Zacka, Bernardo (2017) Why Bureaucrats Don't Seem to Care, The Atlantic

And choose one of the following:

> Moskos, Peter (2008) Under Arrest: Discretion in the Ghetto, chapter 6 in Cop in the Hood: My Year Policing Baltimore's Eastern District
>
> Conover, Ted (2001) Newjack, chapter 4 in Newjack: Guarding Sing-Sing

Do:

There is no assignment.

6 – Peer-pressure and professionalism

Government agents can be accountable not only to their superiors and citizens, but also to their peers and other stakeholders in their environment. How do these lateral pressures affect the behavior of government agencies?

Read:

Please choose one of the following:

Abers, Rebeca and Luciana Tatagiba (2016) Institutional Activism: Mobilizing For Women's Health From Inside The Brazilian Bureaucracy

Teaford, Jon (1984) The Professionals, chapter 6 in The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870–1900. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press

Pruitt, Charles (1979) People Doing What They Do Best: The Professional Engineers and NHTSA, Public Administration Review

Do:

There is no assignment.

7 – Discretion and innovation

So far, we have examined the different pressures that impinge on (and restrict) what government agents do. Still, under certain conditions, frontline government workers can retain their discretion and use it to pursue public goals.

Read:

Please choose one of the following:

Coslovsky (2016) Beyond Bureaucracy: How Prosecutors and Public Defenders Enforce Urban Planning Laws in São Paulo, Brazil, International Journal of Urban and Regional Research

Pires, Roberto (2013) The Organizational Basis of Rewarding Regulation: Contingency, Flexibility, and Accountability in the Brazilian Labor Inspectorate, Politics & Society

Coslovsky, Salo (2011) Relational regulation in the Brazilian Ministério Público: The organizational basis of regulatory responsiveness, Regulation & Governance, 5(1), pp.70-89

Susan S. Silbey (1981) Case Processing: Consumer Protection in an Attorney General's Office, Law & Society Review, Vol. 15, No. 3/4, pp. 849-882

Do:

There is no assignment.

8 – Midterm Review

This is the midpoint of the course. We will take this opportunity to take stock of our baseline and how far we have progressed.

<u>Read:</u>

There are no required readings

<u>Do:</u>

Write a 4-5 page document revisiting and reassessing your baseline reflection (the document you wrote before the first class), but this time you should explicitly draw from the concepts and theories we discussed in class. <u>The midterm is due before class.</u>

9 – Decision-making in complex organizations

There is a fairly widespread belief that most individuals act rationally, at least most of the time. Similarly, organizations are supposed to structure and channel rational action. What happens to this belief when we put it to the test?

<u>Read:</u>

Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, Michael Woolcock (2017) Looking Like a State: The Seduction of Isomorphic Mimicry, chapter 2 in Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action, Oxford University Press

<u>Do:</u>

Business people are supposed to be rational in their pursuit of profit. Prior to class, please identify someone who works in a business that sells multiple products or services (ex: a coffee shop, food truck, bodega, fruit stand, nail salon, barber shop, etc) and ask them how the firm determines the price for the different goods (or services). In class, we will compare notes and try to identify patterns in the responses. <u>The assignment is due before class.</u>

10 – Managerial authority and control

Different types of government agencies demand (or allow) different approaches to leadership.

<u>Read:</u>

Wilson, James Q. (1989). Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It. Basic Books: Harper Collins Publishers. (Preface; Chapter on Compliance)

LaPorte et al (1991) Working in Practice But Not in Theory: Theoretical Challenges of "High-Reliability Organizations, JPART V.1 No.1

Do:

There is no assignment.

11 – Inter-agency coordination

Many of the problems that citizens would like the government to solve – poverty, homelessness, crime, failing schools, inefficient healthcare, climate change – can rarely be tackled by an agency alone. Rather, they require two or more agencies to coordinate. Need aside, this is easier said than done. What explains this reluctance to coordinate, and why sometimes agencies do work together?

Read:

Serrano, Rodrigo (2003) What Makes Inter-Agency Coordination Work? Insights from the literature and two case studies

Busuioc (2016) Friend or Foe? Inter-Agency Cooperation, Organizational Reputation, and Turf

Do:

In class, we will work in small teams to design a simulation of inter-agency coordination. To prepare for this hackathon-like experience, students should prepare a short document outlining how such a simulation might work. No one is expected to have a polished product, but everyone should come to class with some proposals on what such a simulation might look like. The assignment is due before class.

12 – Controlling Corruption

Corruption is a key problem that affect government agencies around the world. How can it be controlled?

Read:

Hirschman, Albert (1965) Obstacles to Development: A Classification and a Quasi-Vanishing Act, Economic Development and Cultural Change 13: 4, 385-393

Darden, Keith (2008) The Integrity of Corrupt States: Graft as an Informal State Institution, Politics & Society. vol. 36 no. 1 pp. 35-59

Piattoni, Simona (1998) Virtuous Clientelism? The Southern Question Resolved

Bunker, Stephen (1995) Collaboration, Competition and Corruption in Two Colonization Projects, in Underdeveloping the Amazon, University of Illinois Press

Do:

No assignment.

13 – Designing for implementation

In 1973, Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildawsky published "*Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland …"* To this day, and as the subtitle suggests, planners and policy-makers' "great expectations" are often dashed in the field. But what if planners and policy-makers knew what you now know, how would they modify their plans, policy, and projects so they are more likely to be properly implemented?

Read:

Choose one of the following:

Lamb and Muller (1982) Control, Accountability, and Incentives in a Successful Development Institution: The Kenya Tea Development Authority, World Bank

Israel, Arturo (1987) Institutional Development: Incentives to Performance, World Bank

Tendler, Judith (1993) New Lessons from Old Projects, World Bank

Tendler, Judith (1993) Tales of dissemination in small-farm agriculture: Lessons for institution builders, World Development

Do:

Please write a short document distilling some of the practical lessons for implementable initiatives, as discussed in the reading you chose. <u>The assignment is due before class</u>.

14 – Wrap-up

This is the last session of the course. Please come to class prepared to reflect over the ideas we discussed throughout the entire course.

<u>Read:</u>

No required readings.

<u>Do:</u>

No assignments.