Course description and objectives

This class focuses on classical and contemporary perspectives in the sociology of organizations, with specific application to problems and policy issues in education. It is a theoretical seminar designed for doctoral students who plan to use organizational sociology to study forces that affect organizations, organizational design, as well as the outcomes of and change processes in organizations. Topics include bureaucracy, neo-institutionalism, population ecology, resource dependence, community/societal effects on organizations, power processes, organizational culture and control, structural and functional views of organizations, organizational effectiveness, consequences and pathologies, and innovation and change.

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

1. understand key areas of inquiry and salient debates in research on organizations;
2. apply organizational sociology to study dynamics in organizations, organizational environments, and the interaction of organizations with their environments; and,
3. define a personal interest on a particular topic or two within organizational research in the field of education, or in another field if you are not a SoE student.

Course Requirements

Reading and discussion. This is a theory-intensive seminar, involving a considerable amount of reading. Don’t be afraid! We’ll discuss a technique called “smart reading.” You must do your best to complete the required readings for each session. The quality of the discussion will depend on your preparation and participation. For each session, two people will take primary responsibility to review the readings in class and structure a discussion. Students who miss three sessions will be at risk of limiting their grade to a maximum of “B.” Those missing four or more sessions may have to withdraw from the course.

Blackboard postings. For each session, you need to respond to the readings on blackboard prior to class. These are short responses. For each session, blackboard postings should involve two parts. First, propose an idea that you’d like the class to debate on. Think about this idea in
relation to the readings. It can be anything—a concept that you agree or disagree with, an issue on how one or more concepts in the readings may or may not apply to your work situation, something you saw in the news that relates to the readings, an idea from the readings that you’d like to use in your research, etc. Share this idea and pose a question for a debate. Second, make sure you respond to at least a few others’ postings on blackboard.

Research paper. The key requirement for this course is a term paper, where you pose a question and develop an argument, using organizational sociology and other areas if necessary. The question can be related to your working research interests, but your argumentation must incorporate—though not necessarily be limited to—theoretical knowledge on organizations. Use Times New Roman 12 font and set margins at 1 inch. Double-spaced. Approximately 25 pages, excluding appendices and references. There are several steps in working on this paper:

(1) A brief description of the topic and approach is due on January 26. This is limited to 300 words or so. Explain the topic and why it is important to you. Ask a research question and specify which area of organizational sociology that is most relevant.

(2) A progress report is due on February 23. This is limited to 1 page. Specify the topic, narrow down the research question, and discuss the relevant scholarly approach from organizational sociology. Which literature(s) will you be using? How and why?

(3) The term paper outline is due on March 16. This outline should be about 2 pages. Only bullet-points please. The outline should include the question, the argument, and the list of ideas that’ll help make the paper a “paper” (examples will be provided).

(4) Revised outline is due on April 13. This should highlight the changes you have made since the previous outline.

(5) The final paper and presentation are due on May 4.

Grading

Class participation 35%
Blackboard postings 25%
Term paper 40%

Required books


* Copies of all other readings for the class, both required and supplemental, will be provided either by the instructor or KU’s blackboard site.
Schedule

1. January 26: Bureaucracy

This session addresses the notion of bureaucracy. It reviews the emergence of bureaucracy as an organizational model in the modern era, the basic characteristics of bureaucracy (particularly in public sector organizations), and the challenges and opportunities associated with bureaucracy.

 Required readings:


 Supplemental readings:


 Due:

 Short description of “working” paper topic (300 words).
2. February 2: Institutionalism

The “new” institutionalism argues that practices, policies, job categories, and so on are construed and diffuse by a process of subtle and seemingly unintended rationalization in organizational environments (fields). Such environmental processes determine how organizations should be structured and how they should operate. Neo-institutionalism addresses not only the stability of organizational practices, but also the process by which they are created and destroyed.

Required readings:


Supplemental readings:


3. February 9: Population ecology

The population ecology view addresses the creation, diversification, and death of organizations and organizational forms. This is essentially a biological perspective focusing on changing resource availabilities in the “ecology” of organizations, the adaption of organizational forms to resource niches, and the process of variation-selection-retention. Unlike institutionalism, which explains how “organizations look similar” due to external pressures, the ecology view explains how “organizations vary and thus look dissimilar” due to evolutionary differentiation.

Required readings:


Supplemental readings:

4. February 16: Resource dependence

All organizations depend on their environment for resources and legitimacy. The resource dependence view addresses organizational efforts in managing dependencies on other organizations, and the efforts of those other organizations to control organizations that depend on them for resources. This is essentially a political perspective that reveals organizational strategies and patterns of symmetric and asymmetric dependence in environments.

Required readings:


Supplemental readings:


5. February 23: Economic view

Make or buy? Centralize or localize? Uniformity or competition? Equity or innovation? These are the central questions involved in the longstanding debate on the virtues of markets and hierarchies. The theory of public choice in neo-liberal economics and the theory of transaction costs in organizational research address markets and hierarchies as alternative forms of organization.

Required readings:


Supplemental readings:


Due:

Progress report on paper topic (1 page).
6. March 2: Community, society and organizations

How does society affect the schools? How do we know “society” when we see it? Is it the parents, the district, the state, the neighborhood,…, what is it? Where is it? And how do organizations respond to it? The societal view is a classic approach in organizational sociology that goes back to Max Weber’s foundational work on the relationship between bureaucracy and rationalization. It still applies!

Required readings:

Supplemental readings:
7. March 9: Power and politics

Few structures, if any, are independent of the effects of power and politics. How do you know “power” when you see it? How do you know “politics” when you see it? What are the basic forms of power? Where do interests and preferences come from? Such issues pertain to dynamics both in organizations and in environments. How do we know power when we see it?

Required readings:


Suggested readings:

8. March 16: Control, culture and agency

A central implication of formal organizations is the control of behavior. Some argue that bureaucracy is all about compliance. But, full compliance may be counterproductive, demotivating, and may undermine innovation. Could there be a genuine balance of autonomy and control? Are there task areas where one is more important than the other?

Required readings:


Supplemental readings:


Due:

Term paper outline (2-3 pages).
March 23: Spring break, no class

9. March 30: Structure and function
Structure (formal arrangements) and function (actual processes and operations) are two fundamental components of arrangements in organizations and organizational environments. Structure and function converge and diverge at varying degrees. Such patterns have different consequences depending on conditions.

Required readings:

Supplemental readings:
10. April 6: Goals and effectiveness

What is the best way to evaluate the outcomes of educational organizations? Given that schools have multiple and often ambiguous objectives, what is the best way to specify the criteria for effectiveness? Which forces influence the formation and transformation of goals? What is the relationship between goals and organizational legitimacy?

Required readings:


Suggested readings:


11. April 13: Organizational consequences—equities and pathologies

Most organizations have both positive and negative consequences. This is independent of issues of effectiveness and goals. An organization may be effective but may also have pathological consequences. It may also be ineffective, but still have positive outcomes. The schools are a case in point; they have varying consequences for different groups.

Required readings:


Suggested readings:


Due:

Revised term paper outline (2-3 pages).
12. April 20: Basic views on change

Organizational change is a pervasive topic. For most organizations change is difficult because it involves undoing established routines, behavioral patterns, and hierarchical arrangements. But then, not all changes may be good, at least not for everyone. In addition, most change depends on opportunities, constraints, incentives and disincentives that are both internal and external.

**Required readings:**


**Suggested readings:**


**13. April 27: Systemic change and non-change**

Change is not only associated with organizations, but also with the ecology and environment of organizations. Some changes can only occur if the environment changes. Also, not all changes in the environment good, at least not for everyone. So, organizational responses may vary.

**Required readings:**


**Suggested readings:**


**Due next week:**

Final paper and power point presentation.
14. May 4: Final paper presentations

Please bring hardcopies of your slides to hand out. Suggested (not mandated) format for presentation:

- Title, research question, argument (1 slide)
- Topical relevance: why should we care about your paper? (3-4 slides)
- Application of organizational sociology to your research problem. Which perspective(s) apply and how? Explain this by presenting a thorough literature review. In what ways are you proposing to test the theories you apply? In what ways are you proposing to extend the theories you apply, if at all? (5-6 slides)
- Discuss how you would go about studying the topic and testing your argument. (1-2 slides)
- Conclusions. State your conclusions and explain how they correspond to the research question you posit (2 slides).
- Q&A.