This course is designed to help introduce you to the sociological study of institutions. Many scholars contend that the most interesting questions in sociology today revolve around how institutions emerge, function, and influence individuals and other institutions. In addition to being of significant interest in and of themselves, developing a solid understanding of institutional dynamics should enrich your understanding of a wide variety of social phenomena.

The course is explicitly organized around three dominant schools of institutional thought: institutions as incentive systems (originally dominant in economics); institutions as cultures (originally dominant in organizational studies); and historical institutionalism (originally dominant in political science). While each of these schools continues to have adherents, boundaries between them are blurring. One goal of the course is for you to become familiar with these the major tenets of these schools of thought, and to understand their theoretical and empirical limitations.

The course is implicitly organized around a small set of key theoretical questions: what do we mean by institutions, where do they come from, what keeps them going, and how do they spread, change, and collapse? As we proceed, we will consider major theoretical models that have been used to account for these features of institutions. A second goal of the course is for you to be able to consider how each of the schools of thought addresses these “life-course of institutions” questions.

In spite of these two organizing principles, institutions are used in research investigating an extraordinarily broad range of substantive questions. This poses a challenge for a general course on institutional analysis, since few students (or even advanced scholars) have the substantive expertise necessary to make full sense of arguments and evidence from so many sub-fields. While one strategy would be to concentrate all the readings around a particular question, instead I have tried to select readings that give you a sense of the breadth of institutional analysis without delving too deeply into any particular problem. However, I encourage you to begin to develop the substantive expertise necessary to advance your own research agenda, and I hope that the readings in this course will give you some theoretical and analytic tools to work with.

Finally, I also hope that this course will provide a context for ambitious empirical work that uses some type of evidence to explore interesting questions involving institutions or institutional effects. We’ll talk about both data and methods throughout, with an emphasis on how to actually do research on institutions. My hope is that the course will be a setting in
which you are able to make substantial progress on developing an existing idea, with an eye toward writing a publishable paper.

**Course Requirements:**

Two ways to engage with complex material are to write and to discuss. You will have ample opportunities to do both in this seminar.

- I expect you to write short memos each week’s readings, and to come to seminar prepared with questions and comments. I will read and give you comments on up to three of these memos during the quarter, provided they are turned into me before class on the day we discuss a set of readings. You are encouraged to share any or all of your memos with others in the seminar, either before or after class; I have found that this practice often helps identify areas of confusion and important lines of criticism.

- Each week 1-2 students will be selected to lead our discussion. Discussion leaders should provide an overview of the readings and pose a set of questions for discussion by the rest of the group. Bringing in additional material, reanalyzing data, and connecting to issues raised previously all tend to enhance your understanding of the readings, the quality of the discussion, and my opinion of your performance.

- In terms of formal written work, the primary requirement for the course is to make substantial progress on an empirical research project that addresses a question that falls under the broad rubric of institutional analysis. It is my belief that substantial progress stems from regular writing on a set of related topics. My expectation is that you will turn in, at regular intervals, at least three longish-memos (5-8 pages) documenting your progress on your project. These memos should contain some evidence of how your thinking about your research is affected by the course, though they do not need to be explicitly driven by the course material. At least one of these memos should address how you intend to use empirical evidence in your project. At the end of the quarter, you will integrate these memos into a single, revised working paper.

- If you are already working on a project, please provide me with a document describing your progress-to-date as well as a short outline of questions, issues, and problems that you would like to address during the quarter. These are due by April 6, and do not count as one of your three project-related memos.

- If you do not already have a relevant project underway, during the course of this quarter you could:
  1. Identify and describe a research question that interests you;
  2. Consider appropriate theoretical or analytic ways to address your question;
  3. Begin securing appropriate empirical evidence relevant to your question.
I am very supportive of collaborative research, and encourage you to develop research projects together. Often this makes it possible to collect more data or to undertake more ambitious study designs. Please talk to me if you would like to work in a small group.

These memos are due on the following dates (you are welcome to turn them in earlier):

April 17
May 8
May 22

Your final integrated working paper is due by June 5.

Weekly Outline

March 30  Introduction and Orientation

April 6  What are institutions? Some preliminary answers


April 13  The institutional view from Economics: efficiency

April 20  Origins and Decline: Competition and efficiency
N.B. I will be at a conference this week, and we may have to reschedule this class meeting.

April 27  The institutional view from Sociology: scripts and isomorphism

May 4  Diffusion: Rise and change of institutions


May 11  
**The Institutional view from Political Science: historical contingency**


May 18  
**Reproduccion: path dependency and inertia**


May 25  
**Blurred Boundaries in Institutional Analysis**


**June 1**  
**Wrap-up and Discussion of Future Directions in IA**