I am excited to be working with you in this semester’s Sociology Capstone Seminar. This inaugural version of the course has several interrelated goals. First, and most generally, it provides an opportunity for graduating Sociology majors to engage in a shared capstone experience. While the flexibility and lack of prerequisites in the Sociology major has a number of benefits, one of its downsides is that nearly every department offering attracts a wide range of students, from advanced majors to those with zero prior experience with Sociology, making it difficult to assume any shared prior foundation. We hope that the opportunity to engage with fellow senior majors throughout the semester will provide occasion for different kinds of conversations about sociological phenomena. Second, this course emphasizes the production as well as consumption of sociological knowledge, by focusing on practices and processes associated with social science research. This research focus will emerge not through the pursuit of a semester-long independent research project (the goal of many capstone experiences at other universities, though one that can be fulfilled in other ways in our department), but rather through a series of “under-the-hood” looks at the ways in which sociologists conduct and make use of their research. As such, our discussions and assignments will complement research experiences associated with Senior Honors Theses, Senior Research Papers, or the many independent and collaborative initiatives available across campus, while orienting us to the ways in which practicing sociologists engage with their craft. Third, throughout the semester we will situate these general approaches within the often-pathbreaking approaches of the Sociology department here at Brandeis. Understanding our department’s history will provide valuable context for how and why you have been exposed to particular sociological viewpoints during your time on campus, and allow you to take fuller advantage of those as you advance in your life and career. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this Capstone Seminar will emphasize the relevance of sociological approaches and perspectives for interpreting media accounts of current events, participating in public exchanges over policies and programs, and mobilizing effective responses to issues of concern. Much of our attention this semester thus will be devoted to the various ways in which a “sociological imagination” might creatively and effectively be deployed to these broader civic ends.
Readings

The following books are required for this course:

- *Klansville, U.S.A.: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era Ku Klux Klan*, by David Cunningham
- *Handbook of Public Sociology*, edited by Vincent Jeffries

Additionally, these core texts will be supplemented by a set of chapters, articles, and essays posted on Latte.

Assignments and Grading

Response paper 15%

Early in the semester, we will consider various approaches associated with Chicago School traditions in Sociology. As part of that examination, we will read two sets of “paired studies,” intended to illustrate how similar topics have been examined differently (or not) at different stages of the discipline’s evolution. Following our reading of one or the other of these paired studies, you will submit a response of no more than four double-spaced pages comparing the focus, strengths, and weaknesses of the studies.

Weekly media posts 5%

Each week between January 31st and April 18th, you will locate and post a link to a media account of a story that speaks to an issue that you see as sociologically interesting or otherwise important. While connecting with a wide variety of media sources is encouraged, our core source will be the *New York Times* (nytimes.com). You should plan to at least scan headlines from the *Times* on most days of the week, and at least half of your posted weekly links should come from this source. While you aren’t required to formally reflect on your post in writing, we will select 1-2 of these posts to discuss in class each week, so please be prepared to briefly summarize the basic thrust of your selected story as well as your take on why it is sociologically relevant and interesting. As a default, you will post these weekly links to a Latte forum, though I’m happy to consider other less clunky ways to share our sources. Note that your links should be posted no later than 8am each Thursday.

Class presentation: sociological take on current events 10%

Early in the semester, each of you will sign up for a presentation slot. On your assigned day, you will introduce an event or issue taken from the previous month’s news, providing descriptive background as well as a sociologically-informed analysis – i.e. a discussion that demonstrates
how we might apply an established body of theory or line of prior empirical findings and frameworks to the issue, and/or advances at least one hypothesis informed by prior research to understand or predict the outcomes of your chosen event/issue. You should prepare a ten-minute presentation, which will be followed by an additional 10-15 minutes of open discussion. Note that it is fine if your event/issue is drawn from one of your – or your classmates’ – weekly media posts.

Op-ed essay

This written assignment is designed to be paired with your in-class presentation, and will be due at the start of the class period in which you present. In 600-800 words, you should introduce and support a position on the event or issue at the center of your presentation. The format of this essay should roughly follow the op-ed models that we will discuss in class, and advance a clear, empirically-supported position supported by a sociologically-informed analysis intended to convince readers of the validity and utility of your argument.

Position paper

[Note: while the formal paper described here is the default format for this final assignment, I am happy to have you propose and develop ideas for alternative products of similar scope.] Throughout the semester, you will select and pursue an extended examination of a topic of your choice. The goal of this related assignment is to produce a 10-12 page “position paper” that draws on existing social science research to inform a position on a social problem or issue of use to a broader audience. The motivating goal of this project is to demonstrate your ability to distill and “translate” research findings to effectively construct a theoretically- and empirically-informed position that might guide public efforts. As such, the assignment will draw on and apply our semester-long consideration in class of how academic research can be attentive to, and useful for, varied audiences.

Participation

As this capstone seminar has been designed specifically to provide a space for us to collectively engage with how sociology might inform public issues and debates, much of the benefit of this course will come through in-class discussion. I thus expect each of you to take core components of the course seriously, and to keep up with reading assignments and come to class prepared to discuss issues you found interesting or want clarified. While our small seminar-style arrangement should provide plenty of opportunities for in-class participation, we will also value broader contributions, including questions and/or suggested ideas, possible topics of discussion, and connections between class topics and current events made outside of class (i.e. before or after class, in office hours, or over email).

Accommodation policy

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me as early as possible in the semester.
**Preliminary schedule**

**Week 1 (17 January): Introductions**
- Orientations to Sociology, setting goals and making plans
- Introduction to applied Sociology: opening alumni visit

**Week 2 (24 January): “The Promise” of engaged Sociology**
Readings and activities (read in the order listed here):
- C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (excerpts on Latte)
- James Miller, *Democracy in the Streets* (Chs. 4-5 on Latte)
- Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement* (link on Latte)
- Robert S. Lynd, *Knowledge for What?: The Place of Social Science in American Culture* (excerpts on Latte)

**Weeks 3-5 (31 January-14 February): Assessing the Chicago School(s) and their Legacies**
Readings and activities:
  AND “Pragmatic Sociology and the Public Sphere” (both on Latte)
- Paired studies I:
  b) Sudhir Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day* (excerpts on Latte)
  AND select one of his related articles:
   - “Community-based Interventions into Street Gang Activity,” in the *Journal of Community Psychology* (Latte)
   - “The Social Organization of Street Gang Activity in an Urban Ghetto,” in the *American Journal of Sociology* (Latte)
- Paired studies II:
- Engaged Sociology:
  e) Wendy Cadge on communicating research through op-eds (available at: www.wendycadge.com/in-the-media.php)
   - “Protestant churches shift slowly toward gay equality” (with Laura Olson), in the *Boston Globe*
   - “Different health care reform: doctors trained to deal with patients about faith,” in the *Christian Science Monitor*
  f) current event presentation example

**Week 6 (21 February):** No class (first “spring” break)
Week 7 (28 February): *Chicago Schools, con’t.*

Readings and activities:
- Brown-Saracino book, con’t.
- Brown-Saracino colloquium on community sociology (3:30 in Pearlman Lounge)
- Current event presentations begin

Weeks 8-9 (7-14 March): *Assessing the history and legacy of Brandeis Sociology*

Resources, readings and activities (*to be finalized per our collective interests*):
- Shulamit Reinharz, “The Chicago School of Sociology and the Founding of the Graduate Program in Sociology at Brandeis University: A Case Study in Cultural Diffusion”
- Barrie Thorne, “Brandeis as a Generative Institution: Critical Perspectives, Marginality, and Feminism”
- Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays With Morrie* (excerpts)
- Brandeis University Archives: Gordon Fellman and Kurt Wolff papers
  Compendium of past department syllabi
- Doug Harper colloquium on visual sociology (3/14 at 3:30 in Pearlman Lounge)

Week 10 (21 March): “Under-the-hood” perspectives on current research by Brandeis sociologists

Reading:
- David Cunningham, *Klansville, U.S.A.: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era Ku Klux Klan*

Week 11 (28 March): No class (second spring break)

Weeks 12-13 (4-11 April): “Under-the-hood” research, con’t.

Proposed guests:
- Sara Shostak, *Exposed Science* (excerpts)
- Graduate student presentations from in-progress dissertations

Weeks 14-15 (18-25 April): *Public Sociology*

Resources and readings:
- Michael Burawoy, “For Public Sociology” (2004 ASA Presidential Address)
- Douglas Hartmann, “Public Sociology, From the Editor’s Desk” (audio recording of 2009 department colloquium presentation)
- selected articles from the *Handbook of Public Sociology* and online resources (to be tailored to our collective interests)