Social research affects our lives in many ways: as workers, consumers, activists, and citizens. Media reports of social research influence public attitudes about people, institutions, businesses, social problems, policies, and programs. Researchers make myriad decisions about the questions they ask, the data they collect, their methods of analysis, and the audiences that hear about their findings. Recognizing these decisions—and considering their alternatives and implications—you can participate in the process by which studies inform policy, action, and debate. Understanding the ways in which studies are designed, implemented, and reported therefore provides a means by which you can become a critical consumer of research.

In this course, we will read published studies with the aim of identifying the research methods on which the conclusions rest. Making researchers’ questions and strategies our central focus, we will, in a sense, work backwards, analyzing sources of data, the fit between evidence and analysis, and the decision-making process that led to the findings. A central goal of this course is to demystify social research. Another goal is to develop an analytic vocabulary with which to critique social inquiry. A third goal is to apply that analysis to the process of research design. Course readings will therefore provide a range of models for designing your own research project on a topic of your choice.

With only a few exceptions, the examples each week will address some aspect of the work-family nexus—that is, the connection between paid employment and family needs. An understanding of this work-family link has long been a source of conflict, accommodation, and change, and it informs such policies as welfare reform and family and medical leave. Throughout the semester, then, we will discuss the implications of the studies we read, both for social policies and organizational practices that affect individual choices and actions. Yet another goal for the course, therefore, is to consider the application of research in a variety of contexts.

**Course Requirements/Competency Criteria:**

Although the course readings encompass a broad theme, social research is far broader and encompasses a vast range of subjects, any of which may be appropriate for completing the course and competency. Individual assignments may draw from any number of areas.

Completion of three written assignments and one class presentation will meet the criteria for the competency Social Research: Consumption and Design. I will distribute details about the first two written assignments early in the semester and about the third written assignment in the middle of the semester. Class presentations will cover all or part of each week’s readings and will be spread over the course. Writing assignments may be used to meet the criteria for the Level III portfolio.

You are welcome to turn in written work at any time during the semester, and you are always welcome to submit drafts for review and revision. I accept both electronic and hard-copy submissions (typed or word-processed), which you may either leave in my mailbox or slip under my office door. To avoid a progress report, you will need to submit all assignments on or before the date established by the College of Public and Community Service.

You are also welcome to contact me between class sessions and during times outside office hours. If you are working on an assignment or preparing a presentation, please do not hesitate if you have a question. You need not hesitate anyway. I am at UMass on Tuesdays and sometimes on Wednesdays or Thursdays, but my schedule does vary. I check my voice mail and e-mail at
least once a day. If you need to reach me in a hurry, feel free to try both number phone and e-mail.

I strongly urge you to attend class each week and to let me know if, for some reason, you can’t attend. In class, we will cover concepts that apply to social research and will illustrate the phases of research design and implementation that are essential for completing the competency. You can expect a number of handouts, class discussions, and class exercises that will explain and model this process. The course readings alone are unlikely to be sufficient explanation.

**Course Outline:**

**Week 1: January 27**

Course intro and overview

**Survey Research, With and Without Additional Observations and Interviews**

**Week 2: February 3**


**Week 3: February 10**


**Week 4: February 17**


**Week 5: February 24**


**Research Ethics and Ethical Controversies**

**Week 6: March 2**


Code of Ethics of the American Sociological Association

**Week 7: March 9**

Video: *Juggling Work and Family*


**Social Experiments and Action Research**

**Week 8: March 23**


**Week 9: March 30**


**Qualitative Research: In-Depth Interviews and Participant Observation**

**Week 10: April 6**


**Week 11: April 13**


**Week 12: April 20**


**Week 13: April 27**


**Week 14: May 4**


**Week 15: May 11**
In-Class Presentations:
Presentations are a means for opening discussion on an assigned portion of the course readings. The purpose is not merely to summarize what the readings said but to analyze the researchers’ questions, strategies, and arguments. Presentations can—and should—raise questions about these issues. If you don’t understand some part of the research you’re presenting, feel free to flag questions that you think need clarification in class.

To facilitate discussion, please outline your presentation with the main points you wish you make, and please bring enough copies for everyone in the class to review. Consider the following questions in your presentation.

1. What appears to be the central question or hypothesis that guides or concerns this study?
2. What assumptions do you suspect this researcher brought to this study?
3. What are the sources of data? What alternative or additional sources of data might have been useful? Would you characterize the study as predominately quantitative, qualitative, or mixed?
4. How did the researcher analyze the data? What questions about the analysis does this study raise?
5. What relationships (if any) did the researcher need to establish in the course of the study? What does the study tell you about these relationships? What questions does the study raise about them?
6. What ethical issues might this researcher have had to address?
7. What concepts do you find in this analysis? In what ways are these concepts significant?
8. What questions for further research does this study raise?
9. What policies or interventions does this study suggest, either explicitly or implicitly?