Internship in Local Politics

Eligibility:

Senior Political Science majors only. All internships must be approved before work can begin.

Course Description:

Your internship experience in the (approved) organization of your choice serves as the basis for the work you will do in this class. However, the actual course readings and assignments are designed to encourage you to reflect on this experience not on its own terms, but critically.

The point of departure of the course – and perhaps even of your desire to “get involved in politics” by means of an internship – is that we live in a society that is mired in a profound crisis. This crisis, which has long roots in the reorganization of the world economy since the 1970s, was punctuated by the economic and political events of 2008, and should now be painfully apparent to all working people in this country and abroad. The crisis is characterized by a series of socioeconomic problems – extreme levels of social inequality, chronic unemployment, crumbling infrastructure, the dismantling of public education, etc. But it has also exposed the troubling inadequacy of both the political establishment (its parties, its institutions) and the constellation of organizations usually designated as “civil society.” The past few years in particular have arguably demonstrated that the massive and widespread aspirations for “change” among broad layers of the American people are systematically frustrated by the peculiar workings of the political system and by a set of entrenched social relations that seem impervious to democratic control.

In this course you will read and discuss material that explains the nature and roots of the crisis, as well as many of its manifestations. In particular, you will be asked to focus on the problem of social inequality, in its implications in the field of politics. Your task will be to reflect on and write about your internship experience not on its own terms, but through this particular prism. To put this more concretely, although the organization you will work for will not doubt have its own ideas about what it does and the proper context in which its activities must be understood, the course will ask you to subject them to critical scrutiny from the specific standpoint explained above.

Course Material:

Please purchase the correct edition of the following books, which are available at the campus bookstores:

David North, The Crisis of American Democracy (Mehring)
Paul Pierson and Jacob Hacker, Winner-Take-All Politics (Simon & Schuster)
Course Requirements - attendance:

Attendance is required only for specific class sessions. These are listed in the course outline at the end of this syllabus. For this reason, your internship schedule cannot conflict with the class schedule. The purpose of the class meetings will be to introduce the course and its requirements, to examine the question of social inequality, and to discuss the two assigned texts in preparation for your written assignments. Failure to attend these class sessions will result in severe grade penalties for the course. The rest of the ordinarily scheduled class time can be used for additional office hours, so you will have every opportunity to meet with me concerning your internship experience and the written assignments for the course. The first hour (4:00-5:00pm) of the class time on those days when there is no actual class meeting can be used as an additional office hour. If you wish to do so, make sure to send me an email to schedule an appointment in advance.

Course Requirements – internship:

In order to complete the course you will need to secure an internship that is acceptable based on the course criteria as determined by the instructor. Eighty hours of internship field work are required in order to complete the course. Frequently, students choose internships that are closely related to their career interests. Some examples of previous internships include offices of interest groups, political campaign firms, government agencies, the judicial system or offices of elected officials at the local, state and federal levels. Internships should be done off-campus in San Diego County and should be done for organizations that have a paid staff member in an office (in contrast to volunteers who work from their homes). This is to your advantage because it increases your chances of getting a supervisor who can send in your grade forms on time and provide you with sufficient guidance so that you can have a valuable learning experience. Please note that our department will formally deal with your supervisor about your grade via fax only. Accordingly, make sure that the organization and the supervisor can send and receive a fax or are willing to make the necessary accommodations to do so.

Some students register for the course while already having secured an internship opportunity with a definite organization. In this case, all that needs to be done is for the instructor to verify that the internship is appropriate for the course. In other cases, students will register for the course without a specific prospect. Although the instructor and the department will do what they can to help you secure an acceptable internship, ultimately it is your responsibility to find one. The department keeps a file of all the internship opportunities that have been offered to us in the past, organized by subject matter and also by semester. You will find this information in binder notebooks located in the main Political Science office (Adams Humanities 4142). In addition, the instructor will post the most recent internship opportunities we received on the course Blackboard page under “Course Documents.” If you do not have any specific leads to secure an internship, this is the best place to start. However, you should be prepared to look for internship opportunities on your own as well.

Before you look for and choose an internship, please review the FAQ (frequently asked questions) on the Political Science department website under POL S 495 local internships: http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~polsciwb/intern/local_internships.htm#q2

Course Requirements – forms:

You will be required to complete three important forms for the course.
First, the university requires you sign a “waiver and release of liability” form. This will be done on the first day of class. If you miss that day be sure to come see me during office hours to sign the form. You cannot participate in or complete the course without signing this form.

Second, you will need to fill in a “field work application” form, which will also be handed out on the first day of class. Once you have a prospective internship, you will turn in the form to me in class or during office hours. The form must be completely filled out, including your signature and that of your prospective internship supervisor, and must include two attached documents. The first is a letter from your prospective supervisor briefly explaining your specific duties as an intern. The second is a document from the prospective internship organization describing its general nature. For example, this document could be a printout of the “About Us” section of the organization’s website.

I will review this information to determine if the internship you found is acceptable for the course. The form must be turned in as soon as possible, and ideally before September 9, which is the last day when you can drop the course. The hard deadline to secure an acceptable internship and turn in the form is Thursday, September 19. If you do not have an approved internship and fail to turn in the completed form by September 19 you will receive an automatic “F” for the course. Be advised that, given the nature of the course, there is no guarantee you will be able to find an appropriate internship by September 19. You could therefore be in the unfortunate situation of not being able to drop the course while not being able to complete it either. Should you have difficulties in securing an internship, the only way to avoid this situation is to drop the course by the September 9 deadline.

Finally, you will need to fill in a “department field work grade” form, which will also be handed out to you on the first day of class. The bottom part of this form will be used by your internship supervisor to turn in your grades at the end of your field work, as explained below. You will have to fill in the top part of the form. This includes your information, as well as information concerning your internship’s organization and supervisor. You should attach to the form a business card from your field work supervisor and turn it in to the course instructor along with the completed “field work application form.”

The “field work application” and “department field work grade” forms are posted on the course Blackboard page under “Course Documents”

Course Requirements – essays:

Two essays are required for this course. In both cases, please note that since you could intern in many different types of organizations and institutions, it would be a good idea to consult with the instructor before you begin to work on the essays. Each situation will be different, and in each case the way in which you complete the assignments will have to be tailored to the peculiarities of your internship.

The first is a three-page essay due in class on October 8. The purpose of this essay is to examine the history and nature of the organization you work with, and to familiarize yourself with some of the criticism that has been raised against it. This will involve a combination of basic research (for example, you should read the official website or equivalent printed material of your organization) and some informal discussions with people involved in the organization. You should also find out about groups or organizations that have criticized yours and what their claims are.
The first part of your essay (two full, double-spaced pages) should answer the following three questions:

1) When was your organization founded and by whom?
2) What were the founding principles of the organization?
3) What kinds of concrete problems or issues did the organization seek to address, and by what means?

Please note that if you have an internship in a local branch of a larger organization (regional, national, or international) the focus of your research and essay should be on the largest and most general one. Also note that if you work for someone who is part of a governmental institution, you should focus on his or her political party affiliation, not the institution itself.

Consider for the example the case of an internship with a city council member in San Diego. While formally nonpartisan, all council members have in fact an affiliation with one of the two major political parties. For that reason, should your council member be a Democrat, your task in this essay will be to investigate the origins of the Democratic Party as a national organization. This approach means that it is likely you will have to look your organization through a broader prism than they themselves would recognize.

The second part of your essay (one full, double-space page) should identify one group or organization (failing that, a well-known individual) that has criticized your organization. You should then summarize and explain the nature of the criticism. For this part of the essay, if you are working for a specific political candidate or elected official, you should focus on criticism of the individual, rather than the political organization he or she is affiliated with.

Be sure to include in an additional page at the end of your first essay a list of the sources you used, including websites, publications, names and role of the members of the organization you talked to.

The second essay should be eight double-spaced pages long and is due in class on December 10. The essay should answer the following question: how was the problem of social inequality reflected in your experience and in the activities of the organization for which you were an intern? This essay will require you, first, to carefully study the two books assigned for the course, which will be discussed in class. Both books, each in different ways and from a different political standpoint, make the case that the skyrocketing levels of social inequality in America is a crucial development that has wide-ranging, yet typically unheeded implications, particularly from the standpoint of the functioning of political institutions. Your task is to reflect on your experience in the organization you worked for from the specific standpoint of the problem of social inequality. In some cases, the nature of your organization will be directly connected to the issues discussed in the books (for example, the two major political parties). In other cases, you will have to think more creatively about the way in which the problem of social inequality relates to the nature and activities of your organization. This could involve some minor additional research in consultation with the instructor.

The second essay should consist of two parts. The first (about four pages) should be a review of the arguments made in the two books assigned in class. This review should not be general, but rather tailored as much as possible to your specific internship experience. If, as is likely, you found
arguments and issues raised in the books that relate directly to your internship experience, you should make sure to highlight them in your essay. This part of the essay should include accurate page references from the parts of the two texts you refer to or quote. The second part of the essay (about four pages) should provide an account of your experience in the organization from the specific standpoint of the problem of social inequality. In thinking about how to approach this part of the essay, it might be helpful to consider the following questions. Does your organization deal directly with problems that are directly connected to social inequality (poverty, unemployment, etc.)? Does it advocate specific changes and reforms or does it simply work within the existing legal parameters? If your organization completely ignores issues of social inequality in its principles and activities, in what ways do they nonetheless manifest themselves? Does your organization deal with general issues (rights, services, problems, etc.) that in fact affect different social classes in significantly different ways?

Grades:

In addition to the two essays discussed above, a portion of your final grade for the course will be assigned by your internship supervisor on the basis of your field work in the organization.

Several people play a role in making sure your field work grades are received in a timely manner so that you can receive your final grade on time. The student’s responsibility is to fill in completely the information requested on the “department field work grade,” and turn in the form early in the semester, as explained above. You are asked for your own address and phone number and the complete address, phone number, and fax number of your supervisor. If your supervisor has a business card, please staple it on top of the section which asks for the supervisor’s contact information after completing it. Late in the semester, department office staff will fax the form to your field work supervisor with a letter thanking them for giving you an internship opportunity. Field work supervisors will be asked to evaluate you after the completion of each third of your field work. Each of the three reporting periods counts for 10% of the course grade. As a whole, field work counts for 30% of your grade. Grade forms are submitted by supervisors once at the end of all field work. The forms submitted will show the three grades, one grade for each third of your work. In the rare cases in which the supervisor gives a grade of 0 for all three reporting periods, the student will receive an automatic F grade for the course. If you do not like the grade a supervisor gave you, you may not ask that a different supervisor submit the grade, so be sure that the name you submit as supervisor is the accurate name for all three reporting periods. The reports are faxed by the department to the supervisor and faxed by the supervisor back to the course instructor. Students do not handle the grade forms after they hand in the filled out forms to the instructor earlier in the semester.

Supervisors are asked to grade you with a numerical score ranging from 0 to 100 for each third of the course. The grading scale is as follows: A 93-100; A- 90-92; B+ 87-89; B 83-86; B- 80-82; C+ 77-79; C 73-76; C- 70-72; D+ 67-69; D 63-66; D- 60-62; F 0-59. Supervisors are asked to use the following grading standards, which are published in the undergraduate catalog. A: outstanding achievement, available only for the highest accomplishment; B: praiseworthy performance, definitely above average; C: average, awarded for satisfactory performance, most common undergraduate grade; D: minimally passing, less than the typical undergraduate achievement; F: failing.

In sum, your final grade will be determined following these proportions:
Field work: 30%
Essay 1: 20%
Essay 2: 50%

Course Outline:

Important deadlines:

September 9 (Mon.): university deadline – last day to drop the course

September 19 (Thur.): last day to secure an approved internship and turn in a “field work application” form during office hours

As explained above, all the following class meetings are mandatory and will take place in the assigned classroom at assigned time. The first hour (4:00-5:00pm) of all other regularly scheduled class meetings can be used as office hours by making an appointment with the instructor.

August 27: Welcome and Introduction

September 10: Lecture: What is social inequality?

October 8: First essay due in class

October 22: Class discussion of Paul Pierson and Jacob Hacker’s *Winner-Take-All Politics*. Come to class having read the book carefully. Be sure to bring the text, along with your questions and notes to class.

November 19: Class discussion of David North’s *The Crisis of American Democracy*. Come to class having read the book carefully. Be sure to bring the text, along with your questions and notes to class.

December 10: Second essay due in class