Overview and Objectives

We live in a society of organizations. We are born inside organizations, we are educated inside organizations, we work inside organizations, and when we die, we will be buried by organizations. These organizations, in turn, are governed by another collection of organizations in the form of the state, and are pressured by organized social movements beyond the state. Organizations are the source of social problems from poverty to racial inequality to climate change, and yet they have the potential to ameliorate each of those problems.

In this course, we will endeavor to understand the organizations that comprise society by looking at how those organizations are shaped by their environments. Organizations’ environments mainly consist of other organizations. For-profit firms are attentive to their competitors, their suppliers, their customers, and their regulators. Non-profits manage relationships with funders, from foundations to state granting agencies. Social movements routinely form enduring organizational infrastructures, and routinely target organizations. Universities grapple with accrediting bodies. Indeed, this very syllabus exists as an organizational artifact, with multiple purposes designed to serve multiple audiences — informing students of the plan of the course, while simultaneously assuring outside evaluators of the rigor of Brown’s curriculum.

This course has three major units. In the first, shortest unit we will ask, why do we live in a society of organizations? This unit provides multiple perspectives from economics,
sociology, and history that differentially emphasize efficiency, culture, power, and inertia. In the second unit, we will explore the major organizational theories that guide contemporary understandings of the relationships between organizations and their environments. Again, these theories place different weight on explanations that foreground the role of efficiency (or rationality), culture (or values), power (or politics), and inertia (or emergence). Finally, the third unit of the course will showcase how these theories combine to help us explain the relationship between organizations and society across a diverse array of problems, from law and regulation, to race and gender inequalities, to pollution and the natural environment.

This course is a natural complement to Sociology 1311, which focuses on individuals and groups acting inside organizations, though the two courses may be taken in any order.

Requirements

Attendance and Lateness: You are required to attend all lectures and sections. Your first unexcused lecture absence and your first unexcused section absence will not affect your grade. Further unexcused absences will affect your participation grade. Unexcused excessive lateness will be counted as an absence. Absences for religious observances are excused, as long as you notify your TA in advance, as are absences for illness (with a doctor’s or Dean’s note) or other personal or family emergencies (with a Dean’s note).

Readings: This upper-level course carries a substantial reading load. You are expected to read all assigned material before coming to class. Lectures, discussions in section, and assignments will engage deeply with the readings.

Participation: Students are expected to attend class and to participate actively. Expectations for section participation will be discussed on the first day of section. In lecture, beyond listening actively, asking clarification questions, and participating in in-class exercises, students will also each serve as a “lead discussant” once during the term. On the day you are designated as lead discussant, you will be expected to ask or answer at least one question.

Respect: There are many ways to interpret the course readings in class and many competing views on the topics we will discuss, and I hope we will debate many contrasting viewpoints. We will be covering issues relevant to current policy debates, including sensitive topics related to race, sex/gender, and class. To facilitate good discussion, please keep in mind that we are debating ideas, not each other as individuals. This type of debate might take the form of “I disagree” instead of “you are wrong.” Please keep the difference in mind so that we can engage in useful and vigorous discussion!

Major Assignments: The course has three major assignments, consisting of two short (5-7pp) papers and an end-of-term exam. The papers are designed to give you an opportunity to demonstrate your mastery of the material taught in class; you will not be required to do significant outside reading or research to complete them. Each paper will be due approximately one week after the assignment is distributed. The exam will take place during the designated final exam time (Thursday, May 16, 9:00am). It will consist entirely of multiple choice questions and will cover material from the entire semester.
**Time Expectations:** Students should expect to devote approximately 180 hours to completing the work for this course. Attendance in class constitutes approximately 44 hours (25 lectures * 4/3 hours and 11 sections * 1 hour). Out-of-class activities — primarily course readings — should take approximately 91 hours total (7 hours per week * 13 weeks). The two paper assignments should take approximately 26 hours total (13 hours per paper * 2 papers). Studying and taking the final exam should take approximately 19 hours (two 8 hours days of studying plus the 3 hour exam).

**Grading**

Your grade has three components.

*Lecture Attendance & Participation: 10%*

Perfect attendance and successful completion of your day as lead discussant is worth 10% towards your final grade. For failing to complete your day as lead discussant, and for each unexcused lecture absence beyond the first, you will receive 1% less towards your final grade.

*Section Attendance & Participation: 15%*

For details of section grading, see your section syllabus. Note that section will meet each week of term, including the first week, but excluding the slot between lectures 7 and 8 (Long Weekend) and lectures 16 and 17, just before and after Spring Break.

*Major Assignments: 75%*

There are three major assignments. In order to prevent a single bad paper or exam from dramatically influencing your grade, we will “half-drop” your lowest grade. In practice, this means that two of the assignments will be worth 30% each, while the last assignment will be worth 15%. So, for example, if you received 100 on both papers, and a 40 on the exam, you would receive 66% towards your final grade (100*30%+100*30%+40*15%=66%).

*Grade Appeals*

Your papers and exam will be graded by your TA following standards determined jointly by myself and your TA. If you have a question about your grade, please consult one of us during office hours and we will be happy to provide a more detailed explanation and feedback to help you improve your work for future assignments or classes.

If you feel that an error has been made, you may appeal your grade to me within one week of receiving your grade. To appeal your grade, you must provide a written explanation of the error you believe has been made and then I will re-grade the assignment in consultation with your TA. Please be advised that there is no guarantee that I will raise your grade; in fact, it is possible that I may lower it. For this reason, you should appeal a grade as a last resort when you feel certain that you have been graded unfairly.
Administrative Issues

**Academic Integrity:** Plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct are unacceptable. Information on the University’s academic integrity policy is available here. Any student who plagiarizes will fail the course and will receive any other sanctions imposed by the University.

**Accommodations for Learning:** Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me and your TA early in the term if you have a disability or other condition that might require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with us after class or during office hours. For more information, please contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services (phone: 401-863-9588, email: SEAS@brown.edu). Students in need of short-term academic advice or support can contact one of the deans in the Dean of the College office.

**Email Policy:** All course emails must contain “1315” in the subject line. Any email that does not contain 1315 in the subject may be marked as spam and deleted. Emails marked 1315 will be filtered properly. The TAs and I will try to respond to email within 24 hours during the week. If you do not receive a response within 48 hours, please send a follow-up email. Emails sent on Friday or during the weekend may be answered on the following Monday or Tuesday. We expect emails to be polite and professional.

**Writing Expectations:** The University has many resources to help you with your writing, starting with the Writing Center. In addition, we are happy to offer feedback on the mechanics of writing a clear and well-argued paper. Finally, good writing is a habit. We will pay attention to your writing in each assignment as well as in our written communication such as emails. Emails don’t require the same level of formality as a research paper, but we will expect a professional and polite tone, complete sentences, well-formulated thoughts, and so on.

**Cell Phones and Laptops:** Turn off your cell phone and store it during lecture. If you might need to receive a call during class for some reason, put your phone on vibrate and step out quietly as needed. Similarly, please store your laptop during class. Research shows that using a laptop during class impedes both your learning and the learning of students around you (see, e.g., Sana et al. 2013, and Dynarski 2017). There will be pauses during each lecture where I will encourage you to check your devices. Otherwise, please refrain from using them.

We will designate one area of the lecture hall as a “laptops permitted” zone. Students may sit in this zone if they feel, for any reason, that you would benefit from using a laptop to take notes. Students using laptops or cellphones for purposes other than note taking will be asked to leave and be counted as absent for the class.

**Required Texts**

All of the readings will be available as pdfs on the course website. The list of readings is subject to change. In particular, I may assign topical short articles from newspapers,
magazines, etc. to complement the more scholarly texts on the syllabus. I will give you at least one week’s notice before altering or adding any required readings. We will discuss the required readings in both lecture and section. I recommend trying to read articles before the lecture with which they are associated, but you may find it useful to skim the articles before lecture and then read them more deeply before section. In addition, there will be a short packet of topical readings (primarily newspaper and magazine articles) associated with each of the paper assignments. Some readings, or portions of readings, are marked as recommended.

Course Outline

Unit 1: Why Organizations?

Lecture 1: Course Overview (1/24)

- Read the syllabus!

Section 1

Lecture 2: A Society of Organizations (1/29)


Lecture 3: Why Organizations? Efficiency! (1/31)


Section 2

Lecture 4: Why Organizations? Power, Culture, Inertia! (2/5)

Corporate America.


Unit 2: Theoretical Approaches to Organizations & Society

Lecture 5: Efficiency (Agency Theory) (2/7)


Section 3

Lecture 6: Efficiency (Transaction Cost Economics) (2/12)


Lecture 7: Power (Resource Dependence) (2/14)

No Section — Long Weekend

Lecture 8: Power (Class and Corporate Control) (2/21)


Section 4

Lecture 9: Culture (Institutions, Fields, and Logics) (2/26)


Lecture 10: Culture (Institutions, Myths, and Decoupling) (2/28)


Section 5

Lecture 11: Inertia, Accident, & Emergence (Organizational Ecology) (3/5)

Lecture 12: Inertia, Accident, & Emergence (Path Dependence and Imprinting) (3/7)


Section 6

Paper 1 Distributed 3/7

**Unit 3: Topics in Organizational Analysis**

Lecture 13: Networks of Organizations (3/12)


Lecture 14: Organizations as Networks (3/14)


Section 7

Paper 1 Due 3/14

Lecture 15: Categories and Evaluations (3/19)


Lecture 16: Free Space (3/21)

- In-class discussion.

No Section — Spring Break

Lecture 17: Organizations and the Law (4/2)


Lecture 18: Organizations and Politics (4/4)


Section 8

Lecture 19: Organizations and Inequality (4/9)


**Lecture 20: Organizations and Race (4/11)**


• Berrey, Ellen. 2015. “Diversity is for White People.” *Slate*. Available at [https://www.salon.com/2015/10/26/diversity_is_for_white_people_the_big_lie_behind_a_well_intended_word/](https://www.salon.com/2015/10/26/diversity_is_for_white_people_the_big_lie_behind_a_well_intended_word/)


**Section 9**

**Lecture 21: Organizations and Gender (4/16)**


**Lecture 22: Social Movements and Organizations (4/18)**


Section 10

Paper 2 Distributed 4/24

Lecture 23: Organizations and the (Natural) Environment (4/24)


Lecture 24: After Organizations? (4/26)


Section 11 (Note Reading Period Begins Here, Section Will Meet)

Paper 2 Due 5/1

Final Exam Review (Optional) (TBD)

Final Exam Date 5/16, 9:00am.