Course Description

Congratulations on reaching the final semester of the MPP program at GW’s Trachtenberg School. This capstone course is intended to be a highly integrative undertaking that serves in the place of a end-of-program comprehensive exam. The MPP program begins fairly broadly with required courses and then narrows to a more specialized field of concentration. Now, at the conclusion of the program, the capstone project asks students to integrate and synthesize many components of the curriculum by undertaking a major pro bono policy analysis project of value to an external client.
Student Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- **Scope** research to meet client needs and resolve analytic challenges in the face of ambiguity and competing values;
- **Identify, design, and apply** appropriate research methods to conduct a rigorous research project that is responsive to client needs;
- **Efficiently-manage** an intense, demanding, and collaborative research process;
- **Integrate** and **apply** knowledge and analytic skills gained in MPP courses;
- **Communicate** complex research findings effectively to both academic and policymaker audiences;
- **Provide** new information, analysis, and insight to help inform the policymaking process (defined very broadly).

Capstone Assignments and Due Dates

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<tr>
<th>%</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Due</th>
<th>Details</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Course participation, preparation, teamwork</td>
<td>ongoing</td>
<td>p. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Initial project plan</td>
<td>1/27 or 2/3</td>
<td>p. 5-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>In-class presentations (2)</td>
<td>As scheduled</td>
<td>p. 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Draft report sections</td>
<td>3/2 or 3/9</td>
<td>p. 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NG</td>
<td>MPP program review</td>
<td>3/30</td>
<td>p. 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Draft of final client report</td>
<td>4/13</td>
<td>p. 10-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Final client report and presentation</td>
<td>5/4</td>
<td>p. 10-11</td>
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<tr>
<td>NG</td>
<td>Final report and presentation to client</td>
<td>tbd</td>
<td>p. 11-12</td>
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Class Structure and Schedule

**Class Sessions.** Unlike a regular TSPPPA course, the Capstone class will not meet every week. Instead, it will consist of the following class sessions.

A. Introductory session (1/13) to discuss clients and overview capstone schedule.

B. Project plan presentations (1/27 & 2/3) in which each team gives a 15-minute presentation on their client, project, and key literature/resources for feedback from the research advisers and classmates.

C. Project update presentations (3/2 & 3/9) in which each team gives a 15-minute presentation on their ongoing research for feedback from the research advisers and classmates.

D. Final Presentation to TSPPPA (5/4) in which groups present their final projects to the TSPPPA community (faculty, fellow students, alums).

These are scheduled throughout the semester as follows:

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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Due</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1/13</td>
<td>First full class meeting</td>
<td>Ready to describe client &amp; decision context</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1/20</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1/27</td>
<td>Project Plan Presentations</td>
<td>Initial project plan to all three RAs*</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>Project Plan Presentations</td>
<td>Initial project plan to all three RAs*</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>2/10</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>2/17</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>2/24</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3/2</td>
<td>Project Update Presentations</td>
<td>Draft report sections to all three RAs*</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>3/9</td>
<td>Project Update Presentations</td>
<td>Draft report sections to all three RAs*</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3/16</td>
<td>No class (Spring Break)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>3/23</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>3/30</td>
<td></td>
<td>MPP Program review survey completed</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>4/6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>4/13</td>
<td></td>
<td>Draft client report to all three RAs*</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>4/20</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>4/27</td>
<td>No class (designated Mon.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>5/4</td>
<td>TSPPPA Presentations</td>
<td>Revised client report to Rigby*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>TBS</td>
<td>Client Presentations</td>
<td>Final report to client (email Rigby when complete)</td>
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</table>
Online Instruction. Within Blackboard you will find a series of short video presentations that provide further instruction on the key steps of the capstone project (i.e. identifying research questions, presenting research findings). These should be viewed by each member of your team at the appropriate point in the semester (based on your project timeline). Students will be held responsible for incorporating the instruction in these videos within their capstone project.

Research Advisors. The primary work of the class will be design and completion of your client-based project. To guide your group in this process, you will be assigned a research adviser who will work closely with your group in a role that blends that of a supervisor in a work setting and a professor in an academic setting. At a minimum, you should update your research adviser weekly on your progress, as well as consult her on any major decisions your group is facing. In addition, all work projects (marked with an * in the class schedule above) should be reviewed and all presentations should be presented first to your team’s research adviser for feedback. This feedback should be incorporated into the version that you turn in to all three research advisers and/or present to the class. Unless arranged otherwise with your research adviser, provide at least 3-4 days for review (and an additional 3-4 days to incorporate the feedback you receive). Note: your work will also be reviewed by the other research advisors to provide additional feedback, guidance, and expertise.

Detailed Description of Capstone Project & Assignments

Getting Started

The capstone challenge: In conducting valuable research for an external client, teams should design and implement a substantial project that addresses a public policy issue or policy evaluation and takes advantage of knowledge and tools acquired in previous MPP courses. Successfully accomplishing this ambitious goal – in the relatively tight span of about twelve weeks – requires more than simply a mastery of prior MPP courses; it requires moving rapidly with adroit planning, aggressive time management, resourcefulness and creativity, along with eager, patient, and congenial collaboration. Ultimately, the final product should be a source of professional satisfaction, a genuine contribution to the client, and a worthy culmination of the achievement of earning an MPP degree at GW’s Trachtenberg School.

Team formation: Members of a project team must all be enrolled in the same capstone section. Each project team will consist of four to six people and should be finalized (and approved by the instructor) before the end of the fall semester.

Project topics: Most teams prefer obtaining projects using personal networks and/or directly contacting organizations in areas of special interest. Also, the instructor may have
secured a few potential projects. The instructor must approve all capstone projects. Ordinarily projects involve both: (a) a “field component” with at least some original data gathering (not merely secondary data), such as semi-structured interviews, online surveys, focus groups, and (b) a major analytical component, not merely data collection for a client (although if the client primarily wants the new data, extensive analysis can be added to satisfy to GW requirements).

Conflicts of interest: Avoid even the appearance of any conflict of interest. Projects cannot be conducted for the organization branch employing any team member or their families. At an early stage, make sure your client is told in writing of all current and recent employers or internships.

Client negotiations: Feel empowered to take a proactive stance when you negotiate the research design with the client. Often the client proposes a policy question, while it is your job to turn that policy question into a research question. In addition, as outside analysts, you bring a fresh look at a situation and may see valuable, relevant questions that the client ought to ask but is not. Therefore, after your team ponders the client's question and decision context, you may want to urge the client to add or modify some key research questions or proposed methodology to improve the study. While it is true that "it's all about the client," serving a client well means giving them the benefit of your critical and creative thinking and not being passive about the formulation of the project. That said, any client who insists that you frame your research in a way that is preordained to generate their preferred outcome — or insists that you must unquestioningly accept all of their policy assumptions — is a poor choice for a client.

Capstone Participation and Communication

A successful capstone hinges on sustained engagement from start to finish. To be specific:

- Attendance at all of the capstone class sessions and final presentations;
- Reliable, effective contributions to the team capstone project;
- Regular communication with your research advisor who should be engaged to review all written material and prepared presentations, as well as when making decisions regarding the scope and design of your project;
- Meeting all team and class deadlines.

Initial Project Plan

Due January 27 or February 3. Right away, you should begin working on your initial project plan. Your team should develop a project plan that includes four components (each described in more detail below):

1. Description of client and their request;
2. Signed client letter of agreement;
3. IRB certifications for all team members; and
4. Annotated bibliography of 8-10 key readings/reports that will guide your project (at least three of these should be drawn from the MPP curriculum and the others from the broader literature).

These four items should be reviewed by your research adviser prior to submitting the packet via email to all three research advisers (our emails are on the first page of this syllabus). In addition, one hard copy packet of the initial project plan should be brought to class on the day of your team’s presentation (January 27 or February 3) and given to your research adviser.

**Description of Client**
Provide a short (less than 1 page) description of your client, the client’s preliminary question(s), and your understanding of their decision context (i.e. Why do they want this question answered? What will they hope to do with the analysis you provide to them?)

**Client Letter of Agreement**
Rather than a Statement of Work (SOW) which might imply a legal contractual obligation, the term “Letter of Agreement” (LOA) has a more informal sound but still defines an important joint commitment. Fairly early in the discussions with a client, mention that the research really begins after the instructor has approved and they have signed a short letter of agreement.

For your reference, a model LOA is posted in Blackboard. As you will see, the LOA should exclude entirely intra-GW steps (such as our class presentations) and include the following:

- Objectives / major research questions
- Research design plan (basic layout of methodology, noted as the likely and expected approach)
- Planned timeline, especially major milestones with the client
  - Devising measurement instruments (client approval)
  - Collecting field data/interviews (client assistance)
  - Any other “process” dates with client involvement where specific data must be furnished
  - Final presentation(s) to the client in May
- Communications
  - Client liaison name and contact information
  - Capstone liaison name(s) and contact information
  - A polite statement of turnaround expectations
- Deliverables (products to be presented to the client)
  - Team presentation(s) in May
  - Written report the first week in May
  - Other specified materials, if any
- Research ethics (show sensitivity to the “spirit of IRB”)

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Article

- Note protection of anonymity and confidentiality
- Note that all team members will be certified as having completed and passed GW's IRB training program for social and behavioral science research

* Signatures and dates (for client representative and team)

Please get email approval for the final LOA text from your research adviser before giving it to the client. If you do not have the signed LOA ready to include in the initial project plan, you can include the unsigned version. Just please send along the signed LOA as soon as you get it signed by your client.

**IRB Ethics Training Requirement**

Federal regulations now require researchers to undergo ethics training and certification for research projects they undertake. Because the research projects for this course are considered “professional training” and are not ordinarily published, IRB ethics certification is not legally required for these projects. (If publication is pursued later, IRB approval will be required.)

High ethical standards are always an integral part of the Trachtenberg curriculum and these federal requirements certainly will be pertinent to careers as policy analysts. Understanding the principles and basics of these regulations is important.

To ensure familiarity with these regulations, the online CITI Training Program must be completed with a score of 80% or higher. To get started, please follow these steps:

- Register as a new user at www.citiprogram.org
- Be sure to remember your user name and password.
- Institution: George Washington University (ignore others)
- Then answer questions 2 through 4.
- For step 5, Q1, check “no”; Q2, “no” is fine.
- Next page only requires: GW email; Department=Trachtenberg School; and Role=Student researcher—graduate level
- Next page, check only “Human Subjects Research Training”
- Next page, click “no” to go to “CITI Basic Course”
- Next page, check only “Social and Behavioral Sciences”
- Next “no” for HIPS; “no” for GCP, click Finalize Registration
- Click “Social & Behavioral Research” under “George Washington University Courses” to start the ten modules.

Once you complete the CITI program, you will be provided a certification document. Include a copy of this certification (one for each team member) in your initial project plan. Be sure to also keep a copy for your own records.
**Annotated Bibliography**

Prepare an annotated bibliography of 8-10 key readings that will guide your capstone project. These may be publications like books or journal articles, but may also be policy reports or summaries of governmental statistics. In your annotated bibliography, each source should be referenced (as you would cite it in your final report) and also include a short paragraph explaining its significance to your project.

At least three (but likely more) of these readings should be drawn from a review of the MPP core courses. As discussed in the course description, the capstone’s “integrative experience” is an occasion for a fresh look at the array of foundational courses taken for the MPP degree. With that goal in mind, your team should review the following courses to identify the readings, concepts, and tools most relevant to your capstone project.

- PPPA 6011: Introduction to Public Policy (Politics & Policy Analysis)
- PPPA 6002: Research Methods and Applied Statistics
- PPPA 6013: Econometrics I (second statistics course)
- PPPA 6014: Economics in Policy Analysis
- PPPA 6015: Benefit-Cost Analysis and/or PPPA 6016: Program Evaluation and/or PPPA 6005: Budgeting and Public Finance

The additional readings should be identified during your preliminary research on your topic. Look for articles, books, reports that are regularly cited on this topic (or an aspect of the topic). In addition, look for recent literature review articles or reports on your topic, as well as previous research that asked a similar question and may provide a guide to how your team will pursue the question at hand. Finally, make sure to review the publications of your client organization so you know what they have already done/said on the issue you are studying.

**In-Class Presentations**

Your team will give two 15-minute presentations to the class on your project, as described below. Your research adviser should review this presentation and provide feedback/guidance prior to you presenting it to the class.

**Initial Plan Presentations** will be scheduled for January 27 or February 3. In this presentation, your team should describe your client, their research questions, and the decision context. In addition, highlight the most relevant readings in your annotated bibliography. Finally, include a discussion of your next steps (including any key decisions that need to be made).

**Project Update Presentations** will be scheduled for March 3 or March 9. This presentation should overview your progress to date. It should provide an overview of your project rationale, background, and methodology (see assignment below). Also include an overview of any descriptive data you have available at this point.
Draft Report Sections

Due March 3 or March 9: Your team should submit a draft of the first 3-4 sections of your report (as outlined below).

1. PROJECT RATIONALE
   a. Statement of the problem (why important and to whom)
   b. Objectives of the research (general areas of interest & specific client)
   c. Clearly-defined research question

2. BACKGROUND
   a. Summary of topic/policy/program under study (what do we already know?)
   b. Key information informing your project (why do we need to know what you propose to find out?)

3. METHODOLOGY
   a. Discussion of how prior research informed the research plan
   b. Full explanation of how the study was conducted (including how key concepts were operationalized; data collection; the response rates; and so forth)

4. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS
   a. If applicable, provide a summary of any descriptive or preliminary data that you have collected so far.

In many cases, you may be still determining some of this content, but write these sections based on your work to date. The report sections should be combined in one word document of less than 10 pages, single spaced, in 12 pt. ft. Please email the document to your research adviser for review at least week before submitting the report sections via email to all three research advisers.

MPP Program Review

Due March 30: One of the requirements of the MPP program is that you provide end-of-program feedback about your experience here at the Trachtenberg School. This feedback is collected with an anonymous online survey that should take about fifteen minutes to complete. All students enrolled in the Spring 2015 sections of the capstones must complete this survey by March 30. You cannot receive a course grade and graduate until this requirement is met.

Survey responses will be aggregated before being shared with TSPPPA faculty, and will not be shared with faculty until after grades have been submitted. Your specific responses will not be associated with your name. The survey software will, however, track whether you've completed the survey and satisfied the requirements of your capstone course.
You will receive an email about halfway through the Spring semester with more instructions on how to complete the survey. That email will be sent to the email address associated with your Blackboard account, so please be sure that address is correct.

Draft and Final Project Report

Due April 13 (draft) + May 4 (final version): Each team should prepare a final report suitable for their client. After review from your research adviser, email both your draft and final report to both your research adviser and Professor Rigby. In addition, please bring a hard copy, bound, version of your final report to your final presentation.

Standard Format: In most cases, the client will not specify a specific format. In those cases, use the format listed below. Otherwise, please speak with your research adviser about any alternative report structure.

The final capstone project report should be no more than 30 single-spaced pages, one-inch margins, and a serif font. Supplementary appendices (e.g., full text of questionnaires) do not count toward the page limit. All in-text citations (name, year, page if applicable) and the end references section should use standard APA or Chicago formats. Extra comments suitable as footnotes should be incorporated as footnotes and not endnotes.

1. Front matter (about 5 pgs.)
   a. Title page
   b. Table of Contents
   c. Acknowledgements (thanks to client, key sources, others)
   d. Executive Summary (one page)

2. Body (20-25 pgs.)
   a. Project Rationale
      i. Statement of the problem (why important and to whom)
      ii. Objectives of the research (general areas of interest & specific client)
      iii. Clearly-defined research question
   b. Background
      i. Summary of topic/policy/program under study
      ii. Other key information that informs your project
   c. Methodology
      i. Discussion of how prior research informed the research plan
      ii. Full explanation of how the study was conducted (including how key concepts were operationalized; data collection; the response rates; and so forth)
   d. Analysis of Findings
      i. Description of data
      ii. Analysis of key relationships etc.
   e. Discussion/Conclusion/Recommendations
i. Interpretation of data presented in previous section
ii. Acknowledgements of limits of the study’s internal/external validity

3. Supplemental material (no pg. limit)
   a. References/Sources Cited
   b. Appendices
      i. Appendix A: name and contact information of the client liaison
      ii. Other appendices if needed (e.g., full text of any questionnaires).

TSPPPA Presentation

Due May 4: At the end of the semester each team will make a formal oral presentation to the capstone class along with invited faculty and alumni. Prior to this presentation, you must do at least one practice presentation for your research adviser in order to get feedback on your presentation style and content. In addition, please email the final PowerPoint file (or link to Prezi) at least 24 hours before the presentation to both your research adviser and Professor Rigby.

All team members should participate in a 15-minute summary of the project to be followed by up to ten minutes of questions and discussion. Condensing an extensive project requires carefully focusing on the most critical elements and findings, rather than attempting to communicate every detail. Consider what are the most important points that you want the audience to take away and emphasize those.

Presentations should include the following:
1. The identity of the client
2. Central research questions, plus their importance to the client
3. Background on the topic—highlighting why this study was needed
4. A brief explanation of the methodology—highlighting all that you did
5. A short summary of any challenges and how they were addressed
6. Findings and lessons learned
7. Recommendations to the client

These two basic criteria will again be used: (1) Style: aiming for an engrossing, lively, focused talk, supplemented with uncluttered, attractive, informative visual aids. (2) Substance: achieving a tightly edited, logically developed, effectively analyzed, and convincingly argued report of the research. Most importantly, you want to leave the audience with an understanding of how your project is: important, rigorous, and useful (to your client).

Client Presentation

After receiving feedback on your TSPPPA presentation and final report, budget time to then revise them for the client. In particular, this presentation ought to be specially tailored for the client. Most clients prefer an emphasis on the findings and
recommendations with less time devoted to the methodology (and even less to background on the policy issue/problem). Do not be surprised if clients also ask for comments on the broader implications of your findings far beyond the actual recommendations in your report. This presentation is not graded, but required for completion of the project. Please note that your research adviser and/or professor will contact clients for their critiques of teams’ performances in developing, conducting, and communicating the research.
| OVERALL REPORT
<table>
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<th>Speaking, presentation, etc.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall presentation (slides, response, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarity of writing</td>
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<td>Use of APP training &amp; skills</td>
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<td>Conclusions</td>
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<td>Analysis of findings</td>
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<td>Methodology</td>
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<td>Literature review</td>
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<td>Research questions</td>
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<th>Introduction &amp; background</th>
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<th>Group</th>
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Review of MPP Capstone Research Project
Relevant Trachtenberg School Policies

1. Incompletes: A student must consult with the instructor to obtain a grade of “I” (incomplete) no later than the last day of classes in a semester. At that time, the student and instructor will both sign the CCAS contract for incompletes and submit a copy to the School Director. Please consult the TSPPPA Student Handbook or visit the website for the complete CCAS policy on incompletes.

2. Submission of Written Work Products Outside of the Classroom:
   It is the responsibility of the student to ensure that an instructor receives each written assignment. Students can submit written work electronically only with the express permission of the instructor.

3. Submission of Written Work Products after Due Date: Policy on Late Work: All work must be turned in by the assigned due date in order to receive full credit for that assignment, unless an exception is expressly made by the instructor.

4. Academic Honesty: Please consult the “policies” section of the GW student handbook for the university code of academic integrity. Note especially the definition of plagiarism: “intentionally representing the words, ideas, or sequence of ideas of another as one’s own in any academic exercise; failure to attribute any of the following: quotations, paraphrases, or borrowed information.” All examinations, papers, and other graded work products and assignments are to be completed in conformance with the George Washington University Code of Academic Integrity.

5. Changing Grades after Completion of the Course: No changes can be made in grades after the conclusion of the semester, other than in cases of clerical error.

6. The Syllabus: This syllabus is a guide to the course for students. Sound educational practice requires flexibility and the instructor may therefore, at her/his discretion, change content and requirements during the semester.

7. Accommodation for Students with Disabilities: In order to receive accommodations on the basis of disability, a student must give notice and provide proper documentation from the Office of Disability Support Services, Marvin Center 436 (202-994-8250). Accommodations will be made based upon the recommendations of the DSS Office.