

Course 36620: Applied Policy Communications Lab

Instructor: Meredith Shiner
Email: meredith@meredithshiner.com
Cell: (847) 567-6373

TA: Emma Kortlebein
Email: ekortebein@uchicago.edu

Class Date and Time: Thursdays, 9:30 to 12:20 PM, beginning Sept. 28, 2022

Class Location: Keller 0007

Office Hours: Wednesdays from 8 AM to 9:30, in Conference Room 3060, or by Zoom, via email request to instructor, who will respond within 24 hours

Final: Written assignment and oral presentation

Course Description:

To succeed in the field of public policy, it's not enough for a practitioner to design sound, data-driven strategies. Successful public policy professionals also must convince others—elected officials, peer staffers and constituents—that their position is right, using communications to justify policy outcomes mathematically, economically and morally. In this lab-based course, students will work for a client, and simulate a policy office culture, reviewing and developing communications materials, including:

- a strategic communications plan;
- Op-Ed for a principal;
- a press release;
- policy talking points;
- social media copy;
- traditional media pitches, learning the basics of how to interact with reporters and then doing so with the support of the instructor, a veteran policy journalism and communications professional.

The course will include conversations with outside policy communications experts based in Chicago and Washington D.C., as well as policy reporters based in both cities to better understand how to write in a way that breaks through with media.

At the end of the quarter, the goal for each student in this class is to feel better prepared to enter the real world of public policy, emerging with written portfolio items and practical

experience that can help them ace job interviews with potential employers, from public affairs consulting firms to members of the U.S. Congress.

This course will be grounded in five habitual practices:

1. **Writing:** In nearly every class meeting, students will review, produce or edit a piece of writing, which could be as concise as a 160-character tweet or as lengthy as an Op-Ed or communications plan.
2. **Reading:** Prior to each class meeting, students will need to evaluate assigned readings, from materials provided by the client to professional communications assets, such as press releases and speeches, posted on the class's Canvas site.
3. **Feedback:** Students will collaborate to provide peer feedback on work-in-progress materials and will receive feedback from the instructor as the class progresses, to ensure that each student receives enough feedback on individual pieces of work to be set up for success by class's end, when the full portfolio of writing is evaluated. As this is a lab-based class working with a real-world client, students also will receive feedback, after their final presentation, from the chosen client for their class.
4. **Small-Group Work:** To simulate real-world policy working environments, students will work together to develop and refine communications materials as if they were a team of public policy consultants under contract from a client. Though some materials will be created and assessed individually.
5. **Classroom Interaction:** This course is designed to replicate real-world policymaking environments, so students will be expected to actively participate and lead conversations, assessing assigned materials, talking through their own work product and asking informed questions of weekly classroom guests who have applied experience in the field.

Note: This course assumes proficiency in English. While basic elements of grammar and usage will be discussed, as appropriate, this course is not intended to replace English Language Learning resources available to University of Chicago graduate students.

Required Text:

Required readings will include documents provided by the client to understand their communications goals and needs, as well as relevant examples of communications pegged to current events and posted for download on the class Canvas page.

Learning Outcomes:

By committing to the process of reading, writing, discussing, collaborating, and rewriting, students who complete this course will demonstrate their ability to:

- Read actively to understand and test claims, opinions, and evidence
- Generate questions for the client, as well as for independent research, which allow for clear, compelling writing on policy topics that demonstrates:
 - a grasp of key policy concepts

- the client's work, needs and objectives
- writing techniques that meet the demands of the modern communications landscape
- Understand how to identify an audience for policy communications and then draft and edit policy writing accordingly, in a way that effectively conveys complicated ideas to that selected audience
- Take a strategic approach to policy communications, understanding how all writing and communications tactics can fit together as part of a broader plan or campaign
- Adapt to writing policy positions that might not reflect personal political or policy views but instead are crafted to reflect the policy goals of the client
- Use lessons learned in the course to help assess peer work as well as collaborate on written materials, as required

Assignments and Grading:

Students will, over the course of the quarter, complete a series of written assignments that will culminate in a complete portfolio of policy communications writing. Assessment for this class is scaffolded, meaning the skills required for each writing assignment will build over the course of the quarter, and each assignment will be submitted in draft form first and reviewed by the professor and/or TA and, in some cases, peer-reviewed, before submission. Participation grade includes the on-time submission of draft materials.

- **Writing Assignments (75 percent):**
Each student will write/compose a:
 - **Strategic communications plan and presentation (40 percent):**
 - **Written strategic communications plan (25 percent):** Ultimately, this is a writing course building toward this work product that reflects the highest level of writing ability, strategic thinking and professional counsel. Over the course of the quarter, we'll workshop drafts to ensure students are prepared to deliver professional-grade work to the client. Assessment of these plans will include not only a grade on the final work product but also interim written materials, which factor into the participation grade.
 - **Group presentation (15 percent):** This plan will be a small-group project to simulate a real-world work experience, where teams collaborate on drafting and pitching a strategic communications plan to the client.
 - **Op-Ed (20 percent):** Successful policy communicators can write in the voice of others. For this assignment, students individually will choose a topic that is relevant to the client and write in the voice of the client's principal, with guidance and assistance from the instructor.
 - **Talking points document (+/-, part of participation grade below):** Each student in the group will choose a policy topic within the client's policy portfolio and draft a talking points document. Although most employees within a policy think tank or Congressional office, for example, will not be externally facing communications staff, many have to provide written materials explaining policies to communicators so they can share with external stakeholders, like the media.

This individual policy talking points document, based on a template shared by the instructor, will be peer-reviewed and the instructor will assess both the document and peer feedback.

- **Press release/Media pitch (15 percent):** Students will draft a press release and corresponding media pitch that will be assessed by the instructor and also workshopped during class time with guest lecturing reporters. Students will learn how to distinguish between a press release and a media pitch (they're different!) to prepare themselves for how to be savvier about media in future employment.
- **Social media copy (+/-, part of participation grade below):** Just because text is short does not mean it is not impactful! To exist in a modern policy environment, students must understand how to get their message across in 160 characters or less.
- **Seminar Attendance and Participation (25 percent):**
 - **Attendance (15):** Given that this intensive lab course experience requires asking questions of internal stakeholders at the client organization, as well as guest lecturers with practical field experience, class attendance and participation is important to students' ultimate success. Obviously, conflicts come up over the course of the quarter, so students should coordinate with the instructor in advance of absences to ensure they are able to complete assignments successfully. Up to two missed class sessions are allowed.
 - **Participation (10):** +/- grading of draft assignments reflecting that they have been submitted or not submitted at their due date is included in student participation grading.

Weekly Course Schedule:

Week	Topic Covered & Assignments Due
1	<p>The Principals of Public Policy Communications</p> <p>How To Prepare Questions For Client Interviews To Create Effective Communications Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning how to ask good questions ● Situation analysis: What is it? Why is it important? How is identifying a problem for a client the first step toward creating a policy solution? ● What is a strategic approach? ● What are communications tactics? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What are the most important communications tactics to understand for any policy professional? ○ What does effective policy communication look like? ● How to prepare to meet <i>our</i> client

Week	Topic Covered & Assignments Due
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Division into small groups for the duration of class <p>Guest Presenter A Preparing To Meet A Client: How to Generate Effective Questions for Communications Impact, with a Top Policy PR Professional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Q&A with a leading policy and politics communications professional on how they approach client meetings, forming questions to get the right answers, presenting to clients and thinking through communications strategy <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Questions for client meeting (5-8 thoughtful questions to direct to the client in intro session)</p>
2	<p>Strategic Communications Plan Workshop I — Meet the Client</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review as a class prepared questions for client meeting; workshop any additions or changes in anticipation of visit ● Talk through anticipated challenges and goals for the time with client <p>Client visit and conversation with class</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Client to introduce themselves and give personal overview of organization’s work ● Students to ask questions based on their research and active listening to client’s needs <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: DRAFT Situation analysis for strategic communications plan</p>
3	<p>Policy Talking Points: Translating Complex Policy for The Outside World</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why do talking points matter? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In the modern political climate, “talking points” have been relegated to derogatory status and dismissed as empty words from politicians appearing on television, but talking points, done correctly, can be the foundation of enacting good public policy by clearly defining to audiences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The challenge we’re facing;

Week	Topic Covered & Assignments Due
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What happens if we do nothing; ▪ What happens if we do something; ● What is a “message triangle” and how can policy professionals use it to get their way? ● Review of a current events news cycle and assessment of how well a communications campaign was organizing, reverse engineering the existing communications into the “message triangle” tool <p>Guest Presenter B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy professional(s) discuss in conversation with instructor and class the importance of talking points and clear communication assets to non-communications policy staff ● Client situation analysis review <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Message triangle for client topic</p>
4	<p>Press Release/Media Pitch/Social Media Workshop</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is a press release? When should you use a press release? ● What is a pitch? How is it different from a press release? ● What is the difference between earned media and owned media and when is it appropriate to pursue earned v. owned? <p>Guest Presenter C: Social media and public policy: how to be more than a Twitter troll and communicate effectively with audiences</p> <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: DRAFT press release, media pitch, social text</p>
5	<p>Strategic Communications Plan Workshop II — Strategic Approach and Tactics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review of contemporary case studies in enacted public policy and their political reception ● Group discussion and workshop on approach and tactics, incorporating assets worked on in first half of quarter, applying core principles acquired throughout ● Peer review of press release, media pitch and social media

Week	Topic Covered & Assignments Due
	ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Draft strategic plan approach and tactics, FINAL press release, media pitch and social text
6	<p>How to Write an Op-Ed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Op-Eds can bring attention and prestige to public policy campaigns, but how do you even start to write an opinion, in your own voice and in the voice of others? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Know your audience ○ Know your purpose ○ Know your call to action ● Op-Ed worksheet workshop <p>Guest presenter D: a real-life editor! Hear from the direct source what works and what doesn't when pitching a policy piece</p> <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Draft Op-Ed for client, to be workshopped in next session</p>
7	<p>In-class Op-Ed workshop</p> <p>A full session for peer review and instructor feedback of your two Op-Eds</p> <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Final Op-Ed for client</p>
8	<p>Strategic Communications Plan Workshop III: Putting It All Together</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A full session dedicated to workshopping your two final work products: a strategic communications plan and a deck for presenting your plan to the client; all of the components will be in progress, but a communications plan, if effective, can be a narrative story you're telling a client so they can tell their key audiences <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Final presentation</p>
9	NO CLASS — THANKSGIVING
10	Communications plan presentation to client

Week	Topic Covered & Assignments Due
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Small groups present to the client their final presentations <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR EXAM PERIOD: Final full, written communications plan</p>

Harris School of Public Policy Academic Policies

Academic Integrity

All University of Chicago students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic Integrity and honesty. Among other things, this means that students shall not represent another’s work as their own, use un-allowed materials during exams, or otherwise gain unfair academic advantage.

- The University’s policies regarding academic integrity and dishonesty are described [here](#). It is worth explicitly stating the University’s approach here: “It is contrary to justice, academic integrity, and to the spirit of intellectual inquiry to submit another’s statements or ideas as one’s own work. To do so is plagiarism or cheating, offenses punishable under the University’s disciplinary system. Because these offenses undercut the distinctive moral and intellectual character of the University, we take them very seriously.”
- The Harris School’s policies are available in the *Harris Student Handbook* Canvas site.
 - The *Academic Honesty and Plagiarism* section expresses the main principles.
 - Detailed guidelines for more specialized student work (e.g., problem sets including computer code) are offered in the section titled *Harris Integrity Policy for Problem Sets Involving Code*.
 - Harris’s specific procedures for handling suspected violations of these policies are available in the section *Harris Procedures for Allegations of Plagiarism, Cheating, and Academic Dishonesty* and are also re-produced as an Appendix to this document.
 - All students suspected of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Harris Dean of Students for investigation and adjudication. The disciplinary process can result in sanctions up to and including suspension or expulsion from the University.
 - In addition to disciplinary sanctions, I will impose a grade penalty of “X” for students who have committed academic dishonesty.
 - Other penalties for violations could be imposed instead, alone or in combination. For example:

- Students will receive a grade of 0 on the exam or problem set in question as well as the next lowest problem set grade. This will often result in the student earning a failing grade in the course.
- The student will receive a grade of 0 on the exam or problem set in question and cannot earn higher than a B- in the course, regardless of their performance on other assignments and exams.
- At the instructors' discretion, the student may receive a failing grade for the course regardless of their performance on elements of the course.
- Students found in violation of academic dishonesty will receive a failing grade in the course.
- The student will receive a grade of 0 on the assignment or exam in question (subject to the discretion of the instructor).
- The student may be asked to re-do the assignment or retake the exam (without credit) to ensure that the student has learned how to properly cite sources or demonstrate that he or she has command of material covered.

Disability Accommodations

The University's policies regarding students with disabilities are available [here](#). Students who have disability accommodations awarded by the University Student Disability Services Office should inform the Harris Dean of Students office by the end of the first week of class. The Harris Dean of Students Office will work with the student and instructor to coordinate the students' accommodations implementation.

Harris students are not required to submit their accommodations letter to the instructor. Students from other divisions in the University must submit their accommodations letter to either the instructor or the Harris Dean of Students Office.

Students who do not yet have formal accommodations in place but who feel they need accommodations on a temporary or ongoing basis should contact the Harris Dean of Students Office or Student Disability Services.

It is also worth noting that teaching in a remote environment may generate other questions and issues related to providing accommodations to students with disabilities. Some suggestions are available [here](#).

Diversity and Inclusion

The Harris School welcomes, values, and respects students, faculty, and staff from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, and we believe that rigorous inquiry and effective public policy problem-solving requires the expression and understanding of diverse viewpoints, experiences, and traditions. The University and the Harris School have developed distinct but

overlapping principles and guidelines to insure that we remain a place where difficult issues are discussed with kindness and respect for all.

- The University's policies are available [here](#). Specifically, the University identifies the freedom of expression as being "vital to our shared goal of the pursuit of knowledge, as is the right of all members of the community to explore new ideas and learn from one another. To preserve an environment of spirited and open debate, we should all have the opportunity to contribute to intellectual exchanges and participate fully in the life of the University."
- The Harris School's commitments to lively, principled, and respectful engagement are available [here](#): "Consistent with the University of Chicago's commitment to open discourse and free expression, Harris encourages members of the leadership, faculty, student body, and administrative staff to respect and engage with others of differing backgrounds or perspectives, even when the ideas or insights shared may be viewed as unpopular or controversial." We foster thought-provoking discourse by encouraging community members not only to speak freely about all issues but also to listen carefully and respectfully to the views of others.

Appendix: Full Harris Academic Integrity Procedures

Harris Procedures for Allegations of Plagiarism, Cheating, and Academic Dishonesty

First Violation

If a student is accused by an instructor or teaching assistant of plagiarism, cheating, or any other form of academic dishonesty, the student will be summoned to meet with the Dean of Students and the instructor. In the meeting, the student and instructor both present information about the situation. If it is determined by the instructor and the Dean of Students that the student has, in fact, plagiarized or cheated, the following sanctions will be imposed for the first violation:

- The student will generally receive a grade of 0 on the assignment or exam in question. Please note that grading decisions are fully at the discretion of the instructor, who may decide to impose harsher grade penalties.
- The student may be asked to re-do the assignment or retake the exam (without credit) to ensure that the student has learned how to properly cite sources or demonstrate that he or she has command of material covered.
- A formal letter of finding is sent to the student stating that the student has been found in violation of the code of academic honesty and what the sanctions were. The letter, along with any evidence presented, is archived in Harris Student Affairs records until the student graduates if the student has no other violations.
- Students found in violation of the academic honesty policy are not permitted to withdraw from the course to avoid grade penalties from the instructor.

- In cases where plagiarism or academic dishonesty is egregious, the case may be referred to the Area Disciplinary Committee even on a first offense. The Dean makes all decisions about which cases will go before the Area Disciplinary Committee.

Second Violation

If a student who has already been found in violation academic dishonesty is again accused of academic dishonesty, the case will be sent to the Harris Area Disciplinary Committee. Details about the Area Disciplinary Committee procedures can be found in the [University Student Manual](#). Information about the first violation, including the formal letter of finding any evidence, will be presented to the Area Disciplinary Committee, along with evidence of the current allegation. If the student is found in violation of academic honesty a second time, the Area Disciplinary Committee can assign sanctions including transcript notes, disciplinary probation, suspension or expulsion from the University.

Academic Dishonesty Appeals

If a student has been found in violation of academic honesty and does not believe that either the finding or the sanction is fair or correct, the student has the right to appeal the finding by requesting a hearing from the Area Disciplinary Committee. More information about the Area Disciplinary Committee is available [here](#).