

POLS 4190: Special Topics in Theory/Methods: Institutions and Individuality*

University of Georgia, Department of Political Science
Fall 2026
M W 2:55-4:15pm
Baldwin 311

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Course Description

You are a student enrolled in a course as a part of a series of requirements to receive a degree from the university. You are also a subject of the law, which asks you to submit to a series of requirements. You may also be an employee within a firm, which also asks you to submit to a series of requirements. In other words, you find yourself within institutions. At the same time, you have your own values. How do your values as an individual mesh with or clash with those of the many institutions you find yourself a member of? After a brief investigation into the nature of individuality and what good institutions can do for us, this course looks at a wide range of texts offering explanations of how formal institutions clash with what it means to be a free agent in the world, and possibly how to manage this tension.

Course Objectives

- Understand various theoretical perspectives on how formal institutions interact with individual flourishing.
- Read difficult texts and extract meaning from them.
- Better understand your own values.
- Write cogent arguments regarding the place of institutions in our lives.
- Come to see how formal course objectives like this can be self-defeating.

Course Materials

The following books should be available for purchase from the UGA Bookstore. Other readings are available via eLC.

*Updated August 17, 2026

Brennan, Jason, and Phillip Magness. *Cracks in the Ivory Tower: The Moral Mess of Higher Education*. Oxford University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-0197608272.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Vintage Books, 1995. ISBN: 978-0679752554

Graeber, David. *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. Simon & Schuster, 2019. ISBN: 978-1501143335.

Kafka, Franz. *The Trial: A New Translation Based on the Restored Text*. Translated by Breon Mitchell. Schocken Books, 1999. ISBN: 978-0805209990.

Nguyen, C. Thi. *The Score: How to Stop Playing Somebody Else's Game*. Penguin Press, 2026. ISBN: 978-0593655658.

Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-0300246759.

Assignments and Grading

The following components will make up your final grade in this course:

1. In-Class Assignments: 15%
2. In-Class Essays: 20% each
3. Group Project: 25%

Participation:

Participation does not appear as a formal portion of your total grade, nor do I require attendance. That being said, participation is a key element of succeeding in the class. Exceptional participation can result in a boost of your final grade by a third of a letter grade.

In-Class Assignments:

There will be at least 10 in-class writing assignments throughout the course. These will involve writing a brief response to a question regarding that material that day. Some of these will be issued at the beginning of class and test your comprehension of the reading that day, some during class as a way of generating conversation, and some at the end of class as a way of testing understanding of the material covered that day.

These will also utilize a variety of evaluation methods, including self-evaluation, peer-evaluation, and instructor evaluation. These quizzes will be graded on a pass/fail basis. Your letter grade for this part of your total grade will be based on the number of passes as follows:

at least 9 Passes: A
7-8 “”: A-

*Updated August 17, 2026

6 “”: B+
5 “”: B
4 “”: C+
3 “”: C
2 “”: C-
1 “”: D+
0: F

In-Class Essays:

I will ask you to write three in-class essays during the semester. Your essays will be in response to prompts supplied by the instructor and involve advancing an argument related to the material. You are permitted during these in-class essays to bring your copy of the class texts (but not your notes).

More details will be provided in class.

You are responsible for bringing a blue book to class on the day of each essay. Exam books can be purchased at the UGA Bookstore.

Group Project:

At the end of the semester, I have scheduled a week dedicated to group presentations. The idea is that you will present as part of a 4-person group on a project I will ask you to complete.

The project is as follows:

- (1) Identify an institution or setting you all belong to (it cannot be this class—sorry).
 - (2) Identify a core value and good that institution or setting is supposed to serve.
 - (3) Identify how some design element of the institution or setting gets in the way of achieving that value or good.
 - (4) Identify the best way to make the institution better at achieving its core value and good for you and your group members (e.g. maybe you are all in a position to change the institution for the better; maybe it’s something you all can do as individuals).
- NOTE: what you do must be compatible with the rules and policies of the university.
- (5) Do it.

There will be three components of the project.

- (a) You will hand in a questionnaire on eLC. This questionnaire will outline your group members as well as your parts (1)-(3) above. This is due by September 23.
- (b) You will answer a second questionnaire related to (4) above. This is due by October 21.
- (c) You will present at the end of the course for 10 minutes on your project. In this presentation, you will explain how things did (or did not) go as expected and what

you all learned from the experience. There will be an individualized reflection following the presentations.

More details on the project and its assessment will be available on eLC.

On Group Work:

My baseline assumption is that everyone in a group contributed his or her fair share. Based on this assumption, I will give each group member the same grade. However, this is a baseline, not an ironclad rule. After each presentation, I will ask you to assess each member of your group, including yourself. These assessments will be confidential. These assessments allow you to inform me whether someone did not contribute properly or if anyone went above and beyond. That being said, it is best if you resolve any problems in your group without my intervention.

Rules and Requirements

Academic Freedom and Respect:

We will be talking about controversial issues in this course. I expect students to disagree with each other, as well as with me. To that end, it is important to have an open, civil environment to explore and express a variety of positions. This requires each of us to engage respectfully with one another, especially when we disagree.

Electronic Devices:

There is good evidence that electronic devices significantly distract from learning. Because of this, and the discussion-oriented nature of this course, I do not allow the use of electronic devices in this course (barring exceptional circumstances). Physical notes and physical copies of readings only!

Academic Integrity:

UGA Student Honor Code: "I will be academically honest in all of my academic work and will not tolerate academic dishonesty of others." A Culture of Honesty, the University's policy and procedures for handling cases of suspected dishonesty, can be found at www.uga.edu/ovpi.

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated on any assignment. You are responsible for knowing and following the honor code and all rules of academic integrity.

Generative AI Policy:

Do not use generative AI to replace the hard work of thinking. What does this mean?

Do not use AI to:

- Read the text for you (e.g. summarize).
- Write for you (e.g. scripts for presentations).
- Develop arguments and ideas for you to present as your own.
- Brainstorm plans.

Permissible uses of AI include:

- Grammar and spelling checks (though not the actual generation of prose).
- If you have any questions about a possible use for AI not covered by these rules, please reach out to me.

Makeup Policy

Makeups for in-class assessments will only be granted in exceptional circumstances. If you foresee missing an assessment for a valid and exceptional reason, please let me know at least 48 hours in advance. In cases of emergency occurring within this 48-hour window, inform me as soon as possible.

On Revision:

For each of those three in-class essays, I will provide you with a grade and comments on how to improve your response. You can type up your answer and revise it in response to those comments. I will regrade your response and that grade will replace the initial grade.

To take advantage of this opportunity, please upload three files to eLC under assignments within two weeks of receiving your graded essay (under the assignment module, there will be revision components). First, upload a picture of your original essay along with my comments. Second, upload your typed up revised answer as a Word .Docx or PDF (include a header with your name, the date, and the question you answered). Third, provide a memo (no more than one page long) outlining how you revised your essay in response to feedback.

Course Schedule

*=available on eLC

Date	Reading
Monday, August 17	None

*Updated August 17, 2026

Wednesday, August 19	*J.S. Mill, <i>On Liberty</i> , Chapter 3
Monday, August 24	*Weber, “Bureaucracy”
Wednesday, August 26	*Weber, “Bureaucracy,” cont.
Monday, August 31	Kafka, <i>The Trial</i> , through “The Flogger”
Wednesday, September 2	Kafka, <i>The Trial</i> , to “The End”
Monday, September 7	Labor Day (No Class)
Wednesday, September 9	In-Class Essay #1
Monday, September 14	James Scott, <i>Seeing Like a State</i> , Introduction, Chapter 1
Wednesday, September 16	Scott, <i>Seeing</i> , Chapters 2-3
Monday, September 21	Scott, <i>Seeing</i> , Chapters 4,9
Wednesday, September 23	Michel Foucault, <i>Discipline and Punish</i> , Part One (Group Project Part One due)
Monday, September 28	Foucault, <i>Discipline</i> , Part Two
Wednesday, September 30	Foucault, Part Three, 1-2
Monday, October 5	Foucault, Part Three, 3; Part Four, 3
Wednesday, October 7	In-Class Essay #2
Monday, October 12	David Graeber, <i>Bullshit Jobs: A Theory</i> , Chapters 1-2
Wednesday, October 14	Graeber, <i>Jobs</i> , Chapters 3-4
Monday, October 19	Jason Brennan & Phil Magness, <i>Cracks in the Ivory Tower</i> , Chapters 1-2
Wednesday, October 21	Brennan & Magness, <i>Cracks in the Ivory Tower</i> , Chapters 4-5 (Group Project Part Two due)
Monday, October 26	C. Thi Nguyen, <i>The Score</i> , Chapters 1-3
Wednesday, October 28	Nguyen, <i>The Score</i> , Chapters 5-6, 8

*Updated August 17, 2026

Monday, November 2	Nguyen, <i>The Score</i> , Chapters 10-11, 13, 15
Wednesday, November 4	Nguyen, <i>The Score</i> , Chapters 16-20
Monday, November 9	Nguyen, <i>The Score</i> , Chapters 22, 26-28
Wednesday, November 11	In-Class Essay #3
Monday, November 16	Group Presentations
Wednesday, November 18	Group Presentations, cont.
Monday, November 23	Thanksgiving Break
Wednesday, November 25	Thanksgiving Break
Monday, November 30	*Ursula Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (hand back essay #3)
Monday, December 7	Optional Revision Due 5pm

UGA Well-Being Resources

Mental Health and Wellness Resources:

- *If you or someone you know needs assistance, you are encouraged to contact Student Care and Outreach in the Division of Student Affairs at 706-542-7774 or visit <https://sco.uga.edu>. They will help you navigate any difficult circumstances you may be facing by connecting you with the appropriate resources or services.*
- *UGA has several resources for a student seeking mental health services (<https://www.uhs.uga.edu/bewelluga/bewelluga>) or crisis support (<https://www.uhs.uga.edu/info/emergencies>).*
- *If you need help managing stress anxiety, relationships, etc., please visit BeWellUGA (<https://www.uhs.uga.edu/bewelluga/bewelluga>) for a list of FREE workshops, classes, mentoring, and health coaching led by licensed clinicians and health educators in the University Health Center.*
- *Additional resources can be accessed through the UGA App.*