MASTER SYLLABUS
SW 985  Theory for Research:

I. Rational

This course provides an introduction to interdisciplinary theory for applied social research, along with the opportunity for doctoral students in social work to build an in-depth knowledge of theoretical traditions within related disciplines that are particularly relevant to their individual areas of scholarly interest. The course focuses on: (1) the roles and uses of theory in social inquiry (2) theory building and theory testing (3) induction and deduction (4) the articulation of common or related theoretical traditions in various social science disciplines.

II. Objectives

Upon completing this course, doctoral students in social work will be able to:

1. Describe the role and use of theory in social inquiry, and identify desirable qualities of theory for research in social work.

2. Demonstrate an understanding of how basic epistemological positions held by social and behavioral scientists influence research and theory development.

3. Distinguish between theory when the term is used to mean explanations of relationships between constructs, and other conceptual tools including paradigms, frameworks, ideological perspectives, and typologies.

4. Explain how theoretical considerations can guide qualitative and quantitative research design, data collection, and analytical strategies.

5. Knowledgeably discuss and critique selected theoretical traditions in various social and behavioral sciences such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science and economics.

6. Consider a variety of theoretical approaches in one’s own area of interest, compare and contrast them, and incorporate them into a broad understanding of inquiry in that area of scholarship.

7. Successfully complete exercises in theory construction, explaining the differences between inductive and deductive processes and demonstrating ability in the innovative use of both to build theory.

8. Demonstrate deductive knowledge, skills, and abilities by specifying ideas in theoretical statements with clear propositions and hypotheses so that they can be subjected to rigorous testing.

9. Critically assess existing theoretical models, demonstrating: (a) a thorough understanding of constructs, variables, relationships, mediation, moderation, causal direction, and
reciprocity and (b) an ability to be innovative in recommending improvements to theory and theory development through processes such as specification, elaboration, and extension.

10. Competently choose and apply a theory to questions in one’s own area of scholarly interest by: (a) clearly identifying propositions derived from theory and (b) specifying those propositions as testable hypotheses to help determine the theory’s explanatory value.

III. Topics

• Theory, applied social and behavioral science, and social work
• Theories of change
• Ways of knowing
• Uses of theory
• Is theory really necessary for social work practice research? Policy research?
• Induction, deduction, and theory construction
• Constructs and variables
• Relationships between constructs and variables
• Mediating and moderating variables
• Innovation and improving theoretical models
• Causal direction
• Making and critiquing inference in theory
• Testing theory
• Implications of findings from theoretical tests for social policy and social work practice