Syllabus for PLSC 460-001
Science, Technology, and Public Policy
Fall 2026
TTh 3:05 pm – 4:20 pm, Olmsted E-254

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Course Description

AI is everywhere in public discourse and in our daily lives. We all come to technology with different preconceived notions that shape our willingness to embrace it and level of fear about what it means for the future. In this course, we will apply a social science lens to science and technology policy. While AI will be a major topic, given is current omnipresence, the course will also help students understand how social scientists think about the role of emergent technology in reshaping or reinforcing existing power dynamics, inequalities, and conflicts in society. The course will illuminate why a social science view is critical in assessing and responding to emergent technology like AI. It will also explore how many of the current arguments over AI tech and their potential social, political, and economic nirvanas or catastrophes (depending on one's perspective) are not new. Rather, they have been present in debates over disruptive technologies throughout human history. Students in this course will also engage in an original research project on AI policy and learn how to write about policy for a public audience.

Prerequisites: None

Learning Goals and Objectives

- Goal 1: Develop a social science perspective on emergent technology
    - Objective 1a: Review the process of social science inquiry
    - Objective 1b: Operationalize the process of social science inquiry to address the challenges and opportunities presented by emergent technology
    - Objective 1c: Appreciate the importance of social science inquiry in the conversation surrounding artificial intelligence

- Goal 2: Make connections between current debates over AI and emergent technology of the past
    - Objective 2a: Articulate the major debates over the implications of AI for power, equity, public goods and service delivery, and more
    - Objective 2b: Understand debates from past emergent technology (e.g., corporate farming, nuclear power, the Internet, etc.)
    - Objective 2c: Critically assess the linkages between current AI debates and previous emergent technologies
- Goal 3: Conduct a social science assessment of AI use in government services
    - Objective 3a: Identify the ways in which governments are using AI in public goods and services delivery
    - Objective 3b: Develop a methodology for assessing AI use by Pennsylvania counties
    - Objective 3c: Execute data collection and analysis
    - Objective 3d: Produce policy briefs for county governments on AI use

Methods for Learning and Teaching

This course will rely considerably on active learning in the classroom rather than lecture. It will also employ teamwork in the semester-long research project. To be successful, students must be present and prepared to engage with the material, not present simply to absorb what the professor is saying. We will all be learning from each other and explore this complicated topic together.

Reaching Our Goals

Attendance

Attendance in class is critical for being successful in this course. I will not be lecturing in each class session. There will be a mixture of policy analysis, discussion, debate, and practical application that requires you to be present. Attendance will be a portion of the final grade. I will follow the university's attendance policy when it comes to excused absences: https://aappm.psu.edu/policy/e-11-class-attendance.

Preparation and Participation

I expect you to read the assigned material before class and be able to discuss and apply what you have read. Your effort in preparing for and engaging in each class session will be apparent and will be reflected in your learning and final grade. Furthermore, it is helpful to keep up with current policy debates in the news, since they will be useful for reinforcing concepts discussed in class.

Discussion Ground Rule #1 is Respect

We will be discussing some tough public policy problems in this course. There will inevitably be divergent opinions, some of them very strong, among the class. It is important that you be respectful of your peers and their opinions, lived experiences, and beliefs.

Do Not Suffer in Silence

Please do not suffer in silence throughout the course if you are struggling. Instead, let me know – as soon as possible – what things are not making sense, and we can work it out. If you are having a problem of any kind in the course, please talk to me about it as soon as possible.

Be Flexible

While the syllabus represents an agreement between us, I reserve the right to revise and modify it throughout the course, if it is necessary to achieve our goals. Situations beyond either of our control can also emerge that require course changes. I will notify you right away when any changes are made.

Email Policy

I will work to respond to emails by the next business day. This means that emails sent on the weekends will be responded to by Monday.

Readings

The following books are required for the course:

Berry, Wendell. 2015. The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture. Counterpoint Press. https://www.counterpointpress.com/books/the-unsettling-of-america/. This is an old book, so there are many cheap used copies available online. An older edition is perfectly fine.

Crawford, Kate. 2021. Atlas of AI. Yale University Press. https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300264630/atlas-of-ai/.

Additional readings appear on the course schedule below and can be accessed through Penn State University Libraries (https://libraries.psu.edu/) or online.

Lecture Slides

I will be using limited lecture slides throughout the course. They will not be made available on Canvas, so you will need to meet with a classmate to get the notes if you miss a class session.

Assessing Your Progress Towards Our Goals

The following types of assessment will be used to track your progress towards meeting our course goals: class research project, application and reflection essays, in-class assignments, and attendance.

Each component represents the following percentage of your final grade:

In- and Out-of-Class Assignments	30%
Class Research Project	30%
Attendance	40%

We will use the following grade scale:

Letter	Percent
A	94 to 100
A-	90 to 93
B+	87 to 89
B	84 to 86
B-	80 to 83
C+	77 to 79
C	70 to 76
D	60 to 69
F	Below 60

In- and Out-of-Class Assignments

An important aim of this course is to wrestle with the material together. It is not for me to deliver content and for you to passively consume it. Thus, this class will be "flipped," meaning you will be expected to have read the material for each class session, and we will largely be having discussions and doing exercises during our class sessions. I will also assign some of these exercises to be completed outside of class.

Class Research Project

Learning-by-doing is one hallmark of this course. To that end, you will not only be learning about the importance of social science research for AI policy debates but will be engaging in a semester-long study of how Pennsylvania counties are using AI. This will include tasks like identifying our motivating question, identifying sources of information for answering that question, creating a codebook for the study, collecting data, and analyzing the data. This process will culminate in the production of policy briefs that will (ideally) be published by the Penn State Harrisburg Translational Policy Lab. PA counties will also be the targets of the briefs.

Attendance

Class attendance and evaluation of student performance are to occur in accordance with Academic Administrative Policy E-11. As indicated in this policy, "Class attendance is a critical element of student success and one of the most important ways students learn and understand course materials. Students may need to miss a class meeting to participate in a regularly scheduled university-approved curricular or extracurricular activity or due to unavoidable or

other legitimate circumstances (including participation in local, state, and federal governmental elections and religious observances)."

Given that this course is structured around active and project-based learning, attendance in class is essential for success. To that end, attendance and participation in class has a strong weight in your final grade.

Additional information regarding missed classes and exams can be located in Academic Administrative Policy E-11: Class Attendance and Evaluation of Student Performance.

Make-Up Grades

You are allowed to make-up academic work only in the case of excused absences. These absences may include missing class for a University-sanctioned activity (with proper documentation), illness, religious observance, or family responsibilities. If you know in advance that you are going to miss class, please contact me before the absence to make arrangements for completing the work. If you are absent for an unexpected reason, please check in with me as soon as possible. You will have one week from the day of your return to class to make up a missed assignment.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest, and responsible manner. Academic integrity is a basic guiding principle for all academic activity at The Pennsylvania State University, and all members of the University community are expected to act in accordance with this principle.

According to Penn State policy G-9: Academic Integrity, an academic integrity violation is "an intentional, unintentional, or attempted violation of course or assessment policies to gain an academic advantage or to advantage or disadvantage another student academically." Academic integrity violations include, but are not limited to, unauthorized collaboration or use of prohibited materials, electronic devices, cell phones, or artificial intelligence tools; presenting another person's or generative technology's work as your own; providing false or fabricated information; reusing academic work without the current instructor's permission; and recording or sharing instructional content without authorization. You may not use or submit ideas, images, language, solutions, or other content obtained from another person, from services such as Course Hero or Chegg, or generated by artificial intelligence tools such as Gemini, ChatGPT, or Claude unless your instructor clearly and directly permits such use; when permission is granted, you must follow all requirements for attribution, citation, and disclosure. You may not allow another person to complete academic work or participate in an academic requirement on your behalf, provide prohibited assistance to another student, alter graded work to obtain a favorable grade or regrade, or provide false information to gain an academic advantage or a makeup opportunity. Please be aware that Turnitin may be utilized as a plagiarism detection tool in this course.

Students with questions about academic integrity should ask their instructor before submitting work.

Students facing allegations of academic misconduct may not drop/withdraw from the affected course unless they are cleared of wrongdoing (see G-9: Academic Integrity). Attempted drops will be prevented or reversed, and students will be expected to complete course work and meet course deadlines. Students who are found responsible for academic integrity violations face academic outcomes, which can be severe, and put themselves at jeopardy for other outcomes which may include ineligibility for Dean's List, pass/fail elections, and grade forgiveness. Students may also face consequences from their home/major program and/or The Schreyer Honors College.

See also the Penn State academic integrity resources at https://integrity.psu.edu/academic-integrity and the academic integrity policy of Penn State Harrisburg: https://harrisburg.psu.edu/policy/academic-integrity-policy.

Policy on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

Students may use generative AI tools for other assignments but must indicate which generative AI tool they've used and how they've used it. To do that, students must include an in-text citation directly after any sentence containing information that has been re-worded, paraphrased, copied, or created by a generative AI tool. Students must put copied text within quotation marks and must indicate when other media (e.g., images, graphics, etc.) has been copied or generated. Students must also list the AI tools they've used as a "Sourced Tool" at the end of the paper or project. This policy applies to the use of all generative AI tools, including Grammarly, Copilot, and other artificially intelligent tools provided by the university.

Disability Access

Penn State welcomes students with disabilities into the University's educational programs. Penn State values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. Our goal is to create environments that are usable, equitable, inclusive, and welcoming. Every Penn State campus has a Student Disability Resources (SDR) office. SDR at Penn State Harrisburg is located in the Student Enrichment Center (SEC) Suite 205.

To receive consideration for academic accommodations, auxiliary aids, and/or services, please contact SDR. SDR will engage students in an individualized, interactive, and confidential process to review requests on a case-by-case basis. For more information, please visit the SDR website at https://harrisburg.psu.edu/student-disability-resources.

Please contact the SDR Office at Penn State Harrisburg if you have any questions or would like to discuss accommodations. You can call 717-948-6025, email hbgsdr@psu.edu, or visit the office Monday to Friday between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.

Counseling & Psychological Services

Success in college depends heavily on your personal health and wellbeing. Please recognize that some stress and anxiety is an expected part of life and the college experience, which can be compounded by unexpected setbacks or life changes outside the classroom. Penn State Harrisburg has a number of support options listed in this syllabus.

If you are experiencing issues that feel unmanageable, you reach the point that you have difficulty concentrating and/or feeling motivated, or experience anxiety or depression that interferes with your ability to take care of yourself or your daily responsibilities, or thoughts of harming yourself or dying, please consider talking with someone in our CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services) office. CAPS provides a range of services to help you navigate issues that are impacting your ability to be healthy, well, and productive at college.

You can learn more about the confidential mental health services available on campus at CAPS by visiting the https://harrisburg.psu.edu/caps or by calling (717) 948-6025 Monday through Friday 8am to 5pm. CAPS is located on the 2nd floor of the Student Enrichment Center (SEC), in Suite 205. You can speak to an available counselor 24/7/365 any time by calling 1-877-229-6400 or by texting "LIONS" to 741741. If you or someone you know are struggling with mental health or thoughts of suicide, please reach out, you don't have to struggle alone. Confidential counseling is available and free for students.

Penn State Non-Discrimination Statement

The University is committed to equal access to programs, facilities, admission and employment for all persons. It is the policy of the University to maintain an environment free of harassment and free of discrimination against any person because of age, race, color, ancestry, national origin, religion, creed, service in the uniformed services (as defined in state and federal law), veteran status, sex, sexual orientation, marital or family status, pregnancy, pregnancy-related conditions, physical or mental disability, gender, perceived gender, gender identity, genetic information or political ideas. Discriminatory conduct and harassment, as well as sexual misconduct and relationship violence, violates the dignity of individuals, impedes the realization of the University's educational mission, and will not be tolerated.

Concerns about bias directed toward students can be reported through Educational Equity at the Report Bias site: https://equity.psu.edu/reportbias. Penn State's Code of Conduct can be found at the following link: https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/support-safety/conduct. For additional resources and information, please contact the Inclusive Excellence Center at clj15@psu.edu or (717) 948-6256.

Direct all inquiries regarding Penn State's nondiscrimination policy to the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access at oeoa@psu.edu or (814) 863-0471.

Course Schedule

We will attempt to follow this schedule as closely as possible, but we may take more time on some concepts and less time on others. For this reason, a digital version of this syllabus can be found on our course website (https://sites.psu.edu/djmallinson/plsc-460-science-technology-and-public-policy/). All changes to the schedule will be announced in class or via e-mail and the online syllabus will be constantly up to date. Required course readings are listed and due dates for assignments are in bold. Links to some additional readings are included in the syllabus on my website. If you have trouble, please do not hesitate to e-mail me.

Week 1: Introductions

- August 25: Introduction to the class and each other
- August 27: Let's play with AI
    - Complete AI Essentials Training on Canvas prior to class. Submit completion screenshot in the class Canvas.
- August 29: **Regular Drop Deadline**

Week 2: Social Science Inquiry

- September 1: Social Science Inquiry
- September 3: APSA Conference
    - No in-class session
    - Work with your team to prepare your ICMA report presentation
    - ICMA. 2026. *Responsible Artificial Intelligence in Local Government*.

Week 3: AI and Public Services/Goods Delivery

- September 8: ICMA Report Presentations
- September 10: ICMA Report Presentations

Week 4: AI and Social Structures

- September 15
    - Crawford Introduction and Chapter 1
    - A.I. Revolution
- September 17
    - Crawford Chapters 2 and 3
    - Dark Sides of Artificial Intelligence

Week 5: AI and Social Structures

- September 22
    - Crawford Chapters 4 and 5
- September 24
    - Crawford Chapter 6 and Conclusion

Week 6: Project Work Week (County Governments and AI)

- September 29: Let's Learn About Counties!

    - Read Sections I, II, and IV of the *Manual for County Commissioners*
- October 1: Project Work Day – Let's start digging

Week 7: Transparency

- October 6: The Push for Government Transparency
    - Krastev, Ivan. "Does More Transparency Mean More Trust?" Open Government Partnership.
    - Wang, Qiushi and Zhen Guan. 2023. "Can Sunlight Disperse Mistrust? A Meta-Analysis of the Effect of Transparency on Citizens' Trust in Government." Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory 33(3): 453-467.
    - Tax Project. 2024. Government Transparency Timeline.
- October 8: Is transparency a true regime value? How does it apply to AI?
    - Piotrowski, Suzanne J. 2014. "Transparency: A Regime Value Linked with Ethics." *Administration & Society* 46 (2): 181-189.
    - Marshall, Candace. 2026. "What is AI Transparency? A Comprehensive Guide." Zendesk Blog. April 13.

Week 8: The Old is New Again

- October 13
    - Berry Chapters 1, 2, and 3
- October 15
    - Berry Chapters 4 and 5

Week 9: The Old is New Again

- October 20
    - Berry Chapters 6 and 7
- October 22
    - Berry Chapters 8 and 9

Week 10: Project Work Week – Time for a Codebook

- October 27
- October 29

Week 11: Other Emergent Tech

- November 3: The Printing Press
    - Clear and Present Danger Episode 10
- November 5: The Automobile
    - Past, Present, and Future of the Car

Week 12: Other Emergent Tech

- November 10: Nuclear Power
    - How Nuclear Power Shaped the Modern World
- November 12: The Internet and Social Media
    - Teens, Social Media, and Technology

Week 13: Project Work Week – Complete Data Collection

- November 17
- November 19

Week 14: Thanksgiving Week

- November 24 and 26: No classes

Week 15: Project Work Week – Results!

- December 1
- December 3

Week 16: Project Work Week – Crafting Policy Briefs

- December 8: Learning How to Write Briefs
    - UN FAO. Preparing Policy Briefs.
- December 10: Let's Write!

Week 17: Finals Week

- December 15: Final Research Brief Due