Independent Study (SOC 600)
Sample Proposal

Brief course description
A widely discussed topic in the sociology of education is the impact of teachers professional development programs on the student achievement gap. This self-directed course will facilitate my assessment of how coaching hours and peer-to-peer monitoring can improve the performance of students with low SES in public schools.

Learning goals / purpose of course
My priorities for this quarter are twofold. My first goal is to produce a literature review so that I can situate my preliminary research questions within a broad debate about the achievement gap in public education. I plan to read widely about the social and psychological aspects of teacher career development, with a special interest in studies that focus on coaching and teacher collegiality. A particular attention to inequality in the school system and the role of parents’ SES will also guide my readings. I will also consult publications that specifically discuss the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) test and its reliability as an assessment tool for minority students. Secondly, I anticipate that a teacher’s tenure and the number of coaching hours she has completed will be positively correlated with test scores, especially for students of low SES. I will use this course to estimatesome statistical models that allow me to test this and other hypotheses.

Course structure and learning resources to be used
Over the course of the quarter I will turn in three short reports (4 pages or less). Each report will consist of a brief summary of the works I will have read up to that point, with special attention to how their central arguments relate to my research questions.

I have already met with the professor to choose an appropriate reading list. In addition to relevant articles and books on the subject, I will use the New Jersey Board of Education’s“Cycle I &II Score Interpretation Manual” as a reference in order to understand the intricacies of the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) procedures and their interpretation in previous studies.

Meeting schedule
The instructor and I have agreed to meet twice a month in order to discuss my progress and help me further develop my research agenda. My plan is to bring a list of questions and concerns to these meetings for clarification.

Expected outcome / product
The three short reports will serve as a scaffold to think about appropriate statistical models and measures for a future project. My progressive work in this course will culminate in a 20-page paper, which will include a more extensive literature review and an interpretation of some preliminary statistical models.

Method of evaluation
The professor will give me thorough and detailed feedback on each of the three short reports. I will also take full advantage of our frequent discussions to clarify my understanding of the major themes in the literature. In addition, I intend to present my work at an interdisciplinary conference organized by some graduate students from the college of Education.