

BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE: APPLIED RESEARCH METHODS IN SECURITY AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

To address global security threats that require professionals to be adept in theoretical knowledge and practical application of research methodologies, the Department of Security and Emergency Services at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Worldwide developed a research methods course for undergraduate students in security studies. The course bridges theoretical and practical application gaps in security and emergency services, emphasizing student engagement. The theory-to-practice approach enhances the learning experience and equips students with essential tools for real-world challenges. This article delineates the course's innovations and student impact. Student and instructor feedback are used to evaluate the course's effectiveness, providing insights for other programs and educators across the homeland security enterprise.

Keywords: *emergency management, research methods, security studies*

The evolving landscape of global security threats necessitates a workforce adept in both theoretical knowledge and practical application of research methodologies. Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU)'s Department of Security and Emergency Services developed Applied Research Methods in Security and Emergency Services, a research course to meet this need. This article outlines the course content and implementation, providing a roadmap for integrating applied research methods into security and emergency education. The course bridges the gap between theory and practice. The article highlights student reflections illustrating the course's impact on learning. Student feedback and project results help evaluate the course, informing a discussion on prospective curriculum improvements.

UNIVERSITY AND PROGRAM BACKGROUND

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Worldwide (ERAU-W) is one of three campuses at ERAU University; it is an online worldwide campus. Courses are also available at the residential campuses of Daytona Beach, Florida, and Prescott, Arizona. In 2022–23, ERAU's total enrollment was 30,948 students across three campuses; the Worldwide campus educated 19,237 students (14,546 undergraduates and 4,691 graduates) (Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

[ERAU], 2023). ERAU is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges, Region 3: South, Division 5 (ERAU, 2023).

ERAU-W hosts the homeland security program within the Department of Security and Emergency Services. The program was the first to receive accreditation from the Council for the Accreditation of Emergency Management and Homeland Security Education (2023), reflecting its commitment to leading education in homeland security. The program is one of two bachelor's and two master's degrees in the department, supported by eight full-time faculty members, with an enrollment of 1,687 students (1,435 undergraduates and 252 graduate students) (ERAU, 2023).

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The online course Applied Research Methods in Security and Emergency Services prepares students for research methods across the homeland security enterprise. This nine-week course is required for homeland security majors, has no prerequisites, and introduces students to essential research methodologies applicable to the field. Students learn to develop research designs and methodologies and apply them to real-world scenarios. The student learning outcomes for the course are as follows:

1. Summarize the scientific method, nature of the inquiry, and phases of the basic research cycle as it applies to emergencies, disasters, and other domestic/homeland/civil security crises.
2. Describe the components of a research paper in the study of emergencies, disasters, and other domestic/homeland/civil security crises.
3. Apply scholarly research material to study emergencies, disasters, and other domestic/homeland/civil security crises.
4. Assess various research approaches and data collection methods for the study of emergencies, disasters, and other domestic/homeland/civil security crises and their relative merits based on ethical practices and standards.
5. Produce empirically based research papers on emergencies, disasters, and other domestic/homeland/civil security crises using qualitative and quantitative methods.

Nine weekly modules cover a broad spectrum of research methodologies. The modules begin by teaching students what research is and how it differs from opinion, how to find quality sources and evaluate them critically, and ethical issues in research. Later modules in the course address specific research methods applicable to security and emergency management studies. They are devoted to geographical information systems methods, video ethnography, and interviews with established scholars detailing their research methods and why they chose them. This approach enriches the students' learning experience by underscoring the importance of reflexivity and ethical awareness in conducting research (Redmon, 2019; Tochon, 2007). Case studies are instrumental in fostering students' ability to critically engage with and apply video ethnography methodologies to their research, reflecting a significant focus on ethical considerations and the responsible dissemination of research findings.

For example, students learn about video ethnography as an approach to analyzing and interpreting complex social phenomena through visual storytelling. Video ethnography is a research method that employs video recording to document and analyze the behaviors, interactions, and cultures of individuals or groups in their natural environments. It is essential when researchers aim to capture the complex, embodied, and multimodal aspects of human interaction within their specific sociocultural contexts. It offers a powerful tool for documenting and analyzing the richness of human communication and behavior and is increasingly being employed in research studies of social interactions and cultural phenomena (Meier zu Verl & Tuma, 2021; Mitsuahara & Hauck, 2021). Video ethnography involves observation through film and analysis by practitioners who build long-term relationships and trust with the populations studied (Heath et al., 2010; Knoblauch et al., 2014; Shrum & Scott, 2019). Through discussions, assignments, and film reviews, students engage in the process of creating meaningful and impactful video ethnographies. Highlighting applications in security studies, the module introduces students to the dynamics of interaction and networks through video ethnography.

COURSE ASSESSMENT

Assessment happens at the course level and student learning level at ERAU. Courses undergo a rigorous development process with a team that includes professors, instructional design teams, and the teaching and learning center. Course assessment involves collaboration with this team and includes peer observations, feedback from the team, and student feedback.

Assignments to assess individual student learning include peer discussions, reflective exercises, and a culminating project where students apply research methods they have learned to a problem or situation. The curriculum emphasizes critical thinking and the practical application of research tools, with a significant focus on ethical considerations and the responsible dissemination of research findings. Assessments focus on students' ability to critically engage with research methodologies and apply them to real-world issues.

Student reflections have been overwhelmingly positive, though data are limited, with one class offered to date. Returning to the video ethnography example, student reflections from *Exiled Hopes – Sürgün Umutlar* (ResearchTV, 2023) reveal its powerful role in fostering emotional intelligence and methodological innovation. The documentary explores the lives of Turkish exiles rebuilding their lives in the U.S. following the 2016 alleged coup attempt, highlighting their resilience, cultural adaptation, and struggles with displacement. Students noted how the film provided insights into the political and social contexts of forced migration, enhanced their appreciation for visual storytelling as a methodological tool, and offered broader applications for understanding security challenges. This impactful narrative inspired empathy, critical engagement, and connections to current global security issues while also encouraging future research directions. The following are observations of the course's impact based on student reflections:

- *Empathetic Engagement.* One student noted the profound impact of a photograph in the film showing Turkish military officers with red ‘X’ markers over those purged post-coup. This visual metaphor highlighted personal losses and the abrupt severing of careers and lives, deepening their understanding of the human cost behind political actions.
- *Insight into Political and Social Contexts.* Feedback highlighted a narration where interviewees expressed disbelief at the coup conditions, suggesting a lack of traditional precursors and raising suspicions of orchestration. This discussion prompted a critical examination of political narratives and their implications for citizens’ lives.
- *Appreciation of Visual Storytelling.* Students were particularly moved by the film’s use of altered photographs and personal testimonies to describe the emotional journey of individuals forced to flee their homeland, emphasizing the storytelling power of visual elements to convey complex emotional and social realities.
- *Methodological Appreciation.* The film’s methodological approach, combining intimate interviews with observational footage, was praised for conveying the stories of resilience and hope amidst adversity. A student reflected on how these methods create a compelling narrative that fosters a deep connection with the viewer. A student noted: “The film’s narrative complexity, combined with its methodological rigor, offered a compelling case study on the efficacy of video ethnography in exploring nuanced security issues. It challenged me to think critically about the ethical dimensions of research and storytelling.”
- *Broader Applications for Security Studies.* One student proposed applying the techniques seen in *Exiled Hopes* to document the evacuation of Hmong and Afghan immigrants, drawing parallels between these events and the film’s subject. This underscores the potential of video ethnography to explore and humanize security-related issues. A student reflection illustrates the course’s success in bridging theory with practice: “Watching *Exiled Hopes* transformed my understanding of qualitative research. [The instructor’s] intimate portrayal of the coup’s aftermath revealed the power of storytelling in research, leaving a lasting impression on my approach to security studies.”
- *Inspiration for Future Research.* The *Exiled Hopes* film inspired students to consider video ethnography projects, with one suggesting a study on the challenges aviation security personnel face. This reflects the film’s role not just as a subject of study but as a catalyst for new research ideas within security studies.
- *Connection to Current Security Challenges.* Reflecting on the film, a student discussed its relevance to understanding the plight of refugees and asylum seekers, highlighting the role of video ethnography in bringing attention to their challenges and advocating for their rights through powerful storytelling.

The aggregated student feedback on the *Exiled Hopes* film assignment highlights the significant educational value of video ethnography as a research method in security studies. These reflections demonstrate that *Exiled Hopes* effectively achieved the course objectives by bridging theory and practice, fostering empathy, encouraging critical thinking, and promoting methodological innovation. Students' ability to connect the film's themes to broader security studies and contemporary challenges underscores its transformative potential as a teaching tool. Additionally, the assignment demonstrates the power of video ethnography to shed light on complex issues and inspire future research, making a solid case for its broader integration into security studies curricula.

FUTURE ITERATIONS OF APPLIED RESEARCH METHODS IN SECURITY AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

The course was taught for the first time in the January 2024 term and so will continue to evolve, incorporating student feedback, team feedback, and emerging research methodologies. Future iterations will explore additional case studies and video ethnography projects to address the changing security and emergency services landscape. In future development, the course will focus on integrating emerging research methodologies and case studies, establishing itself as a pivotal model for blending academic inquiry with practical implementation and preparing students to navigate the complexities of global security challenges.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the development and implementation of the Applied Research Methods in Security and Emergency Services course for security studies students at ERAU-W. The course combines theoretical research methods with practical security and emergency services applications. Specific innovations are discussed, including the novel approach of integrating video ethnography, exemplified by the film *Exiled Hopes – Sürgün Umutlar*, which underscores the profound capacity of video ethnography to connect academic research with real-world applications. As student reactions to the film demonstrate, this method is a compelling instrument for traversing the divide between theoretical constructs and practical exigencies in security and emergency services. The course integrates theoretical research methods with practical applications, enhancing students' ability to address security and emergency services challenges. Feedback and evaluations positively impacted student engagement and understanding, demonstrating the course's value in preparing professionals for real-world situations.

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