BUSI 625-002: Design Thinking for MBAs

SPRING 2026

Faculty: Patrick Ray
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Class Location: McNair Hall, Room 216

Office hours: By Appointment

Most business problems don't come with clear instructions. The messiest, most valuable problems resist easy definition, and jumping to solutions too quickly is often what kills good ideas before they start.

This course teaches how to navigate ambiguity, deeply understand problems before solving them, and build the observational and empathetic abilities that underpin human-centered design. You'll learn to see systems under stress, recognize workarounds and friction, map stakeholder tensions, and frame problems in ways that open up genuinely new possibilities.

Key skills you'll learn include:

- Navigate ambiguity and become comfortable with uncertainty
- Practice disciplined observation without premature interpretation
- Build empathy through behavioral inference rather than self-reporting
- Frame and reframe problems to reveal hidden opportunities
- Map stakeholder perspectives and systemic tensions
- Distinguish research that moves understanding from research that merely confirms
- Develop and test solution concepts as hypotheses
- Trace solutions back to specific problem insights

With these skills, you'll be prepared to tackle complex, ill-defined challenges where the problem itself is unclear. You'll learn to resist the MBA tendency to jump immediately to execution, and instead invest time in understanding what you're actually solving for. This approach mirrors how professional design consultancies like IDEO and Frog approach client work, and it's increasingly what organizations need from their leaders.

This class will be highly interactive and experiential, with significant time dedicated to fieldwork, observation, group discussion, and reflection. You might find that this class isn't quite what you'd expected, and that's intentional. This class is built around "thriving in an atmosphere of ambiguity". There won't always be clarity, and there will seldom be a "right" answer. My hope is that this class helps you with the skills to *make* clarity and to build a convincing case for *your* answer.

Being messy is okay, and it's okay to say "I don't know." The goal is not to have all the answers, but to ask better questions.

Readings

There are no required textbooks for this course. Readings and materials will be provided as needed throughout the semester and posted to Canvas.

Optional resources that align with course themes include:

- *Creative Acts for Curious People* by Sarah Stein Greenberg (Stanford d.school)
- Articles and case studies from IDEO, Frog Design, and the Stanford d.school

Projects

This course is organized around three design projects of increasing complexity:

Project 1: Campus Problem Exploration
A short, contained exploration of a campus-based problem. Focus on observation and problem definition only.

Project 2: Community or Business Problem
An in-depth problem definition exercise based on either a community or business scenario. Emphasis on stakeholder mapping, empathy work, and root cause analysis.

Final Project: Complex Problem Scenario
A comprehensive design thinking project where teams define a complex problem, conduct research, and develop solution concepts. Business and nonprofit scenario options available.

You will work individually on project 1 and in different teams for project 2 and the final project.

Team evaluations

You will evaluate team members multiple times during the semester. Your grade for team deliverables will be adjusted if (a) your team indicates that you did not actively contribute, or (b) you do not complete the team evaluation by the deadline.

Grading

All assignments will have detailed specifications available on Canvas. This course uses specifications-based grading: each deliverable has clear criteria, and credit is awarded based on the number of specifications met.

Major Components

Attendance & Participation: 25%

- Attendance (taken at start of class)
- Engagement in activities and discussions
- Quality of contributions during fieldwork debriefs
- Willingness to share observations

Individual Assignments: 35%
Team Assignments: 40%

The exact mix of assignments may be adjusted based on class needs and learning pace. Additional observational exercises or reflection assignments may be added; some assignments may be modified or combined.

Tokens and Revisions

Each student receives **6 tokens** at the start of the course:

- **3 tokens** for 24-hour extensions on individual assignments (must request before due date)
- **3 tokens** for revisions on graded assignments (must request within 24 hours of grade posting; revision due within 48 hours)

Teams receive **3 revision tokens** collectively for team assignments.

Late work and extensions

Unless you are using a token, there is a strict no late work and no extensions policy. In the case of extremely extenuating circumstances (i.e. hospitalization, death in the family), the Faculty will work with you on deadlines.

Students with disabilities

If you have a documented disability that may affect academic performance, you should: 1) make sure this documentation is on file with Disability Support Services (Allen Center, Room 111 / adarice@rice.edu / x5841) to determine the accommodations you need; and 2) meet with Patrick within the first two weeks of the course to discuss your accommodation needs.

Course policies and expectations

My Responsibility to You

My responsibility is to have all of you be one of my top priorities this semester. I will bump you to the top of the list for any office hours or meeting requests. I will work to accommodate your schedules when you reach out. I will turn around grades in a reasonable and respectful amount of time, and provide any answers or clarifications needed.

Most importantly, I will ensure that our classroom is a place where we can dig into the messy world of learning, engage in group discussions, and push back against each other's assumptions and opinions in a highly respectful manner. There is a zero-tolerance policy for anything disrespectful, racist, misogynistic, or anything else that would have a negative impact on our class discussions, cohesion, or community.

I am also very willing to be flexible to the realities of what you are going through. People get sick, cars break down, or we can just be having a rough day. Please let me know if you are going through any extenuating circumstances. I can't help you out if I don't know what's going on, but if you're willing to take that step in being open about it, I promise you I will be as accommodating as humanly possible.

Your Responsibility

Your responsibility in this course is to be an active and engaged learner by coming to sessions prepared and engaging in class discussions and activities. It is your responsibility to be a responsible and engaged team member for your group work. This includes being communicative, collaborative, respectful, and setting aside time outside of class to meet and work together.

Design thinking requires, literally, stepping outside your comfort zone. You will spend time in the field observing, sometimes in uncomfortable ways. You will be asked to sit still for three hours just watching. You will talk to strangers. You will document workarounds and failures. This discomfort is part of the learning.

Attendance

I use a sign-in sheet to track attendance, and I collect it one minute after class starts. Make sure you sign in when you arrive.

If you're running late: Send me an email at least 5 minutes before class starts. Use a subject line like "Late to class -- [Date]" so I can find it easily. You don't need to explain why; just giving me a heads-up is enough, and your lateness will be excused.

If you need to miss class: Things come up, I get it. When they do, please reach out early and keep me in the loop. Be honest with me. If something's going on, just say so; you don't need to invent an excuse. If you're upfront, I'll always do what I can to help you within the bounds of this syllabus.

Why I care about this: This class is practical, and this policy reflects what you'll encounter professionally. In the working world, no-call-no-shows cost you the client, the interview, or the opportunity, and they reflect poorly on the people around you. Reaching out when you're running behind is a small professional courtesy, and this is a low-stakes place to start building that habit.

AI Policy

There are moments in this course where the use of AI tools will be suggested. If it hasn't been explicitly mentioned for an assignment or activity, you must disclose if you use AI tools. Specifically, you should include (a) which tool, (b) to what extent AI supported your work in an assignment or activity. Parts that were generated by AI or assisted by AI should be clearly marked in your assignment.

Rice Honor Code

All assignments submitted to the Faculty must abide by the Rice Honor Code. Given the team-based nature of this course, it's important that all team members contribute to assignments.

It is considered an Honor Code violation to submit work on which your name appears (e.g. group work) if you have not had a material role in the preparation of the submission. Rotating assignments within the group such that only some individuals in the group do the work for each assignment is expressly prohibited.

Feigning sickness in order to get an excused absence or extension is also an Honor Code violation.

Devices

In this course, unless notified by the Faculty during a class session, laptops and tablets are not permitted to be open during class. If you must use a device for note-taking, let the Faculty know beforehand. Under no circumstances can a laptop or tablet be used if there is a guest speaker.

Note: *This syllabus provides the general structure and expectations for the course. Specific assignments, timings, and activities may be adjusted based on class progress and learning needs. Detailed assignment specifications and due dates will be provided on Canvas.*