Philosophy and Public Issues

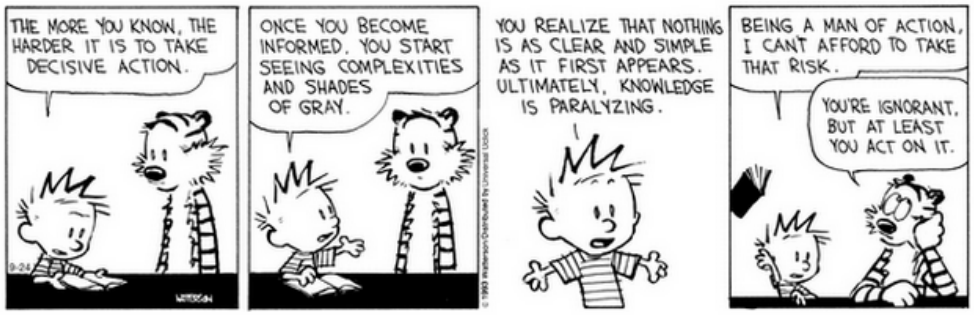
PHIL 0350

Fall 2024

University of Pittsburgh

Class location: 232 Cathedral of Learning
Meeting times: Mon & Wed, 11-11:50am

Instructor: Dr. Shawn Simpson
Pronouns: he/him/his
Office location: 1029A
Office hours: TBD
Email: sms461@pitt.edu, sms521@pitt.edu
TA: Jason Kay: jason.kay@pitt.edu



Watterson, Bill. *There's Treasure Everywhere: A Calvin and Hobbes Collection*. Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1996. Print.

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Overview:

To be human means to be part of a community, and inevitably being a part of a community means dealing with not just your own private affairs but with issues of public concern. As has often been said, no person is an island, and the actions of all in some way directly or indirectly affect the lives of others. The purpose of this course is to guide students through a philosophical analysis of public issues of contemporary importance with an emphasis on how these issues look from the point of view of major moral and political theories. Special attention will be paid to the legal side of these issues. Topics discussed in this course include abortion rights, freedom of speech, environmental policy, and the relationship between law and society.

Required Texts:

There is **one** required book for this course. *Philosophy of Law: A Very Short Introduction* (2nd Edition) by Raymond Wacks. All readings will be made available online through the course Canvas page in the "Files" section.

Grading:

PHIL 0350

Attendance/participation	10%
Essay 1	20%
Midterm	25%
Essay 2	20%
Final exam	25%

Essays will be a minimum of 5 pages and double-spaced.

Exams will be multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and matching.

Course Schedule

Students are expected to complete the assigned readings before the corresponding class session. Required readings are marked with a star *. Assignments are marked with a triple star ***.

Aug 26 Introduction
Brief overview of philosophy and its application to public issues.
Overview of the syllabus and course expectations.
Introduction to arguments and fallacies
*No assigned readings

Aug 28 Meta-Ethics
Introduction to moral philosophy, meta-ethical theories, theories of law
*Rima Basu, "Risky Inquiry: Developing an Ethics for Philosophical Practice"
*Wacks, *Philosophy of Law,* Chapter 1
Optional: J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, selections

Sep 2 No Class
--- Labor Day ---

Sep 4 Utilitarianism
*John Stuart Mill, selections
*Louis P. Pojman, "Assessing Utilitarianism"
Case studies
Optional: Julia Driver, "Pleasure as the Standard of Virtue in Hume's Moral Philosophy"

Sep 9 Moral Relativism
*James Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"
*Wacks, *Philosophy of Law,* Chapter 2

Sep 11 Kant
*Onora O'Neill, "Kant's Ethics"
Case studies
Optional: Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysic of Morals*, selections

Sep 16 Virtue Ethics
*Bernard Mayo, "Virtue Ethics"
Case studies, virtue jurisprudence
Optional: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, selections; Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics and the Treatment of Animals"

Sep 18 The Social Contract
*Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, selections
*Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, selections
*Wacks, *Philosophy of Law,* Chapter 6
Optional: Frederick Douglass "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852); Sitting Bull, "The life my people want is a life of freedom" (1882); John Rawls (the Veil of Ignorance), selections.

Sep 23 Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory
*Charles Mills, ""Ideal Theory" as Ideology"

Sep 25 Consent (in its many forms)
*Phoebe Friesen, "Why Are Pelvic Exams on Unconscious, Unconsenting Women Still Part of Medical Training?"
Optional: The Tuskegee Experiment: https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/index.html

Sep 30 Individual Rights vs. Public Duties
*Colgrove, J. & Bayer, R., "Manifold Restraints: Liberty, Public Health, and the Legacy of Jacobson v Massachusetts"
*Case study: George Washington and Smallpox
******First Paper Due******

Oct 2 The Paradox of Tolerance
*Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* selection
*Godfrey-Smith and Kerr, "Tolerance: A Hierarchical Analysis"

Oct 7 Groups and Collectives
*Scarre, "Evil Collectives"
SEP on Group Agency

Oct 9 Legal Interpretation
*Scalia, Common-Law Courts in a Civil-Law System
*Wacks, *Philosophy of Law,* Chapter 3

Oct 14 No Class
--- Fall Break ---

Oct 16 Terrorism
*The FBI and US Homeland Security definitions of domestic terrorism
Claudia Card, Confronting Evils: Terrorism, Torture, Genocide, selections*

Oct 21 Capital Punishment
*Brooks, "Retributivist Arguments Against Capital Punishment"
*Wacks, *Philosophy of Law,* Chapter 4

Oct 23 Midterm Exam
******Midterm exam******

Oct 28 Civil Disobedience
*Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience"
*Dr. MLK Jr, "Letter from Birmingham Jail
Optional: Abbey, "Polemic: Industrial Tourism…"

Oct 30 Non-Civil Disobedience/Vigilantism
*Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet"
Optional: Dumsday, "On Cheering Charles Bronson: The Ethics of Vigilantism"

Nov 4 Race
*Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, selections on "color-blindness"
*Derrick Bell, "Racial Realism"

Nov 6 Gender
*Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak, "He/She/They/Ze"
*Wacks, *Philosophy of Law,* Chapter 5
Optional: Ásta Kristjana Sveinsdóttir, "The Metaphysics of Sex and Gender"

Nov 11 Abortion
*Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"
*Don Marquis, "Why Abortion Is Immoral"

Nov 13 Killing & Letting Die
*James Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia"
*Winston Nesbitt, "Is Killing No Worse Than Letting Die?"
Optional: David L. Perry, "Battlefield Euthanasia: Should Mercy-Killings Be Allowed"

Nov 18 Eating & Hunting Animals
*William O. Stephens, "Five Arguments for Vegetarianism"
*Roger Scruton, "Fox-Hunting: The Modern Case"
Optional: Aldo Leopold, "On Hunting and Population Control"

Nov 20 De-extinction & Species Value
*Ben A. Minteer, "Extinct Species Should Stay Extinct"
*Lilly-Marlene Russow, "Why Do Species Matter?"
Optional: J. Baird Callicott, "The Philosophical Value of Wildlife"
******2nd Paper Due******

Nov 25 No Class
--- Thanksgiving ---

Nov 27 No Class
--- Thanksgiving ---

Dec 2 Environmental Ethics
*Wilderness Act 1964
*William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature"
Optional: Val Plumwood, "Wilderness Skepticism and Wilderness Dualism"

Dec 4 Leopold's Land Ethic & Its Problems
*Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, selections – "Thinking Like a Mountain", "Escudilla", "The Land Ethic"
Optional: Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, selections and critique of Leopold

Dec 9 Art
*Claire Dederer, "What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?" *The Paris Review*
Optional: Alex King (editor), "Eight Scholars on Art and Artificial Intelligence," *Aesthetics for Birds*

TBD ***Final Exam**

Other possible topics for reading/discussion: What is Democracy/Socialism/Fascism?, Confederate Statues, Protests, Ethics of War, Voting Rights, Political Parties, Propaganda, De-platforming, Book-banning, Affirmative Action, Defunding the Police, Reparations, Gun Rights, Privacy and Information, Political Violence, Civil War/Revolution, Critical Legal/Race Theory, Lawyering, Legal Pragmatism vs. Realism, etc…

Course & University Policies & Services

Academic Integrity
Students in this course will be expected to comply with the University of Pittsburgh's Policy on Academic Integrity. Any student suspected of violating this obligation for any reason during the semester will be required to participate in the procedural process, initiated at the instructor level, as outlined in the University Guidelines on Academic Integrity. This may include, but is not limited to, the confiscation of the examination of any individual suspected of violating University Policy. Furthermore, no student may bring any unauthorized materials to an exam, including dictionaries and programmable calculators.

To learn more about Academic Integrity, visit the Academic Integrity Guide for an overview of the topic. For hands- on practice, complete the Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism tutorial.

Late Assignments
Missing an exam without an excuse is an automatic failure for that assignment. Each day a paper project is late, a half a letter grade will be deducted from the total. Otherwise, students must obtain permission from the instructor prior (for papers, at least a week prior; for exams, at least two weeks prior) to the deadline to extend the assignment's due date or set up an alternative agreement.

No Use of Generative AI Permitted
Intellectual integrity is vital to an academic community and for my fair evaluation of your work. All work completed and/or submitted in this course must be your own, completed in accordance with the University's Guidelines on Academic Integrity. You may not engage in unauthorized collaboration or make use of ChatGPT or any other generative AI applications at any time.

Disability Services
If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and Disability Resources and Services (DRS), 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890, drsrecep@pitt.edu, (412) 228-5347 for P3 ASL users, as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Classroom Conduct
I expect you to complete the assigned readings before the corresponding class session. Some of the topics we'll be covering will be somewhat controversial and some of your fellow students will hold wildly differing views from you. I expect everyone in this class to treat each other with dignity and respect at all times in class. The purpose of this course is to provide a safe space for each of us to learn and explore ideas with each other – not to simply demean or put each other down.

Content Warning and Class Climate Statement
Our course readings and classroom discussions will often focus on mature, difficult, and potentially challenging topics. As with any course in ethics, course topics are often political and personal. Readings and discussions might trigger strong feelings – anger, discomfort, anxiety,

confusion, excitement, humor, and even boredom. Some of us will have emotional responses to the readings; some of us will have emotional responses to our peers' understanding of the readings; all of us should feel responsible for creating a space that is both intellectually rigorous and respectful. Above all, be respectful (even when you strongly disagree) and be mindful of the ways that our identities position us in the classroom.

Devil's Advocate

Part of my job as a philosophy instructor is to play the "devil's advocate". That is, it is my job to question your views and your reasons for holding those views, to question the views of the authors we're reading, and to try my best to defend or argue for views – silly or absurd as they may seem – that contradict yours. Just know that when I take up this role, I am not trying to make you look bad or look stupid. I am also not questioning your intelligence. It is simply my job to dig as deep as I can and see what your real foundational reasons are for holding the views you do. It's worth noting also that just because I argue for (or against) some view, doesn't mean that I really believe it (or don't). Again, this is simply a philosophical method for getting you to think about these issues more deeply and more clearly.

Class Participation

Lack of participation during in-lecture discussions will not lower your grade. I understand that each of us have different degrees of comfort when it comes to talking in large groups and I do not believe in punishing shyness. However, active participation in lecture can affect your grade positively. Discussion during office hours may positively affect your grade too. Also, attendance is a part of your grade. Arriving to a session 10 minutes or more past start time will count as an unexcused absence (unless given prior permission).

Democracy in the Classroom

This course is meant to benefit you. As much as I will try to remain aware of how you all are doing and what is working and not working, *you* – more than I – know what is working and what isn't, what you are interested in or not, or what you need more time on or not. To the end of making this course work for you, I give you a say in just about all matters of course content (within University policy limits). Students may propose changes to and vote on when topics are discussed (earlier or later in the schedule), which topics are discussed (within thematic reason), and which readings are focused on during each section. Students may also propose and vote on changes to the general structure of in-class sessions (whether they want primarily lectures or group work or want to change things up for just one class in particular). If you have a proposal, either bring it up at the end of a class session or email me and I'll be happy to consider it. We'll discuss and vote on proposed changes through Canvas.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The University of Pittsburgh does not tolerate any form of discrimination, harassment, or retaliation based on disability, race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, genetic information, marital status, familial status, sex, age, sexual orientation, veteran status or gender identity or other factors as stated in the University's Title IX policy. The University is committed to taking prompt action to end a hostile environment that interferes with the University's mission. For

more information about policies, procedures, and practices, visit the Civil Rights & Title IX Compliance web page.

I ask that everyone in the class strive to help ensure that other members of this class can learn in a supportive and respectful environment. If there are instances of the aforementioned issues, please contact the Title IX Coordinator, by calling 412-648-7860, or e-mailing titleixcoordinator@pitt.edu. Reports can also be filed online. You may also choose to report this to a faculty/staff member; they are required to communicate this to the University's Office of Diversity and Inclusion. If you wish to maintain complete confidentiality, you may also contact the University Counseling Center (412-648-7930).

Gender Inclusive Language
Language is gender-inclusive and non-sexist when we use words that affirm and respect how people describe, express, and experience their gender. Just as sexist language excludes women's experiences, non-gender-inclusive language excludes the experiences of individuals whose identities may not fit the gender binary, and/or who may not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. Identities including trans, intersex, and genderqueer reflect personal descriptions, expressions, and experiences. Gender-inclusive/non-sexist language acknowledges people of any gender (for example, first year student versus freshman, chair versus chairman, humankind versus mankind, etc.). It also affirms non-binary gender identifications, and recognizes the difference between biological sex and gender expression. Students, faculty, and staff may share their preferred pronouns and names, and these gender identities and gender expressions should be honored.

Sexual Misconduct, Required Reporting, and Title IX
The University is committed to combating sexual misconduct. As a result, you should know that University faculty and staff members are required to report any instances of sexual misconduct, including harassment and sexual violence, to the University's Title IX office. What this means is that as your professor, I am required to report any incidents of sexual misconduct that are directly reported to me, or of which I am somehow made aware. After a report is made, you will be contacted by the Title IX Office for opportunities for support and options for proceeding.

There are two important exceptions to this requirement about which you should be aware:

A list of the designated University employees who, as counselors and medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality, can be found here: https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix-compliance/make-report/information-responsible-employees

An important exception to the reporting requirement exists for academic work and advocacy. Disclosures about sexual misconduct that are shared as part of an academic project, classroom discussion, course assignment or public awareness event, are not required to be disclosed to the University's Title IX office.

If you are the victim of sexual misconduct, Pitt encourages you to reach out to these resources:

Title IX Office: 412-648-7860
University Counseling Center: 412-648-7930 (8:30 A.M. TO 5 P.M. M-F) and 412-648-7856 (AFTER BUSINESS HOURS). This is a confidential resource.

If you have a safety concern, please contact the University of Pittsburgh Police, 412-624-2121.

Your Well-being Matters
College/Graduate school can be an exciting and challenging time for students. Taking time to maintain your well-being and seek appropriate support can help you achieve your goals and lead a fulfilling life. It can be helpful to remember that we all benefit from assistance and guidance at times, and there are many resources available to support your well-being while you are at Pitt. You are encouraged to visit Thrive@Pitt to learn more about well-being and the many campus resources available to help you thrive.

If you or anyone you know experiences overwhelming academic stress, persistent difficult feelings and/or challenging life events, you are strongly encouraged to seek support. In addition to reaching out to friends and loved ones, consider connecting with a faculty member you trust for assistance connecting to helpful resources.

The University Counseling Center is also here for you. You can call 412-648-7930 at any time to connect with a clinician. If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal, please call the University Counseling Center at any time at 412-648-7930. You can also contact Resolve Crisis Network at 888-796-8226. If the situation is life threatening, call Pitt Police at 412-624-2121 or dial 911.

Substance Use Services
If you need immediate help in a substance use emergency, please call 911 or the resolve crisis network at 1-888-796-8226.

College brings a number of unique challenges that can becoming overwhelming. Some students turn to alcohol, drugs or food as a way to cope with a variety of issues. Unfortunately, regular use of substances can create more problems. The UCC offers a safe, non-judgmental and confidential place to share and explore questions, struggles and concerns about our relationship with chemicals, food or any habitual practice that consumes your time and risks your goals and well-being.

While the UCC cannot provide full service rehab, we can support you in better understanding the causes of your use; healthy, alternative, effective ways to cope; and if desired, connect you with recovery sources and programs.

The University of Pittsburgh's resource page on substance use related issues: https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/cc/substanceabuse/

And addiction recover facility near Pittsburgh: https://recovery.org/drug-alcohol-rehab/pittsburgh-pa/

LGBTQIA Services
The University Student Affairs has resources for LGBTQIA students at their website: https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/shs/lgbtqia/resources/
There are also non-university affiliated local organizations: Persad Center: https://www.persadcenter.org/ (5301 Butler St #100, Pittsburgh, PA 15201), PGH Equality Center: https://pghequalitycenter.org/ (5401 Centre Ave Suite 103, Pittsburgh, PA 15232), Allies for Health and Wellbeing (5913 Penn Ave 2nd Floor, Pittsburgh, PA 15206): https://www.alliespgh.org/).

Writing Center
You are strongly encouraged to trade drafts of your writing assignments with your classmates for editing and to make use of the Writing Center.

Location: 317B O'Hara Student Center — Phone: 412-624-6556
Webpage: https://www.writingcenter.pitt.edu — Email: writecen@pitt.edu

Study Lab
A good resource for helping you plan your semester coursework.

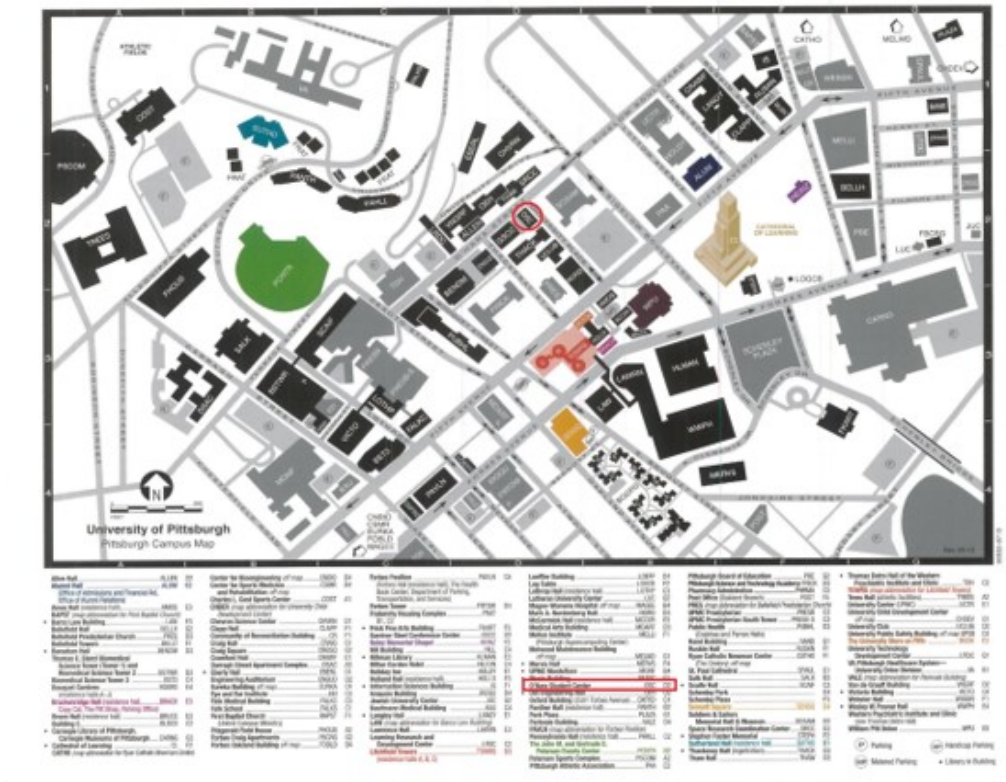
Location: Gardner Steel Conference Center. — Phone: 412-648-7920
website: asundergrad.pitt.edu/study-lab. — Email: study.lab@pitt.edu

Statement on Classroom Recording
To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

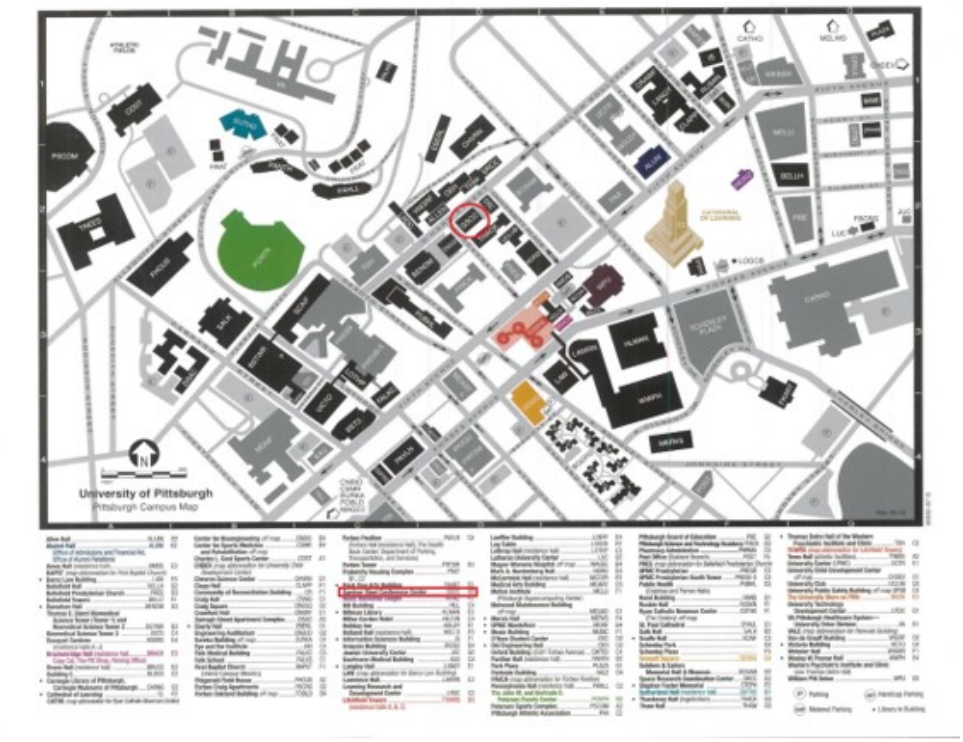
Contacting the Instructor
Please touch base with me about any issues that you might have that could potentially impact your success in the course. Visit me during my office hours or e-mail me with any questions you might have. I am a resource to help you learn. If you are confused about the readings or my expectations from you, please reach out. You can also reach out to the teaching assistants.

Copyright Notice
Materials provided for the course may be protected by copyright. United States copyright law, 17 USC section 101, et seq., in addition to University policy and procedures, prohibit unauthorized duplication or retransmission of course materials. See Library of Congress Copyright Office and the University Copyright Policy.

Writing Center:



Study Lab:



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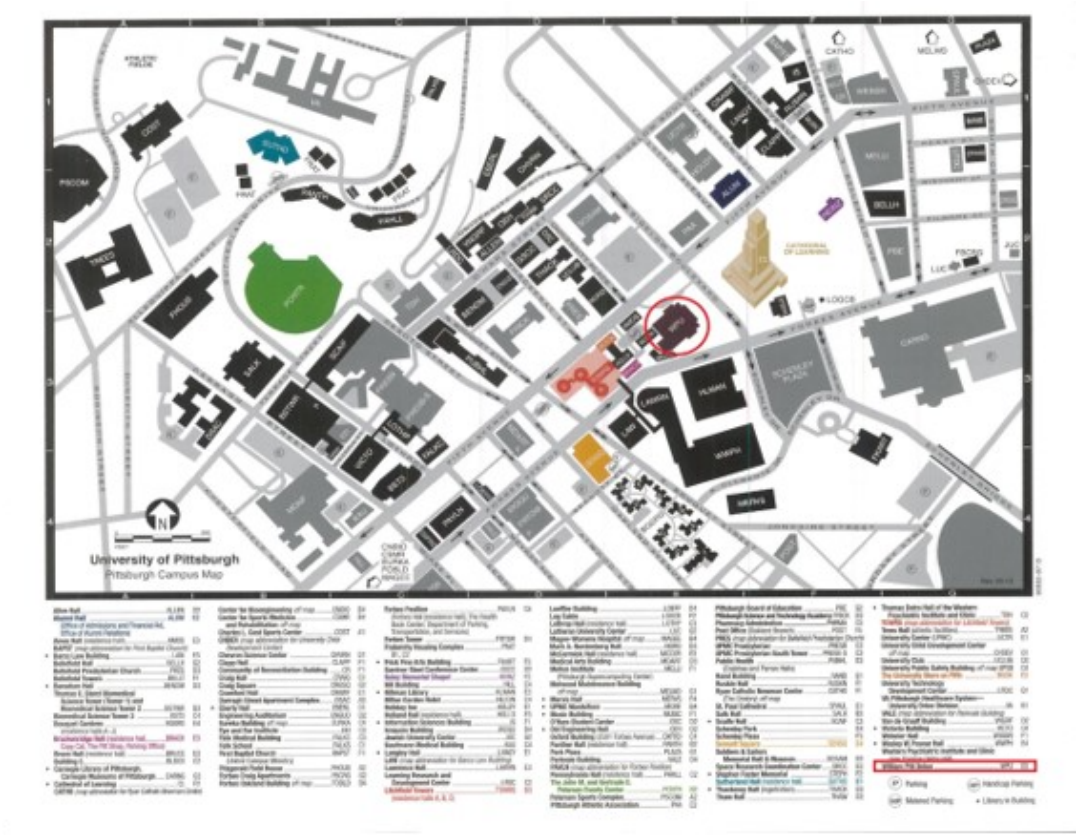
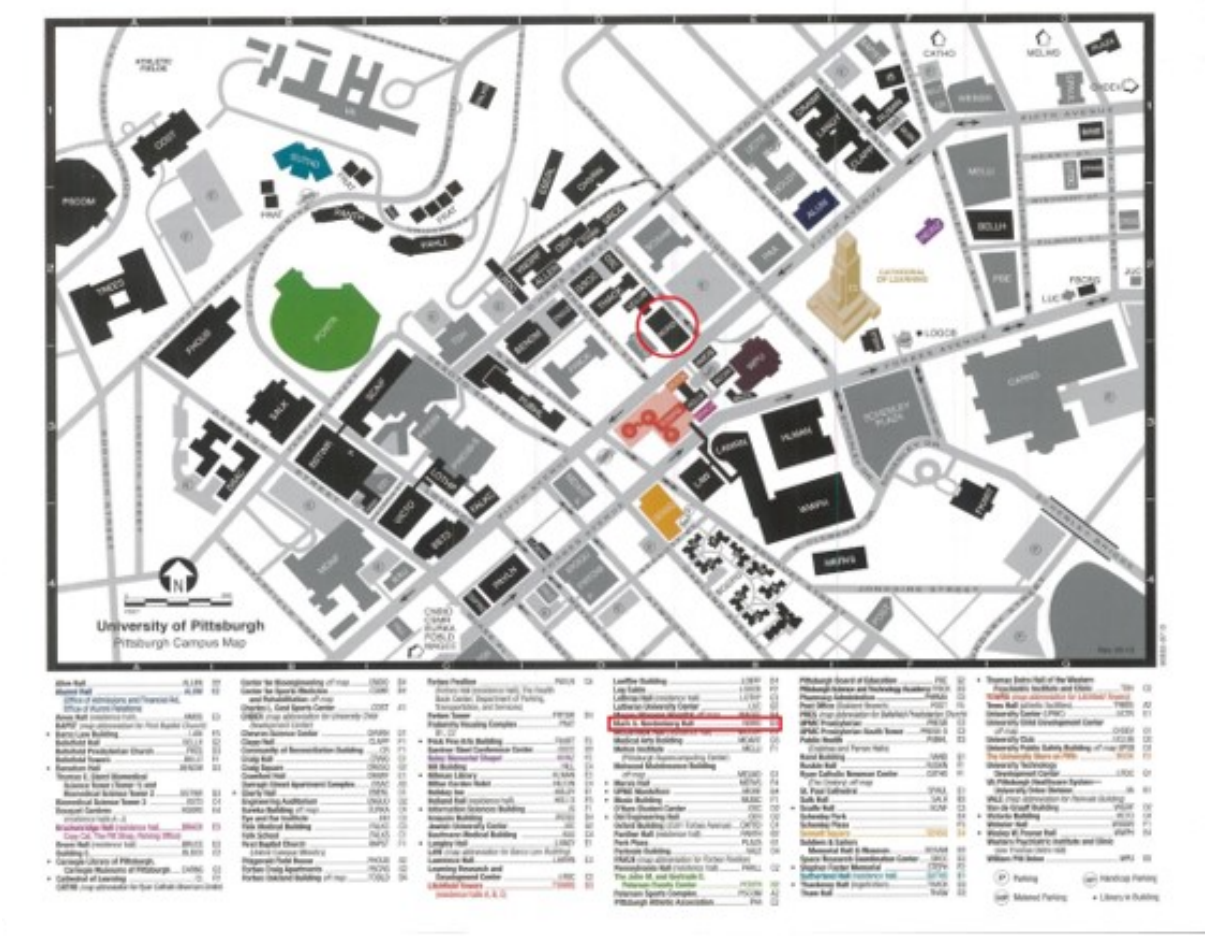
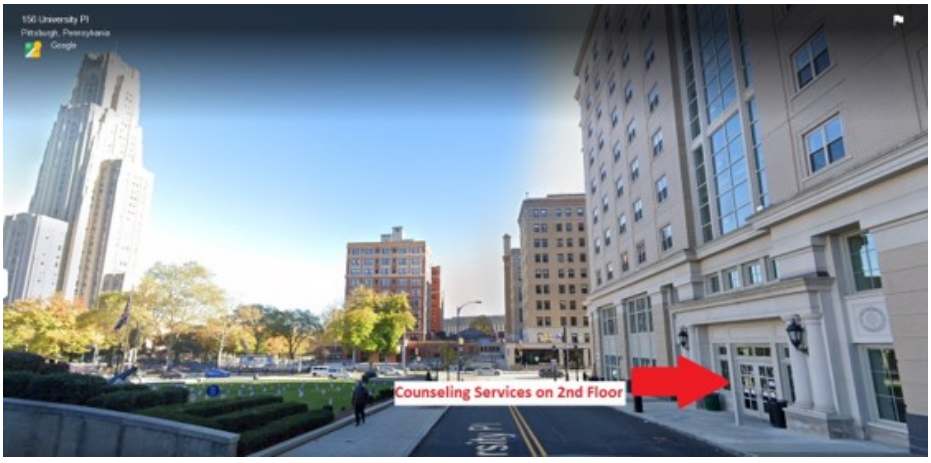


Street view:

Counseling Services: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