

Public Affairs 873: Introduction to Policy Analysis

Spring 2024

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Mondays 3:30 p.m. to 5:25 p.m.
Education L177

Office Hours (215 North Hall): For this class only, Mondays, 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.
Mondays and Wednesdays, 9:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.
Other times welcome by appointment.

This course introduces the study of public policy and the professional practice of policy analysis. We consider several fundamental questions: What are the rationales for collective interference in private affairs? What are the limitations to collective action? What are the generic instruments of public policy? How can we measure social costs and benefits? What are the appropriate roles for policy analysts in democratic societies? We also seek to improve our basic skills in analytical thinking, information gathering, and writing as we attempt to answer these questions.

The course contributes to several Student Learning Goals set out for MPA students. Most fundamentally, it requires demonstration of the following two goals:

“Students will communicate in clear written language: a real-world problem, relevant scholarly studies and practical applications, a policy-analytic method to investigate the problem, and client-oriented advice to mitigate the problem” (Goal III A).

“Students will demonstrate the ability to maintain fidelity to objective social science-based research methods” (Goal IV D).

The course carries three credits. The credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course’s learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit), including class meetings of 115 minutes per week and, as projects are essential vehicles for learning the craft of policy analysis, engagement related to projects will occur during the Monday afternoon office hour, which is set aside for individual and group consultations on projects.

Primary Activities and Assessment

Grades will be based on the following:

Four memorandum exercises, pop-briefing, and class participation (40 percent)

The memorandum exercises provide an opportunity to practice analytical writing: the first exercise provides a general introduction; the remaining three relate to your policy analysis project.

The pop-briefing simulates the sort of oral report you are likely to be called upon to make while you are working on a major project within an organization. You will have a total of ten minutes to introduce the issue you are addressing in your policy analysis project, pose an analytical question you are trying to address, and lead discussion of it. Work hard to keep the general introduction of your issue to about one minute. Use up to four minutes to set out your analytical approach and suggest a topic for discussion. You should allow *at least* five minutes for discussion. The discussion may be extended at my discretion. I will randomly select three or four presenters during each class beginning on **February 12**.

Your active class participation will make the course more valuable for all of us.

Policy analysis project (40 percent)

A semester-long project on a randomly assigned topic gives you an opportunity to apply the concepts and craft skills introduced in the course. I will base my assessment primarily on your first draft (90 percent), which is due on **April 18**, and secondarily on your revisions (10 percent), which are due **May 6** in PDF format with an accompanying memorandum explaining any revisions you made to the first draft. Note that your project report may be an assigned reading for future students.

Midterm examination on March 11 (20 percent)

A test of your mastery of the basic rationales for, and limits to, public policy. See Canvas for a sample midterm.

I consider presentation and punctuality in evaluating all assignments.

Readings

We will make heavy use of the following text, which is available on reserve:

David L. Weimer and Aidan R. Vining, *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice*, 6th ed. (New York, Routledge, 2017).

A few additional readings and other relevant course materials are available through Canvas.

I expect you to identify and draw from scholarly research and other sources relevant to your policy analysis project.

Tentative Schedule

Introduction (January 29)

Projects randomly assigned and briefly discussed; brief history of policy analysis

Exercise 1: Due in class on **February 5**. (Be prepared to discuss in class.)

Discussion of Prior Policy Analysis Reports (February 5)

Readings: Prior projects listed under Exercise 1; Weimer and Vining, Chapter 1

Policy Analysis: Overview (February 12)

We consider two important questions that we will revisit throughout the course: What roles does policy analysis play in democratic societies? What roles should it play?

Readings: Weimer and Vining, Chapters 2 and 3

Market Failures as Rationales for Public Policy (February 19)

Welfare economics specifies the assumptions for the Pareto efficiency of market allocations. Certain violations of these assumptions underlie the common market failures (public goods, externalities, natural monopolies, and information asymmetries), which provide important rationales for collective interference with individual choices. Our goal is to understand market failures, and other limitations of the competitive framework, for purposes of framing and modeling policy problems.

Reading: Weimer and Vining, Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7

Government Failure as Limitation and Rationale (February 26)

Just as markets fail in systematic ways, so too does collective action. Such generic government failures interfere with the effective correction of market failures and produce public policies that themselves are policy problems.

Reading: Weimer and Vining, Chapters 8 and 9

Exercise 2: Due **March 4**

Structuring Analysis (March 4)

An overview of the steps in the rationalist mode of policy analysis. We consider how to frame and model policy problems, select appropriate goals and criteria, specify policy alternatives, predict

and value consequences, identify tradeoffs among alternatives, and effectively communicate recommendations.

Reading: Weimer and Vining, Chapters 14, 15, and 16

Midterm (March 11)

Policy Design (March 18)

A discussion of how to design policies. We will consider generic policies as starting points for design, as well as borrowing and adapting designs used in other contexts.

Readings: Weimer and Vining, Chapters 10 and 13

Victor Escalona Aldana, Krinjal Mathur, Mitchell McFarlane, Madeline McIlhon, and Jacob Pankratz, “Benefit-Cost Analysis of Expanding Wisconsin’s Independent Living Program Eligibility Criteria,” December 2020.

Exercise 3 due **April 1**.

Class Workshop on Goals/Alternatives Matrices (April 1)

Send your goals/alternative matrix for your project to me as an e-mail attachment by Sunday, March 30, as either a PowerPoint slide or pdf page. Be prepared to present it to the class.

Thinking Strategically: Adoption and Implementation (April 8)

A realistic assessment of policy alternatives almost always requires consideration of the feasibility of their adoption and implementation. How can we make predictions about feasibility? How can we alter policy alternatives to improve their feasibility?

Readings: Weimer and Vining, Chapters 11 and 12.

Cost-Benefit Analysis (April 15)

Although cost-benefit analysis (CBA) is rarely appropriate as a decision rule, it provides useful protocols for valuing the efficiency impacts of policy alternatives. We review basic concepts underlying CBA such as willingness-to-pay, opportunity cost, discounting for time, and the treatment of risk. We also consider the conceptual and practical limitations to its application.

Readings: Weimer and Vining, Chapters 16 and 17

No Class (April 22)

Extra office hours to consult about projects: Tuesday, April 16, 9 a.m. to noon.

Full project drafts are due at 8 am on April 18. Please submit to me as a PDF e-mail attachment.

Exercise 4 due **April 29**. Please bring *two* paper copies of your memorandum.

Project Wrap-Up (April 29)

This session is set aside for revisiting topics of interest and discussing successful completion of projects.

PDF file of revised project report due by e-mail attachment on **May 6**. The title of the file should be *your family name_a word conveying the subject_2021.pdf*. *The content of the e-mail or a separate document should indicate how you responded to comments on your initial report draft.*

Exercise 1

Read David Weimer, “Memorandum on Memoranda Writing,” the Live Kidney Case (Weimer and Vining, Chapter 1), and each of the following policy analyses available through Canvas:

Ethan Dickler, “Strategies to Reduce Black Infant Mortality in Wisconsin”

Gillian Giglierano, “Transgender Students & WIAA Athletics”

Samantha Jurvich, “Mitigating Environmental Harm Caused by Bottom Trawling”

Liliana Keomanivong Teniente, “Building a Better NAGPRA”

Migena Vula, “Treatment of Opioid Use Disorder via Telehealth”

Write a memorandum to the client of *one* of these reports that makes a recommendation for action on the problem addressed in the report. You may focus on the recommendation in the report or argue for some other alternative. Your memorandum should be no more than three, double-spaced, typed pages in length. Your recommendation should be stated clearly in the last sentence of the first paragraph. The rest of your memorandum should indicate the advantages and disadvantages of your recommendation. You should reference the report as appropriate. You may, but are not required to, consult relevant sources beyond the report itself. Be prepared to discuss similarities and differences in the structures of the four memoranda in class.

Exercise 2

One of the steps in defining a policy problem is framing it as a market or government failure. The framing helps you to determine if there is a strong rationale for government action and suggests generic policy alternatives for consideration. Prepare a three- to four-page (double-spaced) analysis that introduces the problem implied by your project statement and frames it as a market or government failure. (Projects often begin as a request for analysis of a specific alternative to current policy. In such cases, problem definition involves identifying the underlying policy problem that prompts interest in the alternative.) After writing an introductory paragraph, divide your memorandum into two distinct parts. In the first part provide a sketch of the context for your problem. The sketch may be in the form of a brief history, or it may simply describe the symptoms of the problem. The second part should clearly frame your problem as a market or government failure.

It is likely that you will be able to provide a useful frame by focusing on one market or government failure. It may be that several others are applicable as well. While you may note these in passing, try to stay focused on the one that best helps you understand the nature of the problem from the perspective of the good of society. Your memorandum should show that you understand the concept and that you are able to apply it to a specific context.

Imagine that you are writing your memorandum to a colleague who will be working with you on the analysis. Assume that your colleague does not have much background in economics. Clearly explain any technical terms that you use. Also, avoid using diagrams. If you think that a diagram is essential, then put it in an appendix.

Exercise 3

When doing policy analysis, it is usually helpful to consider some possible policy alternatives in considerable depth well before preparing a full draft. Looking ahead to alternatives often helps one to refine goals and criteria. It also helps one anticipate the sort of information that will be useful for predicting consequences of alternative policies. Now would be a good time for you to focus on one of your promising policy alternatives for your project.

In a brief memorandum of three double-spaced pages please do the following: First, clearly specify *one* of your policy alternatives in terms of all its essential elements. Second, briefly outline what you believe to be the major effects of the alternative—including both the use of resources required to implement it and its impacts. Third, discuss what information you hope to use to predict the magnitudes of the major effects.

Exercise 4

Prepare a brief memorandum of two or three double-spaced pages that provides your colleague with *constructive* criticism of his or her policy report.