PUBL 6325 Capstone Problem Project

1) Purpose of the Course?

In PUBL 6325 you apply many of the tools and concepts you have learned and covered in the MPA Program in research that has practical application. You are required to develop and complete a paper that analyzes a problem of public administration and /or public policy. See Attachment I for four examples of papers.

In the paper, you should demonstrate an understanding of the MPA course material including its application to the practitioners’ world, the use of research design, the ability to write in a manner understandable to practitioners, the development of alternatives, and the making of a recommendation (as appropriate). The length of the paper depends on the nature of the project – that is, some projects will be longer than others depending on the subject matter and the type of paper. As a general rule, papers are 30 pages in length. However, you should not assume that longer is necessarily better.

One of the central objectives of the MPA degree is to train you to think about public problems and their solutions. PUBL 6325, therefore, requires you to define a problem of public administration and/or public policy; to analyze that problem; and offer solutions/recommendations where appropriate.

2) How to find and select a topic?

The potential topics that you may choose are endless. Consequently, one of your first and probably most difficult tasks is to clearly and concisely define the problem that you will address. In the following examples, you would consider the following:

a) What you hope to accomplish.
b) How the approach, methods and analyses you propose or undertake would change the given problem being considered.
c) Your approach will determine or guide the type of research paper you write. (See Attachment I for four types of papers.)

Situation 1
Assume you are the assistant to the City of Houston finance director and she has asked you to assess the financial impact of annexing an area into the City. You would need to analyze the situation so that you could answer the question. You would need to know what information (data) is required. You would need to collect and analyze the data.
In other words you would have to proceed in a logical, planned fashion in order to come up with a first-rate product.

**Situation 2**

*Instead of being the assistant to the finance director, you are the assistant to the City of Houston Planning Director and she has asked you to provide an analysis of how the annexation of an area will impact the city’s development plan for Extra-Territorial Jurisdiction (ETJ).* Although the focus of the case is the same, the process that you will follow must be different because the nature of the problem is different.

**Situation 3**

*You are serving as an intern in a government office and you believe that you have a better approach or process for performing a job or task within that office. You discuss your idea with your superior, and request the authorization to write a proposal or recommendation for performing the job in a more efficient/effective/equitable manner.* This paper could be either a policy analysis or program evaluation.

**Situation 4**

*You are working for a public organization that is confronted with a major issue, but does not know what to do. You could offer to develop a policy position paper for the public organization. You request authorization from your superior.* You would address such questions as: Is it a public problem that should be addressed by the public organization? If yes, then how should it be addressed? Who pays for addressing the problem or for the solutions? This paper could be a position paper.

3) **When should I take PUBL 6325?**

Generally, the capstone project is the final task to be completed prior to graduating with an MPA Degree. You should usually enroll in the course during your last semester (i.e., in the semester that you intend to graduate). Often students start the project sometime before that time. Indeed, you should begin as soon as possible defining your project, and submit your proposal the semester prior to your enrollment in 6325. Ideas for your project may arise from your readings, course discussions, work experience, and current salient topics.

4) **When is the final paper due?**

Submit the final paper, not a draft, two weeks prior to the final exam week in the semester you wish to graduate. Consider the deadline to be the same as a deadline for your boss – i.e., mayor, county judge, department head, non-profit manager or CEO, etc. You don’t turn in a working draft to your boss, so don’t do it to me!

5) **Can I develop a project out of my work experiences?**

The answer is a qualified yes. The capstone project is your individual accomplishment. If the problem that you deal with arises from your work experience, it
should be approved by your superior. This includes the superior defining the problem and assigning it to you.

6) What is the process of completing the final paper?

The final paper is usually completed in three steps:

1) An initial proposal that provides a plan of action to direct you to the final objective. Ideally, this proposal would be submitted before the start of the semester in which you will be enrolled for PUBL 6325. This means December for the spring semester and July for the fall semester. This ensures that you are ready to work on your project from day one of the semester.

2) A polished draft that is read by the instructor

3) The final paper.

The first and third steps are mandatory. They are interrelated and will determine your final grade. The second step may be bypassed, but with the understanding that the final paper is not a draft and must be good. The initial proposal is the most critical step in the process. You should view the proposal as a road map directing you through the terrain of your project. How well that road map details your project will allow you to avoid roadblocks, detours, and breakdowns along the way. As in most cases, the quality of your proposal will determine the quality of your final product.

7) What should I include in my proposal?

At a minimum, the proposal should be organized around the following:

1) **Statement of the Problem:**
   a) Why is the problem important as an issue of public administration and/or public policy? The importance may be stated theoretically or substantively. That is to say, you may work from an abstract frame of reference to establish the parameters of your problem, or you may work from a concrete example as illustrated above.
   b) Based on a) above, what do I assume I will find? Here, you will state those assumptions as conclusions, although you have not substantiated them. These conclusions (hypotheses, propositions etc.) will guide you to the final objective.

2) **Methods/Approach:**
   a) What type of research paper will I end up with? (See Attachment I for four examples.)
   b) What research method or technique should I use? (See Attachment II for a list of possibilities depending upon the question.)
   c) What data must I use to analyze the problem? Here you must have a logical reason for selecting the data.
   d) How will I analyze the data? (See Attachment II for a list of statistical techniques depending upon the question and the research method.)
scheme of analysis should include more than methods, albeit it is important that you know what the best methods to analyze your data are available. You should also indicate how you will organize the information that you collect (e.g. categories or typologies).

3) **Topical Outline:**
   You need to provide a topical outline of your project (you might think of this as a Table of Contents): What will your final paper include?

4) **Bibliography**
   You need to append a working bibliography (An annotation of 2.a) above).

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PUBL 6325 Facilitator
Attachment I

Types of Papers for PUBL 6325

Please note that these papers are not necessarily mutually exclusive. That is, some element of each might be used in another. For example, it would not be unusual for a position paper to include analytical results from a cost-benefit analysis or statistical analysis.

1. **Policy Analysis:** Use if you are problem-solving and seeking the best way to solve a public problem. With a policy analysis paper, you should adhere to standard procedures including:
   a. Compare a number of alternative approaches and determine which offers the best solution to the problem.
   b. Establish criteria for selecting the best alternative.
   c. Be able to measure various outcome of each alternative in order to justify and defend your decision.

2. **Program Evaluation:** Use if you are determining the efficiency and/or effectiveness of a particular public program, public good, or public service. With a program evaluation, you should follow good evaluation procedures including:
   a. Document and assess the activities, outputs, outcomes, and costs of the program, good, or service.
   b. Determine whether the program can be improved; should it be improved; should be remain as is; should it be eliminated; etc.?

3. **Administrative Analysis:** Use if you are assessing an administrative program to determine its fate. Look at the administrative program from various perspectives (e.g., departmental, employees, community, organizational structure, ecological, etc.). Take a case study approach to fully understand and explain the administrative program.

4. **Position Paper:** Use if you are developing a policy argument to support a claim that something should or should not be done. Position papers have two main components: a claim and its support. The claim asserts what should or should not be done. Support for the claim presents the facts, interpretations, and assumptions that lead to making that claim. Your goal is to convince others to accept the claim and to agree with the position. (Smith, Catherine F., *Writing Public Policy*, 2010)
### Attachment II

**Types of Research Techniques/Methods Depending on Research Purpose and Question**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Purpose</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Micro-Conceptual Framework</th>
<th>Research Technique/Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>What, When, Where, Who, How or any combination of above</td>
<td>Working Hypotheses</td>
<td>Case study is typical; structured interviews, document analysis, archival records, focus group. Anything goes—Survey, existing aggregated data. Usually qualitative evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>What</td>
<td>Descriptive Categories</td>
<td>Survey and Content Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gauging</td>
<td>How close is a process/policy to an ideal or standard?</td>
<td>Practical Ideal Type</td>
<td>If generalizing to a group—survey and content analysis. If generalizing to an agency, organization etc. —Case study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>What is the best decision?</td>
<td>Models of Operations Research</td>
<td>Cost Benefit Analysis, cost Effectiveness Analysis, linear programming, decision tree analysis etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation/Prediction</td>
<td>Why</td>
<td>Formal Hypotheses</td>
<td>Experimental and quasi experimental design (broadly defined) Survey, existing data.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Shields, Patricia M., A Pragmatic Teaching Philosophy, *JPAE*, 2003)