

Final Project – Policy Report

MA in Urban Affairs

Urban Studies Department, Queens College-CUNY

Overview: The report focuses on a current, pressing policy matter; it may take one of two forms:

- *Option 1:* You may advocate for a particular policy alternative or course of action to address an urgent issue related to Urban Affairs. For instance, a paper about federal healthcare policy would advocate for national healthcare, a single-payer system, or only private corporate insurance.
- *Option 2:* You also have the option of writing a “case study” of a policy decision or series of decisions related to Urban Affairs. You will describe the policy actors (both “official” and “unofficial”) active on this policy and the debates around this issue. Although you will discuss proposals to deal with specific public problems and/or differing views of the effectiveness or value of a policy, the focus of the report will be on the *policy process*, rather than the policy itself. In other words, you will *not* be studying whether a policy or program works, but rather who is concerned about whether this policy works and what they are saying and doing about it. Taking the example of federal healthcare policy, you would analyze what stakeholders support a given option (like single-payer), how they frame the issue, and why their approach succeeds or fails.

Students should conduct independent research, utilize critical thinking, and apply knowledge and skills gained in Urban Affairs to answer specific research questions in this policy. Sources will likely include primary government documents, but students might also wish to run relevant quantitative analyses and to produce GIS maps to evaluate or to explicate policy alternatives. Students should also plan to draw on news articles, peer-reviewed articles, reports from non-profit organizations/think tanks, and even interviews to contextualize policies and the policymaking process. We encourage students to engage relevant faculty in advisement and experts on the development of research projects. Researching and writing the Final Project generally takes at least **one semester**.

URBST 791: Approximately once a year, a faculty member will offer a special intensive seminar for students to complete their **Final Projects as research papers or policy reports**. Students will learn to research, organize, and write an original research or policy paper on a subject of their choice. This research or policy paper can be used to fulfill the Final Project required for graduation.

Project Advisement

- Students should consult with the Graduate Advisor on Final Project guidance.
- Alternatively, the student may find an Urban Studies faculty advisor who agrees to provide guidance in developing and writing the policy report.
- **Note:** You must have a Final Project proposal **approved** by the Graduate Advisor before beginning your Final Project work. Please see the Proposal Guidelines. A faculty advisor may approve the student’s proposal in consultation with the Graduate Advisor.
- The student is responsible for knowing and meeting all deadlines and meeting the requirements for an acceptable thesis.
 - If a student has a faculty advisor who will review and approve the paper, then the student and faculty advisor should mutually agree upon deliverables and deadlines.

- Note: To graduate at the end of a given semester, the Final Project must be **approved** no later than that semester's last day. But since the policy report needs to be read and reviewed, students should expect to submit the paper drafts at least 4-6 weeks before the end of the semester.
- The Graduate Advisor and/or the Faculty Advisor will evaluate the Final Project for approval. For evaluation of a Final Project, students should expect to:
 - Submit a draft of their report to the graduate advisor and/or faculty advisor.
 - Based on comments on the draft, the students will address the comments and complete a final draft.
 - The faculty advisor and/or graduate advisor may require the student to have additional deliverables and deadlines, depending on the quality of the first draft.

Policy Report guidelines

The policy report usually includes the following sections:

Title

- The title should be catchy and inspire the reader to spend time reviewing your report

Executive Summary

- This should be no more than 5% of the complete document; it should also inspire the reader to read the full report
- Description of the problem addressed; why should we care about this problem?
- What methods did you use to analyze the problem and potential policy solutions? (analysis of legislative history, quantitative analyses, case studies from other jurisdictions, etc)
- Depending on your approach to the policy report (see Overview, above):
 - *Option 1:* A statement on why the current approach/policy option needs to be changed, and your recommendation for action;
 - *Option 2:* Description of the actors (both “official” and “unofficial”) active on this policy and the debates around this issue.
- A preview of the paper's structure and findings.
- Plan to compose the Executive Summary last, as it will serve as an abbreviated version of the entire report.

Background: scope, context and importance of the problem

- Clear statement of the problem or issue at hand.
- Exploration of the problem's root causes
- Outline of the problem's policy implications, setting up the urgent need for legislative (or other political) intervention. Is this a local, state, and/or federal issue? When did this issue get on the policy agenda? Was legislation enacted? What is the implementation process?

Literature Review

- How have scholars and other experts approached this policy question? Is there a consensus or a central debate about the best policy approach? What does your analysis of the issue contribute to the existing literature? Are you providing further evidence to support an

already popular policy approach? Are you proposing a new path entirely? Or somewhere in-between?

Analysis

The Analysis section will differ based on the style of policy report you plan to write (see Overview, above).

Option 1:

- An argument about why and how the current or proposed policy approach is failing (this includes inaction). Convince the reader as to why and how policy change needs to happen.
- Overview of policy alternatives at hand. Analyze their benefits and shortcomings.
- Policy recommendations: what specific, practical measures should be implemented? These might include legislation, budgeting, and public education campaigns. Avoid generalizations. Present the evidence (quantitative and/or qualitative) that informs your recommendations. Acknowledge counterarguments and consider the feasibility of your solutions.

Option 2:

- What happened? Give an overview of the events and the policy actors involved; present a chronology. Which government actors have been active on your issue? What are their *positions* on the issues involved (both for and against)? What *actions* have they taken on this policy or issue?
- Which unofficial actors (representatives of interest groups and “think tanks”) were /are involved in the policy debate? Discuss their *positions* on your issue. Discuss the *activities/strategies* that they engage in to influence decision-makers. For example: doing research and writing reports, giving testimony, having members or supporters contact members of the City Council/State legislature, legal action, organizing demonstrations or rallies, etc.
- How has this issue/policy been framed? If there is clear framing by supporters and opponents, discuss *both*. Use quotes to illustrate how this has been done and by which policy actors.
- Has an interest group succeeded in advancing their agenda? Why or why not?

VI. Conclusion

- This is a short section that restates your policy analysis and summarizes your conclusions. Underscore the urgency of the problem and the possible consequences of policymakers failing to consider your findings.

VII. Optional: Notes, footnotes/endnotes, appendices, etc.

VIII. Bibliography

Policy Report Formatting

- Length: Urban Affairs policy reports are expected to be approximately 30-50 pages (1-inch margins, 12-pt font) before the bibliography and any appendices.

- Referencing: The paper should use a formal referencing system that uses in-text citations for references. For example:
 - APA style: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>
 - Chicago: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/01/>
 - Harvard style: http://www.isa-sociology.org/publ/sociopedia-isa_harvard-style-guidelines.pdf
 - MLA Style: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>
- All images/figures, charts, and graphs should be formatted according to the referencing system you are using. Thus each image/figure, chart, or graph must have an ID (e.g. Figure 1, Chart 1, etc.) & caption.

Evaluation of the Policy Report for your Final Project

Graduate Advisor and/or Faculty Advisor will approve your Final Project if the report meets the following standards:

- The report successfully and sufficiently analyzes a pressing policy matter related to Urban Affairs.
- The report sufficiently addresses all the required sections under the **Policy Report Overview and the Policy Report Guidelines**.
- The policy report thoroughly considers existing literature on the issue at hand in the Literature Review section.
- The policy report carefully engages with evidence derived from methods including, but not limited to: quantitative data analysis, GIS mapping, ethnography, archival research, and interviews. This evidence successfully informs the policy analysis.
- The policy report has a coherent argument and narrative.
- The policy report has sufficient use of and proper formatting for in-text referencing, the bibliography, and for figures, graphs, and charts.
- The policy report is readable and appropriate in terms of style, grammar, and spelling.