

UALR School of Public Affairs MPA Program

# Methods Assessment of MPA Policy Analysis II Papers

Kirk Leach  
Fall 2019

## Purposes

The policy analysis paper assessment seeks to provide data to inform the UALR MPA program's faculty about the extent to which we are successful in meeting our program's academic objectives, including NASPAA's universal competencies. In turn, this data informs our process for reviewing and updating the program's curriculum, teaching approaches and methods, academic advising and other student support services.

In particular, the policy analysis assessment provides data on aggregate student learning with respect to the MPA program's goal identified below:

**Goal 2: Research Skills** --- Use **critical thinking and decision-making** approaches, appropriate research methods and employ **analytical tools and statistical techniques** for collecting, analyzing, presenting, and interpreting data for policy, organizational, and managerial issues in public and/or non-profit organization.

This goal corresponds to two of NASPAA's universal competencies:

**Competency 2:** To participate in and contribute to the policy process

**Competency 3:** To analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions

### Courses & activities assessed:

To measure learning outcomes, the committee evaluated identity-redacted student policy analysis papers produced for PADM 7363 (Policy Analysis) from the preceding two years. This course is a core course typically taken halfway through an MPA student's program. In addition to its status as a core course, the policy analysis course requires that students integrate what they have learned about public administration values and research methods from the first half of the curriculum, particularly Profession of Public Administration (PADM 7301) and Methods in Public Administration (PADM 7315). The policy analysis paper assignment requires that students demonstrate skills at using knowledge of public administration and public policy practice to review and write about literature concerning a public problem; using knowledge of public policy values such as efficiency, effectiveness and equity to weigh policy options; apply methodological skills to show the scope and causes of a public problem and to evaluate policy outcomes; and communicate findings in writing to a public audience.

### Methods used

A total of eighteen papers were available for analysis representing 100% of the artifacts produced for PADM 7363 (Public Policy Analysis II). Two faculty members were each randomly assigned half (50%) of the policy analysis paper (n=9) completed for PADM 7363 in Fall 2017 and Fall 2018 using the rubric shown in Appendix A. Each item in the rubric is matched with a UALR MPA program learning outcome. In turn, learning outcomes are linked to MPA program learning goals and NASPAA universal competencies. Faculty raters scored each paper on a four-point scale according to the extent to which the paper demonstrated mastery of

the corresponding skill as: 0 (skill not evident), 1 (partially evident), 2 (skill clearly evident), or n/a (not applicable).

### Summary results

The frequency distribution and the median for each learning outcome are calculated. The results are reported in Table 1. The median is calculated as the median of the average score reported by the two raters. In addition, we used the frequency distribution of the lower of the two faculty ratings to categorize each learning outcome as follows:

**Significantly deficient:** 30% or more of student papers (6 for this survey) were rated as 0 (not evident) on the item by at least one faculty member reviewing the paper.

**Deficient:** 20% or more of student papers (4 for this survey) were rated as 0 (skill not evident) on the item by at least one faculty member reviewing the paper.

**Superior:** 40% or more of student papers (8 for this survey) were rated as 2 (skill clearly evident) by both faculty members reviewing the paper.

**Satisfactory:** Rubric items for which aggregate student performance meet none of the above standards may be taken to be “**satisfactory**”.

In addition, paper reviewers were asked to indicate whether a criterion was “not applicable” to the paper. A high number of such ratings may indicate that the paper assignment is not adequate for assessing that outcome and hence a need for a review of the relevance of this learning outcome or whether the paper assignment itself should be reconsidered in future years. Hence:

**Unclear:** 20% or more of student papers were rated as NA by at least one faculty member.

Rubric Item	Median score <sup>1</sup>	Overall performance
<i>Goal 2: Research Skills</i>		
<b>Evidence:</b> Supports arguments with evidence from relevant data sources and/or scholarly and public policy literature	1.5	Satisfactory
<b>Chart construction:</b> Tables, charts and illustrations are easy to interpret and adhere to best practices	1.75	Superior

<b>Chart interpretation:</b> Draws appropriate conclusions from tables, charts and illustrations	1.5	Superior
<b>Inferential methods:</b> Uses and interprets inferential statistical methods (e.g. regression analysis) correctly	1.5	Satisfactory
<b>Generalize:</b> Arguments and analysis generalize from the evidence and literature to generate original ideas, conclusions or recommendations	1.75	Superior
<b>Goal 2: Critical thinking and decision making</b>		
<b>Policy recommendations:</b> Paper policy recommendations are clearly stated and design of policy recommendations (i.e. policy instruments and institutional arrangements) adheres to best practices.	1.5	Satisfactory
<b>Policy design:</b> Policy recommendations (i.e. policy instruments and institutional arrangements) adheres to best practices	1.5	Satisfactory
<b>Appropriateness of evidence:</b> Evaluation of policy outcomes and recommendations uses appropriate evidence	1.5	Satisfactory
<b>Values:</b> The paper Uses appropriate values criteria to evaluate policies and make recommendations	1.5	Satisfactory
<i>Score: Clearly evident (2); Partly evident (1); Not evident (0); Not applicable (n/a/)</i>		
<sup>1</sup> <i>Median of the two-rater average</i>		

In addition, it is possible to compare the median scores for *Research Skills* to those in 2012-13 and 2014-2015. These scores are reported in table 2. The rubrics correspond across the assessment periods of 2017-18, 2014-15, and 2012-13. But the 2012-13 and 2017-18 rubric used a three-point scale, where 2 indicated skill was “clearly evident”, 1 partly evident, and 0 not evident. To make the comparison, the four-point 2014-15 scale was collapsed to a 3-point scale by assuming that both the “somewhat evident” (1) and “mostly evident” (2) categories are equivalent to the “partly evident” category of 2012-13. Hence, 2012-13 and 2017-18 data correspond to the re-coded 2014-15 data ranges.

<p><b>Table 2</b>  <b>Comparison of 2014-15 Median Score with 2012-13 Median Score</b></p>	
--	--

Rubric Item	2012-13 Median score <sup>1</sup>	2014-15 Median score <sup>1</sup>	2017-18 Median score <sup>1</sup>
<b>Goal 2: Research Skills</b>			
<b>Evidence:</b> Supports arguments with evidence from relevant data sources and/or scholarly and public policy literature	1	1.5	1.5
<b>Chart construction:</b> Tables, charts and illustrations are easy to interpret and adhere to best practices	0.25	1	1.75
<b>Chart interpretation:</b> Draws appropriate conclusions from tables, charts and illustrations	0	1	1.5
<b>Inferential methods:</b> Uses and interprets inferential statistical methods (e.g. regression analysis) correctly	0	1	1.5
<b>Generalize:</b> Arguments and analysis generalize from the evidence and literature to generate original ideas, conclusions or recommendations	1.5	1	1.75
<i>Score: Clearly evident (2); Partly evident (1); Not evident (0)</i>			
<sup>1</sup> <i>Median of the two-rater average on the 2012-13 three-point scale</i>			

## Discussion

Overall, the MPA program is meeting its objectives with respect to research and analytic skills. The evidence suggests that student research skills continue to improve over the course of the three assessment cycles. Although the 2012-13 assessment found deficiencies in students' research and analytic skills, table 2, however, shows improvements in the five research skills learning outcomes, with particular gains in chart construction, chart interpretation and inferential methods. This suggests that steps taken by the MPA program after the 2012-13 study, such as seeking to integrate descriptive statistical analysis in more of the core courses, continue to have a positive effect. However, the MPA faculty need to continue emphasising and integrating methods across the curriculum to maintain this momentum.

It is noteworthy that Public Policy Analysis I and II course content focuses almost entirely on quantitative methods of analysis. This is only one approach that can be utilized to address public policy problems. Given the diverse and cross cutting nature of the policy problems our students would be faced with during the course of their professional careers, our students can benefit from exposure to more diverse analytic methods. Thus to build on, and maintain this momentum, the MPA faculty should incorporate additional instruction in the application and use of qualitative methods. Specifically, the core courses in policy analysis (PADM 7362 & PADM 7263) provide

the vehicle through which additional content in, for example, comparative case studies, focus groups and interview data collection, and data management techniques can be incorporated into the curriculum.

## Appendix A

### Policy Analysis Paper Assessment Rubric MPA Program Methods and Writing Assessment Fall 2019

**Evaluator:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Year/Paper #:** \_\_\_\_\_

The policy analysis paper assignment in PADM 7363 (Policy Analysis) serves as an opportunity for students to demonstrate professional-level competence at making arguments about a public problem and policy supported with original data analysis, including problem definition and analysis, policy evaluation and analysis of policy recommendations. Each student draws on his/her skills and knowledge in research, quantitative analysis, critical thinking and writing from the first half of their MPA experience to complete this paper. Please indicate the extent to which the paper demonstrates professional-level competence in the following ways:

Score: Clearly evident (2); Partly evident (1); Not evident (0); Not applicable (N/A)

Learning outcome	Criterion	Score
	<i>Holistic criteria</i>	
1.6 and 4.1	Paper is organized effectively to make an argument about the nature, scope and causes of a public problem; evaluate outcomes from a public policy; and/or make a policy recommendation.	
4.2	Paper is free of mechanical problems (i.e. grammatical and spelling errors)	
4.2	Paper's writing style (word choice, paragraph and sentence construction) effectively communicates its argument and analysis to an average reader	
4.3	Paper's executive summary communicates the paper's goals, methods, and conclusions concisely and effectively to an average reader	
1.5 and 2.2	Addresses the concerns and questions of relevant stakeholders and policymakers	

<b>2.13</b>	Conclusions and recommendations logically follow from arguments and evidence	
<b>2.14</b>	Overall, arguments and analysis generalize from the evidence and literature to generate original ideas, conclusions or recommendations	
	<i>Criteria on analytic methods</i>	
<b>2.9</b>	Uses relevant scholarly and public policy literature to support arguments and analysis	
<b>1.9</b>	Demonstrates transparency in choices concerning measurement	
<b>1.9</b>	Demonstrates transparency in choices of analytic approaches and methods (i.e. by assessing strengths and weaknesses of the research design)	
<b>2.12</b>	Uses appropriate data sources and data gathering methods to develop measures	
<b>4.4 (and 2.9)</b>	Constructs tables, charts and illustrations with adherence to best practices	
<b>4.4 (and 2.11)</b>	Interprets tables, charts and illustrations competently	
<b>2.11</b>	Uses other descriptive methods of data analysis correctly and as appropriate	
<b>2.11</b>	Uses and interprets inferential statistical methods (e.g. regression analysis) correctly and as appropriate	
<b>2.9</b>	Overall, uses appropriate quantitative and qualitative evidence to support arguments and analysis	



	<i>Criteria on policy recommendation and design</i>	
<b>1.6 &amp; 2.1</b>	Policy recommendation includes clearly stated goals	
<b>1.6 &amp; 2.1</b>	Design of policy recommendation (i.e. policy instruments and institutional arrangements) adheres to best practices	
<b>1.5 &amp; 2.2</b>	Design of policy recommendation reflects political feasibility	
<b>2.3</b>	Evaluates policy outcomes and recommendations using appropriate evidence	
<b>1.9 and 2.4</b>	Uses appropriate values criteria to evaluate policies and make recommendations	
<b>1.9</b>	Demonstrates transparency in the assumptions and values judgments on which it bases recommendations	
	Overall, the paper demonstrates professional-level competence in policy analysis	