

PUBL 6325 Capstone Problem Project Guidelines (latest ed. 2018)

1) Purpose of the Capstone Course

One of the central objectives of the MPA degree is for you to think about a public problem and its solution. PUBL 6325, therefore, requires you to define a problem of public administration and/or public policy; to analyze that problem; and offer solutions/recommendations/propositions/conclusions. This requires a paper that addresses a public administration issue, problem, program, etc.

To fulfill the PUBL 6325 requirements, your paper should demonstrate the following:

1. An understanding of the MPA course material as demonstrated with its application in your paper and evidenced with the use of citations for course material including readings, discussions, lectures, notes, etc.;
2. The use of research design, which is evidenced by an obvious link between the data/evidence collected and the conclusions to be drawn to the initial questions of the paper; (Yin 2003)
3. The ability to write in a professional manner understandable to practitioners and the public; and
4. A problem solving approach and/or ability to make an argument as evidenced by covering “all the ground necessary” to solve a problem (Morris 2005, 203), and offering discourse that persuades your audience of a particular point of view and builds support for it (Hill and Lynn 2008).

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, the availability of research and data, 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.

2) Prospectus Requirements

The prospectus is a substantial requirement of PUBL 6325, because the quality of the prospectus directly affects the quality of the capstone paper. At a minimum, the prospectus should be four pages and 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 (hypotheses, propositions etc.), although you have not substantiated them. These conclusions will guide you to the final objective.

2) *Methods/Approach:*

- a) What type of paper am I proposing? (See Attachment I for four examples.) Will it adequately and professionally address my problem, question, issue, etc.?
- b) What research method should I use? What kind of data is needed and what method should be used to look into the problem or question being addressed in my paper? Apply the tools you learned in quantitative methods, policy analysis, and/or decision-science to your research. See Attachment III.
- c) What data do I need to analyze the problem? Here you must have a logical reason for selecting the data. This is why the research design is important.
- d) How will I analyze the data? The scheme of analysis should include more than methods, albeit it is important that you know what the best method is to analyze your data. 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 that addresses what your final paper will include.

4) *Bibliography*

You need to append a working bibliography to demonstrate that you have done your homework and thought through your project. This does not mean that your working bibliography will be your final bibliography, because reference materials change in the life of a project.

3) Finding and Selecting 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. When selecting a topic, please consider the following:

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

See Attachment II for a list of potential topics and Attachment IV for examples of capstone papers from previous years.

Chose a topic that is “manageable” in one semester – i.e., you can actually accomplish it and generate a quality paper. Make it large enough to require some serious work and small enough to be done by you alone.

4) When to Take PUBL 6325?

You should enroll in the course during your next-to-last semester (i.e., the semester prior to the semester when you plan to graduate).

Summer enrollment is limited depending on faculty availability so make allowances for this when planning your degree schedule. Do not assume that you can take PUBL 6325 in the summer.

Please note that if your capstone paper is not acceptable per these guidelines, you will receive a non-passing grade of anything from F to B-. If your paper has potential and you demonstrated the capability to improve it, you may be given an incomplete “I” and will have one year to finish the paper. You must be enrolled the semester that you complete an “I”. Note that our intent of awarding you an “I” is so that you will revise and finish your paper before the end of your final semester so that you do not need to enroll just to complete your capstone.

4) Draft Papers and the Final Paper Due Dates

- Drafts must be submitted as scheduled in your prospectus, and approved by your capstone faculty advisor.
- Submit the final paper two weeks prior to the final exam week in the semester you wish to graduate.
- Your approved prospectus should indicate the specific dates for the draft and the final paper.
- If you miss these deadlines, without prior approval of your faculty advisor, your capstone paper can be dropped one letter grade. Missing deadlines makes it extremely difficult for faculty to review drafts and grade final papers. Also, late submittals mean that a student has little time to address the deficiencies identified in his/her paper.

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

The answer is a qualified yes. The capstone project must be 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.

7) Collaborative Efforts

Collaborative efforts on Capstone Projects are allowed, but more is expected from a group effort than an individual effort. The purpose of a collaborative effort in our

academic environment is not meant to create less work for you but to generate a better product – i.e., a more in-depth and researched paper.

If you are contemplating a collaborative effort, visit with the MPA Program Director for approval prior to beginning the prospectus process.

8) The Process of Completing the Final Paper

The final paper is usually completed in five steps:

- 1) Prior to the semester in which you plan to enroll in PUBL 6325, visit with the MPA Program Director to determine your faculty advisor, and to review your progress on selecting a topic.
- 2) Meet with your advisor to review your topic and the prospectus requirements (See #2 above). The prospectus must be approved by your advisor before you start work.
- 3) Submit your prospectus, one week before the start of the semester in which will be enrolled for PUBL 6325. This means December for the spring semester, May for the summer semester, and August for the fall semester. This ensures that you are ready to work on your project when the semester begins. Once a prospectus is approved, you cannot change it without your advisor's approval.
- 4) Submit a polished draft that is reviewed by your advisor for needed revisions. "Polished" means that the draft has been thoroughly proofed by the student for spelling, grammar, flow, readability, etc. An unpolished paper may be returned to the student without comment.
- 5) The final paper should be submitted, after any revisions resulting from step 4, two weeks prior to final exam week.

All the steps are mandatory. They are interrelated and will determine your final grade. The prospectus is a critical step in the process. You should view the prospectus 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 prospectus will determine the quality of your final product.

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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 – Potential Capstone Topics

1. Conducting organizational assessments
2. Evaluating programs
3. Addressing resource development needs
4. Developing impact statements
5. Conducting external policy analysis
6. Gathering and/or synthesizing empirical data
7. Reviewing or examining financial viability of projects or endeavors
8. Designing and planning new initiatives
9. Designing and planning program expansion
10. Conducting neighborhood or community assessments
11. Assisting with strategic planning
12. Reviewing internal procedures
13. Evaluating client satisfaction
14. Etc.

(Schachter & Schwartz, JPAE 15(4) 459)

Attachment III -- Research Design

A research design is a plan for carrying out your capstone project. It lays out the problem to be examined, the program to be evaluated, the policy to be analyzed, and the propositions, recommendations or conclusions to be presented. Then it puts them in the context of the research that has already been done or the information already available, and explains how the necessary information will be gathered and applied to support or test the propositions, recommendations or conclusions.

In a research design, you are providing a plan of how to do the work in the allotted time. You will need to research existing studies, writings, and current events on the topic. You will also have to figure out how to obtain the necessary data, what methods you will use in applying it, and the standards you will use to evaluate your program, policy, propositions, recommendations, or conclusions.

Attachment IV -- MPA Program Capstone Topics

Names of UH MPA Program Capstone Projects 2012-2017
2012
<i>Analysis of Advantages and Disadvantages of the Trade Promotion Agreement-Colombia-United States in the Colombian Automobile Sector</i>
<i>Improving Agency Coordination in the Fight Against Human Trafficking - A Guide for Public Administrators Seeking to Enhance Coordination among Law Enforcement and Social Service Agencies</i>
<i>Gambling on the Future: Assessing the future feasibility of implementing Casino-style gambling in Texas</i>
<i>Deer Park LEPC Pipeline Rupture Exercise</i>
<i>An Evaluation of Municipal Lobbying Efforts in Texas: Collaborative Public Management in Action</i>
<i>The Need to Diversify the Economic Tax Base for the City of Mont Belvieu: A Strategy</i>
<i>United States Deep Water and Coastal Water Oil Spill Response Policy: An Evaluation of Pre-Policy and Post-Policy Cleanup Response and a Path Beyond Deepwater Horizon</i>
<i>MPA Inaugural Luncheon Event Summary and Evaluation</i>
<i>Barriers of Health Care Reform in Rural Areas: Evidence from In-Depth Interviews</i>
<i>A Case Study of Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones in Houston: Evaluating the Impact of Fiscal Policy and Social Equity</i>
<i>Uninsured Young Adults in Texas: A Policy Analysis</i>
<i>Policy Alternatives for Reducing the Aggregated State Burden of Uncompensated Care</i>
<i>Alternatives to Houston's Red Light Camera Program: A Policy and Cost-Benefit Analysis</i>
2013
<i>The Causes of Repetitive Municipal Bankruptcy Filings (1998-2009)</i>
<i>Armed Citizen Project – Decreasing Crime by Facilitating Increased Firearm Ownership</i>
<i>Mixed Income Housing – A Program Evaluation</i>
<i>An Evaluation of the Hurricane Ike Long-Term Disaster Recovery Housing Assistance Program</i>
<i>TIRZs In Texas: A GIS Analysis</i>
<i>Finding a Cure for Bureaucracy within the UN</i>
<i>Immigration Policy in the United States and Its Impact on the Economy</i>
<i>Ensuring the Prevention of Alcohol Exposed Pregnancies Statewide: An Approach to Enhance and Amend Texas House Bill 446</i>
<i>Implementing Merit Pay: A Policy Analysis of the Barriers and Strategies for Policy Change</i>
<i>Strategic Recruiting Plan – A comprehensive Action Plan for Customer Service Talent Acquisition</i>
2014
<i>Distracted Driving: Texas' Problem with Cell Phones – Can Texas Figure Out Texting and Driving?</i>

Names of UH MPA Program Capstone Projects 2012-2017
<i>Market Survey Report – Responsiveness of MPA Program to Public Sector Professionals in Greater Houston Metropolitan Area</i>
<i>Evaluating Governance: Township Model Versus Incorporated City Model</i>
<i>GRE Scores and Undergraduate GPA as Possible Indicators of Ph.D. Completion Potential for Doctoral Students at Rice University: Can a Change in Admissions Standards Decrease Rice Attrition Rates?</i>
<i>The Role of Administration in Teacher Turnover</i>
2015
<i>The Office of Personnel Management Security Breach</i>
<i>Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones and Their Impact on Crime: An Analysis of the Houston Midtown TIRZ #2</i>
<i>Real-Life Implementation of Federal Mandates at a Local Level: An Examination of the Difficulties Inherent to Proving the Efficacy of the Promotion of Federal Fair Housing Policies and Community Development Block Grant Expenditures in the City of Dickinson, Texas</i>
<i>Morgan’s Point Ship Collision – Response and Recovery Evaluation</i>
2016
<i>Addressing the Human Resource Challenges in Nonprofits</i>
<i>Fort Bend County May-June Floods – An Evaluation of the Long Term Recovery Projects</i>
<i>Medicaid Women’s Health Program and the Texas Women’s Health Program – A Program Evaluation</i>
<i>Feasibility Study of Alternative to City-Provided Solid Waste Removal</i>
2017
<i>Free Speech On College Campuses: A Student’s Unconstitutional, Constitutional Right</i>
<i>The Right to a Speedy Trial – An Evaluation of the First Appearance Dockets of Fort Bend County General Jurisdiction Courts</i>
<i>The City of Missouri City, Texas, Website Redesign Project – Findings, Analyses, Recommendations, and Evaluation of the Survey of the City’s Business Community</i>
<i>Harris County Case Study</i>