

Western Michigan University
School of Public Affairs and Administration
PADM6800, Project Paper Seminar
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Project Paper Proposal

As indicated in the project paper guidelines included in the MPA Handbook, students in this course have a choice to undertake a project that falls in one of the following categories: applied analytical work, empirical scholarly research, legal or historical studies, or contemplative treatise. The specific approaches, tasks, and strategies students adopt depend on the category in which the chosen problem falls. It is important to remember, however, that all project paper situations involve integration and analysis of theoretical knowledge, research using new or existing data, and writing based on an appropriate analysis of data. In addition to the requirements and criteria established in the MPA Handbook, your project must meet the following criteria to ensure high-quality research and analytical outcomes in this course.

- a. Projects must seek to advance knowledge in the interdisciplinary field of public administration.
- b. Projects must include an analysis of primary or secondary, quantitative or qualitative, and survey, interview, or other institutional data.
- c. Projects must demonstrate high-quality critical analysis rather than mere reporting of the facts and opinions collected from agencies or informants. While critical analyses can take many forms, they must address specific research questions or hypotheses through examination of strengths and weaknesses, policy discourses, economic, political and social impacts, and/or costs and benefits. This criterion applies to all project papers regardless of the specific substantive issue being examined, the specific theoretical or methodological approach taken, or the specific category in which the project falls.
- d. Projects seeking to produce business plans, policy or procedures manuals, grant applications, or routine performance reviews are discouraged unless they seek to supplement other major pieces that are focused on critical analyses.

You may have realized while taking PADM6060, that what problem to choose for systematic research depends on many factors. You may have also speculated, rightfully, that it will be a good idea to continue with the problem which you used for the research proposal you developed in PADM6060. If you happen to use a different problem, however, you need to think carefully and thoroughly about its breadth and depth. Whichever case applies to you, it is important to use

a problem that can benefit from systematic research to address, keeps you consistently motivated for at least a semester, and is operationally feasible with enough access to relevant data and information.

Even with these considerations, selecting an appropriate problem can be challenging. This is particularly because you have to have enough preparation for its theoretical and methodological treatment. The problem, for example, needs to be in an area which you have already studied directly or indirectly while taking some courses within the MPA program at SPAA or elsewhere. It also needs to be appropriate for investigation using a methodological approach with which you feel comfortable. But since you have completed 30 credit hours of coursework in the MPA Program, I am confident that you have already identified an appropriate problem. Let me know if you are still unsure about this.

Once you have identified such problem, you should create a realistic research proposal to examine it further. The research proposal and its research design will include the following components and sections. Note that this list may go beyond the general guidelines provided in the MPA Handbook.

1. *Title:* A concise and an appropriate running title of the project.
2. *Abstract:* A concise paragraph describing the problem, the project focus, key research questions/hypotheses, and the methodology to be used. The idea is to inform the reader on what is going to be investigated, why, and how.
3. *Introduction:* This section includes an introduction or statement of the problem and its significance to the interdisciplinary field of public administration. It identifies a gap in the knowledge and the need for research to address this gap. It creates the context for the project to which its results and findings will be applied and identifies the direct and indirect beneficiaries of the research.
4. *Preliminary Literature Review:* This section provides a preliminary review of the professional and scholarly literature establishing how the project is placed within the context of the wider body of knowledge about the problem. Literature reviews need to go beyond annotated bibliographies; they constitute integrative reviews that establish where the project can be placed in the broader content and theoretical context of prior published research and analysis. Focus is on the classical and theoretically significant pieces as well as more current pieces to cover the key ideas and recent developments in the area. This exposure to the appropriate literature will also guide you in thinking through design methodologies and approaches to be covered in the next section. Whereas the role of literature review can be more limited in cases of contemplative treatise and legal or historical studies, its role in

many other approaches such as operational, managerial, or evaluation studies will be even more comprehensive drawing from substantive and methodological literature.

5. *Research Design and Methodology*: The overall design of the research including the applicable conceptual framework, a statement of research questions or hypotheses and expected outcomes, operationalization of factors, concepts, or variables, and types of data and their collection and analysis strategies. Your conceptual framework is a logical flowchart that appropriately links the theoretical concepts as identified in the literature review and its description. The framework needs to be sufficiently detailed to establish specific relationships between and among the different theoretical concepts used. While how developed this section needs to be depends on the specific approach taken, more developed frameworks help you guide in formulating specific research questions or hypotheses. You need to provide a concrete plan for data collection and analysis depending on your overall approach with one or a combination of case studies, experiments, field research, focus groups, key informant or in-depth interviews, observations, or secondary research surveys as relevant. If the plan is to collect primary data, you need to discuss the appropriate data collection tools with the actual protocols, agency endorsements, and HSIRB approvals included in the appendix. In this section, you need to be specific with regard to the what, how, and why.
6. *Data Analysis Plan*: This section outlines your plan for presenting, analyzing, and reporting of the data and results. Your plan needs to be appropriate to address the specific research questions or hypotheses but you also need to demonstrate sufficient technical mastery in using the needed tools and techniques.
7. *Timeline*: Provide a realistic timeline of when you expect to complete the key steps in the research project.
8. *References*: Provide and appropriately format (using APA style) the list of references. Remember to include only those references that are cited in the text.
9. *Appendices*: Include any additional information, tools, and other relevant documents, when appropriate, as appendices.

The length of your research proposal depends largely on the nature of the problem, the scope of your theory, and the specific research methodology. While I do not impose any specific page limit, keep in mind that typical research proposals range between 20 and 40 pages.