

PROJECT PAPER SEMINAR GUIDELINES

The Project Paper Seminar is the capstone experience of the MPA program and is required for students in all concentrations. It provides an opportunity for students to integrate theory and practice in a significant problem solving exercise. MPA candidates will conduct an original, analytical research project consisting of professional analysis of a management problem leading to practical implementation in governmental, health care, or nonprofit settings, or theoretical inquiry in the field of public administration. The project, in other words, will produce either academic research that provides new generalized knowledge in the field or a solution to a public management problem, often within the context of a specified agency.

An MPA candidate who has completed at least 30 hours of course works, including all MPA core courses, is eligible to enroll in the Project Paper Seminar. Exceptions to this prerequisite requirement can be made with the written consent of the SPAA Director. However, MPA advisors recommend that students enroll in the seminar as their last course whenever possible because of its nature as the *culminating course* for the entire program.

Framing Your Capstone Experience

One of the most challenging steps leading to the successful completion of the Project Paper is selecting the problem or issue to investigate. Past experience suggests that some seminar participants devote inadequate thought to this important matter and as a consequence may find themselves caught up in a frustrating and seemingly endless project. The selection of a well-defined, "doable" topic, by contrast, can make the Project Paper one of the most rewarding components of the MPA degree program.

Before undertaking the work of researching and writing the project paper, students must obtain approval of the project topic from their instructor and, where applicable, from an agency representative. Students are encouraged to gain this approval during the semester prior to enrolling in the Project Paper Seminar. Students whose project papers focus on a significant agency issue or problem should involve the instructor and agency representative early in the process of selecting a topic. Involvement by the agency should help students receive full recognition of having helped solve an agency problem, even as a normal component of the work schedule, rather than as an unrelated and outside activity. The project is intended to increase the student's probability of advancement and so any potential political fallout or organizational backlash should be carefully considered in selecting the project.

Throughout the program students should keep this capstone experience in mind, from taking analytical methods early in the program, to considering specific term project assignments that might help develop the student's knowledge of relevant research literature, to perhaps framing the study during the quantitative data analysis course or a budgeting course.

Criteria for Selection of the Project Paper Seminar Topic

The following criteria apply to the selection of the Project Paper Seminar topic.

- The topic should be one that can be completed within the semester in which the student is enrolled in the seminar though, as described above, the student will often be working with the instructor before that semester actually begins.
- All topics involving research with human subjects, as defined by the university, must gain approval from the WMU Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). Students are strongly encouraged to work with their instructor in advance of the seminar course to prepare the HSIRB application form, protocol, data collection tools, contact scripts, and consent documentation.
- Project papers do not meet the requirements of an official academic thesis as defined by Western Michigan University. The grade is determined by the instructor of record rather than by a thesis

committee. However, neither is the paper to be merely an expanded term paper. All capstone projects must contain substantial analytical content appropriate to graduate study and use clear methodologies relevant to the topic and approved by the instructor.

- The paper is not to be simply a report of activities undertaken by pre-career students during professional field experience/internship, a case study describing a single set of related incidents and decisions reached by other work colleagues, or a report of the day-to-day responsibilities of in-career students. However, when approved by the project paper instructor, the project paper report may include material related to a student's professional field experience.
- The length of the project paper will vary depending on the nature of the topics and research design employed for the project, yet these are rarely less than 30 pages of narrative plus the required preliminary materials (abstract, table of contents, executive summary), reference list, appendices, etc.
- Per the university's multiple submission policy, the project paper may not consist of substantial portions of previous work submitted for credit in a prior course without explicit permission from the capstone instructor. Thus, if a research proposal is developed in a prior course and a study of the relevant literature is developed in a prior course, the original assignments with instructor feedback should be provided to the capstone seminar instructor in advance so the seminar grade may reflect the value added.
- The seminar topic, its research design and methodology, and the HSIRB application must receive the approval of the project paper instructor (and HSIRB, where applicable) before the research or project activity can begin.

All Project Paper Reports will be evaluated for grading purposes on the basis of the following criteria: quality and clarity of the writing, thoroughness and quality of the research, completeness of documentation and literature review, and the clarity of the paper's organization. An oral presentation of the paper's topic and findings will also be required and evaluated as part of the seminar grade. The project paper instructor may submit the student's final paper to an outside reader for feedback prior to assigning the final grade for the seminar.

Recommended Classes of MPA Project Paper Topics

The following are types of projects deemed acceptable by the School's faculty, although other topic categories may be acceptable upon approval of the project paper instructor and the MPA Director.

- **Applied Analytical Research:** Applied research using analytical and applied research methods to solve a particular policy or management problem of a specific public or non-profit sector agency. Examples of such projects include: program, policy, and project proposals, needs assessments or evaluations, management studies, and budgetary and fiscal studies. While all applied project papers must have a strong analytical component, they may result in the production of practical administrative products as a component of the project paper. These administrative products may include new program proposals, new or revised management plans and systems, employee or operations manuals, strategic agency plans, etc.
- **Empirical Scholarly Research:** Empirical research into the behavior, events, and other phenomena found in the administration of public and non-profit organizations. This research must follow accepted social science research designs and methodologies (quantitative, qualitative, or blended approaches) for evaluating empirical models and testing hypotheses. The project paper instructor must approve the project's research design early in the research process. Examples of projects of this type include studies of organizational and administrative behavior and processes, organizational development and change, citizen interaction with administrative agencies, and the examination of policy making and implementation.
- **Legal or Historical Studies:** Legal or historical analyses, using accepted legal or historical research methods, and focused on public, healthcare, or nonprofit policy making and policy or program implementation issues.

- **Contemplative Treatise:** Students may undertake artistic or philosophical approaches that explore issues of importance to public managers. The paper should be a scholarly examination of theoretical issues and based heavily on a literature review that poses and addresses a central question.
- **Other Projects:** Occasionally, unique projects not defined above are presented to take advantage of rare opportunities to examine issues or problems relevant to public administration as a field of inquiry or practice. Such projects may be approved by the project paper instructor and MPA Director, provided that they meet the seven criteria for selection of seminar topics described above, and the requirements for original research described below in this manual.

Project Paper Proposal

Each Project Paper research proposal and its research design, which should be completed and submitted to the instructor during the first or second class session, will include the following elements, tailored to the nature of the student's approved seminar project:

Abstract: A concise paragraph describing the topic, project focus, and key research question.

Project Description: An introduction to the topic and its applied importance to the field and practice of public administration

Preliminary Literature Review: A preliminary review of professional and scholarly literature establishing how this project is placed within the context of the wider body of knowledge about the topic. Professional or scholarly literature reviews are not to be annotated bibliographies; they are to be integrative reviews that establish where the student's project can be placed in the broader content and theoretical context of prior published research and analysis. In other words, the literature review should be thematic rather than organized author-by-author or study-by-study. The requirements for the approach and content of acceptable literature reviews should be clearly stated in the course syllabus.

Data Collection Strategies: A description of the information and data sources and methodologies to be used in conducting the project.

Research Question and Methodology: The nature of the methodology to be employed in conducting the project analysis, and a clear statement of the research question(s) and, where relevant, hypotheses of the research.

Project Outline: A preliminary outline of the research paper

Timeline: A schedule of dates of when the student expects to complete the key steps in the research/project analysis process.

Projects involving the use of proprietary agency data, interviews with agency personnel, or on-site observations of agency operations will require a letter of agency endorsement for the project. Students are advised to inform their employers when the employer or its employees are to be part of the content of the project paper.

All projects must entail ***original research and writing***, defined as meeting the following criteria:

- The research project has not been previously conducted. If the study is a replication study, it must not have been previously conducted on the project subjects or the agency unless the project involves longitudinal studies of administrative phenomena.
- The study must contain strong analysis as the basis for project findings, recommendations, and/or products.

- The project has used the appropriate methodologies germane to the topic and its academic or professional field.
- The paper provides an opportunity for the integration of the content of the student's MPA curriculum, as defined by the project paper instructor.
- The paper must represent substantially new research, as defined by the project paper instructor.

At the project paper instructor's discretion, all papers may be subject to analysis by a relevant plagiarism detection software, in compliance with university policy.

Project Paper Format and Organization

The basic format issues (margins, table format, page numbering, etc.), should follow the current version of the Graduate College *Guidelines for Theses, Projects, and Dissertations* at www.wmich.edu/grad. The School of Public Affairs and Administration has adopted the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (most current edition) as the standard for headings/subheadings, in-text citations, and reference format. The Publication Manual is widely available including at Waldo Library. MPA Project Papers must follow APA requirements for citations and references, yet the information in this MPA Student Handbook (below) takes precedence.

The finished project paper for applied analytical or empirical scholarly research projects should usually contain the following sections, in the following order.

1. Title page (must adhere to Graduate College guidelines)
2. Abstract (a 200 word summary that includes topic, major findings, and conclusions)
3. Executive Summary (a longer summary that describes the paper in greater detail, but not to exceed two pages (double-spaced, Times New Roman 12-point font))
4. Table of Contents (with page numbers)
5. Introduction (a statement of purpose and organization of the paper, including the expected contribution to knowledge in the field of public administration)
6. Literature Review (a review of the most important documents from related scholarly research and professional sources)
7. Research Design and Methodology
8. Data Analysis and Findings
9. Conclusions and Recommendations (summary of findings, conclusions drawn, recommendations for action or further study)
10. APA-style Reference List (not bibliography)
11. Appendices
 - a. HSIRB approval letter or emails (if needed)
 - b. Agency approval letters (if needed – when a project is heavily based on data from or access to a specific organization, or uses the resources of specific organizations, agency approval letters may be required by the project paper instructor to protect the student and SPAA)
 - c. other appendices

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB)

The role of HSIRB is to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects as well as to protect researchers. Research is defined as any systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalized knowledge. Any research protocol involving human subjects must be submitted to HSIRB for approval, with the project paper instructor as the Principle Investigator and the MPA student as the Student

Investigator, even if the project may result in an approval finding of “approval not required” or “exempt from review.” The project paper instructor will determine if submission is required based on the specific proposed research. For example, methods that involve surveying or interviewing people, or using data that includes personal identifying information, will probably need to be approved by HSIRB.

The online CITI training offered by WMU’s HSIRB is required of all students prior to beginning the project paper seminar as it contains important information and guidance on the research process and research ethics. This requirement remains even if your research does not involve human subjects research.

Seminar Schedule

The Project Paper Seminar will usually consist of three face-to-face classroom sessions involving all students currently in the section of PADM 6800, plus additional meetings between the supervising faculty member, the student, and the student's supervisor or other agency representative (if needed). Seminar meetings will generally be held on Saturdays during the first and third weeks of the semester (or summer I session), and the third session is ordinarily held near the end of the semester (or summer II session) so that students may formally present their research and findings/outcomes. The formal presentation requirement stems from the faculty's belief, backed up by assessments of potential employers, that MPA graduates must be able to make effective, persuasive presentations before groups of peers or policy makers. The final seminar grade will reflect, in part, the professionalism and effectiveness of this formal presentation. Under exceptional circumstances, and with the project paper instructor’s approval, students may be allowed to make their presentations in other venues.

Two copies of the final project paper report must be submitted:

1. A single PDF file with the entire document from cover to cover. Note: the instructor may prefer this in another format to facilitate providing feedback to you, but the School will eventually need this as one PDF file.
2. A soft cover, spiral bound copy to be retained in the library of the School.

Both versions are considered public documents and so please ensure that your final report is of the highest quality and ready to be viewed by the world. The project paper instructor may require changes and resubmission in both formats.

TITLE OF YOUR MPA
PROJECT PAPER

by

Your Name
(Exactly as it appears on documents)

A Project Paper
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Public Administration
School of Public Affairs and Administration

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
Month Year

TITLE OF YOUR MPA
PROJECT PAPER

Your Name, M.P.A.

Western Michigan University, Year

Abstract text...

TITLE OF YOUR MPA
PROJECT PAPER
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Text...