

Western Michigan University

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND ADMINISTRATION

PADM 6800: PROJECT PAPER SEMINAR

PROJECT PAPER GUIDELINES

Introduction

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 research and writing the project paper, students must obtain approval of the project topic from their Instructor of Record and, where applicable, from an agency representative. Students are strongly encouraged to gain this approval at the latest 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 of Record 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.

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.
- All topics involving research using 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 of Record in advance of the seminar semester in preparing the documentation for an HSIRB application.
- Project papers do not need to meet the requirements of an official academic thesis, as defined by the university. However, neither is the paper to be merely an expanded single-course term paper. All seminar projects must contain substantial analytical content appropriate to masters' level graduate study and use rigorous methodologies relevant to the topic and approved by the Instructor of Record.
- The length of the project paper will vary depending on the nature of the topics and research design employed for the project.

- 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. However, with the permission of the Instructors of Record of PADM 6060 and PADM 6800, a research design proposal developed for PADM 6060 may be used as the basis for the research design in PADM 6800.
- 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 faculty mentor, the topic may include material related to the student's role and work responsibilities during the time covered by the seminar.
- The seminar topic, its research design and methodology, and the HSIRB application must receive the approval of the Instructor of Record (and HSIRB, where applicable) before the research or project activity can begin.

All PADM 6800 seminar papers 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 and completeness 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 evaluation criteria for the Project Paper Seminar will also be described in the course syllabus. The PADM 6800 Instructor of Record may submit the student's final paper to an outside faculty reader for comment and grade recommendation 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 Instructor of Record and the School's MPA Committee [or 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 Instructor of Record 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 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 with the endorsement of the Instructor of Record if 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 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. 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 of 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 research question (applied or otherwise) may not have been recently examined in the chosen agency context, or otherwise already extensively covered in the literature of the field.
- The paper provides an opportunity for the integration of the content of the student's MPA curriculum, as defined by the Instructor of Record.
- The paper must represent substantially new research, as defined by the Instructor of Record.

At the Instructor of Record's discretion, all papers may be subject to analysis by *Turnitin* or other relevant plagiarism software, in compliance with university policy.

Project Paper Format and Research Resources

The School of Public Affairs and Administration has adopted the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th edition) as the standard for citation, punctuation, format, headings, pagination, etc. The Publication Manual is available at many commercial bookstores and online booksellers. A summary version of its style guide is also available online. MPA Project Papers must follow APA requirements for style, paper headings, citations and references, pagination, and tabular presentation of data, unless specifically exempted by the supervising Instructor of Record.

There are a number of valuable books on research methods in public administration or the social sciences. Students are encouraged to browse these resources, or contact a SPAA faculty member for recommended reading in these areas. The following sources are useful for planning a research project for the Seminar.

Babbie, E. R. 1992 *The Practice of Social Research*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth.

O'Sullivan, E., Russell, G., and Berner M., 2003. *Research Methods for Public Administration*. New York: Longman.

Students requiring a refresher on the distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research design, or the use of blended approaches, would be well served to read John W. Creswell. 2003. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. ISBN: 0-7619-2442-6 (paperback).

Project Paper Organization

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

- a) Title page (must adhere to Graduate College guidelines)
- b) Abstract (a 200 word summary that includes topic, major findings, and conclusions)
- c) 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))
- d) Table of Contents (with page numbers)
- e) Introduction (a statement of purpose and organization of the paper, including the expected contribution to knowledge in the field of public administration)
- f) Literature Review (a review of the most important documents from related scholarly research and professional sources)
- g) Research Design and Methodology
- h) Data Analysis and Findings
- i) Conclusions and Recommendations (summary of findings, conclusions drawn, recommendations for action or further study)
- j) References (in APA style)
- k) Appendices
- l) Agency approval letter (where applicable)

The project paper organization for legal, historical, and contemplative and other acceptable projects will be established by the Instructor of Record.

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB)

The role of HSIRB is to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects. Research may be defined as any systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalized knowledge. Any research protocol involving human subject participants must be submitted to HSIRB for approval, even if the student believes the project will result on an approval finding of “approval not required” or “exempt from review.” More information about human subject research can be obtained from the Research Compliance web page at the GoWMU web site, or by contacting a PADM 6800 instructor.

MPA students who intend to conduct research in PADM 6800 that will involve research in human subjects should contact the PADM 6800 instructor assigned to their course section prior to the beginning of the semester in order to gain HSIRB approval in sufficient time to complete the Project Paper during the semester in which the student is registered for the course.

Seminar Schedule

The Project Paper Seminar will usually consist of three live classroom sessions involving all students currently enrolled in a section of PADM 6800, plus additional meetings between the supervising faculty member, the student, and (where applicable) the student's supervisor or other agency representative as needed. Some faculty members may elect to add a fourth group meeting. Seminar meetings will generally be held on Saturdays during the first or second week of the semester at a time and location announced in the schedule of classes. At the first meeting, the faculty supervisor may facilitate an MPA program evaluation, will outline expectations for the MPA Project Paper, and will conduct a general discussion of appropriate topics, data gathering procedures, deadlines, and grading criteria. In order to provide seminar participants with as much time as possible to prepare, the first meeting is scheduled early in the semester.

The second seminar meeting will ordinarily be scheduled two to three weeks after the first meeting. Between these two meetings, where applicable, seminar participants should consult with their supervisor or another agency representative and identify the topic, which will serve as a focus of their study. At the second seminar session, each participant will present a formal but brief project proposal of his/her topic. The Project Paper proposal must include: (a) a clear, concise statement of the problem or issue to be investigated; (b) a brief background on the problem or issue to be investigated; (c) published and/or other sources of data (interviews, survey research instruments, questionnaire forms, etc.); (d) procedures to be employed in analyzing the information to be accumulated; (e) major section and sub-section headings which are likely to be found in the final report; and (f) a tentative timetable (for the literature search, interviews, questionnaires, writing, etc.). This second meeting will ordinarily occupy most of the day since each participant will present an outline of his/her MPA Project Paper orally and receive feedback from peers and the supervising faculty member.

If appropriate, other meetings between the student, an agency representative, and the supervising professor can be scheduled in the field following the second seminar session.

The third (and final) seminar session is ordinarily held near the end of the semester (approximately week eleven). In the intervening periods, students will have conducted the academic and professional literature review, collected and analyzed all the information needed to resolve the issue under study, completed the necessary analytical and research tasks, and written at least a preliminary draft of the final project paper. At the Instructor of Record's discretion, this preliminary draft of the paper may need to be submitted to allow the instructor to make suggested changes and constructive comments to aid the student in improving the quality of the final draft.

At the third meeting, each student will deliver an oral presentation of his/her findings. This is to be a formal presentation and students should prepare for distribution copies of any charts, graphs, tables, or other summary materials, which will enhance understanding by other seminar participants. (Arrangements for audio-visual equipment should be completed well in advance of this meeting.) The formal presentation format stems from the faculty's belief that professional administrators must be able to make effective, persuasive presentations before groups of peers or policy makers such as city council members, county commissioners, or state legislators. The final seminar grade will reflect, in part, the professionalism and effectiveness of this formal presentation. Under exceptional circumstances, and with the Instructor of Record's approval, students may be allowed to make their presentations in other venues.

At the Instructor of Record's discretion, the final Project Paper document may be due at the third class session, or at a latter date prior to the end of the semester. Subject to individual variation among supervising faculty members, faculty may require up to four copies of the final paper. Normally, the student will retain one copy; one copy will be read and evaluated by the supervising faculty member and returned to the student with the final grade affixed, and a third copy may be provided to the agency representative for the agency's records or for its comments and/or recommendations. A fourth, final, and bound copy, as specified by the School, will be retained in the library of the School of Public Affairs and Administration. Students should be aware that project papers are subject to public access.

FORMAT SAMPLES

Title Page

The title page should be prepared according to the following instructions and shall be similar in appearance to the samples illustrated on the next pages. The title page is not numbered but is considered to be the first page of the manuscript. The subsequent introductory material (Acknowledgements, Table of Contents, List of Tables, etc.) is, with the exception of the copyright page, numbered using lowercase Roman numerals (ii, iii. etc.).

Center the title of your manuscript in capital letters 1 and $\frac{3}{4}$ inches from the top of the page. The title must be identical to the title appearing on the abstract of your manuscript. Approximately 10 lines below the title, center the word “by”.

Two lines (a double space below the author’s name, center “A Project Paper” followed by 6 or 7 lines of single-spaced text identifying the degree and academic unit. Be sure to use the correct name for the academic unit, e.g., School of Public Affairs and Administration.

Approximately 10 lines below the name of the academic unit, center “Western Michigan University”. On the next line, center “Kalamazoo, Michigan” and on the third line, center the month and year of actual graduation, i.e., April, June, August, or December. No comma follows the month.

EXAMPLE ON NEXT PAGE

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...