

MPP Capstone Policy Memo

Guidelines (Effective May 2021)

The policy memo is the capstone project for the MPP degree. Students will apply the analytical approaches and skills studied in the MPP curriculum to a real-world policy problem of specific interest to the student. The policy memo will include an analysis of the selected policy issue or challenge, along with policy recommendations or discussion of the implications of the analysis.

It is expected that most students will write a policy memo independently, in consultation with a primary advisor and based on student-initiated problem definition, research, and analysis. Advisors must be appointed members of the Korbel School or other DU public policy-affiliated faculty. In some specific cases, and only with MPP Degree Director approval, adjunct instructors may advise policy memos. It is also possible for students, individually or in small groups, to request permission to conduct a client-facing capstone project, if the student(s) concerned have an appropriate existing client relationship. Approval for the latter option is at the discretion of the MPP Degree Director.

Substantive guidelines

The basic structure of policy analysis involves several elements: problem definition, identification of hypotheses or policy options, measurement, projection of potential outcomes, and evaluation of implementation and consequences. Students may choose, in consultation with an advisor, how to tackle a policy issue in their memo. Some memos might involve all of these elements, while others might take a deep dive on one or more of the elements, as follows:

- A memo might focus on understanding the nature of the problem, or critiquing prevailing definitions of the problem, and on how the policy problem might be best assessed. Possible analytical techniques include formal stakeholder analysis, qualitative research to understand the issues from the perspective of key actors, etc.
- A memo might explore the likely consequences of a particular policy option, with appropriate measurement choices. Possible analytical techniques include institutional policy analysis, retrospective program evaluation that sheds light on the efficacy of certain policies, etc.
- A memo might explore prospective policy valuation, with appropriate measurement choices. Possible analytical techniques include economic or other technical analysis (i.e., traditional cost-benefit analysis, equity analysis), or more subjective / critical valuation methods.

Policy memos will be assessed on a Pass / Fail basis by primary advisors and the MPP Policy Memo Coordinator / Degree Director based on how well the following four core goals are met:

1. Define, in nuanced detail, the policy issue or challenge at hand, with reference to appropriate theoretical and analytical frameworks.
2. Propose and/or assess alternative policies to address the policy issue using an appropriate policy analysis framework.
3. Deliver reasoned and actionable policy recommendations to resolve the policy issue, or otherwise discuss the implications of the analysis.
4. Express the complex ideas, analysis, and conclusions advanced in the memo fluidly, persuasively, and with analytical rigor.

Timeline and logistics

It is expected that students will start thinking about their policy memos and taking appropriate courses as early in their program as possible. The MPP Policy Memo Coordinator and Degree Director will meet with MPP students during their first year in the program to discuss the policy memo process, advising on potential topics, forms of analysis, and suggested coursework. Before beginning their final year, ideally, students will identify the policy area on which they will focus their memo and a primary advisor for their project. MPP candidates will then work in earnest on their policy memos over their final three quarters in the program, enrolling in the 4-credit PPOL 4950 Policy Memorandum in whichever quarter makes logistical sense. An indicative timeline is as follows:[#]

Fall Year 2:	MPP Policy Memo Coordinator / Degree Director convene a cohort meeting early in the quarter to initiate the policy memo process. In consultation with their primary memo advisor, students develop a 2-page outline of their project, establishing: (1) the main policy issue under study with brief context on its significance; and (2) a proposed core analytical technique along with some sense of the evidence to be employed. This outline, approved by the primary advisor, is due to the Policy Memo Coordinator by the end of the quarter.
Winter Year 2:	Students work primarily with memo advisor. The MPP Policy Memo Coordinator will convene cohort meetings 4–5 times over the course of the quarter for group advising and peer group support. The Policy Memo Coordinator will ensure that topics are appropriately scoped in terms of the policy analysis element.
Spring Year 2:	Students work primarily with memo advisor. The MPP Policy Memo Coordinator will convene continued group advising meetings. Policy memos, approved by the primary memo advisor, are due to the Policy Memo Coordinator in mid-May. Final approval is communicated to the Registrar by the MPP Program.

An MPP policy memo poster session will be held in late May for all graduating students to present their work to Korbel and DU students, staff, and faculty, as well as any interested members of the public, including prospective employers, the Scrivner Institute community, etc.

Formatting requirements

Format:	The final product should be formatted as a policy brief. Examples will be provided, along with suggested section headings, bibliographic style, etc.
Length:	Memos should be 6,000–8,000 words (15–20 single-spaced pages), with concise presentation of analytical models in the main body of the final product.
Appendices:	Appendices should be used for any necessary additional measurement and assessment details.
Executive summary:	A 2-page executive summary that is suitable for public and policy audiences is required.

[#] A typical 2-year timeline is used here to illustrate the milestones. Students working on shorter (4 or 5 quarter) graduation timelines will adjust accordingly, in consultation with the MPP Degree Director and Policy Memo Coordinator.