

Undergraduate Thesis Requirements and Guidelines

2018 - 2019 Academic Year

Requirements

In response to the Public Policy major's need to experience first-hand the type of practical and professional work typical of a policy analyst, students choosing to receive Distinction in Public Policy will complete a Thesis. This Thesis is modeled after the Policy Memorandum project that all Master of Public Policy students undertake in their second year of study.

Included among the skills that will apply to the thesis are problem definition, critical analysis, research, quantitative methods, and economic analysis.

Defining the Thesis

Students will:

- Identify and define a real-world policy issue
- Analyze the issue by interviewing professionals with opposing views, conducting research, and gathering data
- Recommend courses of action

Topic Choice

- Involve a policy decision within the public, private, or nonprofit sectors
- Require a precise problem statement
- Involve conflicting viewpoints or alternative points-of-view
- Require careful delineation of actors and stakeholders
- Involve the use of information, both qualitative and quantitative
- Be specific to relevant issues; not general

Length and Formatting

The Thesis is expected to be approximately 20 pages, including tables and charts (excluding references). The standard formatting that should be used is 11-point font, double-spaced, with 1" margins.

Organization

There should be seven main sections to the Policy Memorandum:

1. Executive Summary
2. Problem definition
3. Research Approach
4. Issue analysis
5. Proposed solutions
6. Strategic recommendations
7. Weaknesses and limitations

Students may add sections or sub-sections to this general guideline, but should not omit any of these primary areas.

Grading

The student's final grade will be determined by the Thesis advisor, with input from the other two panelists. The grade will be based on how well the "thesis elements" (below) have been addressed.

Professional Ethics

Thesis content should be the student's original thought – or properly attributed in accordance with recognized citation standards. Any unattributed content will result in a failing grade, as well as referral to the Office of Student Conduct.

Timeline

Please use the following schedule throughout the Thesis process. Work directly with your Thesis advisor to fill in exact dates for steps in which a hard deadline is not already set.

In addition to these deliverables, your advisor may choose to schedule regular meetings with you throughout the process.

All forms mentioned, as well as additional details on the process, can be found on the [Korbel BA Portfolio site](#).

PREPARATION

Departmental Distinction Application

Due to the Korbel Office of Academic and Student Affairs: April 1st of junior year

Approach faculty regarding thesis

Complete: after you receive notification of acceptance. It is recommended that you do this before leaving for the summer break.

Begin to develop an idea of the policy issue you would like to address. Request a meeting with the appointed faculty member of your choice within the Public Policy department to discuss the possibility of them serving as your thesis advisor. Come prepared with one or two brief, written statements that express your intent to complete a thesis on a particular topic or topics.

Submit “Thesis Intent” and “Independent Research” forms

Due to the Korbel Office of Academic and Student Affairs: Prior to the start of the quarter in which you intend to register for the thesis credits (either Fall or Winter)

PROBLEM DEFINITION

Complete by: _____

RESEARCH AND COLLECT DATA

Complete by: _____

FIRST DRAFT

Complete by: _____

SECOND DRAFT

Complete by: _____

FINAL DRAFT

Complete by: _____

PRESENTATION

Complete by: _____

Student and Advisor should discuss panelist options. It is up to the student to coordinate schedules to find a mutually available time for all panelists. Reserve a conference room for the presentation in <https://25live.collegenet.com/du>. See the "Presentation/Thesis Defense" section below for details.

REVISED DRAFT (IF NECESSARY)

Complete by: _____

SUBMIT FINAL COPY & APPROVAL FORM

Due to the Korbelt Office of Academic and Student Affairs: week four of spring quarter, senior year, on Monday at noon

Email the final copy to Debbie.gaylinn@du.edu and bring a signed copy of the "Final Thesis Approval" form to the Office of Academic and Student Affairs, Sie 2030.

Thesis Elements

Topic Choice

The choice of your topic is extremely important for the success of your Thesis. You should choose a topic that lends itself to policy analysis and therefore policy solutions. An appropriate topic has the following characteristics:

Precise: it is easily defined in straightforward terms. Example: “improving graduation rates in public schools” is a precise definition, whereas “improving education in the US” is not. A vague topic choice would be detrimental to the focus of your research. It would also lend itself to vague policy recommendations.

Specific: it is limited to a well-defined policy area and (possibly) to a well-defined domain. A specific topic will help you limit your research to the information that you actually need. Example: “Resource management in the US” would be a very general topic that has countless potential venues of research and analysis, whereas “Water management in Colorado” would focus your research on a specific resource (water) and on a specific geographic domain (Colorado).

Disputed: it lends itself to multiple approaches and points-of-view. If your topic is about an uncontroversial issue, then it is not going to command the attention of your audience; same if the solution to the problem is foregone.

Sections

What follows is a detailed guideline to drafting your Thesis. In addition to these sections, a comprehensive list of references must be included.

1. **Executive Summary.** The one-page executive summary aims to convince the reader further that the brief is worth in-depth investigation. It is especially important for an audience that is short of time to clearly see the relevance and importance of the brief in reading the summary. As such, a one-page executive summary should include: a) a description of the problem addressed; b) a statement on why the current approach/policy option needs to be changed; c) your recommendations for action.
2. **Problem Definition.** You should clearly define the problem you intend to address in your Thesis. You should define your problem in a way that lends itself to policy solutions. A vague definition of the problem will hinder your search for policy solutions. You should also give a clear answer to this

question: ‘why is this issue a problem?’ That also answers the next question: ‘why should we dedicate our efforts to this?’ You should answer these questions in a clear and compelling fashion when you define your problem. Some people might think that the issue you chose is not even a problem: that is one of the reasons why you make your definition as dispassionate as possible. Remember: do not define your solution into the problem. You should make it straightforward for the reader to understand why this is a problem; therefore, you should prepare a single sentence problem definition followed by additional necessary background or details in order to provide appropriate explanation and context.

3. **Research Approach.** After you have defined your problem, you should devote your attention to gathering data/evidence about the issue. In this section, you should explain clearly what kind of evidence you gathered for your research and the reasons for your choice. Be candid and straightforward. If you wanted to gather ‘the perfect data’ for your research but you could not, explain why. Highlight the strong sides of your data but also the weak ones. When in doubt, always opt for transparency. It is important that you explain precisely what your criteria is for judging success or failure of your recommendation.

4. **Issue Analysis.** In this section, you should analyze the issue with the tools of your choice (see ‘Methods’ section). Depending on the issue you are analyzing, it might be useful to provide some historical context, especially if the historical development of the issue at hand can provide some hints about how to treat the problem. Maybe there were some other attempts to solve the problem in previous times that failed, or maybe a similar problem has been addressed in a different context. Having a grasp of the development of the issue over time can help selecting viable alternatives amongst policy options. For example: a Thesis that addresses the issue of public housing should not forget to consider the failure of public housing policies in the past (‘The Projects’). Beyond historical information, your analysis will heavily depend on the methodological choices you made. Your analysis tool (hard data, surveys, etc.) will probably not allow you to take into consideration all the factors that contribute to the problem. This is unavoidable. Again, choose transparency and be candid about what you are ‘leaving out’ of your analysis. Your analysis should individuate the relevant stakeholders in the issue and address their interests. Possibly, you should try to quantify such interests. From a qualitative standpoint, you should also try to assess how intense stakeholders’ preferences are about different possible solutions to the problem. It is critical that you address the primary objections to your proposal and reach a conclusion on whether or not they are valid.

5. **Proposed solutions.** In this section you will analyze the possible solutions to the problem of your policy memorandum. Here you should think hard about what kind of policies could address the problem you are analyzing. You should report solutions that are realistic and viable. If you decide to rule out some solutions, you should be transparent about what makes them unviable or unrealistic.

Lay out the possible solutions clearly. Be straightforward about the components of the policy alternatives. Be clear about the conditions that would make a specific policy fail or succeed.

6. **Strategic Recommendations.** This section is the result of your analysis. Here you should convince your audience that the policy you recommend is better than other alternatives. This implies giving a definition of what ‘better’ means: you should set forth straightforward criteria to judge the success or the failure of policy. This definition of criteria will allow you to structure your cost-benefit analysis.

7. **Weaknesses and Limitations.** In this part, you should analyze your own analysis and policy recommendations to find out what their weaknesses and limitations are. These might come from the data (e.g. you could not get enough data), context (e.g. conditions on the ground could vary in a few years), or other factors such as political will (e.g. “this could be the best way to tackle the issue but there is no way political leaders will green light it”). Past experience can also be a factor in assessing weaknesses and limitations (“we tried this before and it did not work”). This section should not be an afterthought. Hiding the potential weaknesses and limitations of your analysis will only make it weaker. Again, transparency makes for better analysis.

Presentation/Thesis Defense

The panel members will consist of the Thesis advisor, one additional public policy faculty member, and one additional DU faculty member of the student’s choice. Work with your Thesis advisor to identify faculty from around the University or from within the Public Policy department that would be appropriate, given the subject matter.

You will have approximately 30-45 minutes in which to present. Prepare a PowerPoint that includes any applicable charts, data, or graphics that will help the panelists better understand your main points. Dress professionally and practice your presentation ahead of time to ensure you are comfortable with the material and that it fits within the allotted time.

Following the presentation, you will accept questions from the panelists, after which you will be asked to step outside for a few minutes for the panel to discuss your Thesis and presentation. Finally, the panel will provide some feedback and tell you whether changes should be made before a final, revised draft is submitted.

General Tips

An effective Thesis should have the following qualities:

Focused: all aspects of the Thesis should be strategically aimed at achieving the goal of convincing your target audience about the accuracy of your analysis and therefore the quality of your policy recommendations. Avoid lengthy digressions. Avoid anything that can distract the reader from the issue at hand

Professionally crafted: your document is a tool for decision-making. Keep it professional. Both the look and the content of the document should be polished, focused, and easy to understand. Avoid copy-and-paste. Edit your document carefully: you should use professional language. Be passionate about your topic and your policy recommendations, but avoid hyperboles that could be detrimental to the credibility of your document.

Evidence-based: your audience (decision-makers) not only expect a rational argument but will only be convinced by argumentation supported by evidence that the problem exists and the consequences of adopting particular alternatives.

Understandable: you should use clear and simple language, avoiding the jargon and concepts of an academic discipline. You should also provide a well-explained and easy to follow argument. Again, avoid lengthy digressions; keep the structure of the document coherent and linear.

Accessible: you should make the document easy to use and therefore subdivide the text using clear and descriptive titles to guide the reader. The use of such structure also makes it easy to get back to specific sections of the paper for successive readings. If it is hard to find information in your document, policy makers will not use it.

Promotional: your document should catch the eye of its potential audience. Creating a favorable impression is essential to catch the attention of the reader. A poor-looking or poor-reading document is detrimental to its content.

Practical and feasible: your document should provide arguments based on what is actually happening in reality. Your policy recommendations should sound realistic to the target audience.

Explicit: given your policy recommendations, you should provide specific criteria to assess either the failure or the success of the policy changes you are recommending. These criteria should come as much as possible from your cost-benefit analysis.

Transparent: do not try to hide information that does not support your policy recommendations. Recognize the weaknesses of your analysis and be straightforward about it. Being transparent strengthens your argument.