TO: Prospective Capstone Analytic Project (CAP) Client  
FROM: The Dean and Faculty of the Goldman School of Public Policy  
SUBJECT: Client-Based Projects with Goldman School MPA Students

Overview

In their final (third) semester of study at the Goldman School of Public Policy (GSPP), all MPA students write a high-quality professional policy analysis, program analysis or policy-focused research paper, known as the Capstone Analytic Project or CAP. With faculty supervision and advice, each student conducts a thorough analysis of a major policy question facing a real-world organization or policy practitioner, applying the interdisciplinary methods, approaches, and perspectives that comprise the GSPP curriculum. MPA students spend 10-15 hours per week on their CAP (for a total of 150-250 hours of work), starting over the winter break or in January, completing it by early May and, throughout the Spring semester, meeting weekly with their faculty advisor and MPA peers to plan, review, evaluate, and support their project work.

A student’s findings and recommendations are most often presented as a professional-quality written report, but may take other forms (such as, for example, a reorganization plan) as agreed between student, client and instructor. The final product must meet both the academic standards of the School’s faculty and the standards and needs of the client. The analytic work and argumentation underlying the report must meet academic standards, while the written product is engaging and persuasive to lay readers. In the past, the analogous capstone papers written by the students in the school’s two-year MPP program have led to significant changes in policy and organizational management practices.

Who are the MPA students?

MPA students are highly-qualified mid-career professionals seeking to serve the public in a variety of ways. The focus of the degree is on policy analysis combined with deep engagement with questions of organizational leadership, innovation, strategy and adaptation. Some students come from federal, state or local government service, some from philanthropy and non-profits, and some seek to pivot from private to public or non-profit work. MPA students are selected into the program based on their strong professional backgrounds, energetic commitment to the public interest, and strong academic qualifications commensurate with UC Berkeley’s standards. Entering the degree mid-career, the MPA cohort are accomplished managers and executives in their fields, with diverse and deep work experience and, in some cases, already holding an advanced degree or advanced training in a field. The MPA curriculum focuses on economic analysis, research methods, strategic thinking, ethical leadership, and negotiations. Students also undertake individual and group assignments that emphasize both short turnaround analyses and in-depth studies of policy issues.

What distinguishes a good project?

When developing a project, keep in mind that projects should be:

1. **Intellectually and analytically challenging.** Ideal projects involve some uncertainty regarding the projected effects of specific policy choices in which the alternative outcomes are very different and consequential. In addition, projects should not be based on a client’s preferred solution. We enjoin our students to take a critical stance toward any policy analysis problem and, if necessary, to try to persuade the client of a different point of view. Students are consultants (rather than interns) with a fair degree of professional and analytical autonomy. Projects involving little more than collecting survey data, developing program descriptions or information about possible funding sources are not suitable unless these activities raise interesting issues of analysis.
2. **Centered on a decision faced by your organization.** CAP projects should have an important “applied” component, rather than be primarily based on research with remote policy implications. Applied projects allow students to hone their policy analysis skills and their ability to confront difficult tradeoffs between two or more alternative courses of action.

3. **Possible to complete by early May of next year.** Projects should be relatively narrow though complex, rather than broad but simple. Note that there are instances when the client requires the student to start the project sooner than January; we regard this as perfectly acceptable, as long as this is mutually agreed upon between the client and student.

**CLIENT RESPONSIBILITIES**

Successful working relations between students and clients will vary greatly in detail. But at their core they all have a client who sets high expectations for quality of analysis and presentation. A client has five main responsibilities:

1. Meet with the student, in person if possible, prior to the start of the project to negotiate and define the project’s scope, remembering that a project must meet the student’s academic requirements and interests, as well as the client’s needs;

2. Continue to consult with the student regularly throughout the Spring semester to ensure the project stays on course, as well as provide feedback and comments to interim drafts;

3. Provide internal data sources relevant to the project, and advise the student about external data sources;

4. Arrange for student access to stakeholders who may serve as an information source related to the project; and

5. Read and provide feedback on the final report

Most clients do more than this. Interacting more frequently with the students – including commenting on interim written products – typically improves the product and increases the likelihood that it will meet the client’s needs. In addition, clients often provide students with opportunities to present their work before executive staff, advisory boards, and other audiences as appropriate. Some clients find that the student’s completed report is worthy of publication and dissemination in a variety of settings.

**Compensation:** Some CAP students are paid by their clients, some are not; the Goldman School takes no position on compensation. *If your organization cannot offer payment for the project, reimbursement for project-related expenses including but not limited to travel, attending conferences relevant to the project, phone calls, photocopying, and faxing, is expected from the client.* All details of payment must be agreed upon before the start of the project.

**NEXT STEPS**

There will be 33 MPA students doing CAP projects in Spring 2021. Prospective clients are encouraged to work with individual MPA students to develop an appropriate project. GSPP also invites organizations to submit proposals by email to Senior Assistant Dean of Academic Programs Annie Campbell Washington (acw@berkeley.edu). All submitted proposals will be circulated among students for review, and students interested in a project will contact potential clients. Students are currently in the process of selecting their projects, so organizations or individuals with project ideas are encouraged to submit them by November. If you have questions, please don't hesitate to contact Annie Campbell Washington or email mpa@berkeley.edu.