

ASSIGNMENTS

Social Welfare Programs, Policies, and Issues

A. BOOK REVIEW FOR POLICY PROFESSIONALS

Based on the book you chose to read, prepare a two-page (single-spaced) review intended for social workers and other policy professionals. Identify major issues and themes from the book that are important to practicing social workers and others that impact policy. Determine which issue(s) and theme(s) you want to foreground in your review and connect these with current and/or past social welfare policies and programs. **This is not a book report: your review is an evaluation of the book and its value to policymakers, not just a summary.** These questions can help develop your review:

- What does policy mean in these people's lives? How might their lives be different with or without a particular policy? What do their stories tell us about our society?
- Which themes from the book excite you and/or draw an emotional response? What is the emotional heart of the book?
- What is the main argument of the book? If the writer wanted you to take away one idea from the book, what would it be?
- What is the specific subject or topic of this book? Did the author cover all the angles of this subject? How did they present the subject (e.g., narrative, linear, chronological, analytical, etc.)?
- What is the setting of the book? What kind of place is this? How do people in the book inhabit this setting?
- How does the author support their argument? What issues were raised that were left unaddressed?
- Who is the author? What is their background? How have the author's background or experiences shaped the book?
- What is the genre of the text? Does it come from a particular field/discipline? How does the book fit within its genre?
- How has the book helped you understand this subject? Would you recommend this book?
- Why should policymakers care about this book? What are the implications of this book for social workers and other policymakers?

The structure of the review is up to you. But consider these broad areas: introduction/prelude, concise summary of content, analysis/assessment, implications, and conclusions.

Tips for writing your book review: Keep summary sections brief; share the important issues, themes, and argument you have identified rather than retelling the entire book. Avoid using direct quotations from the book (unless it's the phrase or idea so essential that it can't be conveyed with other words). Instead, use your own words to distill and paraphrase themes, ideas, people, settings, or events. This will require some more effort on your part but **your words matter!** Along with the summary section, you can also share important details from the book as evidence to support your claims and conclusions.

Class time for reading free-choice book: We set aside time to read in class throughout the semester. These dates are posted in Canvas. You are also expected to read at least 20 minutes every day outside of class. Use your weekly online reactions, structured as you like, to connect ideas, questions, and impressions from your free-choice book and course material (e.g., textbook/background readings).

Let's help our social work student peers! In addition to your two-page (single-spaced) book review for social workers and policymakers, please write a separate 200- to 300-word recommendation to share with students in next semester's class. **Write this 'blurb' like you were talking about the book over lunch with a friend.** Your book blurb will be appreciated by future students trying to decide which books to read.

B. POLICY ANALYSIS PROJECT

Working in teams throughout the semester (4 or 5 students per group; assigned randomly), students identify and analyze a social problem/issue they wish to impact. Early in the semester, teams will suggest possible social issues/problems and consult with the instructor to choose one issue/problem for this semester-long project. When considering possible issues/problems for this project, teams are encouraged to preference those affecting our local/regional communities.

The purpose of this project is to develop policy analysis and advocacy skills to deploy now and in the future, as practicing professionals and engaged community members. Writing and speaking are the primary ways we influence people, which in turn, can influence policy. This policy analysis project comprises **(1) a social problem/issue paper, (2) expert/community consultation, (3) policy memorandum (“policy memo”), (4) opinion-editorial (“op-ed”), and (5) dissemination and presentation of your work.**

1. Social problem/issue paper: Each team will write a 3-5 page (single-spaced) critical analysis of a social problem/issue of your choice. In addition to any assigned course readings you wish to reference, please find and incorporate at least **six outside scholarly sources** to support your investigation of this social problem/issue. Use 12-point typeface and 1-inch margins (bottom, top, sides) throughout the document. The paper should include but is not limited to:
 - Description of the problem/issue
 - Its impact on society and/or local communities
 - Roots of the problem/issue
 - Student perspective of the problem/issue
 - The stance of your profession (e.g., social work) on this problem/issue

There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.

— Audre Lorde, 1982

2. Community/expert consultation: Each team will consult with one key informant: a local expert, community leader, or other person with insider knowledge about the issue/problem your team is investigating. Identify and contact a community organizer/leader, policymaker, researcher, elected leader, or other ‘insider’ to gather and interpret information about your issue. **Key informants are often people who are respected and listened to by community members** (Hardcastle et al., 2011); they have practical and deep knowledge about the issue/problem your team is addressing. They may even have experience implementing policy options you plan to write about in your memo! Use this opportunity to increase your understanding of the problem/issue and sharpen recommendations in your policy memo. Please include notes from your expert/community consultation as an appendix to your policy memo. Questions for the consultation may be similar to those guiding the social/issue paper but could also include:

- What concerns/issues/problems do they identify? How does the expert/community leader’s description of the problem/issue align with your perspective? How does it differ?
- In the expert/community leader’s view, what are the preferred outcomes for stakeholders impacted by the problem/issue?
- What has already been done about this problem?
- What successes and/or promising approaches, if any, do they report?
- Ask about *feasibility*: What, if any, resources and/or community assets are available?
- Ask about *evaluation*: How will policymakers, you, and those impacted know if the policy or program option (once implemented) is working?
- What might your group be overlooking?

Conviction without experience makes for harshness.

— Flannery O’Connor, 1955

3. Policy memorandum (“policy memo”): Write a 4-page (single-spaced) policy memo providing policy advice on the social issue/problem. Good policy memos help policymakers understand the social issue or problem, consider options for addressing the problem (including possible benefits and disadvantages of each decision), and make a recommendation based on evidence. Policy memos should include the following:

- *Memo title and addressee(s)*: Address your memo to a specific person or small group of influencers. Write for this particular audience.
- *Executive summary*: This should be a short summary (approximately 200 words) of the purpose of the memo and its recommendation. Indicate in an additional sentence the audience for whom the memo is intended and why it’s directed to them.
- *Statement of issue/problem*: Include key facts and scholarly research that a decision maker must know to understand the context of the problem. Be clear, precise, and succinct and include credible references from scholarly sources.
- *Existing policies*: Summarize what has been done about the problem thus far. Be concise and include just essential facts to inform the reader of policy options that have already been pursued, if any. Note that the absence of action may be considered a policy decision.
- *Multiple policy options*: Provide three potential courses of action, and discuss advantages and disadvantages (pros/cons) of each policy option. These options should refer to specific policies and/or programs. Build a persuasive evidence-based argument (using logic and facts) supported by credible sources.
- *Your recommendation*: Please recommend and briefly discuss why this option is best. Convince your readers they need to support this choice.
- *References*

Tips for writing the policy memo: Use subheadings, bullets, and italics or bold to emphasize key points. Aim for concise paragraphs made up of concise sentences. Put your main point in the first sentence. Don't bury a key policy recommendation or observation in the middle of a paragraph. Use blank space to separate sections. Whenever possible, choose plain words over jargon or complex words. Use 12-point typeface and 1-inch margins (bottom, top, sides) throughout the document. Experiment with colors, images, and/or graphs. Consider fonts other than Times New Roman. To avoid chunky or patchy text in collaborative documents, consider appointing a team member as copy editor.

4. Opinion-Editorial ("op-ed"): Based on your policy memo, teams will write, revise, and submit an Opinion Editorial to a newspaper/media source (500 to 800 words). Opinion editorials, or "op-eds," are short commentary pieces. An op-ed is a way to communicate your message, directly and unfiltered, to target audiences. Op-eds appear each day in almost every newspaper and usually weigh in on current issues, express a viewpoint, and frequently offer solutions to address those issues. Op-eds are a valuable advocacy tool and can raise awareness about important issues. Policymakers and voters often read op-eds.
5. Dissemination of your work and class presentation/learning activity: Each team will present their work at the end of the semester. The presentation should focus content from community/expert consultation and the policy memo. Presentations should not exceed 40 minutes (including Q&A and discussion). Use Powerpoint/Prezi and/or handouts if helpful. Each team will lead a class discussion and should prepare for this (e.g., discussion prompts, questions, or group learning activity). Also, share your strategy for sharing your findings **outside of this class** (e.g., social media, community partners, peers, etc.).

To prepare, teams will **make an appointment and meet as a team with consultants from UT Austin's Public Speaking Center**. The center serves undergraduate students and is located on the ground floor of PCL. Schedule an appointment online:

<https://ugs.utexas.edu/slc/support/speaking-center>

C. PREPARATION, ATTENDANCE, AND CONTRIBUTION

Brief weekly reactions in online notebook: Use this space to reflect, react, and/or respond to assigned readings, class discussions, and/or your free-choice book reading. Possible areas to write about include:

- Application of assigned readings to current events, discussions, team project, or free-choice book reading
- An interesting idea you wish to highlight and reflect on
- Links between contemporary issues with political, economic, or social conditions from the past
- A critique of something from your readings

As with all work this class, write about what matters to you. Online reactions are for informal writing of your choice. **Organize reactions as you like.** I encourage you to experiment. Have fun! Use contractions! Write sentences with 'I' or 'we'. Write about what you're passionate about. How do ideas/materials/concerns/discussions from class connect with your interests and experiences? How do the stories from your free-choice books connect with other course material?

Entries should be between 200 and 400 words. Only the course instructor will read and comment in your online notebook. Each reaction should also include a question.

Choose a reading to share with the instructor and find a compelling op-ed to discuss with your team: Please share a reading (any type) with the instructor that you find meaningful. Also, to help write your team-based op-ed, find a compelling one to share, evaluate, and discuss with your team.

Attendance and contribution: Because this learning community is the mutual responsibility of the instructor and students, full participation and attendance in this course is important. Be prepared to demonstrate your familiarity with major concepts and ideas from the readings during class discussions and other learning activities. In addition, be prepared to engage with your peers in small group discussions and team projects.

D. MONTE CARLO QUIZZES

There will be several in-class "Monte Carlo" quizzes given throughout the semester (usually on Tuesdays). A Monte Carlo quiz is like a pop quiz except that the decision to have a quiz during any given class is determined entirely by chance! At the beginning of class, a student will roll a die. If an odd number is rolled, a quiz will be given. There is only one question per quiz. **Details about Monte Carlo quizzes and the types of quiz questions are available on Canvas.** The quiz is not open book (unless noted otherwise), but you may bring notes and refer to them during the quiz.

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