MIA/MPA Capstone

Project Management Resource Materials

COLUMBIA | SIPA

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CONTENTS

I. SUGGESTIONS FOR PROJECT MANAGEMENT

A. Defining the Problem

The first step in analysis is to define the problem you are analyzing. You will begin this process with several resources: (1) the faculty advisor's summary of the understanding between the client and Columbia; (2) a key contact, client or project officer at the client organization; and (3) your faculty advisor.

The process of problem definition begins by ensuring that there is a fit between the problem to be solved and the resources available to solve the problem. A workshop project is necessarily limited by student time and capability and the number of weeks in the semester. These constraints will affect the amount of data collection and analysis possible. The feasibility of data collection and analysis should be the chief non-analytic factors considered in problem definition.

Once an initial problem definition is agreed to by the research team, the faculty advisor, and the agency client, it should be further refined and operationally defined in the project control plan.

B. Client Relationships

There is no single model for research team-faculty-client relationships. The key variable will be the nature of the project and the role played by the client. In some instances, the client will provide a good deal of guidance and direction to the research team. In other cases, the client may play a less visible role or prefer to work through the student liaison. In any event, the customer or the client is always right. This does not mean that issues could not be discussed with the client; it means that the client has the last word. However, the client is not simply an authority figure. He or she is: (1) a guide to sources of data; (2) responsible for obtaining agency clearance to conduct interviews or obtain files; (3) the person best suited to evaluate the team's analytic framework and research questions; and (4) usually a subject matter expert in the field of inquiry. Therefore, it is essential that a good productive relationship be established with the client. The client's feedback should be sought on all key project questions and issues.

C. SIPA Capstone Midterm Presentations

Kellogg Center (schedule tbd)

The SIPA Capstone Midterm Presentations are intended to provide an opportunity for teams to present their initial findings and discuss analytical issues or problems they are having. Teams will briefly summarize their work to date and present expected outcomes. Teams will be grouped based on the nature of their workshop and will be given 15 minutes to present to a panel of Capstone advisors followed by 15 minutes of Q&A. All students are expected to attend the presentation. Panelists will be composed of capstone faculty advisors and will respond with methodological and analytical suggestions.

D. The Project Control Plan – To be completed by the student teams

The most critical early phase of a research project is the development of a plan to manage the project. For purposes of convention we have labeled that plan the Project Control Plan (PCP). Below is a sample outline for a PCP. All PCPs should include most of these elements, but this sample should only be seen as a model. Each element of the PCP should have an expected date of completion determined early on in the project. These dates will be modified as needed throughout the project.

Every PCP should include the following outputs and milestones:

(1) A draft report

(2) A mid-term briefing to the client on the project's progress

(3) An oral briefing of the initial findings and expected outcomes to the workshop members and other students and faculty

(4) A final report

(5) An oral briefing of the final report to the client.

The PCP is the first "deliverable" of the workshop project. It should be given to the faculty advisor early in the semester. At the first workshop session your advisor will arrange a due date.

II. CREATING THE PROJECT CONTROL PLAN

1. Operational Definition of the Problem

The first section of the PCP is a detailed definition of the problem. This section should not be more than one page. It should be developed in consultation with the client and should answer the question: What problem is the workshop team trying to develop solutions for?

2. Project Overview

The overview is a 3-5 page study prospectus. It should be a mixture of prose and outline. To write the overview the research team will need to catalogue and briefly review available data and literature. It will discuss the gaps in available data analyses that the project will seek to bridge. The overview should include a first draft of the final report outline, and the study design and methodology. It should also discuss the expected results and benefits of the study. It is always useful to compare these early expectations to the report finally submitted to the client.

3. Brief Task Descriptions

A detailed outline that describes the tasks, subtasks, and critical milestones that must be reached to produce the outputs required by the client and the workshop.

4. Assignment of Responsibilities

In this section you should answer the critical management question -- who does it? Who is responsible for completing the tasks you have just described? Who plays a supporting role?

5. Schedule of Tasks

All of this may seem terrific and complete, until you figure out that you have 6 person-months of work and only 3 person-months of labor. This section should address the following questions:

- When do tasks start and end?
- Are the tasks properly sequenced? If "A" must be completed to start "B", will "A" be ready on time?
- How many person-days are required for each task?

EXHIBIT 1: SAMPLE OUTLINE FOR A WORKSHOP PROJECT CONTROL PLAN

I. Operational definition of the analytic research problem

- **A.** What problem is the team trying to solve?
- **B.** What research will be necessary to provide a solution?

II. Project Overview: Although the project will often determine the specific nature of the report, generally the overview could include:

- **A.** Description of available data and literature
- **B.** Discussion of data needs
- **C.** "First cut" of study design and methodology
  - i. How data will be collected
  - ii. Probable study hypotheses
  - iii. Draft analytic strategy
- **D.** Draft outline of final report
- **E.** Expected result and benefits

III. Brief Task Descriptions

- **A.** Develop Final Study Design and Methodology
  - i. Develop survey instruments and/or other data collection strategies
  - ii. Pose study hypotheses
- **B.** Collect Data
  - i. Interviews (who, what, where, when, why, how)
  - ii. File searches
  - iii. Literature review
  - iv. Other
- **C.** Analyze Data
  - i. Relate data to study hypotheses
  - ii. Develop and implement final analytic strategy
- **D.** Provide Recommendations to Solve the Problem
- **E.** Develop Preliminary Report
  - i. Summarize preliminary findings
  - ii. Brief client
- **F.** Develop Draft Report
  - i. Outline draft report
  - ii. Assigning writing tasks
  - iii. Edit draft report
- **G.** Develop Workshop Briefing
  - i. Assign responsibilities
  - ii. Develop A-V materials (if any) and briefing book
  - iii. Conduct dry run

H. Write Final Report
   i. Write outline and review with client
   ii. Assign writing tasks
   iii. Edit final report

IV. Assignment of Possible Roles/ Responsibilities

A. Project Manager/ Client Liaison
   i. Name
   ii. Specific lead responsibilities

B. Editor
   i. Name
   ii. Specific lead responsibilities

C. Fieldwork Coordinator
   i. Name
   ii. Specific lead responsibilities

D. SIPA Liaison (required)
   i. Name
   ii. Specific lead responsibilities

E. Other
   i. Name
   ii. Specific lead responsibilities

V. Schedule of Tasks

A. Graphic display of tasks, responsibilities, milestones and outputs

B. Week by week table of information summarized in the graphic display described above

III. GROUP RESEARCH

A. Common Problems

The most common problem with group work is gaining the wholehearted participation of all group members. In the workshop project we hope to avoid this problem by clearly assigning responsibilities in the PCP, and by constant interaction between faculty and students.

Other common problems are personality conflicts, unskilled group members, and "grandstanding." Where problems develop, group members must deal with the problem forthrightly, and bring the problem to the attention of the faculty advisor before it gets out of hand. If the advisor senses that team dynamics are affecting productivity, it is possible to use the **peer evaluation form (see appendix 2)** to flush out the internal issues and address the problem. This is why it is required to use the peer evaluation form midway through the workshop to key in on any difficulties that might be going on 'behind the scenes'. It is also required that the advisor uses the peer evaluation form at the end of the workshop to assist with grading.

IV. FIELDWORK AND DATA COLLECTION

A. How to Organize It

The client should play an active role in determining appropriate sources of data, including the individuals who should be interviewed. Since the workshop projects must be completed in three months, and since staff resources are extremely limited, fieldwork and data collection must be carefully targeted. As a rule of thumb no more than half the person-days in the project should be devoted to fieldwork and data collection. Time must be available for analyzing data, developing recommendations, and preparing reports and briefings.

Data collection should be a planned rather than haphazard activity. A strategy should be developed to enable the research team to focus its efforts on the collection of data directly relevant to the problem described in the PCP.

As a rule, a review of existing data should precede the collection of new data, and should be used to target personal interviews and other data collection activities. Bear in mind that collecting new data is quite time consuming for both the research team and individuals who are interviewed. Whenever possible, existing data should be used and new data only collected when truly needed.

B. How to Conduct Research

Data collection can be a frustrating, time-consuming activity. Having a data collection strategy helps, and using key contacts to help focus your activity can also be useful. Once you are at the data collection site (respondent's workplace or home, office files, data archive, newspaper morgues, library, etc.) you should always maintain two objectives: (1) gather the information you need as efficiently as possible, and (2) remain unobtrusive. Personal interviews and file searches are particularly sensitive situations. In both cases the researcher is intruding on the workspace and time of the individuals and organizations being studied.

1. Interviews

Remember that when you conduct an interview you are a representative of your client and the University. You should be cordial, respectful, and professional. At the beginning of the interview you should always identify yourself, the University, and your client -- and briefly explain the objectives of the study and the role the respondent plays in it.

Immediately upon leaving the interview, check your notes and add additional information you can remember, but didn't have time to write down during the interview. If your respondent wishes to see a copy of the study when it is completed, take down his or her mailing address or business card and promise a follow-up. Clients may have different policies regarding the release of reports but at a minimum the faculty advisor (or Client) can send a follow-up letter explaining that policy and including the abstract of the project report.

2. Access to Files

If you have obtained permission to search an office's files or other written records you must be certain not to interfere with the normal use of those files. Before leaving the office you should ask the individual responsible for giving you access to the files if he or she would like to review your notes or photo-copies.

V. REPORT WRITING AND BRIEFING

After you have collected and analyzed your data, it is necessary to communicate your findings. In the workshop this is accomplished through written reports and formal briefings. Other forms of communication typical in public sector agencies include memos, informal briefings, meetings, and audio-visual tools.

A. Planning a Report

Reports for workshop clients are not term papers. Term papers tend to be long. Useful policy-relevant reports tend to be short and to the point. When reviewing a draft report you should always ask: Is this (chapter section, paragraph, sentence, word) needed to communicate the point? One way of ensuring a succinct report is to think through the report before you begin writing. Before writing, always develop a logical, detailed outline.

The outline should be organized to answer the questions posed in the problem statement included in the PCP. The outline should be divisible into distinct units to facilitate the assignment of writing responsibilities. Every member of the group should be given responsibility for writing the first draft of one section of the report. Some advisors choose to select an editor for the group, while others prefer to divide up the task of editing equally among members.

B. Writing the Report

After preparing the report outline the project team should submit it to the faculty advisor. Once approved by the advisor the outline should then be submitted to the client. Report writing should not begin until the client, the advisor, and the group has agreed to a final outline. The PCP should include time to review and revise the outline.

Similarly, the PCP should allow enough time for multiple drafts of the report to be written, reviewed, and revised. First drafts of each section of the paper should be submitted to the faculty advisor for comment. Comments should then be incorporated into a second draft of the report which should then be submitted to the group's editor to consolidate and edit.

The editor's first draft is then presented to the client for comment. After discussing the client's comments with the faculty advisor, the editor (and possibly other members of the research team) prepares a draft final report for submission to the faculty advisor and client. If the draft final report is acceptable to the advisor and client, it becomes the final report. If further revision is needed, the report must be rewritten.

Multiple drafts may seem repetitive, however they are a necessary part of analysis in any work environment. Analysis will often raise sensitive issues that the client will be more conscious of than the research team. The client may have additional data or new considerations that need to be reflected in the report and the research team must comply with the client's needs.

C. Briefings

1. Planning and Conducting a Briefing

Each research team is responsible for presenting three formal briefings during the course of the semester. The first is a mid-term progress report presented to the Client. The second is presented during the **Midterm SIPA presentations (March 5-6th)** and is based on the PCP; teams are expected to present their initial findings and discuss analytical issues or problems they are having. Teams will briefly summarize their work to date and present expected outcomes. The third is the final client briefing. Briefings can run from five minutes to several hours. The faculty advisor will assign you a time limit for your workshop and client briefings.

Briefings should always be short and to the point. When reporting on a research project, they should include a statement of the problem, a brief discussion of the study's methodology, findings, and recommendations. Bear in mind that you are more familiar with the subject of your briefings than your audience. When preparing a briefing try to gauge the amount of knowledge your audience has. When in doubt, it is better to assume a lack of knowledge than to assume the presence of knowledge. Repetition is boring, but the absence of basic information is a significant obstacle to communication. It is better to be boring than incomprehensible -- although, naturally, it's best to be neither. Briefings should be lively and stimulating. Try to get your audience engaged in your topic. Explain your problem in terms that people can relate to and identify with.

A briefing should never be scripted. The group should prepare talking points to guide the presentation. Visual aids are an essential element of a good briefing. However, visual aids should serve and not dominate the communication process. Visual aids should illustrate key points. We recommend that the team provide a briefing book to each member of the audience.

It is essential that briefings be rehearsed. A "dry-run" will tell you if you are within your time limit, and will allow you to work out bugs before you appear in public. Although more than one person may speak at a briefing, there must always be a briefing leader. A moderator who acts like a TV news anchor person can help give the briefing coherence, and the appearance of organization. Finally, a formal briefing should allocate a few minutes to answer questions from the audience, facilitating interest and communication through dialogue.

2. SIPA Midterm Briefing

Some suggestions for the content are:

- A brief description of the project and the client.
- Statement of the original question
- A description of your project methodology and why you chose it. What other methods did you consider? Why did you reject these other strategies?

- A description of the data/information you are collecting and your collection methodology. Was there any information that you wanted to collect, but could not? How did this shape the way you chose to conduct your analysis?
- A description of the major problems left to be resolved. These may be analytical problems or problems of some other nature such as problems in your relationship with your client.
- A short summary of the tasks you have left to finish. Do you think you will be able to answer the initial question?
- Following the group's briefing, the audience will have a brief period to ask questions. If you have any analytical problems that you think other students or faculty may be able to offer advice on, feel free to raise those in your briefing. These mid-term sessions should be a time for you to reassess your project and to get a fresh perspective from some interested parties who have not been directly involved in your work.