

WHAT IS A PROFESSIONAL DECISION REPORT (PDR)

A Professional Decision Report (PDR) is a 30 to 40 page (double spaced) analysis of a specific policy question which is conducted by a student who is completing her or his MS in Urban Policy Analysis and Management at the Graduate School of Management and Urban Policy.

The PDR is "client-oriented", and is ultimately delivered to a client for the explicit purpose of substantively contributing to the solution of policy problem faced by a nonprofit, private, or public sector institution. Therefore, an important measure of PDR's success is client satisfaction. However, the PDR must simultaneously prove to be a significant learning experience for the student. It should expose the advanced student to real-world issues faced by urban practitioners in the field. In doing so, a PDR involves more than a routine gathering and delivering of information on a predefined client problem. It should enable the student to share the responsibility with the client for defining the problem, grappling with its ramifications, and deriving scenarios or recommendations which offer reasoned solutions to the policy question as it was defined by the client and student.

A good student-client relationship is an essential ingredient for the production of a good PDR. Equally important is the fact that the PDR should measure up to independent academic standards set by the Graduate School, including establishing a sound framework for analysis, precisely defining the problem, carefully analyzing and weighing the evidence, identifying important trade-offs, and succinctly presenting results and recommendations.

The following discussions provide important insights on the production and purpose of the PDR.

Choosing a PDR Client

The choice of a client is one of the most important decisions students writing a PDR must make. While it is possible to write a good PDR without having a good relationship with a client -- and to learn useful lessons by making the best of a bad relationship -- the most valuable learning comes from working closely with a good client.

A good PDR client is one whose actions and decisions have a significant impact on public policy. Good clients may thus include:

Elected officials and public managers;

The staffs and outside consultants who advise them;

Policy advocates inside and outside government;

Lobbyists, interest groups, and trade associations; and

Business, industries, and nonprofit institutions that deal extensively with government.

A good client is one who knows how to use analysis. This means appreciating the strengths and understanding the limitations of formal methods of analysis. It means understanding enough about political, institutional, and historical context difference, of the problem to recognize when formal analysis can make a difference, and when it may not.

A good client is one who is open to different perspectives, who views the PDR as a way of exploring a problem, highlighting trade-offs, and determining whether difference of view turn on the facts or values. The client may prefer, for tactical or strategic reasons, to keep the results of the analysis private. But the client should want to know the strongest arguments for and against each option, even if the client decides to pursue an option other than the one the analysis suggests and the student recommends.

Since some PDR clients are policy advocates, the PDR itself may be an advocacy document. Effective advocacy, however, requires anticipating and responding to opposing arguments. This may be done in the advocacy document itself, or in separate memos to the client. If done separately, both the advocacy document and the separate memos should be submitted to the student's faculty advisers, and together should not exceed 35 pages.

The Student's Responsibilities to the Client

The student's basic responsibility is to try to put herself or himself in the client's shoes. What does the problem look like from the client's point of view? What can the client do about it? What levers does the client have? What constraints is the client operating under?

Part of the advantage the student brings to the client, however, is the student's independence. The student should therefore not hesitate to look at the problem from points of view other than those of the client, and to bring those differing perspectives to the client's attention. One of the most useful services a student can perform is to keep the client informed of facts, arguments, and perspectives that might not have seemed important at the outset, but later turn out to be.

Another of the student's comparative advantages is time. Busy clients normally have not had time to think through carefully the problem students are asked to address. That is usually one reasons they have asked for help. Therefore, as the students learn more about the issue and the client's perspective, the student should not hesitate to suggest that the focus of the PDR be modified. While the client may ultimately disagree, the discussion will almost certainly help to clarify the problem.

The student's day-to-day relationship with the client should be governed by the highest standards of courtesy and commitment, keep the client informed, seek guidance when appropriate, be respectful of competing demands on the client's time, preserve confidences, protect the client's relationship with others, and generally act in a way that brings credit to both the student and the client.

Standards for Good Analysis

While the PDR is primarily designed to help the client with a specific policy problem, the document should also measure up to independent standards for good analysis. A major part of the faculty adviser's role is to make certain that those standards are met. In most cases there should be little conflict between those standards and the client's needs. In the event that those conflicts arise, faculty advisers should help make decisions about trade-offs and help strike a balance that is professionally and intellectually responsible. Discussions between the faculty adviser and the client may help to resolve such conflicts, and are thus strongly encouraged.

In general, good analysis has the following characteristics:

The problem is precisely defined, clearly stated, and placed in context.

There is a clear and logical framework that guides both the analysis and its presentation.

The analysis is based upon the best available evidence.

The presentation of the analysis is clear, well-organized, supported by the evidence, and illustrated with specific examples.

The conclusions and recommendations follow logically from the analysis.

A Final Evaluation

As a final test in evaluating a PDR, readers should ask themselves this question: If you had to make a decision that had important real-world consequences, would you be prepared to act on the basis of the PDR you have just read? If so, it's probably a good PDR.