

Practice Makes Perfect: Teaching Policy Analysis Through Integrated Client-Based Projects

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ABSTRACT

The role of the client in policy analysis has been shifting in the professional field and in academia. In this paper, I reflect on the client orientation of graduate studies in policy analysis. I propose a framework for teaching policy analysis that relies on theoretical foundations but also uses integrated practical application and client-oriented learning throughout the master's curriculum. I then illustrate the framework's application through a sample of highly client-integrated graduate programs in public affairs, focusing particularly on the policy analysis curriculum at The New School's Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy. Evidence suggests that an integrated and continuous client-based approach is the exception; most schools with a client component relegate it to a single capstone at the end of the degree, and few publicize the client work as central to the program. Through a continuous client-based approach, students get repeated practice at real-time policy analysis, learn how to adeptly construct an evidence-based and coherent argument for a variety of issues, and explore ways to confidently communicate their analysis and recommendations succinctly and persuasively in written and verbal form. The integrated client-based curriculum creates value not only for the students, but for the outside clients and the school overall.

Keywords: policy analysis, client-based curriculum, theory and practice

The role of the client in policy analysis has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Some propose that this is due to a shift away from “top-rung” and centralized decision-making power toward a more horizontal and dispersed bargaining process where client interests are less obvious (Radin, 2012). Other perspectives suggest that it is directly linked to the nature of graduate training in the field, which

has moved away from emphasizing the centrality of the client. Weimer and Vining (2011) distinguish between policy *research* and policy *analysis*, where traditionally the latter stresses the importance of client interests and decision-making power (see also Behn, 1985; Weimer, 2012). Behn asserts, “If you do not have a client, you are not doing policy analysis” (1985, p. 428). According to Radin (2012), this distinction has become less and less clear, and it is in no small part due to the pedagogical and research activities at universities. The intent of this paper is not to explain (or verify) the shift away from client-based approaches, but I raise it as an important point of reference for the analysis that follows. Although client-based projects are not new to (nor are they entirely absent from) graduate policy programs, the intensity of their application is variable and increasingly relegated to single capstone experiences. What is the role of the client in policy graduate studies, and how can a school integrate the client effectively into the core curriculum? A number of public affairs programs in the United States have made more dynamic and central the role of client-based work in their curricula, and here I showcase these approaches with the hopes of informing policy studies more broadly.

In this paper, I propose a framework for teaching policy analysis that relies on theoretical foundations, but continuously integrates practical application and client-oriented learning. I then illustrate the framework’s application through the policy analysis curricula at a sample of highly client-integrated policy graduate programs. I present a case study of one particular program at The New School’s Milano School for International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy (herein referred to as Milano). Although to slightly different degrees, these integrated programs require students to take a sequence of two or three courses that repeatedly ask them to apply and develop timely and robust policy analysis in both “live” and simulated client-based scenarios. These scenarios vary in their time intensity, topic area, and individual versus collective responsibility. At Milano, in particular, the analytical application is rooted in formal theoretical foundations. Based on a survey of policy analysis offerings at graduate programs in public affairs across the country, the integrated and continuous client-based approach seems to be the exception; most schools with a client component incorporate it into a single capstone event at the end of the degree, and few publicize the client work as central to the program.

The views and observations presented in this paper emerge primarily out of my personal experience in teaching and reflecting on a long-standing client-based curriculum at Milano. I also collect information on public affairs graduate programs across the United States and draw on survey data and anecdotes from students and clients involved in the Milano curriculum. In sum, I make the case that an effective policy analysis curriculum relies on a combination of critical and foundational *theory*, *repeated* application of theory to practice, *time-sensitive* contexts, and *both* team and individual client-based work. Together, this coursework provides students with a rigorous analytical framework for tackling complex policy and management issues (of any topic) pertaining to the public and nonprofit sectors.

Further, students learn how to communicate their analysis and recommendations clearly, succinctly, and persuasively in written and verbal form. Students can find internships and full-time positions, thanks to their contacts from the client-based work and to the quality memos and reports they produce for their job market portfolios. In addition, an integrated client-based pedagogical approach creates value for the students as well as for outside clients and the school overall.

WHAT SHOULD A THEORY-PRACTICE CURRICULUM LOOK LIKE?

Weimer and Vining define policy analysis as “client-oriented advice relevant to public decisions and informed by social values” (2011, p. 24). The question at hand is driven by a client, rather than inspired by the analyst or researcher; and policy analysis, unlike policy research, is characterized by time and resource constraints (Weimer & Vining, 2011). This approach is consistent with Flyvbjerg’s praxis-oriented (rather than theory-focused) phronetic model of social science, where the analyst’s task is problem driven and informs public deliberation and decision making (2005). Here, I adapt these descriptions to consider policy analysis more broadly as a technical decision-making tool that guides the assessment of various options in the face of social, institutional, and economic constraints. This tool can be implemented in the public sphere, but it is also transferrable to private settings such as organizations. In general, a policy analysis framework should rely on evidence (whether it be quantitative or qualitative, large scale or anecdotal) to make reasoned choices across a range of options.

Core competencies for a graduate degree in policy analysis can be categorized into two areas: topical and technical. Students should leave a graduate program with a strong grasp of a particular policy area and a solid foundation of analytical skills. Any policy analysis curriculum falls into the latter area—it is a process through which students learn decision-making tools and master how to use them in actual policy-making settings. And the nature of these settings is somewhat irrelevant; that is, policy making can occur in government (at any level), informally among local communities, and even in private organizations. In fact, the less attached the technical skills are to the context, the more generalizable the method to various policy issues.

If the primary goal of a policy analysis curriculum is to teach students how to analyze policy issues systematically and rigorously (in essence, the decision-making model), the (close) secondary goal is to teach them how to present their analysis and recommendations. The rigor and completeness of the analysis does little good if analysts cannot present their process and results clearly, concisely, and confidently. Moreover, it is not merely the quality of the results, but the quantity of time or space it takes to explain them. The reality of policy analysis and real-time decision making is that it often does not allow for much time (or other resources). Therefore, students should be instructed on how to present their analysis within very real and binding constraints, whether they be resource-based or information-based.

Strong Theoretical Foundations

Even though policy analysis is very much an applied tool, it is rooted in theories of decision making (i.e., Lasswell, 1971; Meltsner, 1976; Stokey & Zeckhauser, 1979). These theories typically offer a set of principles to guide the systematic consideration of policy problems and their potential solutions. Theory gives the students a historical and conceptual foundation for the analytical and decision-making methods. It also serves as a tool to “systematically organize knowledge” (Miller, 1997, p. 363) that, if used practically and actively, can render complex systems and issues analytically manageable. It is the equivalent of showing the derivation of the standard error calculation before teaching students how to use it in inferential analysis. As professional analysts (whatever form this role might take), the graduates of a master’s program should not only understand how to implement a tool, but know what its origins are as well. What is the theoretical motivation behind one analytical approach over another?

Central to the “theory” conversation is acknowledgment of the (often rigid) assumptions underlying the model. Rather than being taught as gospel, the assumptions—and the models more generally—should be presented as guidelines or templates for analysis. This point is often illustrated by comparing various decision-making models, rather than focusing on a single approach. The simplicity of the models is presented as a tool for organizing one’s thoughts (something that is hugely helpful when addressing complex, multidimensional policy issues) and not necessarily as an accurate and sufficient reflection of real processes. Perhaps most important, in-class “theory” conversations provide a space for critical thinking about the strengths and weaknesses of an analytic tool and engage students in the dialogue of what is effective policy analysis.

Application of Theory to Practice

The next challenge is linking, in a convincing way, the theoretical assumptions and models to actual practice. Here, practice is construed in two ways. First, practice refers to application: taking the theory, or the model, and using it on actual “data” (in this case, policy issues and the quantitative and qualitative data that comprises the analytical evidence). Application can be both simulated and “live,” and an effective learning process should include both. Simulated applications provide students with the opportunity to falter without severe consequences; this is important for the reflective part of the process as well as the ego. Vining and Weimer aptly name these learning experiences “sheltered workshops” (2002, p. 703). Live applications (i.e., real-time problem solving), on the other hand, provide students with the opportunity to perform under actual pressures and constraints; this is important for assuring skill relevance beyond the graduate school context. This is where the client experience fits in because, for the policy analyst, the client is theoretically the purveyor of these issues, pressures, and constraints (Lynn, 1980; Meltsner, 1976; Moore, 1983; Szanton 1981). The client-based curriculum serves as the “bridge” between the classroom and the professional world (Allard & Straussman, 2003).

Second, practice refers to repetition—the process of turning the science of policy analysis into an art. In other words, more important than the application of policy analysis is the *repeated* application of the decision-making model to real issues and questions. Repetition helps the students to refine and make more nimble the decision-making model, which is really just that, a framework from which to start. Stokes (1986) equates this approach to the flight simulator exercise that pilots undergo to prepare for conditions that might arise in the air. The more developed analysis emerges when the analyst uses the model as a guide whose nuances take different forms depending on the subject matter and context. This is ideally part of the process where students own the analysis more, as it becomes more integrated with each student's broader problem-solving style.

INTEGRATED CLIENT-BASED LEARNING IN ACTION: EXISTING CURRICULA

This part of the paper examines actual policy analysis curricula at a sample of U.S. public affairs graduate programs. I pay particular attention to the master's program in urban policy at The New School's Milano School for International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy in New York City, because it provides a useful illustration of the framework proposed earlier. Most of the content in this analysis is a product of my own experiences teaching the Milano curriculum for the past 3 years, and my interactions with the curriculum's primary faculty and original conceivers. I supplement these observations with data I collect on other, "competing" public affairs programs (the collection methods and outcomes for the data are outlined in the next section) and from previously implemented surveys of graduating urban policy students, alumni, and former clients of the Milano program.

To collect information from participants in the Milano program, a survey was sent by the chair of the urban policy department via e-mail (with a link to an online-generated form) to Master's students upon graduation in spring of 2012 asking them about their academic experience at Milano. Here, I draw on questions asking them specifically about their experience with the policy analysis curriculum and the aspects of the degree that they found most valuable.¹ The response rate for this survey was 66% (29 out of 44). A similar survey was sent to alumni in early 2011 (respondents graduated anytime between 2001 and 2010).² The relevant questions in this survey were more open ended, and so content was analyzed with respect to the policy analysis curriculum. The response rate for this survey was 50% (125 out of 250). Finally, clients who participated in the Lab course (described later) were surveyed on their experiences; I obtain data from the 2011 and 2012 spring semesters. The response rate for this survey was 59% (17 out of 29) in 2011 and 69% (11 out of 16) in 2012.

Data Collection on Existing Policy Analysis Curricula

I survey the current state of policy analysis studies at graduate programs across the country. To do this, I use the list of public affairs graduate schools provided by *U.S. News and World Report* 2012 (with no regard for the rankings), under the

assumption that this is a reasonable source for the universe of relevant graduate schools. I then navigate to each school’s website and identify master’s degree programs in public policy, public administration, and public affairs more broadly. I then search for information on whether they offer client-based coursework (either “live” or simulated) in their core curriculum and, if so, (a) whether it incorporates team or individual projects; (b) to what degree they use the client-based curriculum as a marketable strength, that is, by explicitly highlighting it in their program descriptions and/or central mission rather than simply listing the course; and (c) how integrated it is across the entire degree program.³ For this final factor, a curriculum is considered integrated if the client-based work (either live or simulated) spans multiple semesters, thereby exposing the students to client work beyond a single culminating thesis or project. Preference is given to coursework that spans both years of the program, incorporates both live and simulated analytical projects, and involves at least one client-based experience under fast-paced and time-constrained circumstances. The programs with a single capstone experience, even if it spans two semesters, are not considered integrated because the client-based learning is really only a single experience (and it usually does not reflect compressed time constraints). A summary of the findings is displayed in Table 1.⁴

Table 1.
Client Orientation of U.S. Public Affairs Graduate Programs

		Yes	No	Missing	Total
Has an applied policy capstone/project?		127	151	0	278
<i>For those with an applied policy capstone/project:</i>		Yes	No	Missing	
Uses “live” clients?		43	73	11	127
Average # semesters of applied capstone/project coursework		1.2	—	—	
<i>For those with a client-based capstone/project curriculum:</i>		Yes	No	Missing	
Website highlights client-based curriculum?		15	28	0	43
Average # semesters of client-based coursework		1.5	—	—	
	Team	Individual	Both	Missing	
Team versus individual responsibility	20	11	8	4	43
		High	Low	Missing	
Level of client-based curriculum integration		6	37	0	43
# schools	265				
# programs	278				

The results reveal that just under half of the programs surveyed (127 out of 278 total) require some applied capstone course or project for the graduate degree (whether or not it is completed for a live client). The nature of this requirement varies tremendously, from a single paper to a multi-semester research project. Of those with an applied policy experience, about one third incorporate live clients (versus simulated client topics or no client at all). This means students are working with current policy issues presented by actual clients with whom they interact on a regular basis. For those with live client-based work, the likelihood of incorporating team projects is higher than that of individual projects, and a small part of the sample incorporates both into their curricula (only 8 out of the 127 programs have some applied policy capstone or project).

The survey also demonstrates the centrality of client work to the policy curriculum. First, only 15 out of the 43 degree programs with live client-based coursework actually highlight it (or applied policy work more generally) as a core component of the curriculum on their website. Rarely is it a selling point for the program, and most often it is entirely omitted from their program descriptions. Second, of those 43 curricula with a live client component, only 6 could be characterized as integrated. The overwhelming majority incorporate the client project as a final-semester analysis project that serves as a culminating application of the skills that students accumulated over the previous two or three semesters.

Integrated Client-Based Policy Analysis Curricula: An Overview

The six programs identified as highly integrated are those that, in one way or another, incorporate a range of client-based learning experiences throughout the degree's curriculum (see Table 2 for a summary of their characteristics). Integration can take various forms, but in general, these programs have courses or projects that introduce applied client-based work in the first year of the program, in addition to a larger culminating experience in the final year (the mean number of semesters for client-based work is 2.5).⁵ In addition, all of the programs require both individual and team client-based analytical work, and most (except Duke) provide the students with simulated and live client-oriented experiences. And, not surprisingly, all of the programs highlight the client-based approach on the program's website: They explicitly mention it as an asset and focus of the program.

On the other hand, each program organizes the coursework and analytical projects differently across the 2 years of the degree. First, all of the integrated programs include short-term, time-compressed analytical projects as well as those on longer timelines. This combination, however, is achieved in various ways. For example, Milano and Duke's Sanford School are the only ones to have a complete course in the first year dedicated to the client-based analytical experience. The others can take various forms, but in general, these programs have courses or projects that introduce applied client-based work in the first year of the program, in addition to a larger culminating experience in the final year (the mean number of semesters for client-based work is 2.5).⁵ In addition, all of the programs require both individual

Table 2.

Client-Integrated Curricula

School	Degree	"Live" or Simulated	Team or Individual	# of Semesters	Website highlights client-based curriculum?
Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy	Master of Public Policy	Live	T/I	3	Y
Harvard University Kennedy School of Government	Masters in Public Policy	Live/Sim	T/I	3	Y
Princeton University Woodrow Wilson School of Public and Int. Affairs	Masters in Public Affairs	Live/Sim	T/I	2	Y
The New School Milano School of International Affairs, Management & Urban Policy	Master of Science in Urban Policy Analysis & Management	Live/Sim	T/I	3	Y
UC Berkeley Goldman School of Public Policy	Masters in Public Policy	Live/Sim	T/I	2	Y
University of Oregon Dept. of Planning, Public Policy and Management	Master of Public Administration	Live/Sim	T/I	2	Y

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In sum, although different in their curricular approach, all (or most) of these highly integrated client-based programs provide the students with several opportunities to practice their analytics in the context of both live and simulated clients.

They also place the students in various contexts: They are required to work individually and collaboratively and in both fast-paced and relatively less compressed time settings.

Integrated Client-Based Policy Analysis Curricula: The Milano Case

Although the components of the Milano master's program are consistent with many of the characteristics of the other highly integrated examples, they do constitute a slightly different approach to the client-based learning experience. Most notably, the Milano curriculum is relatively more incremental in its sequencing of client-based practica, and it generally asks much more of the students, in terms of client-based work, in their first year of the program. In addition, it provides a nice illustration of how a very applied curriculum can be rooted in a formal theoretical framing.

The Master's Program

The Milano School offers a number of graduate degrees, one of which is the MS in Urban Policy Analysis and Management. Most of the students are enrolled full-time, but about one third are part-time; all students, regardless of status, generally have the same requirements and take classes together. Typically, classes are kept to a 25-student maximum, even in the core courses (electives can be considerably smaller). In addition to the policy analysis curriculum, the required core coursework includes public management, quantitative methods, economics, public finance, and political economy of the city. Then the students are allowed to take five electives in one or several of the specialization areas the school offers (e.g., housing and community development or social policy). Students are required to start the policy analysis curriculum in their first semester, and the entire curriculum extends through three terms. Therefore, unlike any other core competency, the policy analysis coursework is a constant element in any student's class schedule.

THE MILANO POLICY ANALYSIS CURRICULUM

The policy analysis curriculum is both theory- and practice-based. It is comprised of three courses, described here.

Course 1: Introduction to Policy Analysis

Part I: Learning the five-stage model. The coursework begins in the student's first semester with an introductory Policy Analysis course, which is a mix of foundational theoretical readings, case-based class discussion, and applied issue analysis.⁶ The course meets twice a week for nearly 2 hours at a time. The number of students in the class tops out at about 28 (depending on the section), and each section has a primary faculty instructor and a teaching assistant (TA). The TAs are selected from among the top performers in the class from the previous year. Throughout the semester, the TAs hold "office hours" and various workshops on cost-benefit

analysis, creating PowerPoint presentations and conducting final briefings. The TAs are tremendous resources for the students, since they have successfully completed the first year of the curriculum.

The first part of the course revolves around learning the five-stage analytical model for decision making, drawing heavily from Bardach’s “Eightfold Path” (2009) and the Stage Heuristic, as first conceived by Lasswell (1956) and others (see Table 3). Also known as The Rational Actor model, it is a stylized and boiled-down version of how the decision-making process ensues. In the literature, it is synonymous with the economic paradigm undergirding traditional policy analysis (e.g., see Munger, 2000) and has served as the foundational perspective for seminal analytical treatments, such as Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow’s “Essence of Decision,” in which they use it to explain (as one alternative) decisions behind the Cuban Missile Crisis (Allison & Zelikow, 1999) and foreign policy more generally.⁷

Table 3.
Five-Stage Decision-Making Model

1	Problem definition
2	Select evaluative criteria
3	Generate alternatives
4	Analysis of trade-offs
5	Make a recommendation

The students are trained to think in a very formalized way, and at this point the five-stage model is applied with little flexibility. The five-stage heuristic is intended to provide the students with a manageable tool that can be operationalized and is rooted in a long-standing theoretical dialogue in the field. It is an effective starter kit, because it is also provocative in its rigidity. This quality challenges the students to learn how to apply the model in an active and creative way.

A clear example of the model’s actionable nature is the decision matrix. The matrix as a tool for applying criteria to multiple alternatives is emphasized and required as part of the memo assignments (described later). Table 4 displays a generic outcomes, or criteria-alternatives, matrix.

Lectures progressively lead the students through the five-stage process, using a policy or management case to apply each new concept. The cases are an essential instructional tool in the curriculum, because they immediately get the students accustomed to grappling with complex, multi-actor, and often socially and politically sensitive issues. Massie (1995) describes them as “praxis learning,” which is particularly useful in introductory courses where students have less experience with making the theory-practice link; the method promotes learning where theory

Table 4.
Generic Outcomes (Criteria-Alternatives) Matrix

	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3	Alternative 4
Criterion 1	High	Low	Moderate	High
Criterion 2	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Criterion 3	Low	Moderate	Low	High

is actively applied to practice instead of rote memorization of facts. Cases are selected to coincide with the session's lesson as well as contexts or issues that are close to the students. For example, at Milano cases often pertain to issues specific to New York City and increasingly to international scenarios as the international student body has grown.

Deliverable 1: The students now must complete their first individual memo assignment, in which they analyze a case on how best to provide the flu vaccine. This usually occurs 2 weeks into the semester, and the students have about one-and-a-half weeks to complete it. The memo is addressed to a U.S. congressman and cannot exceed five pages—this is an exercise in writing concisely and constructing a reasoned and robust argument (following the five-stage model) with a clear policy recommendation at the end. In the spirit of “practice makes perfect,” students are allowed to revise this memo (and are required to do so if they receive a grade below B+). This is almost always a completely new way of writing and presenting ideas for the students, and indeed, the super-majority of the class typically must revise their memos.

Part II: Learning cost-benefit analysis. The second part of the course introduces Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA), to which seven class sessions are dedicated. Students are presented with a formal explanation of discounting and CBA methods and then asked to apply these models to actual cases and data. Like the case-based coursework, the CBA material is intended to enhance the analytical tool kit that the students will ultimately employ during their client-based work. Ironically, what they often discover in the live client-based work is that few issue analyses are well suited for a legitimate cost-benefit analysis; the numbers are often unattainable or flimsy. Nevertheless, the CBA training provides them with important tools to incorporate such quantitative analysis if necessary (it is also a skill they can market to potential employers). Transparency, reasonableness, and consistency are emphasized.

Deliverables 2 and 3: The students are required to complete two assignments on the discounting and CBA material. First, they do a discounting exercise in which they calculate and compare net present values for various construction options.

Second, the students write another brief case-based policy memo on whether to construct transportation infrastructure in Costa Rica that still follows the five-stage decision-making model, but now includes as part of the analysis a formal CBA. The CBA is treated as another evaluative criterion in the context of their analysis.

Part III: The “trial” round for client-based issue analysis. The final part of the course involves a trial round of client-based issue analysis. This part of the course provides the students with a practice round analysis project, which is repeated the following semester with a set of real clients in the “Lab” (described later). The students are placed into teams of four or five and together conduct policy analysis on issues that have been prepared for actual public and nonprofit organizations in New York City in the previous year. Teams are assigned based primarily on skill set and secondarily on subject matter. For the remainder of the semester, the class no longer meets together. Teams use the class time to meet separately and with the faculty instructor and TA assigned to their project (indeed, teams usually meet outside of the allotted class time as well).⁸

Teams are provided with a policy mandate from the simulated client and a datapack with actual materials and data to conduct the analysis. The mandate is a description of the central policy problem, the organizational and policy context, and any other specific guidelines for framing the analysis from the client (see Appendix B for a sample client mandate). During the trial round the clients are not re-engaged, but the issues are used for simulating the analysis process. The datapack is the product of the live analysis from the previous year. Trial round teams use the datapack contents as their research material. Because the teams do not have to worry about culling original data, they can really focus on the analysis process itself. One challenge with this approach, however, is that the students are constrained to use ideas that coincide with data in the pre-populated datapack. At best, this is yet another chance to practice the analysis process within information-based constraints.

Deliverables 4 and 5: At the end of the trial round, the team must prepare a short (two-page) memo addressed to the client describing the analysis and final recommendation, and conduct a presentation of their analysis and findings in front of the class (simulating an actual client presentation). Every team member must participate in the presentation, and every presentation is followed by a question-and-answer period with the simulated client (usually a faculty member).

Course 2: Laboratory in Issue Analysis

In the semester following the introductory Policy Analysis course, students are required to enroll in the Laboratory in Issue Analysis (“Lab”). Students work in teams of five or six with actual clients on timely policy questions, hence this is labeled the live round. The clients come from all three sectors, are located within the New York City metro area, and present a wide range of issues. Appendix C

displays a list of selected clients and issues from past years. About 35% of these clients are repeat participants in the program.⁹

In the course of 16 weeks, the students work with two different teams/clients, and for both projects receive guidance from a faculty instructor and student teaching assistant. Although the timeline is rather compressed for each project, the idea is that it better reflects the urgency of real issue analysis. In addition, it encourages students to remain active and nimble in their application of the analytical models from previous semesters. Miller (1997) acknowledges the threat of “unreflective practice” when analysts rely too heavily on set heuristics and models; the Milano curriculum avoids this pitfall by introducing new (and often unfamiliar) issues multiple times. The process for each client round generally echoes that in the trial round, except for a pre-populated datapack: In the live round, the students start from scratch in terms of research and data collection. For each client and issue, the students conduct research on the issue, produce a comprehensive report documenting their analysis and recommendation, write up a two-page memo summarizing the analysis and findings, and conduct a formal briefing in which the entire team presents its analysis process and findings. The briefing is followed by a question-and-answer period between the team and the client, and any outstanding issues must be addressed in the final report, which is typically submitted about 1 week later. The students present in front of a panel comprised of the client and Milano faculty. Although they do not participate, everyone in the class is also required to attend their peers’ briefings.

The teams have a mandatory initial client meeting the first week of the round and then arrange regular meeting times and milestones. The teams meet weekly with their assigned advisor and TA. Other than the regular team meetings, the entire Lab cohort comes together for weekly plenary sessions where special topics are covered by faculty and guest lecturers. Table 5 shows some of the topics covered in the plenary session.

Table 5.
List of Plenary Session Topics

Plenary Session	Topic
Session 1	Welcome to the Lab: Introduction to Course and Policy Issues
Session 2	Data Collection and Research Strategies
Session 3	Structuring and Delivering Effective Client Communications
Session 4	Managing Group Dynamics
Session 5	Preparing for the Briefing and Public Speaking
Session 6	Course Reflections and Evaluations

Course 3: Advanced Seminar (“Professional Decision Report”)

Finally, the students complete their culminating Professional Decision Report (PDR). This assignment typically occurs in the student’s final semester, and the students now conduct the issue analysis solo with clients of their choosing. Students are responsible for securing their own client, establishing the core policy issue for analysis, and sustaining a working relationship with the client throughout the project. The client can be a current employer, but many students use this as an opportunity to gain entrée into another organization or field. Whether the student presents a final product to the client (other than in the written report) depends entirely on what the client wants. This is the most loosely structured course in the series, because it is almost entirely driven by the student-client relationship. The students do meet with faculty advisors weekly to discuss key concepts (such as the analytical process, literature reviews, or interviewing protocol) and receive guidance on their specific projects. Appendix C shows sample PDRs from past years. The two students who submit the most exceptional PDRs receive awards at graduation.

Logistics and Responsibilities: How the Courses Come Together

Forming and managing a cohesive teaching team. The Milano curriculum is comprised of numerous moving parts and players. Well-timed and consistent oversight is a requisite for successful implementation. It is a time-intensive endeavor, and Milano definitely benefits from its routinization of this long-standing curriculum. At Milano, the team of faculty and teaching assistants have all experienced the policy analysis curriculum at least once before (refer to Table 6 for a summary of the teaching team members and their responsibilities). It is also beneficial to have instructors (both full-time faculty and adjuncts) who have practical experience with clients; it is challenging for an instructor without any relevant experience to guide the students in a realistic way.

In addition, one faculty member (or, if resources allow, an additional part-time instructor) serves as the “director” for the policy analysis course and the Lab; he or she leads the coordination and manages the client recruitment. Responsibilities of this director include (a) selecting the TAs for the current year, (b) scheduling and leading regular meetings with the Lab instructor and TA team (the Lab team) throughout the year, (c) identifying the cases from the previous live round to be recycled in the current year’s trial issue analysis round, (d) recruiting clients (and, if the student cohort is large, additional adjunct instructors to work with teams), and (e) disseminating and processing course feedback tools (which are executed at the end of the first policy analysis course and each Lab round).¹⁰ Regular meetings with the Lab team are essential for maintaining some consistency among expectations and guidance and for sharing insight. Because Lab team members are approaching their roles with different experiences and perspectives, guidance inevitably will be

varied. However, these regular meetings and a brief orientation for the new instructors before the start of the issue analysis help to minimize discrepancies.¹¹ At Milano these meetings have become more regular, and complaints from the students about inconsistent advice have diminished.

Table 6.
Teaching Team Responsibilities

Team Member	Responsibility
Director	Typically a full-time faculty member or part-time adjunct; responsible for coordinating trial cases, creating student teams, recruiting clients, and organizing cohort-wide plenaries and workshops.
Faculty instructor	A full-time faculty member; responsible for teaching introductory policy analysis course, helping to recruit clients, guiding teams through Lab analyses, and advising culminating PDR.
Adjunct instructor	A part-time faculty member; responsible for guiding teams through Lab analyses.
Teaching assistant	A second-year master's graduate student who completed Policy Analysis and Lab courses in previous year; selected based on exemplary performance and leadership potential; responsible for advising teams during trial and live issue analysis and conducting tutorial workshops on cost-benefit analysis and professional presentations.

Recruiting clients. Reaching out to and orienting the clients is perhaps the most critical role of the director. This process typically begins toward the middle of the semester preceding the Lab course, and the first round of clients is confirmed before the end of that semester so that students can rank their interest in the available subject areas (a survey is sent around). This process is repeated for the second round of clients. Consistently, at least one third of the clients are repeated from previous years. Other clients are recruited by exploiting personal and professional connections (mostly through the director and other affiliated faculty).¹² The school's strong relationship with practitioners, who are also often adjunct faculty, and with alumni also help bring in new clients. Experience demonstrates that most organizations are very receptive to the opportunity to work with students and to receive free consulting work. The bigger challenge is agreeing with the client on an issue that is narrow enough to address comprehensively in the time allotted and that is not framed in a prescriptive way. That is, the question should warrant the analysis of multiple alternatives; if, for whatever reasons, the outcome is obvious (or inflexible) or if there is no actionable goal, then it is not a good fit for this exercise. In many cases the client will essentially design a research project or best practices review, and this is not in line with the curriculum design. The issue needs to pose a problem that warrants action or resolution, and the preferred strategy should not be predetermined.

As regards client commitment, it generally is quite minimal. The minimum participation involves drafting the mandate (usually with the help of the course director), hosting an initial meeting with the student team at the organization's office, conducting a midpoint meeting (either in person or on the phone), and attending the final briefing at The New School. Although such time is not scheduled explicitly, the client is also expected to interact with the students should they need information, contacts, or other relevant data. Of course, the burden will vary by the organization's size and/or capacity; smaller and understaffed organizations may find any regular interaction with the students hard to manage. Indeed, some clients choose not to repeat the program in the future, because it proved too onerous. However, this is usually the exception; clients generally find the product well worth the time dedicated toward interacting with the students. In fact, clients are often very hands on and request more frequent meetings or updates than are required on by Milano.

Because Milano is situated in New York City, and its degree specializes in urban policy, the clients do reflect this context. All of the government agencies are local, and the nonprofits tend to be focused on urban issues. These tendencies emerge out of The New School's local connections, but they also serve the interests of students. This approach, however, could easily be replicated in the context of state or federal government clients and international NGOs. Time and resources are limited; thus, the Milano program relies on the close proximity of clients, so that students can travel to their offices and any other relevant sites (and so the client can easily attend the briefing). However, with more resources to support travel and virtual interactions, the same approach could be achieved with nonlocal clients. Still, it is important to keep in mind that the more the students need to travel, the less time they will have to dedicate toward productive analysis.

INTEGRATED CLIENT-BASED CURRICULA PRODUCE TANGIBLE OUTCOMES

Outcomes from the client-oriented policy analysis coursework are evident both inside and outside of the classroom. First, the improvement from the first to the final policy memo is quite impressive. The final reports produced by teams usually display quality that is legions beyond what was achievable in the first memo assignment. In what is a relatively short amount of time, the students transform their writing styles and become incredibly agile at writing direct and cogent analytical arguments. This improvement is largely due to the rigid parameters that direct their writing assignments from the beginning and also the repeated opportunities for revision and rethinking. The transformation is also highly contingent on extensive professor involvement: Grading the memos with such attentiveness takes time, and professors also usually meet with students to discuss the revisions.

Second, the students hone their presentation skills. For many, the briefings are their first experience with formal, and in the case of the live briefings, high-stakes presentations. During the trial and live briefings, every student is required to present

a part of the PowerPoint without notes, and they must field spontaneous questions during and after the presentation. This is not an exercise in presenting a flawless analysis; rather, it is an opportunity to orally portray and defend a well-formed argument that is bolstered by quantitative and qualitative evidence. The students learn how to think on their feet and how to sell a defensible argument with actionable recommendations in a relatively high-pressure context.

Third, the utility of a common language, as provided by the five-stage model, becomes evident in the Lab course when teams are comprised of students from different Policy Analysis sections (and instructors). Jumping into a tightly scheduled project is largely facilitated by the common analytical foundation that the team members share. Alumni have also indicated that these analytical “heuristics” help them tackle complex and unfamiliar problems in their interviews and jobs.

Fourth, the students have in their job market portfolio relatively polished, policy-relevant memos that are professional and concise. In addition, the numerous presentation opportunities help to hone interviewing skills and general confidence in public speaking.

Fifth, the Lab and PDR courses generate networking opportunities and contacts for future internship and postgraduation job prospects. Indeed, a good number of students either work with their Lab or PDR client or related organizations after completing the degree.

Finally, there is a public relations benefit from the client-based coursework. The client-based work not only helps connect the graduates (and the school’s name) to the professional world but also associates the school with a product that can be marketed. For example, the service provided by Milano’s Lab and Advanced Seminar to local organizations and agencies is a great value added: It costs the client almost nothing (save coordination costs of working with the team) and provides them with new, organized information (that they probably would not have collected on their own). Indeed, based on client surveys conducted after the completion of the Lab from two consecutive years, about one third of the clients revealed that they likely would have not researched the topic had it not been for the student team’s work. In addition, in surveys (and through numerous anecdotal accounts) clients respond enthusiastically to the professionalism and rigor of the students’ work; the product often “far exceeds” their expectations. Clients almost unanimously report that they would work with another team and would recommend the Lab experience to another potential client.

Admittedly, the client-based curriculum also exposes the school to potential bad press. That is, if clients have unfavorable experiences and/or outcomes, the school’s reputation and any postgraduation prospects for the students could suffer. This is an undeniable risk, and one that is mediated by close supervision of the student teams. At Milano, not only do teams meet at least two times per week with their faculty advisors and TAs, but every major deliverable is also reviewed by the faculty member before it goes to the client.

CONCLUSION

This paper considers a method for teaching policy analysis that relies on a strong link between theory and practice and one that integrates client-based coursework throughout the graduate school experience. A survey of graduate programs in public affairs indicates that an intensive client-based curriculum for a policy degree is rare; any client-based learning typically occurs sporadically or as a culminating capstone event. Only 6 out of 278 U.S. public affairs programs incorporate client-oriented work continuously into their master's curricula. And the policy analysis curriculum at Milano has a slightly different approach, even among these highly integrated programs. It relies on formal theoretical foundations and multiple, incremental iterations of client-based work to instruct students on how to make transparent and systematic decisions in a variety of policy and organizational contexts.

If we expect professional public affairs degrees to prepare students for real-world challenges, then it is reasonable that the curriculum emphasize repeated analytical applications that mirror the resource constraints and interpersonal interactions of actual decision-making scenarios. The implication from the highly client-integrated programs is that a client-based curriculum should be interwoven throughout as much of the coursework as possible and not limited to culminating theses or capstone projects. Interactions with clients and urgent policy issues can be intimidating and pressure filled. By providing repeated opportunities for students to practice resource- and time-constrained issue analysis and client relations, student confidence is developed and analytical skills are more ingrained. This kind of training serves as a bridge from the classroom to the professional world and sets up the students with highly transferrable skills that they can employ adeptly in interviews and on the job. At Milano, students overwhelmingly isolate the client-based coursework as the most valuable experience from their graduate studies, and the clients find value in the products as well.

The Milano case is an instructive illustration of a client-integrated approach that is exceptional in its theory-practice link and its continual reliance on client-based applications. That said, Milano's approach is transferrable. The urban focus and application of the Milano curriculum provides really nothing more than a context for skill development; therefore, to accommodate students studying management, public administration, or even international affairs, the adjustments are primarily in the topical content (i.e., the client's field or orientation). Milano, a relatively small program, relies on a rather personalized approach for client recruitment and project assignment; larger programs can make this process more routinized and cast wider nets for client recruitment to reduce preparation time. The efficacy of the Milano program relies heavily on instructor commitment, and this component cannot be compromised as easily. To shepherd the students through the various phases of the client-based work and to ensure quality control for the live clients, the instructors need to be available to students and conscientious in their oversight. This commitment ensures a coherent learning experience for the students and a solid reputation for the program.

The regular involvement of live clients guarantees that students are exposed to current issues; the challenge is keeping the analytical framework on the cutting edge. The Milano program benefits from the coordination of its long-standing curriculum, but its somewhat traditional technical approach begs for the consideration of more innovative tools. Rather than relying so heavily on a single, stylized framework, theoretical foundations could (and probably should) consciously incorporate alternative decision-making models. Policy communications could move beyond the traditional memo or PowerPoint presentation toward more multimedia forms; students also found PowerPoint presentations to be unsuited for particular contexts. As long as the client component is continuous and diversified (in terms of live and simulated, of team and individual), there is ample room to tailor the analytical scheme to match the mission and needs of any particular program. In the end, the process has the potential to simultaneously shift pedagogical approaches and real-time policy discourse and action.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 For example, the questions asked students to rate their experience in the policy analysis core classes and to rate how well the curriculum prepared them to make evidence-based, systematically assessed decisions in their current employment. The respondents were also asked to identify aspects of the program they found particularly valuable; content was analyzed for reference to the policy analysis curriculum and/or the skills gleaned from it.
- 2 This was the only survey with some incentive attached to it (respondents were entered into a drawing to win either an iPod or Kindle).
- 3 I focus on the content of the core curriculum and not electives, because the latter are idiosyncratic to the student; it is a reasonable assumption that every student is required to take the core classes.
- 4 This method will underrepresent the degree of client-based work for programs that do not fully disclose it on their websites; however, I argue that if it is a core piece of the curriculum, it should be publicized on the program's website.
- 5 The University of Oregon's program is the one exception: There is no required first-year, client-based work, but the applied curriculum is varied and intensive enough in other ways to warrant its consideration among the integrated programs.
- 6 See an (abbreviated) schedule of lecture topics (lifted from the full syllabus) for the introductory Policy Analysis course in Appendix A. Although not comprehensive, it gives a sense of the order of topics and materials used in class.
- 7 The strength of the Allison and Zelikow treatment is actually their multiple-lens approach, illustrating that the decision-making process can be explained in different ways depending on the theoretical framework. The students engage in similar discussions in class when they are assigned readings on alternative policy decision-making models. This part of the curriculum is omitted here for purposes of brevity.
- 8 Additional faculty members (either full-time or adjuncts) are brought in to supervise the teams, because each section typically has five or six teams and only one instructor and TA. Each instructor and TA pair works with two teams.
- 9 This return rate is consistent with client-based courses at other institutions: for example, according to Allard and Straussman (2003), between 25% and 50% of the clients participating in the MPA workshop at the Maxwell School return for another round. The recruitment of new clients

(instead of a higher number of repeat clients) is mostly a product of the director's discretion (the contacts and issues of interest typically shift from year to year). However, some previous clients might find the involvement too time-consuming or that they no longer have a qualified project, both of which would deter them from repeating the experience.

- 10 Coordination of feedback is a critical component. It involves several parties, because there is feedback from the instructor, TA, and each member of the student team. In addition, the goal is to return the feedback from the first round of Lab clients to the students before the start of the second round of Lab clients, so that they have this information to influence their performance going forward. This task is usually facilitated by having spring break between the two live Lab rounds.
- 11 In addition, over the years Milano has developed a cohort of instructors who are familiar with the curriculum and help to maintain consistency in the pedagogy.
- 12 Another strategy is to advertise, on the program's website or through mailings, the projects as an opportunity for clients to receive free consulting work; this shifts the burden onto the clients to contact the school (although it may bring in a larger pool than the program can handle). The Wagner School at New York University, for example, does this for its capstone projects.

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APPENDIX A

Abbreviated List of Class Topics

Class	Topic	Case/Reading	Source
Class 1	Problem Definition	Air Pollution and Democracy: The Mexico City School Calendar Change Proposal	KSG*
Class 2	Generating Alternatives	Ellen Schall and the Department of Juvenile Justice	KSG
Class 3	Objectives and Evaluative Criteria	The Challenge of Adapting to Climate Change: King County Brings Local Action to a Global Threat	KSG
Class 4	Analysis and Recommendations	Swimming Pools	KSG
Class 5	Review of Analytical Process	Seattle Commons	Electronic Hallway
Class 6	Alternatives to the Five-Stage Model	Stone (2002); Lindblohm (1959); Kingdon (2003); Baumgartner & Jones (2009); Elmore (1979)	See references
Class 7	Intro to Cost-Benefit Analysis and Discounting	Herzlinger & Nitterhouse (1994); Stokey & Zeckhauser (1978); Wheelan (2011)	See references
Class 8	Discounting Applied	Leicester Polytechnic Institute	Herzlinger & Nitterhouse (1994)
Class 9	CBA Applied	Crossrail (A): The Business Case	KSG
Class 10	Critical Perspectives on CBA	Boardman et. al. (1996); Trumbell (1990); Kelman (1992); Jenkins-Smith (1982); Amy (1984)	See references

KSG = Kennedy School of Government Case Program.

APPENDIX B

Abridged Sample Policy Mandate for Laboratory in Issue Analysis

Milano The New School for Management and Urban Policy
72 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10011 - (212) 229-5400 - www.milano.news.school.edu

Laboratory in Issues Analysis

Spring 2010

Mandate

CLIENT/AGENCY: New York City Department of Small Business Services,
District Development Unit, 110 William Street, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10038

CENTRAL POLICY ISSUE:

1. What can District Development do to determine the relative health of low-to moderate-income neighborhood business districts in New York City?
2. How can District Development use this information to help make funding allocations through the Avenue NYC program?

BACKGROUND OF ISSUE:

New York City Department of Small Business Services

The New York City Department of Small Business Services (SBS) makes it easier for companies in New York City to form, do business, and grow by providing direct assistance to business owners, promoting commercial districts, promoting financial and economic opportunity among minority- and women-owned businesses, preparing New Yorkers for jobs and linking employers with a skilled and qualified workforce.

SBS' District Development Unit supports community-based economic development organizations throughout New York City in order to create the conditions under which local businesses thrive and residents enjoy access to a vibrant mix of goods and services. Through its network of 64 Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), SBS' District Development unit oversees the provision of almost \$100 million in services annually. District Development also partners with dozens of local development corporations, merchants associations and other neighborhood economic development organizations through Avenue NYC.

Avenue NYC

The Agency's Avenue NYC program provides funding to non-profit economic development organizations (local development corporations, merchant associations, and other community organizations) to carry out commercial revitalization activities in neighborhood business districts throughout New York City. The Avenue NYC program is funded entirely through SBS' annual allocation of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) dollars, administered through the Entitlement Communities program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

NATURE OF THE PROBLEM: Each year SBS receives applications for Avenue NYC funding from an average of 85 non-profit economic development organizations throughout the five boroughs. Funding decisions are based on three broad criteria:

1) Existing Organizational Capacity (40%); 2) Strength of the Avenue NYC Project Proposal (50%); 3) Viability of the Proposed Avenue NYC Budget (10%)

SBS evaluators prioritize applicants' dedication of human resources to a proposed project, previous experience carrying out commercial revitalization activities, previous experience contracting with the City of New York, and the alignment of adequate financial resources toward the proposed project when making their funding decisions. The challenge in making funding decisions based on these criteria is that the focus is largely on organizations, rather than on the neighborhoods they serve.

Applicants are requested to provide a general overview of their targeted commercial district and highlight current conditions and trends related to the retail mix and vacancy rate in that district as part of the application. However, these descriptions are often subjective in nature and are not incorporated into SBS evaluators' funding decisions in any meaningful way. Designation as a low- to moderate-income commercial district as defined by HUD's CDBG requirements is the only objective criterion that is consistently applied in directing where Avenue NYC program investments are made.

Given that SBS cannot fund all CDBG-eligible neighborhood business districts through the Avenue NYC program, what are other neighborhood-specific characteristics (aside from CDBG eligibility) that the Agency should consider when making its funding decisions? What data is currently available that will allow the Agency to acquire a more nuanced understanding of the low- to moderate-income commercial districts served by applicant organizations? How can the Agency easily aggregate and use this information on an annual basis to help determine where Avenue NYC investments should be made throughout the five boroughs?

Proposed Approach: SBS is engaging the Milano Policy Lab to assist District Development staff in creating this more objective and comprehensive means of determining the health of the low- to moderate-income neighborhood business districts served by Avenue NYC applicants. The ultimate goal of the project is to have a system (e.g., a matrix) that provides up-to-date information on specific indicators of neighborhood business district health across the multiple neighborhoods served by Avenue NYC applicants. The neighborhood-specific data will help Agency staff to compare the health of individual districts to one another and will complement the information included in the Avenue NYC applications so that staff can more rationally determine where Avenue NYC investments should be made.

Possible indicators of neighborhood business district health may include crime and foreclosure rates, property values, business openings/closings, business tax revenues, owner-occupancy rates, among others. In selecting the indicators, however, focus should remain on the commercial corridor. While surrounding residential conditions unquestionably impact business district conditions, the system created must adequately capture what is happening along the commercial corridor served by an Avenue NYC applicant.

Reliability of data sources, frequency with which these sources are updated, and ease of accessing and aggregating these data sources must be the primary considerations when

designing the system. The number of staff dedicated to overseeing the Avenue NYC program is small, and therefore, ease of compiling the data from multiple sources and segmenting of that data by individual districts must be considered when selecting the indicators included in the final deliverable.

District Development staff will work with the Milano Policy Lab group to define individual neighborhood business district boundaries and the total number of districts included in the final deliverable. Ideally, the system would include information on all neighborhood business districts represented by Avenue NYC applicant organizations so that this information could assist staff in making FY2011 funding decisions (to be made in May 2010). If this is not possible, however, District Development staff will determine a limited number of neighborhood business districts on which the selected indicators should focus.

APPENDIX C

List of Sample Lab Clients and PDRs

Client	Central Policy Issue
NYC Department of Parks & Recreation	What performance metrics should the Recreation Division employ to help guide new programming, redefine and measure the success of existing programming?
Office of Vital Records, NYC Dept. of Health & Mental Hygiene	How can the Corrections & Amendments Unit enhance its workflow in order to create a more customer responsive and efficient process?
Hostelling International New York	How should Hostelling International respond to a recently enacted New York law banning short-term rentals (less than 30 days) in most multi-unit residential buildings, a law that goes into effect May 1, 2011?
Gale Brewer, New York City Councilwoman	What should Councilmember Brewer propose the City do to improve voter turnout?
United Way NYC	How should United Way restructure its food stamps outreach program in order to better achieve the organization's goals of expanding access to food stamps for low income New Yorkers?
Annenberg Institute for School Reform	What should the Annenberg Institute for School Reform recommend to optimize the role students and parents can play in meaningful and sustainable school transformation?
Citizens Budget Commission	What position should the Commission take with regard to the construction of waste-to-energy facilities for the disposal of the City's municipal waste?
Taxi & Limousine Commission	How should the Taxi and Limousine Commission operationalize the Five-Borough Taxi Plan, a new category of taxicab (called a Borough Taxi) that would be permitted to pick up "street-hail" passengers outside Manhattan?
SAGE (Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders)	How can SAGE advance affordable housing opportunities for LGBT older adults in NYC?

APPENDIX C

List of Sample Lab Clients and PDRs (continued)

Paper title	Central Policy Issue
Combating Gangs in Jersey City	Friends of the Lifers Youth Corp
Assisting Habitat Affiliates toward Building Energy Star Rated Homes	Habitat for Humanity International
How to Incentivize Small Retail Development within Affordable Housing Complexes	Center for an Urban Future
Conforming to the Final Rule Amendments of the Violence Against Women Act	Housing Authority of New Orleans
State Banking: A Solution for New York's Financial Woes?	Center for Working Families
Deconstructing the Articulated Ensemble: Analytics and NYC's Capital Budget	NYC Office of Management and Budget
Illuminating the Black Box: Economic Impact Modeling in NYC	Good Jobs New York
Parent and student involvement in teacher evaluations	Annenberg Institute for School Reform
Expanding access to anti-hunger programs	New York City Coalition against Hunger
Pursuing new methods to ensure accessible integrated public benefits for Miami residents	City of Miami Economic Initiatives
Exploring college readiness & career pathways for General Educational Development graduates	Henry Street Settlement
Proposal for Advancing Environmental and Community Health in Northeast Haiti	National Organization for the Advancement of Haitians New York
Incentivizing Store Owners to Sell Healthier Foods in NYC	NYC Department of Health
Deconstructing Flint: The Game Plan	Genesee County Land Bank
How to best transition former program participants to staff positions	The Doe Fund
Creating a unified workforce development system: The integration of TANF and WIA	Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies
Closing the Gap: A Plan to Lower the Electricity Cost Burden for Section 202 Residents	Hope Community, Inc.
Looking past the skyline: Zoning for a greener New York	Natural Resources Defense Council