AI-Enhanced Policy Briefings

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Developing Professional Policy Analysis Skills in the Age of Generative AI.

Policy advising in government relies heavily on the synthesis of complex information into concise 'briefing notes' for decision-makers. This fundamental skill for public servants is traditionally emphasized in public affairs education. However, the emergence of generative AI (GenAI) tools capable of similar analytical synthesis raises important questions about how we should teach and evaluate policy writing skills.

This project examines the use of GenAI as an initial drafting tool for briefing notes and investigates a critical question: Does AI assistance improve students' independent briefing note writing skills, or merely enhance the quality of their outputs without developing underlying competencies? The learning activity positions AI as a collaborative partner in the drafting process, while carefully measuring skill development outcomes. Through evidence-based assessment of this approach, we aim to ensure that educational methods in public administration remain effective in developing the essential analytical and communication capabilities that future policy professionals require. The findings will inform teaching strategies that appropriately integrate AI tools while maintaining focus on core skill development in policy analysis and communication.

University of Regina

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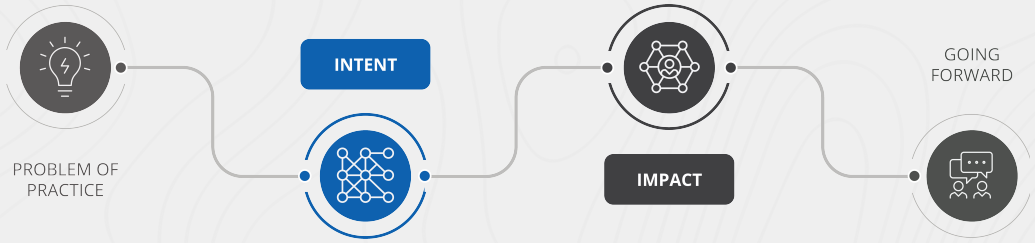

Intent

This use case aims to introduce students to the foundational skills involved in conducting policy analysis and writing briefing notes, provide guided instruction in GenAI prompting to create draft briefing notes, emphasize critical evaluation of those GenAI draft briefing notes, and—through comparison of their independently writing briefing notes and those created with the assistance of GenAI—consider the trajectory of their skill development as policy analysts. Implementation steps:

- Introduce students to traditional approaches to policy analysis and briefing note writing in an introductory core course in our master's program in public administration.
- Introduce students to prompting strategies and the use of GenAI for creating draft briefing notes.
- Discuss, in class, the critical evaluation of briefing notes drafted by GenAI focussing on contextualization, the removal of extraneous information, the addition of information and structure to aid decision makers, and the improvement of language to aid in communication.
- Have students create their first briefing note using GenAI and have them focus on improving the draft.
- Have students create a briefing note from first principles, where they are prohibited from using GenAI during the research and writing process.
- Have students repeat this cycle (i.e., creating a briefing note using GenAI and writing a briefing note independently) once more during the term.
- Evaluate the quality of the outputs both within each used case (i.e., compare the two GenAI-created briefing notes against each other, and compare the two independently drafted briefing notes against each other) and across all four attempts.
- Compare the quality of the briefing notes created without the assistance of GenAI against the quality of briefing notes created by students in a comparable class where the use of GenAI is entirely prohibited.
- Survey data from both cohorts will be used to probe student perspectives on the experience of learning the skills associated with briefing note writing both with and without the aid of GenAI.

> "I can attest, as a former public servant and policy analyst myself, that writing briefing notes is one of the most common and central activities our students are going to engage in in their future public sector careers. That's why we spend so much time in our program emphasizing the research and writing that goes into a good briefing note. GenAI has made astonishing gains in just the past five years in its ability to write plausibly good briefing notes. This raises the question: do we still need to teach students how to write briefing notes if GenAI can do it just as well?"
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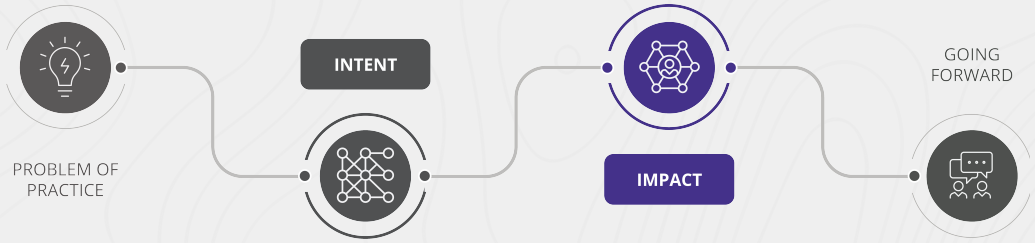
> *—Dr. Justin Longo, Associate Professor, University of Regina*



Impact

Based on ongoing experience with deploying these methods for teaching policy analysis and briefing note writing, the integration of GenAI tools into policy analysis education has had mixed impacts on student learning and skill development.

Differential Learning Benefits: An inverse relationship has emerged between students' prior policy analysis experience and the perceived value of GenAI assistance. Novice writers with minimal professional communication experience appear to benefit the most from GenAI assistance, using the drafts as scaffolding to understand briefing note structure and professional tone. Conversely, students with substantial public sector experience often complain that GenAI tools are less than beneficial, sometimes viewing them as constraining rather than enhancing their established analytical and writing processes.

Surface-Level vs. Substantive Engagement: A concerning pattern involves students' tendency to focus disproportionately on linguistic refinement rather than substantive policy analysis. Many participants devoted considerable attention to "wordsmithing" AI-generated language while giving insufficient critical attention to the underlying policy recommendations, their feasibility, or their contextual appropriateness within specific governmental frameworks. This surface-level engagement on changing the words but not the ideas suggests lingering concerns on the part of the students at being 'caught' plagiarising even when the assignment explicitly requires the use of GenAI.

Evolving Research Questions: While our initial inquiry focused on whether AI assistance improves briefing note writing skills, a deeper more complex question has emerged: To what extent does AI influence—or potentially supplant—the fundamental policy analyst role that should underpin effective briefing notes? We should understand that being a good briefing note writer and a good policy analyst involve complimentary skills, but one does not wholly imply the other. This raises critical pedagogical concerns about whether students' writing skills are improving while their analytical capabilities potentially atrophy due to over-reliance on AI-generated content.

Professional Learning insights

- **Experience-Based Utility**: AI tools provide greater benefit to novice policy writers than to experienced practitioners.
- **Focus Misdirection**: Students often prioritize language refinement over critical evaluation of policy substance.
- **Analytical Independence**: The development of independent analysis skills may be inadvertently compromised by easy access to AI-generated policy frameworks.
- **Pedagogical Recalibration**: Instructional approaches require adjustment to emphasize critical engagement with AI-generated content rather than mere refinement

These preliminary findings suggest that while AI tools can enhance briefing note quality, careful pedagogical design is essential to ensure students develop robust analytical capabilities alongside improved writing skills.

Going Forward

This investigation into the intersection of GenAI and public administration education has revealed complex questions about the development of analytical and communication competencies in public administration programs. Going forward, our research agenda will focus on several critical dimensions:

Strategic Research Initiatives

Analytical-Writing Skill Differentiation: There is ongoing work to develop robust frameworks to distinguish between improvements in writing mechanics versus substantive policy analysis capabilities, creating assessment tools that specifically measure each competency independently.
Longitudinal Skill Development Assessment: A comprehensive study tracking student progression from program entry through early-career public service positions will evaluate the durability and transferability of skills developed in AI-enhanced learning environments.
Pedagogical Model Refinement: Building on preliminary findings, we will design, and test varied instructional approaches that strategically incorporate AI at different stages of the policy analysis process to optimize skill development.

Implementation and Knowledge Dissemination

Collaborative Faculty Development: A series of workshops will engage public administration educators across institutions to share best practices, refine teaching methods, and establish standards for appropriate AI integration in professional education.
Curriculum Adaptation Framework: We will develop and disseminate structural guidelines for integrating generative AI into core policy analysis courses while preserving essential analytical skill development.
Public Sector Partnership Initiative: Engagement with public service organizations will provide real-world performance metrics and feedback on graduates' analytical capabilities, creating an evidence-based feedback loop for curricular refinement.

Our research recognizes that future public servants will inevitably use AI tools in their professional practice. Rather than shielding students from this technological reality, we aim to establish empirically-grounded approaches that harness AI's capabilities while ensuring robust development of independent analytical competencies. This work provides foundational insights for the broader community of public administration educators navigating the integration of emerging technologies into professional education.

Resources

- Best Practices Guide: "**Guidance on Using GenAI to Teach Briefing Note Writing**"
- Research Paper: Safaei, M. & Longo, J. 2024. Testing the Capability of Artificial Intelligence to Generate Plausible, Persuasive, and Useful Policy Analysis. Digital Government: Research and Practice, 5(1), Article 4 (March 2024), 1-35. ACM Paper #224.208. **https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3604570**.
- **GenAI for Briefing Notes** (includes detailed notes)
- **Pre-reading: Workshop for students on methods and strategies for using GenAI to assist in briefing note writing**
- Conference Paper: Boucher, M., Dupeyron, B., Longo, J., McWhinney, H. & Prytula, M. (2024). **Using GenAI for Teaching Briefing Note Writing?** Canadian Association of Programs in Public Administration Annual Conference (CAPPA 2024). Halifax, NS. May 22-24.
- Presentation: **Harnessing GenAI: A Novel Process for Teaching and Learning Policy Analysis**.