



NYU

**ROBERT F. WAGNER GRADUATE
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE**

PADM-GP 2165

**POLICY IMPLEMENTATION:
How Government Agencies Convert Plans, Policies and Projects into
Action**

Fall 2024

Wednesdays, 4:55 PM - 6:35 PM
31 Washington Pl (Silver Ctr) Room 514

This version: September 5, 2024

Salo Coslovsky
svc2@nyu.edu

Prerequisites:

Management & Leadership (all students), Introduction to Public Policy (PNP) or History and Theory of Planning (MUP). Students in other programs, departments, or schools should have comparable experience or background.

Undergraduates can enroll with the permission of the instructor.

Course Description:

This course examines how government agencies implement plans, policies, and projects under real-world constraints. Government agencies are some of the largest and most consequential organizations shaping contemporary life. At any moment, different agencies are tackling a web of interconnected problems - from housing and education to health care, criminal justice, economic growth, and climate change.

Surprisingly, their importance is rarely matched by an equivalent amount of attention. Government agencies are under-examined and often misunderstood. Sometimes, they are treated as if they were easy to fix. On other occasions, they are dismissed as broken beyond repair.

In contrast to these mutually-incompatible views, this course draws from a mix of theory and case studies to examine why government agencies (and their agents) do what they do. First and foremost, it aims to provide students with the concepts and theories they need to make sense of bureaucratic behavior. In turn, these insights can empower students to devise plans, policies, and projects that are more likely to be implemented in a way that generates the intended results.

This Course in Context:

This course sits at the intersection of multiple groups within Wagner, including the management, policy, and advocacy specializations, the urban planning program, and the cross-cutting international specialization. It is recommended to all students who consider working for public sector organizations or who care about their ability to implement plans, policies, and projects, both in the US and abroad.

Students who are pursuing the management specialization should know that this course strives to complement the required management courses (i.e. Strategic Management; Human Resources; and Performance Measurement), as well as various electives. While the latter impart general management skills that can be useful across multiple settings, this course emphasizes those concepts and analytical skills that are tailored towards understanding government agencies.

Learning Objectives

At the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Recognize how public sector organizations face challenges that are intrinsically distinct from those faced by private or even not-for-profit organizations;
2. Identify some of the key variables that affect the behavior of frontline government agents;
3. Understand the main constraints and opportunities that managers and executives face when trying to direct their subordinates;
4. Suggest changes to plans, policies and projects so they are more likely to be properly implemented.

Assignments and Evaluation

Grades will be based on a baseline reflection (10%), class participation (10%), four short assignments (totaling 20%), a midterm (20%), and a final paper (40%).

All written assignments should be double-spaced, with 1 inch margins, and 12 font.

- The baseline reflection (10%) consists of a short and informal document (about one to two pages) in which students describe their encounters with (or impressions of) a government agency and articulate their personal theories explaining why this particular agency operates the way it does. The reflection is supposed to draw from personal experience and it does not require additional research. It is due before the first class.
- Class participation (10%) hinges on engagement in live classroom activities over the entire course.
- Short assignments (20%) consists of four short documents (about a page each) that students have to submit before designated sessions and that will help structure the

corresponding classroom discussion. These assignments will be graded on a pass-fail basis.

- The midterm (20%) consists of a longer document (about four pages) in which students re-examine the impressions of public sector organizations that they recorded in the baseline reflection, but now drawing from the materials covered in class. It is due before the eight session.
- The final paper (40%) consists of a research paper, personal reflection, OR a book review. It should be five to ten pages long, including title, bibliography and footnotes. It is due one week after the last class.
 - The research paper examines a topic of the student's choice and that connects directly with the themes discussed in class. Ideally, the paper is anchored on a compelling, open-ended question or puzzle, which is then answered through empirical research.
 - The reflection is a first-person essay in which students draws from the concepts and theories discussed in class to reassess their ideas about government agencies. It can be a revised and extended version of the baseline and midterm.
 - The book review summarizes the argument put forth by the author(s) and examines how the concepts and theories examined in class confirm and/or challenge the facts described in the book. It is paramount that you connect the review to the themes we discuss in class. One way to do it is to ask: if the book was going to be assigned in the course, where would it go and what point would it illustrate? Another way to do it is to ask: how should the course be modified so this book could be included, and why would that be a good idea? Students interested in writing the book review must submit the title of the book to the instructor for approval.

Course Outline

- | | | |
|----|--------|---|
| 1 | Sep 4 | Priors about public sector organizations – baseline is due |
| 2 | Sep 11 | Can the government be reinvented? |
| 3 | Sep 18 | How are government agencies different? |
| 4 | Sep 25 | Case study – short assn is due |
| 5 | Oct 2 | Situational imperatives |
| 6 | Oct 9 | Professional norms & peer-pressure |
| 7 | Oct 16 | Discretion, alliances and innovation |
| 8 | Oct 23 | Midterm discussion – midterm is due |
| 9 | Oct 30 | Mgmt decision-making in organizations - short assn is due |
| 10 | Nov 6 | Executive authority and control |
| 11 | Nov 13 | Inter-agency coordination – short assn is due |
| 12 | Nov 20 | Insights from evaluation |
| 13 | Nov 27 | Deriving lessons from practice – short assn is due |
| 14 | Dec 4 | Wrap-up |
| | Dec 11 | Final assignment is due |

Course Plan

1 – Priors about public sector organizations

Everyone comes to a class like this with some theories on what government agencies (and their agents) do and why they do it. What are your theories and what are the experiences that led you to develop them?

Read:

- Saletan, William (2003) I Fought the Law: My adventures in traffic court, Slate.

Do:

This class will revolve around students' baseline reflection. These reflections are supposed to be informal, personal and short (about two pages). They should describe a memorable encounter (or encounters) with a government agency and explain why this agency (and its agents) behaved the way they did. The baseline reflection is due before class.

2 – Can the government be reinvented?

There are a lot of enticing ideas out there on how the government can be reinvented: digital technologies, privatization, clear goals coupled with strong incentives, enlightened leadership. How good are these ideas? In this class, we will examine them, to separate actionable insights from hype.

Read one of the two sets of readings:

Set 1:

- Noveck, Beth (2021), The Innovation State, Daedalus
- Osborne, David (1992) Government that Means Business, The New York Times
- Osborne, David (1993) Reinventing Government, Public Productivity & Management Review, Vol 16, No 4, pp.349-356 [*please note that both pieces by Osborne cover similar ground*]

Set 2:

- Janke, Katharina, Carol Propper and Raffaella Sadun (2019) The Impact of CEOs in the Public Sector: Evidence from the English NHS, NBER working paper [*no need to read all the econometrics, skim for main points*]
- Saxe, Shoshanna (2019), I'm an Engineer, and I'm Not Buying Into 'Smart' Cities, New York Times

- Joy, Tara (2018) The Problem with Private Prisons, The Justice Policy Institute
- Aviv, Rachel (2014) Wrong Answer. The New Yorker
- Ruderman, Wendy (2012) Crime Report Manipulation Is Common Among New York Police, Study Finds, New York Times
- Buntin, John (2016) 25 Years Later, What Happened to 'Reinventing Government'?, Governing

Do:

During class students will debate the following proposition: “The government can be reinvented”. Students who read set 1 will make a case “For” the proposition. Students who read the set 2 will make a case “Against” the proposition. Please come to class with notes so you can engage in the debate.

3 – How are government agencies different?

In this class, we examine some of the key features that make government agencies intrinsically different from private or even not-for-profit organizations.

Read:

- Kauffman, Herbert (1977) Red Tape: Its Origins, Uses, and Abuses, Brookings Classic, reissued 2015
- Leonnig, Carol [2021] Zero Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Secret Service, Random House [pages 3-70]

Do:

There is no assignment

4 – Case study

The common wisdom about governments is often based on inaccurate facts mixed with speculation and misunderstanding. In this class, we will examine the case of the US\$1,7 million toilet, to try to get to the bottom of the story: what is myth, what is reality, what is reasonable and what is unreasonable?

Read:

- Knight, H. (2022, October 19). Only in S.F.: \$1.7 million for one public toilet. *San Francisco Chronicle (CA)*, p. A001

Do:

In 2022, the SF Chronicle reported that the city of San Francisco had secured US\$1,7 million to build a single, relatively small, toilet, in a public square. The story became a national scandal, and came to symbolize the dysfunctions of (liberal) government. It is not the first story of its kind. In prior years, we had a US\$435 hammer, a US\$600 toilet seat, a US\$16 muffin, and many others. These reports are often followed by outrage at the inefficiencies (or corruption) of government. But are these stories based on fact or fiction? And what variables help explain the seemingly unreasonable price tag?

We will answer these questions as a group. To this end, please conduct original research on some aspect of the US\$1,7 million toilet debacle. You can choose whichever aspect you want to investigate, but we are interested in facts (not myths), including political, organizational, legal, budgetary, and engineering details. I'd rather you go narrow & deep into one aspect of the story than be shallow and wide. You might have to be resourceful and creative to uncover original material and stand out from your classmates. In class, we will collate your reports into a coherent case study and try to draw lessons relevant to the course.

Please submit your short assignment before class.

5 – Situational imperatives

A large number of government agents are in direct contact with citizens, and this proximity can have a profound effect on what the agents do.

Read:

- Zacka, Bernardo (2017) What I Learned When I Became a Bureaucrat, Salon
- Zacka, Bernardo (2017) Why Bureaucrats Don't Seem to Care, The Atlantic

And choose one of the following:

- Moskos, Peter (2008) Under Arrest: Discretion in the Ghetto, chapter 6 in Cop in the Hood: My Year Policing Baltimore's Eastern District
- Conover, Ted (2001) Newjack, chapter 4 in Newjack: Guarding Sing-Sing

Do:

There is no assignment.

6 – Professional norms

Government agents can be accountable not only to their superiors and citizens, but also to their peers and other stakeholders in their environment. How do these lateral pressures affect the behavior of government agencies?

Read:

Please choose one of the following:

- Kellogg, Kate (2011) Challenging Operations: Medical Reform and Resistance in Surgery [chapter 3, Meet the Iron Men]
- Espeland, Wendy (1998), The Struggle for Water, [Chapter 2, Nature by Design: The Bureau of Reclamation's Western Conquest, pages 54-73]
- Katzmann, Robert (1980) Regulatory Bureaucracy: The Federal Trade Commission and Antitrust Policy [Chapter 4, Professional Economists and the Case Load: The Impact of the Bureau of Economics]
- Pruitt, Charles (1979) People Doing What They Do Best: The Professional Engineers and NHTSA, Public Administration Review
- Harris, Joseph (2015) "Developmental Capture of the State: Explaining Thailand's Universal Coverage Policy, Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law

Do:

There is no assignment.

7 – Discretion, alliances and innovation

So far, we have examined the different pressures that impinge on (and restrict) what government agents do. Still, under certain conditions, frontline government workers can retain their discretion and use it to pursue public goals.

Read:

Please choose one of the following:

- Abers, Rebeca and Luciana Tatagiba (2016) Institutional Activism: Mobilizing for Women's Health from Inside the Brazilian Bureaucracy
- Coslovsky (2016) Beyond Bureaucracy: How Prosecutors and Public Defenders Enforce

Urban Planning Laws in São Paulo, Brazil, International Journal of Urban and Regional Research

- Pires, Roberto (2013) The Organizational Basis of Rewarding Regulation: Contingency, Flexibility, and Accountability in the Brazilian Labor Inspectorate, Politics & Society
- Coslovsky, Salo (2011) Relational regulation in the Brazilian Ministério Público: The organizational basis of regulatory responsiveness, Regulation & Governance, 5(1), pp.70-89
- Vilaca, Luiz (2020) When Bureaucrats Become Activists, Mobilization: An International Journal

Do:

There is no assignment.

8 – Midterm Review

This is the midpoint of the course. We will take this opportunity to take stock of our baseline and how far we have progressed.

Read:

There are no required readings

Do:

Write a 4-5 page document revisiting and reassessing your baseline reflection (the document you wrote before the first class), but this time around you should explicitly draw from the concepts and theories we discussed in class. The midterm is due before class.

9 – Managerial decision-making in organizations

There is a fairly widespread belief that most individuals act rationally, at least most of the time. Similarly, organizations are supposed to structure and channel rational action. What happens to this belief when we put it to the test?

Read:

- Cohen, Nissim and Ofek Edri-Peer (2024) Bounded Rationality in Public Policy, Encyclopedia of Public Policy
- Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, Michael Woolcock (2017) Looking Like a State: The Seduction of Isomorphic Mimicry, chapter 2 in Building State Capability: Evidence,

Do:

Business people are supposed to be rational in their pursuit of profit. Prior to class, please identify someone who works in a business that sells multiple products or services (ex: a coffee shop, food truck, bodega, fruit stand, nail salon, barber shop, etc) and ask them how the firm determines the price for the different goods (or services), over time, and why they do it this way, or whether they tried a different method in the past. In class, we will compare notes and try to identify patterns in the responses. The assignment is due before class.

10 – Executive authority and control

Different types of government agencies demand (or allow) different approaches to leadership. At the same time, many of the forces that affect their performance originate outside the organization and lay outside of its managers' direct control.

Read:

- Wilson, James Q. (1989). Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It. Basic Books: Harper Collins Publishers. (Preface; Chapter on Compliance)
- Kaufman, Herbert (1991) The Administrative Behavior of Federal Bureau Chiefs, The Brookings Institution (Chapter 2)

Do:

There is no assignment.

11 – Inter-agency coordination

Many of the problems that citizens would like the government to solve – poverty, homelessness, crime, failing schools, inefficient healthcare, climate change – can rarely be tackled by an agency alone. Rather, they require two or more agencies to coordinate. Need aside, this is easier said than done. What explains this reluctance to coordinate, and why sometimes agencies do work together?

Read any combination of the following articles:

- Serrano, Rodrigo (2003) What Makes Inter-Agency Coordination Work? Insights from the literature and two case studies
- Busuioc (2016) Friend or Foe? Inter-Agency Cooperation, Organizational Reputation, and Turf

- Weiss, Janet (1987) Pathways to cooperation among public agencies, JPAM

Do:

In class, we will have a guest speaker: Rochelle Brahall (MUP 2022), Director of Strategic Initiatives & Chief of Staff, Transit Development Division of the NYC Department of Transportation. A big part of her job entails coordinating with other agencies, and she will discuss challenges, lessons learned and achievements trying to coordinate with the NYC Dept of City Planning, Dept of Health and Mental Hygiene, Dept of Buildings, NYS DOT, the governor's office, and more.

To prepare for this session, students should read any combination of the assigned pieces (including all three, if you are up for it), and write a short memo summarizing the main points, emphasizing the key lessons on why inter-agency coordination is so difficult and explaining how, under some conditions, it can still be achieved. The assignment is due before class.

12 – Insights from Evaluation

It is relatively easy to design projects that look perfect on paper but make it exceedingly difficult for implementers to succeed. Our task, as planners-to-be, is to derive good insights from existing experiences, which can be done through evaluation of both success and failure. In this class, we examine three approaches to evaluation and the lessons that they generate: (a) HKS-style case studies, as portrayed by Chetkovich & Kirp; (b) a critique of these cases, by the same authors; and (c) an article by Judith Tandler, who was a renowned evaluator.

Read:

- Chetkovich, Carol and David Kirp (2001) Cases and Controversies: How Novitiates Are Trained to Be Masters of the Public Policy Universe, JPAM
- Tandler, Judith (1993) Tales of dissemination in small-farm agriculture: Lessons for institution builders, World Development

Do:

There is no assignment.

13 – Deriving lessons from practice

There are several cases around the world of organizations that deliver excellent services under difficult circumstances. In this class, we will draw from the invention and roll-out of Oral Rehydration Therapy by BRAC in Bangladesh to identify key insights that might be useful in other settings.

Read:

- Mushtaque A., Chowdury, R. and Cash, R. (2007) A Simple Solution: Teaching Millions to Treat Diarrhoea at Home, The University Press Limited

Do:

Please draw from the discussions and insights from the entire course, and from the previous class, to write a short document summarizing BRAC's experience and distilling some of the practical lessons concerning policy design and implementation that can be derived from it. The assignment is due before class.

14 – Wrap-up

This is the last session of the course. Please come to class prepared to reflect over the ideas we discussed throughout the entire course.

Read:

No required readings.

Do:

No assignments.