

## **Learning Contract Project- Dr. Catherine Reese of Arkansas State University**

Each student will complete an applied project related to public budgeting and finance using a learning contract to define the scope of the project and the evaluation criteria. The idea behind a learning contract is that each student defines what s/he wants to learn or accomplish and how they intend to learn/accomplish it; it opens up the possibility of doing something for your major project other than a research paper. The contract is similar to a syllabus, except it is developed by the student and tailored to each student's interests. Possible projects include: analyzing an agency's budget process (using the four phases of the process as a guide), analyzing the financial condition of a city or other public organization (see International City Management Association book for an example of a format for this), writing a comprehensive purchasing or risk management policy for an organization, preparing a research report on an aspect of financial management or public budgeting, making a documentary on state- or local-level budget-makers, developing a training guide or instructional video on a public budgeting and finance topic, organizing a workshop, reviewing legislation / regulations / court rulings on a complex issue and developing a lay-person's guide to the legal status of that issue, or any other topic of interest to the student and public administrators. In selecting a topic, students are encouraged to consult with officials in a public or non-profit organization and to tailor the project to meet a public budgeting or financial management need of that organization. In summary, you determine the subject matter and the nature of the project. This should be a major project, in keeping with its point value for the project as a component of the overall course grade (30 points or 30%).

There are four components to this project:

1. Identify a general topic for your project in one paragraph or so. This will not be graded but you will receive feedback on whether this is an appropriate topic. Note that the project must be budgeting- or financial management-related and involve a public or non-profit entity.
  
2. Submit a learning contract proposal for instructor approval, by March 3 at the latest. This proposal should contain:
  - a) a description of your learning objectives – that is, the knowledge or skills you hope to acquire or enhance through this project;
  - b) an explanation of the intended audience and the need for the project;
  - c) the methods you will use to gather necessary information or skills (beyond the research required in step 3 below);
  - d) a description of the product you intend to produce (a research paper, a report, a section of a manual, a fiscal analysis, an analysis of a budgetary process, a video, etc....);
  - e) You are strongly encouraged to submit the contract early for feedback (worth 5 points).
  
3. Conduct a review of the current academic and professional literature on their topic and prepare an annotated bibliography of the 15-20 most useful and relevant sources.

Students should use resources from the library, the Internet, professional and trade publications, interviews, and in some cases statutes, regulations and/or court rulings (worth 5 points).

**4.** Finally, you must submit the project itself. Each student will make a presentation on their project on the last day of class or second-to-last day of class (worth 10 points). Please turn in a copy of your (previously approved) learning contract along with your project.

**Project concept originally adapted from Dr. Nadia Rubaii-Barrett at SUNY-Binghampton.**