

State Budget Project

From Nita Rinehart's "Budget and Tax Policy" class at Evergreen State College (Washington State).

Project

1. Chose a budget or tax issue that is under consideration now by the Washington State Legislature. To find budget items go to the Governor's website and go through her budget when it is proposed. You can also find proposed expenditures by looking at prefiled bills at leg.wa.gov. If the bill requires spending, it can be a budget item to follow. For tax proposals, look at prefiled bills or consult various press releases. The best place to start is leg.wa.gov.
2. Attend at least 2 hours of a hearing on your topic. If the scheduling of your issue doesn't correspond to our class schedule, attend a hearing that is reasonably related if possible. The goal is for you to experience a legislative hearing in person. Guidelines for observing hearings are below. Write a one-page double-spaced summary of your hearing.
3. Interview at least one person who is involved in the issue you have chosen. You can talk with an advocate, a staff person, a legislator--doesn't need to be an expert, just someone who has either knowledge of or interest in your issue. Write a one-page double-spaced summary of your interview. Guidelines for interviews are below.
4. Choose a book or comparable reading related to your budget or tax issue. Write a one-page double-spaced report on your reading.
5. Make a 5 minute oral presentation to the class and an invited panel. Presentations will be informal and followed by discussion. Your oral presentation should share what you consider to be most important about your issue and what you learned from various sources.
6. Write a 6 page analysis of your issue. Include a clear statement of the issue, list the actors involved in the issue, your assessment of the policy, politics and process implications of your issue. What social justice questions are raised by your issue? Make your best prediction of the outcome of your issue and give your basis for that prediction.

Guide for Interviews

1. Schedule your interview well in advance so you aren't caught short near the end of your project. When you request time for an interview, be clear about your objective and the amount of time you are requesting. Fifteen minutes is a standard appointment slot for busy people; others may have a half hour. Be realistic.
2. Choose a person to interview (at least one, but feel free to choose more than one) who is involved in the creation or implementation of your policy choice.
3. Think about what you want to learn from the person you interview. For example: What is the most puzzling thing to you about your issue? What is the intention behind the policy? What are the values underlying the policy? Who has the most power over the policy? Who could change the policy?

4. Generally, open-ended questions are best for eliciting information, but if your person starts to ramble, have some prepared questions handy to get back on track. As a general rule, it's good to close with "Is there anything else I should be thinking about to understand this policy?"
5. It's wise to write a brief thank you note to the person who took time to talk with you.

Guide for Attending Legislative Hearings

1. Ideally, you will find a meeting that deals with the issue you have chosen, but that may not be possible.
2. Attend at least 2 hours of the meeting in person. TVW gives you only the camera's perspective and you cannot get a complete sense of what's happening.
3. What is the stated purpose of the meeting you attend? Is there an unstated purpose?
4. Pay attention to who wields power over your issue. Is a decision being considered? Made? Implemented? Is there public participation?
5. As you listen to various speakers in the meeting, identify the values they are expressing. How many sets of values do you hear? How are conflicts resolved or avoided?
6. If speakers give evidence to support their positions, what academic discipline is the source of their evidence?
7. Did the meeting influence your thinking about your chosen policy? If it did, how?