

Book Review: A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving

by blog admin

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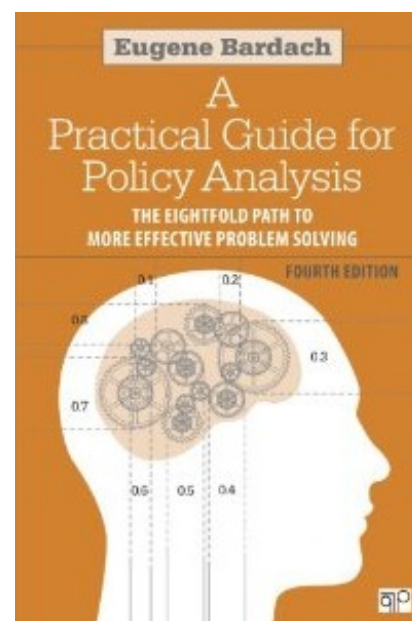
Presenting a concrete plan of action for anyone who needs to perform a policy analysis, Eugene Bardach's fourth edition is full of helpful tips and case studies written to enthrall and appeal to undergraduate students. Jennifer Miller finds that the book steers clear of technocratic jargon and ideological bias, and believes that it will continue to play an important role in the professional development of policy analysts.



A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving, 4th Edition. Eugene Bardach. CQ Press. October 2011.

With almost 40 years of experience teaching public policy analysis at the University of California, Berkeley, Eugene Bardach has played a significant role in shaping the practice of this field through training of policy analysts. His book, now in its fourth edition, is widely used in undergraduate, graduate, and professional training. The new edition has been reorganized to embed helpful tips within the analysis process, to incorporate new material on understanding institutions and garnering political support, and to provide updated examples.

As described in the introduction, the book has become a classic not just for its contents, but also for its brevity and readability: "My students tell me that the book should be treated not just as a quick and pleasurable read, which of course it is, but as a reference volume to be experienced again and again for its delicious subtleties. No doubt they are right."



Bardach has three main aims in the book: to guide students through his eight-part policy analysis process, to help students develop concrete skills in acquiring data relevant to policy problems, and to provide a roadmap for learning how to transfer "smart practices" from one setting to another. He wisely forgoes detailed coverage of economic principles, referring the reader instead to excellent alternative texts. The core of the book's enduring appeal is the so-called eightfold path. The introduction of key elements of policy analysis in a logical flow without constraining them to a linear process are part of what makes the book an easy read with enduring utility.

The book also contains a number of useful appendixes, including an annotated model policy analysis by RAND Corporation evaluating mandatory minimum sentences for cocaine offenses. The inclusion of a sample analysis aligned with the author's recommended approach is one of the elements I most value when selecting a policy textbook. The subject matter seems a good choice given sex, drugs, and rock & roll reliably energize an undergraduate audience!

In my teaching, I have found the appendix "Things Governments Do" an especially helpful tool to introduce undergraduates new to the study of public policy to our basic toolkit. Arguably, these eleven activities, spanning from taxation to bureaucratic reforms, cover perhaps 90% of public policy's actual concerns. Some of my colleagues, however, find less value in this straightforward approach. By analogy to the proverbial iceberg, they consider these activities the submerged 90%, with the most interesting policy work

— i.e. the kind that will ignite students’ passion for the field— existing in the emergent 10% of social innovation and entrepreneurship. This text will stretch to accommodate those approaches, especially with the expanded coverage of design problems, but it does not emphasise them.

Considering the pace of change in society, and especially in information technology, the book faces a daunting challenge in providing concrete, up-to-date guidance on assembling evidence. For example, students are led by the hand through the practical aspects of setting up appointments to interview key stakeholders, but disconcertingly this section makes no reference to email. This section also fails to point out new technology-driven approaches policy researchers can use to good effect, such as identifying connections to stakeholders through online social networks or conducting interviews with geographically dispersed stakeholders via Skype.

There are some places where I feel an instructor using this book, especially with undergraduates, should exercise some caution. Bardach’s advocacy early in the book of educated guesses may be uncomfortably fuzzy—and lead to uncomfortably fuzzy results—when students are just beginning the education that will inform their guesses. Students might also benefit from a bit more emphasis on considering the audience for their analysis. Will evidence from an ideologically-oriented think tank be persuasive? This may depend even more on the audience than it does on the think-tank’s commitment to rigor.

Some of the more determined interviewing techniques could backfire when applied by students still learning the norms of professional communication. Compounding my concern about such techniques as “leveraging the defensive informant” is the increasing involvement of many U.S. universities in ongoing programs of engaged research in their communities. In the language of game theory, what may not be a repeated game for the student interviewer probably is a repeated game for the instructor and institution. As an instructor I would want to take the lead in helping students see the bigger picture when planning interviews.

Overall, I am delighted that this highly accessible guide has been updated and will continue to play an important role in the professional development of policy analysts. Public policy is a field that lends itself to technocratic jargon and ideological bias, and this book does the field a valuable service by steering clear of both. While the book contains enough depth to stimulate critical thought, its greatest contribution is in presenting a concrete plan of action for anyone who needs to perform a policy analysis.

Jennifer Miller received her doctorate in public policy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May 2012. Her research interests focus on the scientific workforce. She has also written about collaboration among universities, industry, and government in university research centers. In fall 2012 she will be a Teaching Postdoctoral Scholar at North Carolina State University’s School of Public and International Affairs and in January 2013 she will take a position as a Teaching Assistant Professor at the University of Southern California’s Sol Price School of Public Policy. Before pursuing her doctorate, she worked for IBM in human resources. [Read more reviews by Jennifer.](#)

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