

PhD Comprehensive Exam
SAMPLE UNSTRUCTURED PROBLEM

This component of the exam consists of an unstructured problem. Please select one of the problems below, and flesh out a potential research design to inform the problem, as one might find in a research proposal. Do not focus on the policy or management area, but rather on the analytical and methodological approaches to inform the problem. You should not have a literature review or citations specific to the policy/management area (and should not spend time researching the policy/management area); you will not be evaluated on your knowledge of the policy/management area. There are two key objectives that should guide your response:

- 1) Conceptualize a public policy or management problem and structure that problem in an way to allow for analysis or evaluation;
- 2) Demonstrate understanding of a variety of research designs and methodological techniques that could be applied to analyze the problem, with discussion of the appropriateness and limitations of the variable approaches.

Problem 1:

On September 14, 2011, Senator Tom Coburn from Oklahoma held up a transportation bill in the US Senate because he wanted to eliminate spending on the highway program on transportation "enhancements" such as bike paths and beautification projects. Supposed you were asked to design a research study to examine the benefits of spending on these transportation enhancements (the direct costs are known, as they are line items in the legislation). What would you measure? How would you design such a study? What data would you need? How could they be collected and analyzed? What are the potential drawbacks to your proposed designs and methods of analysis?

Problem 2:

The Ohio Credit Union League (CUL) is a nonprofit membership organization for credit unions in Ohio, with more than 400 affiliated credit unions. Credit unions are nonprofit cooperative financial institutions that are owned by their members, and run by volunteer board members. As nonprofits, they are intended to serve the needs of their members (sometimes members of a local community, other times employees a particular organization). Suppose you were asked by the CUL to design a research study to examine the extent to which Ohio credit unions serve the needs of their members, and the role of management or governance practices within the individual credit unions. What would you measure? How would you design such a study? What data would you need? How could they be collected and analyzed? What are the potential drawbacks to your proposed designs and methods of analysis?