Teaching Family Policy in Undergraduate and Graduate Classrooms: Why It's Important and How to Do It Better*

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Abstract: As newcomers on college campuses, family policy courses have the potential to benefit policymaking, fill a void in undergraduate and graduate education, strengthen families, and prepare students for lifelong political engagement during a pivotal period in their development. Yet, family policy has proven a challenging course to teach. Family policy is an esoteric concept, which makes courses difficult to distinguish from other policy courses. The content of a family policy course is fluid and inherently value laden. This paper proposes course content and teaching techniques to transform these challenges into learning opportunities. The author discusses similarities and differences in teaching undergraduate and graduate courses and recommends cross-university dialogue and resource exchange to improve the teaching of family policy in college classrooms.

Key Words: family policy, pedagogy, undergraduate and graduate college teaching.

Family policy courses are newcomers to the curricula on many college campuses, and their inclusion in college timetables parallels the emergence of family policy as a specialized field of study. Policy discourse in the United States has always had a family tilt, yet family policy is young both in terms of intellectual inquiry and policy formation centered on the family concept. Kamerman and Kahn (1978) trace its origins back to the landmark Senate hearings on American families in the 1970s. Progress was stymied for almost a decade in the 1980s by the controversial White House Conference on Families. Given these birth pangs, it was not until the 1990s that family policy evolved as a legitimate area of empirical and theoretical inquiry (Bogenschneider, 2000).

During the last three decades, the dramatic changes in family composition, family functioning, and the conditions of family life have prompted policymakers and the legal system to become more involved in family issues. For example, between 1990 and 1995, state and federal expenditures on child care tripled, direct cash benefits to families doubled, and family services increased by 50% (Kamerman & Kahn, 2001). Thus, it has become increasingly important to acknowledge family considerations and take them into account in political and legal decisions. In response, college campuses have initiated courses on family policy, and the National Council on Family Relations has legitimized these courses by requiring knowledge of family policy for certification as a family life educator (Bredehoft & Walcheski, 2003; www.ncfr.org/cfle/index.asp).

At the University of Wisconsin—Madison, family policy has proven a difficult course to teach. Regardless of instructor, the course evaluations are generally lower, and student complaints are typically higher. Granted, the challenges of teaching family policy may be attributable to both its consumers and producers. Students are often reluctant...
consumers of family policy courses, and many instructors are hesitant producers because family policy, by its very nature, is inherently political and touches on deeply held values. This article is addressed to the producers of family policy courses in an attempt to begin a dialogue about the precepts and philosophies from which good courses and high teaching evaluations are made. To this end, the paper begins by defining family policy, describing the value-added perspective that it brings to college curricula, and identifying the unique challenges instructors face. For each challenge, course content and teaching techniques are given. I discuss similarities and differences of teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels and conclude by recommending avenues for initiating cross-university dialogue and resource exchange to improve the teaching of family policy in college classrooms.

**What Analytic Approach Underlies This Paper?**

This paper derives from my experiences teaching family policy for 10 years at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. My student evaluations have consistently been higher than those of other instructors of this course and higher than the department means for other courses. Developing this course has been an interactive process—introducing new materials and teaching techniques—and then based on student feedback, adjusting what is included in the course and how it is taught. Student voice is reflected throughout this paper based on the comments of 155 undergraduate and graduate students who completed course evaluations (93% response rate).

My teaching has been influenced by both theory and practice. Theoretically, I have published widely on family policy (Bogenschneider, 2003), including the decade review of family policy (Bogenschneider, 2000), and a recent textbook, *Family Policy Matters: How Policymaking Affects Families and What Professionals Can Do* (Bogenschneider, 2002). Pragmatically, my teaching is influenced by over a decade of experience conducting 22 Family Impact Seminars for Wisconsin policymakers (Bogenschneider, Olson, Mills, & Linney, 2002) and 6 years providing technical assistance to 20 states conducting seminars in their state capitols through the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars.

**What Is Family Policy?**

A good course begins with clear definitions. Clear definitions of family policy help instructors decide what to include in the course and help students understand how family policy curricula differ from other policy classes. If definitions are too broad, they potentially encompass everything and lose any integrity. Conversely, if definitions are too narrow, they include so few families, policies, and political settings that they become virtually meaningless (see examples in Bogenschneider, 2002). To provide clarity, I return to the roots of the field (Kamerman & Kahn, 1978) and define family policy using both explicit and implicit terms. The explicit term *family policy* focuses on four family functions: (a) family creation, (b) economic support, (c) childrearing, and (d) family caregiving (Ooms, 1990).

The companion implicit term, *a family perspective in policymaking*, acknowledges the important role that family considerations can play in a broad range of policy issues. A family perspective in policymaking analyzes the consequences of any policy, regardless of whether it is explicitly aimed at families, to determine its impact on family well-being. For example, based on the four family functions listed above, family policy includes issues such as child care, divorce, family violence, juvenile crime, and long-term care (Ooms, 1990). Tax provisions that create a childcare tax credit or decrease the marriage penalty would be classified as family policy. However, a tax law that lowers taxes for individuals, many of whom live in families, would not be considered an explicit family policy. Moreover, other issues such as health care, housing, poverty, and unemployment would not be considered explicit family policies because they are not aimed specifically at families. Nonetheless, these issues could benefit from a family perspective that examines in what ways families contribute to problems, how families are affected by problems, and whether they need to be involved in solutions.

**Why Is the Teaching of Family Policy Important?**

Teaching family policy depicts the academy’s tradition of preparing students to understand important societal issues, specifically how family policies and
laws influence the structure of families (e.g., family formation and dissolution) and their functioning (e.g., how families raise their young, provide economic support, and care for ill, disabled, and elderly members). Family policy courses, if taught well, have the potential to (a) benefit policymaking, (b) fill a void in undergraduate and graduate education, (c) strengthen families, and (d) prepare students for lifelong engagement in the political process. Each of these benefits is described below.

First, a family perspective has the potential to bring an essential quality to American policymaking that no other institution or interest group does as well—commitment to others. At the heart of both the explicit and implicit definitions is the critical family element, which moves beyond the individual to a relationship between two or more individuals tied together by blood, legal bonds, or the performance of family functions such as caregiving and economic support. This fundamental distinction is often overlooked in policy circles. For example, children’s policy or women’s policy is sometimes incorrectly equated with family policy even though the target of interest is an individual, not a family relationship or family unit. In family policy classes, students learn to look at issues through the family lens of the connectedness of human beings to one another. This perspective has the potential to counter the narrow, self-serving agendas of many special interest groups and political action committees (Bogenschneider, 2002).

Second, family policy courses are underrepresented in the course offerings of colleges and universities across the country at a time when issues such as child care, marriage, and social security are of high interest to public officials. Ooms (2002) questions why there are only a handful of family policy courses being taught in family studies and social work departments and even fewer in public policy schools. Currently, colleges offer courses on families that pay little attention to policy issues and courses on policy that seldom analyze issues for their impact on families. This family vacuum in the training of political scientists is reflected in their subsequent scholarship. In a review of the top 26 political science journals from 1907 to the present, Strach (in press) found that the word family appeared in article titles only 61 times. That is, in almost a century, political scientists published less than one article per year with a family orientation prominent enough to warrant a mention in the title. Of these 61 entries, only 21 were in the field of American politics, and nearly half dealt with political socialization.

Third, if family policy courses instill students with attitudes and behaviors that are more family sensitive and policy centered, the ultimate beneficiary will be families. Empirical data are needed, but conceivably, the graduates of family policy courses may be more likely to influence policy in a wide range of venues, such as prompting schools, agencies, and organizations to be more family friendly in their philosophy and operation; encouraging employers to recognize that workers are also family members; and helping enact laws that support family members’ roles as workers, parents, partners, and caregivers. These actions have the potential to strengthen families as surely as our other professional endeavors, and perhaps even more so, because policy changes can influence family functioning for large numbers of families for years to come.

Finally, teaching college family policy courses to young adults may be a sensitive period for the development of political attitudes and behaviors that may last a lifetime. In a 50-year longitudinal study, women were assessed at three points—as students at Bennington College during the 1930s, as middle-age women during 1959–1960, and as mature women in 1984. Late adolescence and early adulthood proved to be fertile years for developing political attitudes which, once formed, remained remarkably stable throughout their lives (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991). Similarly, we found the postsecondary years to be a pivotal period for social scientists who later were successful in the policy arena. In qualitative interviews of 14 exemplar social scientists, one-fifth made initial contact with policymakers as part of their college studies or through the encouragement of their advisor (Fries & Bogenschneider, 2005).

What Unique Challenges Do Family Policy Instructors Face?

In many respects, the teaching objectives in a family policy course are consistent with those of other college courses—to promote critical thinking, to acquaint students with rigorous scientific work in the field, to provide theoretical frameworks for explaining or understanding phenomena, and to help students learn to express clear logical arguments orally and in writing. Yet, based on my experience, family policy courses also present four unique challenges that differentiate them from other family studies or generic policy courses.

First, family policy is an esoteric topic that can be difficult to describe and demystify. Second, family
policy is a concept that is foreign to most students, which makes courses difficult to distinguish from other policy courses on social policy, policy analysis, and political science. Third, family policy by its very nature is fluid, so it is not a class that easily can be resurrected out of a file drawer. The content varies each semester depending upon what elections are being held and which issues are being debated. Moreover, policy is context dependent (Zimmerman, 1992), so the pressing family policy issues and the prevailing political climate may be different in Mississippi than in Massachusetts. Finally, family policy is inherently fraught with values and political perspectives (Anderson & Skinner, 1995) that demand astute pedagogical techniques to encourage open expression of and respect for diverse views. Each challenge is discussed below, along with teaching precepts and philosophies that can transform these challenges into learning opportunities (see summary in Table 1).

Challenge I: Describing and Demystifying the Esoteric Topic of Family Policy

Many who enter a required undergraduate class are reluctant students of family policy. My goal is to demystify family policy and transform it from a dry, mundane concept into a dynamic, germane process. My ability to enliven family policy is captured in these students’ comments on course evaluations: “I was not interested in policy at all. In fact, on the first day of class, I almost dropped. But I stuck in it and I learned a lot. I found the topic interesting,” and “she has made a difference in my life—the true test of teaching.” To spark this interest, I begin the course with several concrete examples of what family policy is, and how it shapes the everyday living of families and impacts the work lives of professionals. To build on students’ interest in future careers, I detail nine roles professionals can play in building family policy and several case studies of each. The course content and teaching techniques are described below.

What family policy is. When students come into class, they typically hold stereotypes of policy as primarily what senators or representatives do in Congress or the State House. To broaden conceptions of what policy is and who policymakers are, I define policy as a plan or course of action carried out through the development, enactment, and implementation of a law, rule, or code in the public or private sector. Policymakers are those who enact laws at several levels—in Congress and state legislatures; in counties, cities, and villages; and in schools, workplaces, and communities.

To illustrate the ecology of how and where decisions are made, I use a set of Russian nesting globes. The innermost globe, painted with a human face, illustrates how individuals set standards to guide their own behavior. For example, individuals decide whether to use alcohol and how much time to commit to family and community life. The next globe represents a family. Families set policies about behaviors such as adolescent alcohol use and teach values such as how to treat people of a different color, creed, or religion. Another globe signifies communities. Community policies often determine the availability of health services like immunizations and home visiting. The housing market is influenced by what decisions local zoning boards make, and the job market is affected by what steps local municipalities take to attract employers. The next globe typifies state and federal governments that enact policies regarding school funding, health care services for pregnant women, and penalties for juvenile offenses. The final globe depicts the cultural climate, which can be an ethos of individualism, a belief that every person controls his/her own destiny with nothing expected from or owed to others, or an ethos of commitment to others, the seeking of a better balance between our rights as individuals and our responsibilities as members of families and communities (Responsive Communitarian Platform, 1992).

How family policy affects families. True stories illustrate how family policy impacts the everyday lives of families. Of the examples in Bogenschneider (2002), my favorite is two e-mail messages that arrived in my inbox, both from friends who had recently given birth: one in this country and one in Europe. My American friend returned to work after a 2-month maternity leave. Immediately, she was placed on mandatory overtime, despite having two preschoolers at home and a husband who was working two jobs to make ends meet. In contrast, my Austrian friend received 16 weeks of leave during which she was forbidden to work, and if found doing so, could have been fined. Following maternity leave, she was eligible for 18 months of parental leave. Stories like these can help students understand the real-world impacts of family policies.

How policy shapes the work lives of professionals. Just as policy molds the environment in which families exist, it impacts the settings in which professionals operate. Whether or not family professionals
decide to seek a career in which they can shape policy, their career will likely be shaped by policy. For example, a professional works for an independent living agency, in which many of their clients care for spouses at home rather than placing them in an institution. Medicare pays for some medications and visiting nurse services but does not provide what caregivers say is most needed: respite care. The professional is faced with the decision of whether to provide the best support possible given the current political realities, or to also advocate for the policy changes needed by family caregivers, many of whom are too overburdened to speak for themselves.

What careers are available in family policy. For students unfamiliar with family policy career options, my book (2002) proposes nine roles that professionals can play in the policy arena. Examples of these roles include assisting in policy implementation, evaluating policies and programs, disseminating research to policymakers, and engaging citizens in the policy-making process. I illustrate these roles with 26 case studies, including researchers who were asked by policymakers to calculate the cost-effectiveness of an early intervention program for low-birth weight infants. Other professionals advocate for the political, social, and cultural needs of 300,000 families or bring together high-ranking state agency officials to provide peer mentoring on implementing welfare reform. These stories exemplify how professionals have underwritten with their lives that building family-friendly policies is deserving of their dedication. Professor Deborah Gentry, Illinois State University, assigns each of the nine policy roles to one subgroup of students. Each subgroup describes to the rest of the class which skills this role would require and what a typical workday would be like (D. Gentry, personal communication, March 23, 2004).

Challenge II: Distinguishing Family Policy From Other Policy Courses

Making family the unit of analysis is a unique perspective that differentiates family policy courses from policy courses taught in policy schools and in political science or social work departments. When asked the best things about the class, students wrote: “I learned about political science as it relates to family issues. This is not covered in any other course”;
and “AFIA [Family Impact Analysis] was especially interesting.” To bring this value-added dimension, I believe three components are fundamental: the individualistic nature of U.S. family policy, the effectiveness of family policy, and the procedures for conducting a family impact analysis.

How individualistic U.S. family policy is. Individualism is so ingrained in American thought and experience that it often goes unnoticed and may be as difficult for students to perceive as it would be for fish to describe the water in which they swim. To help sensitize students, I provide examples of the individualistic nature of our local, state, and federal laws; the operating procedures of agencies and organizations; the training of professionals; and the availability of data and theories. For example, the 1997 State Children’s Health Insurance Program increased federal reimbursement to states for health care coverage of children but not for their parents. Homeless shelters often refuse to accept boyfriends, and 40% exclude adolescent sons (Jacobs, Little, & Almeida, 1993). Examples are given in a PowerPoint lecture (www.familyimpactseminars.org/bogentalk.htm) and in my book (Bogenschneider, 2002).

To provide a historical context, students read Tocqueville’s (1945) writing on American individualism in the 1830s. Tocqueville worried that freedom in the United States was threatened by individualism—the tendency of citizens to isolate themselves from their responsibilities to the larger society by focusing exclusively on themselves and their families. According to Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1996), this individualistic tendency to pursue private interests and ignore obligations to the rest of society is still pervasive today. A contemporary example is the decline in American civic engagement as evidenced by the precipitous drops in voter turnout, attendance at public meetings, and associational memberships (Putnam, 1995).

To alert students to the individualism that is so often taken for granted, the first assignment in graduate courses is to read, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Bellah et al., 1996). One student commented on the value of this assignment:

I found this book very interesting—it’s not something I have thought about before. In fact if you had asked me what I thought about individualism in American (sic) before last week I probably would have only been able to think mainly positive aspects. After reading this book, I realize how much we have all been influenced by individualism—both in positive and negative ways.
Table 1. Four Unique Challenges Family Policy Instructors Face: Course Content and Teaching Techniques for Transforming These Challenges Into Learning Opportunities

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<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Course Content</th>
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<tr>
<td>I. Describing and demystifying the esoteric topic of family policy</td>
<td>What family policy is</td>
<td>Use Russian nesting globes to illustrate the ecology of how and where family policy decisions are made</td>
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<td>How family policy affects families</td>
<td>Tell true stories of how family policies impact the everyday lives of families</td>
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<td>How policy shapes the work lives of professionals</td>
<td>Relay real-life examples of how attaining professional work goals may be compromised by absent or unsupportive family policies</td>
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<td>What careers are available in family policy</td>
<td>Students describe the skills different family policy careers would require and what a typical day would be like</td>
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<td>II. Distinguishing family policy from other policy courses</td>
<td>How individualistic U.S. family policy is</td>
<td>Provide pragmatic examples of the individualistic nature of laws, organizations, data, theories, and professional training</td>
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<td>How effective family policies are</td>
<td>Give historic and contemporary examples of individualism</td>
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<td>How to conduct a family impact analysis</td>
<td>Conduct mini comparative analysis of U.S. and international family policies</td>
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<td>III. Deciding how to teach a fluid subject with shifting content</td>
<td>What are front-burner policy issues</td>
<td>Review relevant research on family approaches to social issues and methods of family support</td>
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<td>What trade-offs policymakers face to get legislation passed</td>
<td>Read Family Impact Seminar briefing reports and newsletters that address issues from a family impact perspective</td>
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<td>Where policy decisions are made</td>
<td>Discuss how family approaches can have adverse side effects</td>
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<td>Students track current policy issues</td>
<td>Provide rationale, tools, and procedures for family impact analysis</td>
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<td>Students identify the policy implications for families</td>
<td>Prepare a meta-analysis on existing family impact analyses</td>
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<td>Students write a letter to an editor or to a government official</td>
<td>Conduct a family impact analysis on an issue, legislation, law, or program</td>
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<td>Students attend two meetings where policy is being debated or decided</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Students debate 29 public and private options for supporting single-parent families</td>
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When asked about the most valuable idea in the course, she reported beginning to notice many ways in which our country is individualistic and, consequently, unfriendly to families.

The individualistic flavor of policies in the United States also becomes apparent when students compare and contrast U.S. family policies with those in other countries (Haas, 1996; Hantrais, 1994; Wisensale, 2000; Wisensale & Khodair, 1998). Students engage in a mini comparative analysis by identifying the values that underlie international family policies and contrasting them with those underlying U.S. family policies. To make the role of individualism in U.S. policymaking more transparent, I also review times in the last century when its gravitational pull has been weakened and its converse, familism, has received robust support (see Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2004). Reviewing the history of U.S. family policy, I contrast periods of benign family neglect (e.g., the Hoover era emphasis on individuals and profitability) with activist periods during which families were both a focus of attention and a source of inspiration (e.g., the 1921 Sheppard-Towner Act and the 1939 Social Security Amendments).

How effective family policies are. One fundamental issue in establishing a rationale for family policy is whether policies and programs would be more effective if they employed a familistic, rather than an individualistic, approach (see Bogenschneider, 2002). The best evidence for family-focused policies has emerged from experimental studies that train parents to improve their child management practices and then track the behavior of their children over time. Several streams of research are illustrative, some that focus on a method of family support such as home visiting (Olds et al., 1998) and others that focus on specific issues such as education (Murnane & Levy, 1996), health care (Doherty, 2002), juvenile crime (Dishion, Andrews, Kavanagh, & Soberman, 1996; Dishion, McCord & Poulin, 1999), parenting (Riley & Bogenschneider, 2002), and adolescent smoking (Doherty & Allen, 1994). In addition, 79 Family Impact Seminar briefing reports and 13 newsletters bring a family impact perspective to topics such as child care, health care, school funding, and welfare reform (see www.familyimpactseminars.org). In fairness, not all policies aimed at helping families do so; any policy powerful enough to influence families for the better could also have unanticipated and adverse side effects.

How to conduct a family impact analysis. A valuable professional skill is learning how to conduct a family impact analysis that critically examines the past, present, or probable future effects of a policy, program, or service on family stability, family relationships, and family members’ ability to carry out their functions (Ooms & Preister, 1988). Family

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<td>IV. Dealing with diverse</td>
<td>How to establish a classroom climate that fosters an open exchange of ideas</td>
<td>Set ground rules regarding tolerance of diverse views, inference of motives, and</td>
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<td>values and political</td>
<td>What role facts, myths, and values play in public policy</td>
<td>confidentiality of students’ comments made in class</td>
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<td>perspectives</td>
<td>What are three worldviews of family changes in the last quarter century</td>
<td>Use worm exercise to illustrate how research can dispel myth and furnish facts for</td>
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<td>What theoretical framework can help foster compromise on controversial family</td>
<td>policy decisions</td>
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<td>policies</td>
<td>Students guess the country of origin of a national family policy</td>
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<td>Students engage in thought experiments that introduce them to three different</td>
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<td>Students describe an issue from the three worldviews, explain how the issue could</td>
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<td>benefit from each perspective, and apply the theory of paradox to move the issue</td>
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Table 1. Continued
impact analysis can be used for reviewing rules, legislation, or laws; evaluating programs, services, and operating procedures of agencies or organizations; and preparing questions or testimony for hearings or public forums. A general family impact checklist is available (Bogenschneider, 2002), along with several specific checklists for assessing the family friendliness of schools, communities, and adolescent treatment centers (see www.familyimpactseminars.org/impact.htm). Also available are procedures for conducting family impact analyses of policies, programs, and organizations, and guidelines for using the checklists for developing testimony and questions for public hearings (www.familyimpactseminars.org/reports/fiacond.pdf).

I teach family impact analysis skills in two ways. First, undergraduate students prepare a meta-analysis of one family impact analysis in the Ooms and Preister (1988) manual to examine how well this particular analysis was done and to note impacts that the writer may have overlooked or misinterpreted. The day these assignments are due, we discuss each case study, which generates a lively, well-informed exploration of how family impact analyses can raise issues that might otherwise be overlooked in policy debate. In graduate courses, students conduct a family impact analysis on an issue, legislation, law, or program of their choice. The best papers are peer reviewed and published on the Web site of the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars (www.familyimpactseminars.org/analyses.htm).

Challenge III: Deciding How to Teach a Fluid Topic With Shifting Content

Each semester that I teach family policy, different elections are being held and different issues are being debated. Given this, I focus more on process and less on content because courses that center primarily on current issues, while germane at the time, become quickly outdated. Instead, I provide frameworks for thinking about policy in ways that transcend particular issues, scientific advances, and shifts in the political climate. However, removing content entirely can squeeze the vitality out of a policy course. Carefully crafted activities can have the immediate effect of immersing students in political debate and may have the long-term effect of hooking them into becoming lifelong political junkies. These activities are one of the things students like best about the course: “Not just a ‘sit and get’ course”; “Assignments encouraged me to do things I wouldn’t normally do—attend a policy meeting, write a letter to editor”; and “I enjoyed having to go to legislative hearings because it combined ‘text book knowledge’ with real world events. Was great!” Below are three activities that introduce students to the drama and intrigue of the political process.

What are front-burner family policy issues. Students bring current content to my classes using an assignment developed by Professor Denise Skinner, University of Wisconsin—Stout. Students read daily newspapers to track current policy issues and write a short paper that summarizes one article, identifies policy implications for families, and provides a personal reaction that draws upon class readings. To transform this assignment from a classroom exercise to a real-world experience, students also write a 200-word letter to the editor or government official expressing their views on the issue. Extra credit is given if letters are published.

Where policy decisions are made. Initially, students think of policymaking as occurring only in Congress or the State Capitol, thereby overlooking a number of family policies that emanate from employers, local government, and nonprofit organizations. To address this, I require students to find and attend two meetings in which policy issues are being discussed: a hearing of the state legislature, a government meeting (e.g., county board, city council, school board), judicial proceedings, advocacy meeting, political forum (e.g., League of Women’s Voters debate, candidate speech), or nonprofit organization (e.g., aging commission, childcare board, church or other religious council). Drawing upon class readings, students give an 8-min oral report and submit a written summary of how decisions were made, whether the decisions might affect families, and what they learned about policymakers and the policy process.

Students initially complain of the difficulty of squeezing this assignment into their busy schedules but ultimately find the experience meaningful. For example, one student who attended a legislative hearing saw the value of getting involved:

While I was there, it also “hit” me how important it is for citizens to learn about issues and let their views be known. Otherwise, decisions will be made for us that aren’t necessarily supportive of our needs. In this way, we could make the government work with us instead of for us.
Another student saw the value of citizen involvement beyond the seat of government:

Small towns … depend on citizen involvement to provide services. They do not have the budgets to fund programs like cities like Madison do. Volunteers make the difference. Not only do these volunteers help to provide services, but they also become empowered and take ownership of what is happening in their town … No longer will I think that I cannot make a difference for I have seen that I can.

Students also become more aware of how policy decisions are made:

I also saw how many different sides of bills have legitimate points that may delay bills indefinitely. There is no clear-cut line of right and wrong—what to do and what not to do. The decisions are not perfect and have to be analyzed carefully before any consensus can be drawn.

Some of these insights are more apparent when students supplement class readings with observations and analysis of policymaking in action.

What trade-offs policymakers face to get legislation passed. Another activity teaches students about the policymaking process—where issues are resolved with debate and compromise among diverse interests with divergent views. Students read a briefing report that lists 29 policy options for supporting single-parent families (e.g., child support, Earned Income Tax Credit, family resource centers, and marriage enrichment programs) and come to class with the five policies they think would be best. First, in a small and then the large group, students provide a rationale for their choices and lobby for their preferences (see details in Anderson, Skinner, & Letiecq, 2004 or www.familyimpactseminars.org/fptradeoff.htm). Students actively participate in an animated debate of these different policy options and report feeling elated if their option is chosen and deflated if it is not. This activity illustrates to students the difficult job that policymakers face in choosing among competing, often highly desirable, policy options.

Challenge IV: Dealing With Diverse Values and Political Perspectives

As important as what is taught in a family policy course is how it is taught. In fact, the approach to pedagogy may be especially important for policy classes because policy issues touch on deeply held values, which can spawn ideological clashes about what is true, right, and good. For example, when confronted with social problems, some students prefer structural solutions that provide the conditions for change, and others argue for cultural solutions that provide the motivation for change.

To make this course a positive experience for students with diverse values and political views, I teach family policy using an educational rather than an advocacy approach. Instead of basing the instruction on my personal value system and my own interpretation of the scientific evidence, I deliberately do not share my positions on issues. Instead, I present a range of policy perspectives and often play the devil’s advocate to ensure that alternative views are expressed. In this way, students are encouraged to determine their own political stances, rather than parroting back my positions in an attempt to get a good grade. I also teach this educational approach along with advocacy as two competing models that professionals can use in working with policymakers (see a discussion of the education and advocacy approaches in Bogenschneider, 2002, chap. 12).

In over a decade of course evaluations, no student has requested that I state my personal political views. To the contrary, students say the best thing about the instructor’s teaching is: “uses education model to teach,” and the best part of the course is “the encouragement we got to think for ourselves,” and “able to form ideas and opinions, not have them given to you.” I establish a classroom climate that fosters an open exchange of ideas in a number of ways but particularly by differentiating the role that facts, myths, and values play in public policy; assigning course readings that encompass three worldviews of family change; and providing a theoretical framework that can help foster compromise on controversial issues.

How to establish a classroom climate that fosters an open exchange of ideas. To establish a safe, accepting environment, I set ground rules regarding tolerance of diverse views, three of which are described here. First, I organize the class much like a study group or policy board that one might
encounter in business, education, or the legislature, in which a group of people grapple with ideas in a responsible, mature manner. Second, I emphasize the responsibility of each class member to respect and not reject out-of-hand views that differ from their own. For example, I require students to respond to classmates’ comments at face value and to refrain from inferring motives or implying particular agendas. Third, I encourage students to discuss course content outside of class, but I discourage attributing comments made in class to a particular person.

I challenge students to engage in the difficult and paradoxical task of comparing research findings with their own experience, but I point out that if the two do not agree, it does not mean either is wrong. To illustrate this, I explain the differences between the physical and the biological/social sciences based on a distinction made by my colleague, Dave Riley. In the physical sciences, any hydrogen atom can stand in place of any other, so it is more likely that we can make statements that are true for the entire population. However, in the biological/social sciences, a rose or a human being cannot stand in place of another, so it is more difficult to generalize to the population as a whole. That is, what is true for the individual may not be the norm for the population. Even statistically significant findings published in our best journals allow us to make statements that are true for most individuals or families, but not necessarily for all. One of the most difficult aspects of learning is the ability to put aside what is true for us personally, when that differs from what is true for the population. Thus, I ask students to critically examine ideas but in a reflective way that allows them to remain open to those that differ from their experience.

What role facts, myths, and values play in public policy. I use Flinchbaugh’s (1988) definition of facts as verifiable statements of what is, myth as what people falsely think is true and treat as fact, and values as people’s notions about what ought to be. Social science research is valuable in analyzing what is, but has limitations in shaping social policy, which Seeley (1985) defines as what ought to be. Enacting social policy often entails ranking the needs and interests of one group in society as more important than another; neither science nor scientists can supply these value judgments (Barrows, 1994). To illustrate this idea, I draw two worms using Flinchbaugh’s specifications and procedures (www.familyimpactseminars.org/worm1.htm). Everyone votes on which worm is longer and then a volunteer measures the worms with a yardstick. Most people accept the result because there is universal agreement on the measuring stick. Inevitably, some students vote that the shorter worm is longer or that the worms are the same length, based on the “myth” that the way the legs are drawn only make the worms look different sizes. Next, the class votes on which worm is the prettiest. Because there is no universal yardstick for prettiness, this issue cannot be solved by science and must be settled with value judgments. This exercise demonstrates that research can play a role in dispelling myth and in furnishing fact as a basis for policy decisions but plays no role in proving whether values are right or wrong.

To teach about the influence of values in policymaking, I use one nation’s national family policy, which I obtained from Professor Elaine Anderson, University of Maryland. Using a condensed version of the policy, I challenge small groups of students to figure out which country this family policy originated in. Without exception, each class has been able to identify the country, followed by an animated discussion of how the values expressed in this policy reveal their source.

What are three worldviews of family changes in the last quarter century. To help students learn ways to achieve political consensus, I try to reframe class dialogue away from the stereotypic classification of liberal and conservative that tend to force students into rigid, opposing camps. Using an idea from Blankenhorn (1990), I pose a question that defines policy debate and holds the potential to lend clarity, cooperation, and common ground to controversial issues: What are the social consequences of the demographic changes that have occurred in family life in the United States in the last quarter century? This question brings into sharp relief three different worldviews of family change. The “concerned” camp focuses to a large extent on the negative consequences of family changes, particularly for children. The “sanguine” camp focuses more on the positive consequences of these changes, particularly for women. The “impatient” camp stresses the inadequacy of the shifts that have occurred in family life, calling for further change and more tolerance and support of diverse family forms.

To introduce these worldviews, I use Blankenhorn’s (1990) three thought experiments (see Anderson et al., 2004 or www.familyimpactseminars.org/demochange.htm): (1) student perceptions of a family photograph, (2) reactions to a line in the 1988 movie River’s Edge
about whether there is a fundamental moral breakdown in society, and (3) predictions about whether a baby born today or in the 1950s will do better. These activities never fail to generate comments emanating from each of the three camps. Class readings expand on the concerned view of family change (Daly, 2001; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Popenoe, 1993) as well as the sanguine (Orthner, 1990; Schroeder, 1984) and impatient perspectives (Smith, 1993; Stacey, 1993). Students discuss and write about the values underlying each view, the supporting empirical evidence, and the policy responses that stem from each (see Bogenschneider, 2002, chap. 9).

What theoretical framework can help foster compromise on controversial family policies. It has been said that nothing is as practical as a good theory, but is this axiom as true for policymakers as for other professionals? Can theories, which strive to explain “why things are,” be useful to policymakers who strive to design “how things ought to be?” I begin by explaining generally how useful theory can be to policymakers (see Bogenschneider & Gross, 2004), and then specifically, how the theory of paradox can overcome the polarization that often stymies progress in moving family policy forward (see Bogenschneider, 2002). When asked about the most valuable idea in the course, over half of the students in one graduate class mentioned the “theory of paradox.” This theory builds on Rappaport’s (1981) compelling concept of true paradox—two ideas or principles that seem, at first blush, irreconcilable with each other, but prove on closer scrutiny to be simultaneously valid. By recognizing the validity and utility of seemingly antithetical viewpoints, the theory of paradox emphasizes that different views can contribute to the fertile middle ground from which compromise and consensus can spring forth.

For one assignment, students analyze a controversial family policy issue of their choice from the concerned, sanguine, and impatient perspectives. Students describe all three views, contrast the position each view would take on their issue, and explain how understanding of and progress on their issue could benefit from each perspective. Nine years later, one student reflected on the value of this assignment: “I remember back to taking your policy class at UW and spending weeks on the paper that covered those ideas. I have never focused more on a topic since then! I still hold that Rappaport has the best idea with the theory of paradox.”

Similarities and Differences of Teaching Undergraduate and Graduate Family Policy Courses

Irrespective of whether I am teaching undergraduate or graduate students, I address many challenges of teaching a family policy course in similar ways. The real-life examples of how policies affect families and what family professionals can do are virtually the same. The definition of family policy and its unique contribution to policymaking, the family impact analysis skills, and the effectiveness of family policies are included in both undergraduate and graduate classes. At both levels, I employ the educational approach to establish an open and accepting classroom climate. I provide several assignments that tap different competencies so students know how they are doing and have multiple opportunities to raise their grade. Many assignments are the same for undergraduate and graduate students (e.g., writing an issue analysis, analyzing a family policy from three worldviews). I have found those with real-world consequences (e.g., writing a letter to the editor, attending policy meetings) work equally well at both levels.

The differences in undergraduate and graduate curricula are primarily the extent and complexity of course readings, the depth of discussions, and the difficulty of assignments. In particular, I have responded to two common student complaints: (a) the amount of reading and (b) the grading of assignments. Over time, I have reduced the extent of reading, developed a scoring rubric for each assignment, and determined which assignments are best suited to undergraduate classes (see syllabus at www.familyimpactseminars.org/bogen535.htm) or graduate classes (see syllabus at www.familyimpactseminars.org/bogen766.htm). For example, undergraduate students prepare a meta-analysis of family impact analyses written by others, whereas graduate students conduct an original family impact analysis. To address the perennial problem of having students come to class prepared for discussion, I distribute advance discussion questions covering the readings assigned for the following class. For undergraduate classes, I select from only these questions for the final exam. For graduate classes, students read the book Habits of the Heart (Bellah et al., 1996) during the first two weeks of class and write a short reaction paper—an assignment too challenging for most undergraduates.
Final Reflections

For me, success as an instructor is having students leave my class loving family policy as much as I do, so that they become lifelong students of, and participants in, family policy broadly defined. Granted, falling in love with policy involves a degree of discomfort for some students because there are no easy answers to difficult problems, progress can take a long time to achieve, and sometimes policies can create more problems than they solve. Given these and other challenges that family policy instructors face, teaching a course well is personally gratifying, but inspiring the next generation of family policy scholars can produce important political, societal, and developmental benefits.

Politically, the term family policy is still not widely used by policymakers, journalists, or the public, so it needs the attention of professionals who study families and work on their behalf. A family perspective brings an essential quality to American policymaking — commitment to others — which has the potential to counter actions that are narrow and self-serving and to contour agendas that respect the rights of others and assume responsibility for the collective good. Societally, if a family perspective is used to guide decisions, policies can create the conditions for all families to do their best in what families do best — instilling the responsibility and commitment to others on which our country was built and on which the future of democracies depend. Developmentally, family policy courses fill an important gap in collegiate education at a sensitive period in young adults’ lives — when political attitudes are forming that may last a lifetime. As aptly put by one student: “Teaching family policy in this way will help future generations to get involved and get great policies acted upon.”

Family policy instructors face two major challenges: deciding what to teach and how to teach it. Regarding what to teach, courses are more likely to be of long-lasting value if they provide frameworks for thinking about policy that transcend particular issues, instances, and ideologies such as the family impact perspective, the three worldviews of family change, and the theory of paradox. Regarding how to teach contentious topics like family policy, students seem to prefer instructors to use an educational approach that provides a range of political perspectives, thereby forcing the winnowing and sifting of ideas on which critical thinking is based.

Because family policy courses are newcomers on many college campuses, formal opportunities to learn from the experience of other instructors are infrequent, which curiously may make them more enlightening when they occur. I recommend three strategies to break down the walls of isolation and to foster the cross-fertilization of insights and perspectives about student learning that might be more apparent to scholars teaching family policy than those researching or writing about it.

First, scholarly publication around pedagogical issues is an important catalyst for prompting vital discussions about college teaching. More specifically, such scholarship can lend legitimacy to newer fields like family policy by introducing readers to cutting-edge scholarly references, theories, and teaching techniques. Second, providing family policy teaching resources is an important means of encouraging the exchange of ideas and the development of family policy curricula. For example, Anderson et al. (2004) have produced a second edition of the Handbook of Course Syllabi, Teaching Strategies, and Resources, which has proven invaluable for introducing novice instructors to the teaching of family policy and for enriching the instruction of veteran instructors through new classroom materials and techniques. Third, web technology is an increasingly useful vehicle for facilitating cross-university dialogue and resource exchange. Skinner has taken the lead in developing a teaching section of the Web site of the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars. This site includes numerous teaching techniques and the syllabi of many family policy instructors (see www.familyimpactseminars.org/syllabi.htm). Any instructor is encouraged to forward syllabi, teaching techniques, activities, assignments, or abstracts of recent policy-relevant publications to Skinner or the author for web publication.

In the words of T. S. Eliott, “The end is where we start from.” Writing this paper and reviewing the voices of students as recorded in course evaluations over the past decade validated the inextricable value of teaching family policy to college students. At the same time, it revealed just how isolated college teaching is, particularly for specialized courses like family policy. The impetus for this paper is to jump-start a dialogue about teaching family policy in college classrooms so that we can learn from each other and from our students “how to do it better.”