

TEAM BRIEFING ASSIGNMENT: How “Good” are the New Orleans Recovery Plans?

Objectives. This two-week assignment has three main ones:

1. To help you get to know classmates in the context of an engaging, multi-faceted planning challenge that draws on the range of your backgrounds and perspectives;
2. To deepen your understanding of planning’s multiple traditions—design, policy analysis, social reform and empowerment, etc.—through practical application of their core concepts (concerns); and
3. To hone critical professional competencies, particularly in teamwork and professional communication, with the latter understood as “developing and delivering arguments effectively” and not simply the mechanics of public speaking.

A variety of other worthy learning objectives do not define this assignment, objectives pursued in studio, practicum, and other courses at DUSP, for example: to develop your skills at applying specific analytic tools or design techniques (e.g. site planning or cost-benefit analysis); to develop your skills at interacting with individual clients or client communities in the context of an extended project (offering deep immersion in a place); and so on.

Overview of the task. Working in a team with 4-5 classmates, you will prepare and deliver a 20-minute oral briefing, with an additional 10 minutes for questions and comments, focused on an assessment of selected New Orleans recovery plans. You will adopt a particular perspective to guide your assessment, as explained later in this document.

- You will prepare and deliver an essential **dry-run briefing** (a complete practice briefing) and receive feedback on Friday, September 21st. Students often regard this as one of the most rewarding elements of the briefing assignment. At the dry run, DUSP faculty will coach you on *content* (are the ideas clear? convincing? well organized?) as well as *delivery* (was it professional? engaging?), and you’ll have a few days, before your final briefing, to make changes and practice some more as a team.
- **Final briefings** will be delivered on Tuesday, September 25th, Wednesday, September 26th, and Thursday, September 27th to a group of invited guest briefees. DUSP faculty and fellow students may also attend.
- You and your team will **debrief** your performance (using a video to review your briefing) and the two-week experience with Xav in a mid-October evening session. This has also been an especially popular element of the assignment because of the specific 1-on-1 feedback and the chance to review your strategy for the briefing, how you dealt with surprises, etc.

Note that a highlight of the assignment is the chance to see other teams give their briefings: You may attend as many briefings by other teams as you want provided that they are not briefings in your perspective category (design, etc.) that are taking place before yours. Put differently, *you may attend all of the briefings in the other categories and any briefing in your category that is scheduled after yours.* This is a great way to learn more about delivering briefings, including creative visual argumentation, managing unexpected audience questions well, coordinating the team, and more.

Context: Planning Action in New Orleans. While a few details of the briefing scenario are necessarily fictionalized for teaching purposes, the challenges are very real and very “real-time” (contemporary):

In August 2005, New Orleans and nearby areas of the U.S. Gulf Coast were hit with Hurricane Katrina, which would soon rank as one of the deadliest and costliest natural disasters in the nation’s history. Yet the very scale of that destruction created an enormous opportunity: to plan and rebuild New Orleans and other devastated communities in the region much better than before.

What followed, perhaps not surprisingly in light of the region’s history and politics, was great conflict and uncertainty about who should plan, how they should plan, and for what (exactly) they should plan—not to mention how implementation of rebuilding, which includes a wide array of private and public costs—would be funded. These conflicts were particularly extreme in New Orleans, which suffered the worst and most prolonged flooding in the region because of several major levee failures and over-flows. But equally striking was the ingenuity and persistence of citizen planners, professional planners, businesspeople, community organizers, and others. Our main class meetings will help you understand, in broad terms, the political and institutional context of recovery planning.

As of August 2007, there is, at last, an adopted **Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP)** and a host of important neighborhood and district-level plans as well, which detail more street-level ideas for recovery. But the plans vary widely in content, from one part of the city to the next, and there is a shortage of public and private funding and operational capacity to ensure the plans’ implementation. Your team will assess the citywide UNOP plan plus one (1) district-level UNOP plan.

Using background materials, in-class case discussion, and guest experts, and drawing on the diverse backgrounds of your teammates, you will prepare an interactive oral briefing offering a preliminary assessment of the New Orleans recovery plans and highlighting some priorities for the implementation ahead. See specific questions below.

Your role, audience, and objective. As we’ll soon discuss in the Professional Communication Workshop, a briefing is not a persuasive speech prepared in the abstract. It is a guide to action, prepared with the information needs of specific listeners in mind—listeners who must make judgments and then do things that have important consequences. They are not intellectuals gathered in a seminar room simply to exchange clever ideas. It’s here that we must take a few liberties with the “facts on the ground,” both to make this workable in a short period of time and to give you an action context...

You and your team represent the nonpartisan voice of **expert volunteers** who have been invited by the city’s Mayor and the state’s Governor to visit New Orleans and assess its recovery plans, using specific questions to guide you. To promote a nonpartisan perspective and enhance your credibility,

the chiefs of staff for the Mayor and Governor asked an informal committee of planning academics from New Orleans and elsewhere, including MIT, to choose the volunteers (you). And a variety of teams have been invited, so the players (see below) won't be hearing only from your team.

You can describe individual roles within the team however you like during your briefing—be creative—but the key point is that you are not New Orleans insiders. There have been very few forums for critically debating the contents of the recovery plans, and the media and elected officials remain very focused on the critical funding issues. But how good are the plans? Are they the best they can be? You have been invited *because you're not local insiders* to offer some critical assessment and recommendations, free of any need to represent a particular agency, elected official, or other interests.

You will be briefing the **working group on recovery implementation**—not a formal public body but a committed group representing the City's Office of Recovery Management (which reports to the Mayor), the state's lead recovery person (who reports to the Governor), a senior staff member from a private, philanthropic foundation (the Greater New Orleans Foundation, which supported the planning process in vital ways (with help from national foundations), a local federation of organized labor, and a retired businessperson who has no financial interest in recovery projects but is seen as a vital source of business perspective and a well-respected ambassador to business leaders around town. Working groups of this kind are common when problems are complex and the influence needed to get things done is widely dispersed. But the group has announced that this will be a public meeting. Though there is "planning fatigue" in New Orleans, and though UNOP sponsored quite a few public meetings to produce the plans, the working group wants to signal that a big event to gather outside perspectives ought to be very public.

Given your role and audience, your **objective** is to advise the working group, presenting your judgments as to the strengths and weaknesses of the recovery plans *from a particular planning perspective, as outlined next*, and defining key next steps that you think would make the most of the strengths and mitigate the weaknesses.

What defines "good" in a plan?: Perspectives and guiding questions. There are a variety of ways to assess plans and define them as "good" or not so good. You will read recovery plans and supplemental materials with particular priorities in mind. That is, you will use a Focal Perspective, as follows:

- **The Design Perspective** (Teams 1-4): Judging the plans mainly according to classic considerations of urban design, such as aesthetics and functionality, as well as environmental sustainability. Design teams will review the *UNOP: Citywide Strategic Recovery and Rebuilding Plan* and the District 1 plan.
- **The Social and Economic Empowerment Perspective** (Teams 5-8): Judging plans mainly according to how much they promise to transform social and economic disadvantages, generating better outcomes and more influence for people and/or values that have been historically marginalized. Empowerment teams will review the *UNOP: Citywide Strategic Recovery and Rebuilding Plan* and the District 6 plan.

- **The Policy Analysis Perspective** (Teams 9-12): Judging the plans mainly according to how optimally they use society's limited resources, i.e. with a strong emphasis on wise choice among alternative courses of action. Policy analysis teams will review the *UNOP: Citywide Strategic Recovery and Rebuilding Plan* and the District 3 plan.

Assessing a plan involves making a series of judgments according to criteria. These judgments typically cover what is in the plan but also, very often, highlight what seems to be missing. And both of those are fair game for your team's judgments and the key messages your briefing emphasizes. Read the emphasis and guiding questions that define your Focal Perspective as well as the other two:

The Design Perspective emphasizes the character and potential function of a place, i.e. as an object for our values, needs, and desires for living. It seeks to make that object livable but also sustainable and economically competitive. Main questions: Does the plan appropriately reflect the area's history, social make-up, the physical constraints and opportunities of the city-region, and its potential futures in terms of the *functions* it organizes? Does the plan include a compelling *aesthetic* to help "place-make" for New Orleans residents as well as visitors and migrants to the city? Does it address the design elements of *environmental sustainability* wisely and/or creatively?

The Empowerment Perspective emphasizes who gets and who loses (or potentially wins or loses) through planning and redevelopment. It bases a critique and a positive, normative vision of the future not only on the prevailing contemporary forces and challenges but a read of the history of a place and how power and resources have been allocated there. Main questions: Does the plan represent a plan for equitable redevelopment, including an appropriate balance between the needs of pre-storm residents, many of whom have not yet been able to return, and visitors or newcomer residents? Does the plan include measures for promoting environmental justice, in terms of access to natural resources and exposure to environmental hazards? Does it include elements likely to expand the political influence and economic success of disadvantaged groups?

The Policy Analysis Perspective, the most formally "rational" of planning traditions, emphasizes making optimal decisions *for the society/city as a whole* in the face of limited resources, a finite set of alternatives available to decisionmakers, and the potential risks, rewards, and trade-offs associated with those alternatives. It thus emphasizes the vantage point of policymakers (those entrusted to govern effectively) rather than particular interest groups in the city or universal design values such as beauty and functionality. Main questions: Does the plan clearly articulate why certain courses of action represent the optimal ones among alternatives, based on clearly stated decision criteria? Does the plan identify costs and benefits? Does it project the consequences of making particular choices in light of known risks or uncertainties? (A *risk* is a possible outcome for which odds can be estimated in advance, while an *uncertainty* involves unknown odds—much more problematic from the standpoint of decisionmaking.) Does it offer any feasibility statement or other evidence on how do-able (implement-able) the elements of the plan are?

Task specifics: The oral briefing, slides, and handout. You are to prepare a briefing **not to exceed 20 minutes** (with an additional 10 minutes granted for questions and comments), for the ad hoc group and others that may be in attendance, such as trusted advisers. As outlined above, your

briefing should provide both analysis and recommendations. It will include a visual component (such as a Powerpoint presentation) suitable for projection as well as handout.

As with any professional briefing, yours should be responsive, informed, and flexible: You are not giving a speech but having an informed conversation with decisionmakers about multi-faceted problems. You can't know everything about the case details or what the future will bring, and neither can the decisionmakers. The purpose of a briefing is to inform the best-possible decisions, given those constraints.

Since in real-world practice it is always possible that a briefing could be cancelled, postponed, or shortened on short notice, or that attendees vary in their background expertise and concerns, the **handout/slide printout** should function well as a "stand alone" to help the reader understand your message and its context. And you should hand this out, to each main briefee (we'll identify them for you), at the beginning of your briefing.

An appendix or other addenda are fine (at the back of the slide show handout). That is, you may wish to produce slides that you don't plan to project as part of the main briefing if, for example, these additional slides provide valuable reference information or extensions to your ideas (Hint: having them available also gives you more options should questions get posed that take you beyond your "core" slides).

But don't turn the slide show handout into a major report, let alone a mere gallery of images. A main slide show of 12-15 slides will usually work well for a briefing of this length (more if some are simply images that you'll pass over quickly), with perhaps 4-6 additional slides in an appendix, should you decide to include one. Include more slides, especially in the core briefing, and you run the risk of overwhelming the listener or skimming quickly over important ideas.

Preparing. You and your team should use only the material available on the course website (including specific web links focused on New Orleans recovery) or on course reserve at Rotch and not do outside research. In addition, you may draw on key concepts about the ends and means of planning, that we've covered in 11.201 so far. Dividing the labor of all that reading, analysis, and message crafting well is part of your team's work, and so is deciding how to organize the subtopics, your central arguments, and your slide show.

In the world of professional briefings, as opposed to oral exams, the supplemental readings—i.e., beyond the plans themselves—aren't simply "background." They're *resources* for you to deepen your analysis and command of the issues and analytic frameworks. Using this material well often makes the difference between a minimally acceptable briefing that skims the surface and provides a few interesting ideas (but without much evidence to support them) and a strong or even outstanding briefing that persuades the audience that you have thought hard about the issues, brought the work of leading thinkers to bear on the material, and backed up your arguments with specific examples or other evidence, for example from New Orleans or other places described in the readings.

For the final briefings, **dress professionally**, and **bring six (6) copies of your handout** (black-and-white copies are absolutely fine). Be mindful that briefees may need to arrive or depart *during* your briefing. This is common in professional life, as you may know already, especially when you are briefing very busy senior decisionmakers, and it's nothing personal. So don't let it distract you.

How you'll be assessed. We'll focus mainly on the content of your ideas, expressed orally and in the slide show/handout. While we'll give you feedback on your delivery as well, it matters for grading only where delivery strengths or problems directly affect your ability to get your message across. We won't separately grade you on delivery. See sample feedback memos (names removed) on the course website, linked to this assignment. In general,

Grade "A" briefings will be outstanding, meeting professional standards for oral briefings (covered in Workshop) in every key dimension and presenting concepts persuasively—in ways that reflect careful and even creative judgment about the material—with perhaps 1-2 areas for improvement.

Grade "A-" briefings will be very strong on all key dimensions, meeting professional standards, with perhaps 3 key areas for improvement.

Grade "B+" briefings will have solid basics but show more areas for improvement, such as in organizing the core message, executing it in the slides, or responding thoughtfully to audience questions.

... and so on.

If you have questions. Contact Prof. Briggs if you have questions about assignment expectations that aren't clear in this document. You have also been assigned a *coach* (one of the Instructors). She will check on your progress, react to your thinking, and help relay additional questions that Prof. Briggs should answer for your team or perhaps for the class as a whole.