This Insight gives the characteristics of three styles of research conducted by university faculty who consider themselves policy analysts. The three styles studied are policy analysis, policy research, and applied social science research.

**Policy Analysis**

Example: Staff memo on whether the National Advisory Commission on Social Security should recommend that federal liquor and tobacco taxes be dedicated to the Medicare trust fund.

Problem definition: Consider a narrowly defined problem faced by a specific decision-maker in a specific position at a specific time.

Audience: Decision-maker client.

Time period during which the work will be relevant: Days or weeks.

Scope of work: Narrow focus on those aspects of the problem that are of greatest concern to the client, synthesizing readily available data and relevant research findings.

Quantitative methods: Addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.

Comments: This activity is closest to the work that students in public policy programs are likely to do after graduation. Thus, this activity is helpful in teaching, but memos are not publishable.

**Policy Research**

Example: Monograph on the deregulation of natural gas prices.

Problem definition: Conduct broad assessment of a policy problem or policy option.

Audience: Present and future policymakers, policy analysts, academics, the public.

Time period during which the work will be relevant: A few years.

Scope of work: Comprehensive review of many findings and considerations within a normative framework provided by economics and political theory.

Quantitative methods: Decision analysis, cost–benefit analysis, systems analysis.

Comments: The research agenda is defined by the problem rather than by the needs and interests of an academic discipline.

**Applied Social Science Research**

Example: Technical article reporting statistical analysis of the effect of changes in the minimum legal drinking age on the auto fatality rate.

Problem definition: Develop empirical assessment of the actual or projected impact of a policy intervention on a narrowly defined set of outcomes.

Audience: Academics, policy analysts.

Time period during which the work will be relevant: A few years.

Scope of work: Narrow focus on a particular causal mechanism or process.

Quantitative methods: Regression analysis, hypothesis testing, mathematical modeling.
If you do not have a client, you are not doing policy analysis. This simple test focuses attention on the real purpose of all policy analysis, serves to differentiate policy analysts from social scientists, and provides a basis for evaluating any piece of policy analysis. Policy analysts are in the business of helping their clients resolve particular public policy dilemmas.¹ The key standard for evaluating their work is the one of policy relevance: Has the analysis indeed helped a policymaker—the client—do his or her job? In contrast, social scientists seek to advance their discipline by producing general theory. Social scientists care little whether their generalizations can help any policymaker. For the practicing policy analyst, however, the master is not an abstract ideal such as furthering the frontier of the discipline or applying an intellectual paradigm to a new class of problems; rather, the master is the client.

This “client test” is not original, of course. The writings of Laurence Lynn, Arnold Meltsner, Mark Moore, and Peter Szanton² all implicitly assume that the policy analyst must serve the client. Nevertheless, it is helpful to make this client test explicit, for it distinguishes policy analysis and dramatizes how demanding and rigorous this work must be.

Actually, there are two types of policy analysis: (1) Institutional policy analysis is conducted for some governmental institution such as Congress, the Social Security Administration, or New York City. (2) Personal policy analysis is conducted for a specific person, a real policymaker who faces a real dilemma under a unique set of personal, political, legal, and organizational circumstances. This second type of policy analysis is both the most intellectually demanding and the most likely to produce results.

Academics, consultants, and other outsiders, to the extent that they do engage in policy analysis, usually undertake the institutional type; they seldom have a particular person as a client. Or, if they do attempt to advise a specific individual, they seldom know enough about their policymaker’s particular situation to tailor their report to his/her immediate needs.