



NATIONAL
HISTORY
CENTER

HISTORY AND POLICY
EDUCATION PROGRAM

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Introduction

The History and Public Policy Briefing Program is designed to show students how to bring historical perspectives to contemporary policy issues. It provides a curricular model that educators can apply to their existing history classes to better illuminate the myriad ways we can learn from the past.

Understanding history is essential to all policymaking. Every issue has a history and we make better policy decisions when we understand that history. Designed to be adaptable to many courses and teaching styles, the History and Public Policy Briefing Program provides a guide for history educators to develop and host briefings about the historical dimensions of current policy questions.

The National History Center's Congressional Briefings Programs

The program is modeled after the National History Center's Congressional Briefings Program. The Center's briefings are non-partisan, public presentations by historians to Congressional staffers on the historical dimensions of an issue facing Congress. Held in Washington, DC, in U.S. House of Representative or Senate office buildings, these events last about an hour. Thirty minutes are devoted to the historians' formal remarks and thirty minutes are reserved for questions and comments from the audience.

National History Center (NHC) Congressional briefings have addressed a range of topics, including mass incarceration in the United States, tax reform, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Confederation monuments, U.S.-Chinese relations, automation and the workforce, civil-military relations, and Ebola and the African public health crisis.

Learn more about the NHC's briefing program here:

<http://nationalhistorycenter.org/about/program-descriptions/congressional-briefings/>

The History and Public Policy Briefing Program Overview

The History and Public Policy Briefing Program provides a guide to enable educators and students to craft a briefing on the historical background of a policy question at the local, state, or national level, following the National History Center's model.

At these briefings, students work as a team to (1) identify an issue confronting policymakers at the local, state, or national level; (2) research the historical roots of the issue or some closely related issue that arose in the past; (3) prepare a briefing paper and presentation to an invited audience (from parents to local policymakers) that highlight the insights we can gain from an historical perspective on the present. Working both individually and collaboratively, students will engage in historical inquiry, research, and analysis as they investigate particular policy questions. They will also develop written and oral presentation skills as they prepare for and present the public briefing. Finally, they will deepen their civic knowledge and engagement as they grapple with the roots of issues that are relevant to their own lives.

The program is designed to be integrated by educators into existing history classes at the college or high school level. The policy briefings will not drive the course but rather will provide a fresh framework for addressing topics that already relate to the course material. Educators can integrate the program into their classrooms in several ways: from start to finish, it can serve as a capstone research project; broken into its component parts, it can be used to spur discussion or encourage student debate; if a wider audience is invited, it can be a way for student-historians to showcase the value of their history education.

Learning Outcomes

- Developing a methodological practice of gathering, sifting, analyzing, ordering, synthesizing, and interpreting evidence.
- Exploring the complexity of the human experience by evaluating a variety of historical sources for their credibility and perspective.

- Learning to value the study of the past for its contribution to lifelong learning and critical habits of the mind that are essential for effective and engaged citizenship.
- Engaging a diversity of viewpoints in a civil and constructive fashion as students apply historical knowledge and analysis to contemporary policy conversations.

N. B. These learning outcomes are drawn from the [AHA History Tuning Project: History Discipline Core](#).

Sample Assignments

1: Getting Started

Week 1: Familiarize students with National History Center’s Congressional Briefing program. Have them watch one of the NHC’s briefing videos and read a summary of the one of the NHC’s briefings.

Videos of NHC briefings can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2352A9946D36F0DE>

Summaries of NHC briefings can be found here:

<http://nationalhistorycenter.org/about/program-descriptions/congressional-briefings/>

Next, have students identify several issues currently confronting state legislatures, municipal councils, or other policy oriented groups that pertain to subjects addressed in class. Newspapers and legislative websites are good sources for information about legislative agendas.

Example: Students in a course on the history of American social movements might research legislative issues and learn that the state legislature is considering sentencing reform; Sunday alcohol sales; riverboat gambling; and educational standards.

Week 2 - 3: Have students select which legislative issue the class will focus on. Each student will pursue further research on an aspect of the issue and prepare a 150-250 words topic description, along with a preliminary bibliography of relevant readings.

Example: After considering various issues before the legislature, the instructor and students decide to focus on the history of incarceration and sentencing reform.

2: Research

Week 4 - 5: Have each student prepare and submit a short paper on the selected topic that outlines the history of some aspect of the issue.

Example: Different students' papers consider the invention of the penitentiary; women in the penal system; prison reformers' transatlantic connections; revolution and penal reform; convict leasing; prison rebellions; drug laws and sentencing; and the privatization of prisons.

Week 6: Have students research which committee or subcommittee of the legislature or municipal government has jurisdiction over the legislative issue the class is considering. Have them identify which legislators sit on the committee and make initial contact with those policymakers' offices. In addition, students should draw up a list of other interested parties, such as representatives of non-profit organizations and journalists, to invite to the briefing. (See page 9 for tips on inviting policymakers to the briefing.)

**If the instructor would like to hold the briefing in a room in a state legislative or municipal office building, the instructor and/or students should begin arranging for a room this week. (See page 10 for tips on how to arrange for space in a state legislative or municipal office building.)

Example: Students learn that the Judiciary Committees of each house of the state legislature have jurisdiction over sentencing and penal issues. They identify the relevant subcommittees and their members. They call the legislators' offices and inform the staff members who work on penal issues about the briefing, explaining that a formal invitation for the legislators and staffers will be forthcoming in a few weeks. They also identify two local non-profits that work on penal issues and a local journalist interested in the issue of incarceration and similarly reach out to them.

3: Individual Presentations

Week 7 - 8: Each student prepares and makes an oral presentation on his or her selected topic. The class discusses which three topics will be presented at the formal briefing.

Example: After hearing all the presentations, the class decides that the scope of the formal briefing will be the history of incarceration in the United States since the late nineteenth century. At the formal briefing, one presenter will speak on convict leasing, one will speak on drug laws and sentencing, and one will speak on the privatization of prisons in late twentieth century.

4: Preparing for the Briefing

Weeks 9-10: Working collaboratively in small groups, students prepare for the formal briefing. The three presenters coordinate and hone their presentations with feedback from other students. Different groups work on: crafting a one-page briefing handout that offers a succinct synopsis of the history of the topic; crafting and issuing formal invitations; pursuing a social media campaign as appropriate; and arranging logistics such as videography and audio-video equipment as needed.

Week 11: Dress rehearsal for formal briefing. The three presenters practice their presentations to the class. The other students stand in as audience members, asking questions during the question-and-answer portion.

5: The Briefing

Week 12: Formal briefing to state or local policymakers, journalists, student leaders, etc.

6: Reflection and Follow-Up

Week 13: Students submit a 1-to 2-page reflection on the questions audience members raised at the briefing. In considering the discussion at the briefing, they may draw on material from weeks 4-5 and 7-8 that was not presented at the formal briefing.

You may submit a video recording of the event and/or a blog post about your experience with the History and Public Policy Briefing Program for possible inclusion in the National History Center's or American Historical Association's online or print publications.

PLANNING AND HOLDING THE BRIEFING

The nitty-gritty

- One hour total
- Two or three presenters
- Invited audience
- 30 minutes total for formal remarks
- 30 minutes for questions and answers

Logistics

In advance, you will need to:

- Set a date
- Book a room
 - Have students familiarize themselves with the space if possible
- Invite an audience
- Publicize briefing to target audiences
- Arrange refreshments as needed
- Arrange audio/visual as needed
 - Ensure presentation is compatible with available technology
- Arrange videography as needed

Tips for Inviting Legislators and Other Leaders

- Identify legislators on committee of jurisdictions for the issue under consideration
- Legislators will be most responsive to their constituents! If the instructor or students are constituents of the relevant legislators, have those people be the points of contact.
 - If legislators or staff members are alumni of your school, they may also be particularly helpful.
 - State legislators have district offices. If your school is not in a state capital, you can still invite legislators and their staff members.
- Several weeks before the event, invite the legislators to the briefing.
 - Issue formal invitations closer to the event and request RSVPs.
 - One day before the event, send reminders to everyone who RSVPd.
- Invite the legislators' staff members to the briefing.
 - Staffers play critical roles in shaping legislation and their presence at the briefing is very valuable.
 - If you will be offering refreshments, note that on the invitation.
- You may also want to invite
 - policymakers in relevant state or municipal executive branch offices;
 - the district staff of members of the U.S. Congress;
 - staff of local non-profits interested in the issue under consideration;
 - journalists interested in the issue;
 - the president or principal, department chair, and students leaders at your school;
 - and your students' families.

Remember that many of the people you invite, even if they are not legislators, are leaders and will in time work in other leadership positions. Your students are contributing broadly to helping leaders understand the importance of including historical perspectives in policymaking conversations.

Tips for Arranging a Briefing in a State or Municipal Office Building

Holding your briefing in a state or municipal office building can lend a special prestige to the event, but can also be tricky to arrange.

- Ask your elected official if it's possible for outside groups to arrange space for events.
- Work through your elected official or ask students to contact their elected officials to request a meeting space.
- If your elected official cannot help, try to identify a legislative staff member who can help. Sometimes a staffer may be willing to book space for you. Networking is critical here!
 - Ask your students if they or their parents have contacts among legislative staff.
 - Ask colleagues and friends if they know legislative staffers.
 - If the legislature has a historical office, cultivate a relationship with the historians who work there. They can be very helpful.
 - Ask for their advice on organizing an effective briefing.
 - Invite them to offer pointers at the practice briefing and invite them to the formal briefing.

The National History Center is grateful to Cristina Belli for her work on this guide. The Center also acknowledges the contributions of the American Historical Association's History Tuning Project: History Discipline Core.



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