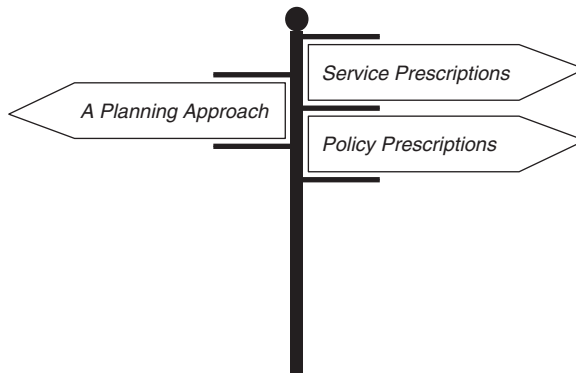


Five

Prescribing

Researching Options



WHICH WAY SHOULD YOU GO FROM HERE?

For those of you not familiar with the famous story of *Alice in Wonderland*, it is a quite amazing fantasy of a little girl's attempt to

find her way home from a very strange place, full of wondrous characters and numerous challenges. At one point in the story Alice happens upon one of my favorite characters, the Cheshire Cat, whom she asks for directions:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

Now you may have even seen those two lines quoted in a number of places. They are used quite often to illustrate the importance of goal-oriented thinking. But you may not have seen the subsequent lines quoted so much:

“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”¹

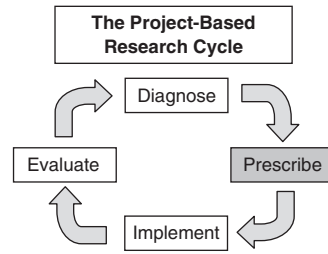
In the world of social change programming, whether the goal is individual change through a social service program or global change through a social movement, we often settle for any change at all. We are content to reduce crime, increase home ownership, improve life expectancy, or make some other general change. And we jump on the latest bandwagon, follow the latest fad, or try to find the cheapest alternative because we lack the resources to figure out exactly what is needed. In addition, we are often so busy trying to stop bad things that we don’t have time to think about what good things we want to put in their place. Our work, as a consequence, is often terribly inefficient. Yes, we are sure to get somewhere, if only we get enough grants, hire enough consultants, try enough new ideas, and work long enough and hard enough. There are rarely enough resources to work so inefficiently, however. In addition, those people who are suffering from disinvestment and a lack of corrective development and services that can reverse the effects of disinvestment have neither the time nor the patience to wait for us to get it right. It’s better to delay starting a project while we do careful research than delay having a real impact because we haven’t chosen the most effective and efficient path.

This chapter is about deciding not just where we want to move from but where we want to get to. It is about figuring out the kinds of communities, the kinds of opportunities, the kinds of possibilities,

the kind of future, we want to create. We will of course talk about planning interventions to stop the bad things. But we will also spend time talking about plans to create new good things.

The prescription stage of project development is about the plan. Because prescription involves some form of intervention in an existing condition, it is important to have diagnosed the existing condition in as much detail as possible. I worked with a local foundation a few years ago that wanted to start a program to help community development organizations go beyond “bricks and mortar” development activities to also organize their neighborhoods. They attempted to diagnose the readiness of each organization to do community organizing, but since it was a brand new program they were not sure what questions to ask. It was only after we conducted an intensive evaluation (described in Chapter 7) of the program that we were able to develop effective diagnostic questions. So if you skipped the previous chapter, you may want to go back.

A good diagnosis, then, is the first source of information for developing the prescription. Whether the diagnosis has focused on needs or assets or both, the prescription stage is about figuring out how to fill those needs or deploy those assets.



INWARD-LOOKING VS. OUTWARD-LOOKING SOCIAL CHANGE: SERVICES AND POLICIES

Researchers who study social change movements have for some time distinguished between those that focus on changing the external world and those that focus on changing their own members.² Those externally focused efforts are what we normally see on the news—demonstrations and protests, along with a lot of backstage organizing and lobbying, designed to change some government or corporate policy. The global justice movement, which became famous through massive demonstrations beginning in Seattle in 1999, focuses on trying to change the policies of global organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, as well as the global trade policies of individual nations.³ There are other much more local social change efforts, such as city-level movements for living wage laws so that working parents can earn enough money in entry-level jobs to support a family.

Inward-looking movements are focused on changing their members. Alcoholics Anonymous, whose purpose is to help its members become and stay sober, may be one of the most famous internally focused movements. Groups such as this may occasionally take a stand on social issues, but the main thrust of their work is changing individuals. Other organizations focus not so much on individuals as on their group as a whole. Co-housing communities—experimental forms of community where a group of people live together in a subdivision and cooperate to meet their common needs such as child care, meal preparation, home maintenance, and other tasks—are a form of such an internally focused group.⁴ The emphasis here is on providing services, sometimes for individuals and sometimes for groups, toward the goal of helping them sustain or change the community and/or its individuals.

We will not be concentrating so much on the social movement aspects of these and other social change efforts, which is an entire field of study in itself, but on the research methods that support such efforts. For our purposes, the importance of distinguishing between internally focused and externally focused social change efforts is that internally focused efforts often look for service prescriptions, and externally focused efforts often look for policy prescriptions. This isn't a rigid distinction. Sometimes, a service program project will focus on changing policy to allow other service projects to proceed. Often, this involves lobbying for public funds. AIDS advocates engage in a great deal of policy work to obtain funding and research to support the direct services they provide to HIV-positive individuals.⁵

Aside from services being internally focused and policy change efforts being externally focused, there are other differences between these two approaches. It is tempting to think of service programs as simply the internal policies of a group or organization. But they are crucially different. Policies are not concrete how-to guides. Instead, they set the boundaries on what can be done. Programs are actual implementations. For example, as part of a neighborhood improvement program, I have recently been involved in a project trying to measure changes in teen pregnancy in a neighborhood. After discussing the best ways to get the data, we decided that the most accurate information would be county statistics on teen births, which we found out could be sorted by address. But there are strict government policies on disclosing the identities of minors that made the county health officials very concerned about providing the data for us.⁶ They were even wary of counting the number of teen births in the neighborhood themselves and just giving us a total number. The

Service Prescription	Policy Prescription
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inward-focused • Concrete plans • Narrow application • May include policy changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outward-focused • Abstract rules • Wide application

policy protecting the identities of minors does not say how to run programs for youth. It only specifies the boundaries of collecting and using information about youth and doesn't even do that clearly enough for those county health officials to feel comfortable with providing summary statistics on teen births in a neighborhood.

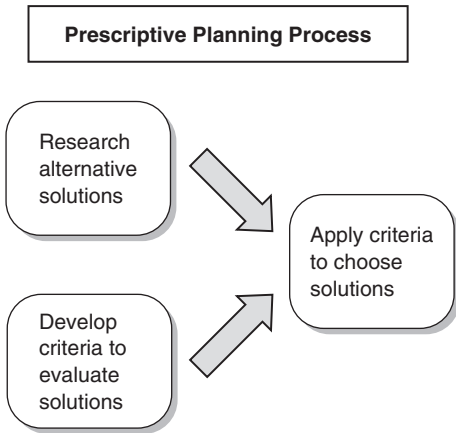
Another important distinction between services and policies is that services have narrow application to the individuals or community for which they are developed. Yes, it is possible that a community health service program developed in one area might be generally applicable to other places, but it almost always needs to be adapted to the particularities of each context. That is why intensive diagnostic research is so important—to discover the characteristics of the community context that will affect the service program outcomes and make sure that the program is custom-designed to fit those characteristics. Policies, on the other hand, are designed to apply across wide-ranging places and situations. In most cases, policymakers prefer to make as few exceptions as possible.

Even with these differences, however, both the services approach and the policy approach require good diagnostic research. In addition, at the prescription level, they often involve a planning process using an intensive research model. So before we look at the distinctions between the two approaches to prescription, we will look at how a general prescriptive planning process works.

A PLANNING APPROACH

Whether a group is involved in designing services or changing a policy, at this stage they are engaged in a planning process. There are a number of models a group can use, including strategic planning, visioning, empowerment planning, and other models. All of them use some version of the prescriptive planning process outlined in the chart above and produce a plan based on researching alternatives,

developing criteria to evaluate the solutions, and then applying the criteria to the options and choosing the best one. The order of activities



is somewhat arbitrary. In some cases it may make sense to develop the criteria before shopping for solutions, especially if the problem or issue is broad and the possible solutions are many. In other cases, especially if the problem is unique and the solutions not readily apparent, it may work better to gather up all the possible solutions and then see what criteria they suggest.

When the city of Toledo, Ohio was considering changing its form of government (we had an appointed city manager rather than an elected mayor, and a city council elected from across the whole city rather than from districts, which many of us thought was rather undemocratic), a group of community activists got together to try and impact the next city government structure. One of the things we did was research city government structures across the country for models that were more representative and democratic. Since there were dozens of options, we established some criteria up front—we would only look at cities of a similar size and that had mechanisms for direct citizen involvement in government. Using those criteria, we ended up with only a half dozen cities, and our research task was much easier. We did our research with zeal, but, as a reminder that the research is only a small part of the project, the organizing necessary to get our ideas into the resultant plan didn't happen, and we ended up with a city government that is only superficially changed from what we had before.

Each of the steps of researching solutions, developing criteria for comparing the alternatives, and then choosing, involves some specific tasks.

Researching Solutions

How does one research solutions? I have a cool piece of fired pottery on my desk, which my wife found at a rummage sale, with *Alternatives* stamped across the side. I use it as a pencil holder. It's a

nice symbolic representation for me since it includes everything from your basic #2 wooden pencil to mechanical pencil to cheapo pen to a fancy, well-balanced, easy-gliding-ink, fine-line writing instrument. When you research solutions, that is what you will often find. There are cheap solutions, which may be practical or just cheap. There are expensive solutions that may be highly advanced or just superficially flashy.

The task of researching alternatives is to fill the alternatives jar, preferably with a variety of possibilities. The process is very much akin to the literature review in traditional research—finding out everything that anyone else had said about this problem or issue. It can be frustrating work for a while. Anyone who has spent hours in the library, pouring over article after article, and book after book, finding nothing until suddenly the one perfect article presents itself, with references to all the information you could ever hope for, knows how challenging this part of the process can be. At least initially, this kind of research is like groping in the dark. And, just like groping in the dark, luck will play some role in whether it takes a long time or a short time to find that one perfect source that leads you to all the other sources.

So don't be tempted to take the easy way out. You may have heard the joke about the guy who lost his car keys. It was late at night, well after darkness had descended. And there under the street-light he was on hands and knees looking in futility for his keys. A police officer happens upon the scene and asks what he is doing. "I am looking for my keys," the guy responds. "Are you sure this is where you lost them?" the officer responds. "No," says the guy, pointing down the street toward his car, "I lost them over there." "Then why are you looking for them here?" asks the officer. "Because this is where the light is," replies the guy.

We are often tempted to go for the easy way out, to look where the light is rather than where the actual solutions might be. But, of course, such a search often ends in futility. There is often no easy way to fill up your jar of alternatives, and you need to become comfortable groping in the dark. There are some strategies, however, that can make the search more systematic.

Sad but true, sequestering oneself away in a real college or university library with real books and real journal articles for a few days can make a real difference. Your local public library may also be of use, but is unlikely to have a wide range of academic research. You can, of course, do some of the initial searching over the library's Internet site, but eventually you need to go and actually read what you have found. Be forewarned that an increasing number of university libraries are password-restricting their online databases. If

you are not on the university payroll or a student, you may have to fight for your right to use their materials.

Another strategy, sometimes a bit more challenging, is to read the insider stories. In most areas of community work there are a

Finding Alternatives

- Use the library
- Read the trade publications
- Find and use networks
- Brainstorm—visioning; charrettes

number of trade publications—magazine-style periodicals focused on a particular community work niche such as community health, or housing development, or some other area. The nice thing about trade publications is that they concentrate on stories of real projects out there with contact information that you can use to follow up. Once

you find the relevant publication, you can get access to a number of alternatives. But many of these publications are rather obscure and may not be available at your local public or university library. An Internet search may help turn them up.

If you are working on an issue and you don't know anyone else who is, your first task should be to find them. It is nice if you can find other people locally and get together for lunch to trade ideas. But you can also find people on e-mail lists, Web sites, and through library searches and trade publications. You can also sometimes save yourself some time searching through trade publications or libraries if you can find someone who can just tell you where to look. There are even a number of agencies out there that may be good sources of information. If you are working on a public health issue, your local public health department may know where to look for alternatives. You could get transferred a half dozen times before you find the person who can really help, but by that time it will be worth it. Don't be shy about contacting strangers if they are working on something similar. They will probably also appreciate someone to compare notes with.

In situations where there are no recognizable alternatives, the alternatives don't seem to fit, or maximizing participation is paramount, it is desirable to sit down with a group and brainstorm possible strategies. Especially if you have done some research into the possible alternatives and found nothing that fits, you may have learned enough to piece together bits from what you have learned. A typical brainstorming process involves writing down every idea mentioned, regardless of how weird it seems, without people responding. When you have the list of ideas, you then start developing or applying criteria to critique the ideas. Then, when you whittle down your list to the things you really like, you might go back to your network of contacts, especially those who are experts in the

area, to get their feedback. The “open space” process has become one of the more popular methods for involving participants in the management of a brainstorming session and producing practical options.⁷

When the focus is broad and long-range, the process is often called *visioning*. In a visioning process, a group of people come together not just to discuss program and project ideas but also to discuss values. In many cases, the community visioning process begins with asking the group what values they can all agree on. This stage can often be the most difficult as conflicting values surface. In community planning, for example, business owners may value population increases, while residents concerned with traffic and other disruptions may value population stability. Finding those core value agreements and disagreements can require expert facilitation.⁸

Visioning processes have often been criticized for producing only lofty, flowery statements, kind of like “The Acme community vision is of a group of neighbors who all hug each other at least once a day and where all the children are happy and smart,” which is not helpful at all. Visioning processes that stop at generating core values are worse than useless because they take up people’s time and don’t generate anything that can be acted upon. Good visioning processes begin with more or less agreed-upon core values and then move on to generating usable ideas. One way to do this is to use an idea board. Participants in the visioning process are instructed to write down ideas on notecards or sticky notes. They then post their ideas on a large board with whatever technology seems safe and convenient. In some cases the board is divided into core values, and participants post their ideas under the heading that fits best. In other cases they just stick them anywhere on the board. Then the fun begins, because the participants next look at the *mélange* of ideas and attempt to group them for similarity or complementarity or some other criteria. At the end of this step you have a board with groups of ideas.⁹

Another strategy used in architecture but applicable in any setting where pictures are helpful is the *charrette*. A *charrette* is a short, intensive planning session, often lasting for one or two days.¹⁰ A *charrette* usually involves more preparation than a visioning process, however. Visioning sometimes occurs without any diagnostic research at all, while the *charrette* process involves extensive diagnostic research into existing conditions and available resources. Once that research has been compiled, it is presented to all the participants. In the 1980s the east side of Toledo, which had suffered massive industrial disinvestment, used a *charrette* process to focus on redeveloping a main industrial transportation corridor in the hopes of bringing industry back to the area. The two-day planning process, including residents and city and corporate officials, focused

on issues such as moving heavy truck traffic off residential streets, relocating the area fire station across the railroad tracks to reduce emergency vehicle delays caused by trains, and widening and hardening the road to support the intended industrial traffic. Architects trained in participatory methods projected an outline of the street onto a long sheet of butcher block paper and then literally sketched participants' ideas onto the paper.¹¹

The ideas generated from such brainstorming processes or, indeed, from any of the strategies mentioned above, will then need to be winnowed, shaped, and made practical. It's not only okay but preferable not to impose too many restrictions on ideas at the beginning, because it may prevent something new and innovative. In the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis, for example, one of the ideas that came from their community planning process involved putting new townhouse units in the *middle* of the large square blocks that characterized the neighborhood. And they had to fight hard to gain the right to do that. It was an off-the-wall idea, designed to meet the city's demands for higher-density housing in the neighborhood (which the city was partially funding), that would never have been tried without a very creative, open-ended neighborhood planning process. But then the neighborhood activists had to carefully develop the idea to meet the objections of the fire marshal and city planning officials. So the next step is to develop criteria to evaluate all those wonderful ideas and develop a practical plan.

Developing Criteria

How does a group choose among the alternatives? Here is where developing criteria is important. Just as a professor develops criteria to distinguish an "A" paper from a "B" paper, or a pipe fitter develops criteria to distinguish a strong pipe weld from a weak one, a group engaging in a community change project needs criteria to distinguish an effective program from an ineffective one. As I mentioned above, you may even want to do this before filling your alternatives jar to make your search more efficient. But the criteria may also emerge as you explore and discuss alternatives. Much of the research you do to find alternatives will also include research on the impacts of those alternatives, complete with the criteria employed.

One source of standards you will often find while researching alternatives in many areas of community work will be called "best practices." *Best practices* is one of those overused insider phrases, and it's unclear what it actually means. At some point in a specific, focused area of community work, such as housing development, an

agreement emerges among those working on the issue that certain practices work better than other practices. In housing development, for example, one of the best practices for helping first-time, low-income home buyers is through rent-to-own programs. In community policing there are best practices for reducing crime in a neighborhood through a combination of prevention and enforcement. Studying the best practices will often reveal what problems the best practice was meant to address and will then help you build your criteria. One of the reasons for the rent-to-own option in housing development, for example, is to prevent displacement of existing residents when neighborhood rental housing is redeveloped toward the goal of increasing homeownership, since the existing renters often don't have enough money for a down payment. So you may decide, by studying this practice, that two of your criteria for evaluating various housing development options is that they should support homeownership and not displace existing residents. Funders also often latch onto these best practices and then use them to evaluate other applicants for funds. So it is important to know what the best practices are for your issue because the criteria implied by those best practices will likely be imposed on your grant applications. The problem with best-practices standards, however, is that they often become reified—they thwart the development of other creative solutions. So when you find best practices, don't make those the sole source for your criteria.

If there are no best-practices standards, or even if there are, another source of criteria for evaluating alternatives is the academic research. Many projects have been tried in many places, and many of them have been researched. If you are shopping for youth recreation programs in the hopes of reducing juvenile crime, you may be able to find existing studies looking at the impact of youth recreation programs on the juvenile crime rate. Those studies may provide information on the characteristics of such programs that have the most impact. Those characteristics then become part of your criteria. Using such research may also be convenient if you are already searching the academic literature to fill your alternatives jar.

If you can't find any good research showing the effects of an intervention, you may apply a theoretical standard. In other words,

Criteria for Evaluating Alternatives

- Apply best-practices standards
- Derive criteria from existing research
- Develop standards from theory
- Include unique community characteristics
- Derive criteria from project goals
- Engage stakeholder groups

can you create a project that draws on theoretical relationships that have been found in academic research? There has been a lot of talk lately about the positive health effects of religious faith, with some research showing a relationship between the two¹² (not necessarily a causal relationship, but at least an association—people who express more religious devotion tend to have better health). You might conclude, based on a thorough reading of that academic literature, that you could develop a communitywide religious recruitment campaign to reduce the incidence of heart disease in a community. Be careful with theoretical relationships, however. It may be that the important health effect of religion comes from creating a sense of community and reducing stress. So it is theoretically possible that any number of stress reduction or community relationship programs could have the same impact.

In addition to any best practices or research-based criteria you develop, you also need to consider the uniqueness of the situation the project is being designed for. Will youth recreation programs developed in poor urban African-American communities work equally well in poor rural white Appalachian communities? If not, how are the communities different and how may those differences impact the program? You may not want to employ these criteria when you search the literature for your alternatives, since that may preclude you from considering alternatives from other places that could actually work. But at some point you will want the unique qualities of your community to inform the criteria you use for choosing an alternative to implement. The question, of course, is what community characteristics to include in your criteria. Some may be highly relevant and others may not be. The research literature will give you some suggestions—various studies may have tested for the relevance of race or age or some other characteristics. If so, you will certainly want to include those criteria. Cultural and ethnic characteristics are also often important, even when they don't appear in the literature. So many projects are conducted in relatively homogeneous settings that it is difficult to test for the effect of ethnicity.

The program or project goals can also be used as criteria for evaluating alternatives. At this stage in project development, however, there may not be goals. In fact, choosing an alternative may inform goal setting, since the diagnostic process may have identified a number of issue areas, but the group or organization may only have the capacity to handle one or a few of those issues. If the group has gone through a visioning process, they will be close to setting goals.

How does a group go about goal setting? Many groups often do not distinguish between goals and strategies. Too often a group or

organization will have as a goal “implementing a youth recreation program” rather than “reducing youth crime.” In other words, a strategy—the youth recreation program—becomes the goal. Goals should be expressed as outcomes—reducing youth crime—rather than as strategies. The outcome goals can be set on a particular timeline (one year, for example) or for a particular quantity (a 10% change, for example). Goals should be based on what is possible as well as what is desirable, and goals that are set too high may result in no alternative looking acceptable. Here again is where consulting the existing research, or talking to others who have already done similar projects, is helpful.

Be forewarned that choosing criteria can be a political process. One group may be concerned about getting the maximum impact. Another may be concerned about using the fewest resources. One person may advocate for standards that reduce the power of another stakeholder. Situations like this are why Carl Patton and David Sawicki advocate a process for developing criteria that takes into account different groups’ interests.¹³ A neighborhood group going up against city hall on criteria for funding neighborhood redevelopment plans may not want to use the city’s criteria, but they had better know what those criteria are so they can defend against them if need be.

Choosing an Alternative

Once the criteria for evaluating alternatives are established, it may be obvious which project alternative will work best. But the situation is often more complex than it seems. This step, in fact, can be the most involved of all, since it requires predicting the future, which is one of the most difficult research tasks. Another thing making this step complicated is the need to weight or rank the criteria you use, accurately measure costs and benefits, and then accurately apply the criteria to the measurements. A lot can go wrong on the way to the final decision with all that measurement.

There are a number of ways to rank criteria. One of the most popular is a ranking method where members each rank the project goals with numbers. The numbers for each goal are then added together and the goal with the highest or lowest score (depending on whether the lowest number or highest number signifies most importance) becomes the most important goal. It is best to not get too rigid with this process, however. It is mostly a heuristic device, designed to help people organize their thinking, not to direct their thinking. Such ranking processes apply quantitative measures to qualitative

concepts. If six people rank three goals, with 1 being most important and 3 being least important, and the most important goal gets a total score of 8 while the next gets a score of 11, that means the average scores of the two goals are 2.67 and 3.67.

Choosing an Alternative

- Rank criteria
- Calculate benefits
- Calculate costs

Would you stake the success of your project on a one-point difference? Such a goal-ranking process is mostly a way to get a feeling for how the group is thinking. There

are more sophisticated ranking methods, such as Q-sort, paired comparison, or Delphi survey,¹⁴ but in a planning context they all are aids to decision making rather than methods to determine the best option.

You can also order criteria using a bottom-line priority. The West Bank Community Development Corporation (CDC) in Minneapolis's Cedar-Riverside neighborhood used the force field analysis results of its previous projects (described in Chapter 4) to choose projects for the next year. Two of the criteria they emphasized as a result of that analysis were practicality (how easy an option would be) and affordability (how much it would cost). But another criterion they applied was whether an option should be part of the core budget for the CDC. Those activities selected to be part of the core budget would get done first, and the others would get done only if the CDC was able to get grant funds. One of the CDC board's strongest expressed needs focused on economic development, as they wanted to replace an important historic building in the neighborhood's business strip that had been destroyed by fire. But their force field analysis, looking at the slow economy, the need for city funds, and their oppositional city council member, convinced them that the project wasn't feasible. They also wanted to develop a strong community organizing program. But even though they determined it would not be excessively costly, and would not be terribly difficult, they could not justify giving it core budget status.

Once the criteria are ranked, the next step is to actually apply the criteria. In the Cedar-Riverside example, and in most cases, a group applies the criteria in a two-hour meeting. This is certainly practical for time-stretched groups. But this may not be the best way to approach the task of choosing a project. When time permits, using a *comparative research* process may produce beneficial results.¹⁵ Comparative research is actually an academic research protocol, but it is easily adaptable to practical purposes. In traditional comparative research, the researcher chooses a set of theoretical ideas that they believe will explain different outcomes of different cases. The da

Skocpol (pronounced “*thaida skotchpole*,” in case you were wondering), in a famous study comparing the national revolutions of Russia, France, and China, decided that just a few specific variations in economic and government characteristics would explain most of the differences in those revolutions.¹⁶

Project-based comparative research is similar except that the criteria—be they best practices or project goals or whatever—replace the theoretical concepts. The primary purpose is not to explain how each option works but to study the extent to which each of the options produces outcomes that best fit the criteria of the group. I have mentioned my work with a program a couple of years ago helping community development corporations engage in community organizing activities. This was quite a change for these organizations, who had been devoting their time to rehabilitating commercial and residential buildings and were now going to organize residents to take control of their neighborhoods. My actual role was to do evaluation research for the project, and you will learn more about that in Chapter 7. But the evaluation research allowed us to also do comparative research between two CDCs. One CDC had an elected board and created a separate community organizing group. The other CDC had an appointed board and tried to organize residents into the CDC itself. The first CDC was much more successful at community organizing. The comparison allowed us to show the kinds of conditions that would help community organizing flourish.¹⁷ Regrettably, it was too late to preserve community organizing in both CDCs, and only one has continued with the program.

To use such a comparative research method before, rather than after a project has begun, can be a bit more challenging and takes some time. Take the example of trying to reduce youth crime. What if one faction of the planning committee thinks that midnight basketball will have the most impact on youth crime, while another faction of the planning committee thinks that after-school peer tutoring will work better? How would you set up a comparative research project to answer that question? Given that there are probably more criteria than just the impact on reductions in youth crime (such as project cost and availability of facilities), you would set up the research to study existing peer tutoring and midnight b-ball. There may be existing projects in your area, and you could study them to see how much they cost, how they obtained facilities, and how much impact they had on crime. Be forewarned, however, that this might be a big research project that could require surveying the youth participating in each of these projects. If there are no projects in your area, the research becomes even more challenging to complete.

As you've probably already suspected, doing such research is often impractical. Not only are there too few resources for such comparative research to choose the best-fitting project alternative, there are also too few resources for doing good research assessing the outcomes of projects. So even when there are other programs out there to compare, we rarely have good outcome data to use in comparing specific projects. That makes a comparative research project into something that often takes a year or more because the outcome data have to be compiled along with the analysis of the project itself.

Most groups, then, choose a project option based on what might be called hypothesized effects. In essence, because they have no research establishing the effectiveness of any single project alternative, they rely on a theoretical prediction that a certain project will produce a set of effects. In the midnight basketball vs. tutoring example above, the group might hypothesize that midnight basketball will involve male youth after dark and thus directly impact the mischief they could otherwise get into, while tutoring would have a more indirect future impact. That may be correct. But it also may not be, making the project itself essentially a quasi-experiment, which we will discuss further in the evaluation chapter.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS

We have mostly concentrated up to this point on developing prescriptions for projects directly impacting the community. But many communities suffer because of policies that have done harm in the past and continue to do harm, either by allowing bad things to continue or preventing good things from starting. So many groups and organizations find themselves in the position, sooner or later, of bumping up against the rules. One of the most famous community-based policy change efforts came in the 1970s from the nationwide efforts to change a bank lending practice called redlining. Bankers would literally draw a red line around certain central city areas they deemed high risk and would refuse to make home loans in those areas. The Chicago-based National People's Action and other groups undertook a massive amount of research to document the extent and consequences of redlining, diagnosing much of the central city decay of the time as a direct result of this discriminatory banking practice. They then began to develop policy prescriptions to prevent banks from such blatantly discriminatory lending, ultimately resulting in the national Community Reinvestment Act, passed by the federal government in 1977.¹⁸

Making Policy Prescriptions

Find a Good Issue

- Keep your eyes and ears wide open.
- Watch the regular sources.
- Keep your eyes and ears open on a specific issue.
- Research a specific issue.

Find Policy Alternatives

- Use the methods for developing service alternatives.
- Do a survey of stakeholders.
- Do a survey of experts.
- Imagine the ideal.

Develop Criteria

- Develop criteria from the context to determine practical limits.
- Develop criteria from core values to determine acceptable compromise.

Choose an Alternative

- Making predictions
- Comparing costs and benefits
- Tracing decision steps

Most community groups and organizations engage in policy prescriptions on a much smaller level, if at all. They are often so caught up in making service prescriptions that they either don't realize how policy helps cause the problems they are treating or they don't have the resources to address the policy issues. Policy work seems like a luxury because it doesn't meet people's immediate needs. But the Community Reinvestment Act provided community groups and poor neighborhoods with millions of dollars in loans and other investments, making it well worth the effort. What follows, then, is a brief outline of how to do small-scale policy prescriptions, following the steps of finding issues, finding alternatives, developing criteria, and choosing alternatives for policy issues.

Finding Issues

There are policy issues and ideas everywhere. Most people in the field of community work see the problems caused by a lack of decent food, clothing, housing, education, employment, legal protection, and other rights and goods that are unequally distributed. There is no shortage of ideas about policies to address these inequalities. So the challenge is not so much finding policy alternatives as finding winnable policy battles. You will not be able to end capitalism in your city. But you may be able to pass a living wage law requiring employers who receive government funds and contracts to pay their employees a wage that will support a family.¹⁹

Finding practical policy battles requires an organization to stay in touch with the policy issues making their way through various levels of government. Brian Hogwood and Lewis Gunn²⁰ draw their strategies for finding juicy policy issues from the management literature. The most general strategy is *undirected viewing*—basically “keeping your eyes open” without any particular purpose to see what the policy issues are that are circulating through government. This is the most challenging strategy in some ways since it involves having someone in your group who is well connected to policymakers and regularly getting fed information on what policy issues are current at different levels of government. This may be impractical for many groups, but a project sponsored through a political science class at Middlesex Community College provides a model for this kind of work. There the students researched the policy issues being debated in the state government, wrote up briefs on those that were relevant to nonprofit organizations, and distributed the packets to area nonprofits. A less labor-intensive strategy for staying current on policy issues is what Hogwood and Gunn call *conditioned viewing*—regularly checking regular sources. Most local and state governments in the United States, as well as the federal government, will provide information on bills under debate from their Web sites. The next more focused strategy is an *informal search*, which involves keeping your eyes and ears open for policy information in a specific issue area. Advocacy organizations will regularly distribute policy alerts in their particular issue area, as will issue-oriented e-mail lists. Finally, the *formal search* is choosing a specific policy issue and conducting intensive research.

Usually, in the project-based research model, a policy issue comes directly from diagnostic research. In the process of diagnosing a community problem, a group or organization will often uncover policy issues that are either causing a problem or preventing a solution. As we discussed in Chapter 3, community workers addressing housing

issues recently discovered a new form of redlining called predatory lending. As banking was deregulated and the Community Reinvestment Act weakened, individuals and families in poor communities found it again more difficult to obtain mortgage loans from traditional lenders. But a new form of sub-prime lender, who makes loans that are statistically more risky, has grown to fill the gap. The problem is that the interest on the loan is exorbitantly high, or the loan has fine print that requires a dramatic increase or “balloon” in the monthly payment a few years down the road, and many poor borrowers then default and lose their home to the predatory lender, who then sells the home to the next low-income buyer who can’t get a traditional loan. The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and other groups have gotten involved in pressing state governments and the federal government to develop policies to better protect low-income borrowers.²¹

Finding Alternatives

Once the diagnosis is achieved, and it becomes clear that a policy prescription is the best medicine to address the problem, the group or organization begins a search for alternatives. In many ways, the same research methods used for service project prescriptions apply here: Use the library, read the trade publications, find and use networks, and brainstorm. There are also some other strategies, outlined by Patton and Sawicki, that apply specifically to finding policy alternatives. One of those is a survey of the people affected to get their policy opinions. A quick survey of policymakers or experts in the field can also be useful. And a third strategy is to imagine what an ideal circumstance would be—such as low-income lenders being able to get loans that they could actually repay—and then develop a policy alternative to support that ideal.²²

As with service projects, however, sometimes there are not realistic alternatives. Patton and Sawicki also attempt to develop a systematic method for creating alternatives when there are no ready-made options. The idea is to break a policy issue up into parts.²³ If the problem is youth crime, for example, one aspect of the problem is law enforcement. Another is parental rights and responsibilities. Yet another might be youth employment and recreation opportunities. You may have found policy options in some or all of these categories. Because the problem is broken up into categories, it is possible to creatively combine one policy covering law enforcement with another covering youth employment and recreation.

Developing Criteria

There are two approaches to developing criteria in policy projects, which are probably best used together. The first is to consider the context. Because the political context is often much more important in policy projects than it is in service projects, understanding that context becomes crucial. The challenge is deciding just what “the context” includes. Ann Majchrzak argues that, once the social problem is selected, the next step is to identify the key policy issues suggested by that problem.²⁴ Promoting an educational policy that allows for more parent participation in school decision making may involve, for example, thinking about school funding and taxes; union collective bargaining processes; how school board members are elected; how principals are appointed; and numerous other issues. Because how unions, teachers, voters, school board members, and taxpayers will react to a policy initiative is important. Then it is important to conduct historical research on the legislative history of educational reform in general in your area, as well as on the history of the particular reforms you are proposing, to see what has been tried and to understand why some policy efforts succeed and others fail. The group also needs to find or construct organizational charts on the relevant decision-making bodies; in this case probably the school board and administrative bureaucracy. All of this information provides the raw material for a model of the policymaking process—one of those boxes-and-arrows diagrams showing who has what kind of input at what point. If possible, interviewing stakeholders to find out where they stand will allow you to elaborate that policymaking model to see where particular roadblocks may be along the way. By the time you are done with this research project you will be well on your way to a set of criteria showing what kinds of parental participation policies are practical and what interventions are needed to expand the range of practical options.

Some practical criteria that can come out of such a process include effectiveness, efficiency, administrative ease, legality, and political acceptability.²⁵ A policy has to effectively accomplish the goals for which it is intended. In today’s political climate it will also have to achieve its effectiveness with a minimum expenditure of money and other resources. It will have to be easy to administer to avoid getting tied up in red tape and loophole management. A policy of course has to be legal, but here that mostly means that it doesn’t create a domino effect of requiring changes in other policies to make it legal. And, finally, it has to be acceptable to the wide range of political players in whatever context the policy is being created.

Relying only on criteria emphasizing what is practical, however, may in the end be impractical. Because maybe what is practical contradicts the group's values. So a second set of evaluative criteria need to come not from the context but from the group or organization itself. This is very similar to the visioning process discussed above for service prescriptions. The focus here is developing and ranking the group's core values. One of the useful things about doing this is that it both helps define criteria for judging policy options and helps the group to look into the consistency of its own value system. A group that realizes it values both better schools and lower taxes may need to decide, when push comes to shove, which it values more highly. The group then uses these values criteria to judge each of the policy alternatives.²⁶

And what if the values criteria and the practical criteria produce two different groups of policies? Ah, those situations are where the difficult choices come in and where groups often splinter. The gap between what is valued and what is practical can force a group to choose between defeat with dignity and a meaningless win. You either choose to lose because you realize you can't get an acceptable policy or you take what you can get, even though it seems fatally flawed. In such situations the project may shift from changing a policy to changing the policymakers. In one Tennessee school district, a group concerned about racial equity in the area schools decided that the only way to improve their chances of success in changing the policies of their local school board was to change the composition of the board itself. They were especially frustrated by one longtime school board member who had long opposed their efforts. So they designed and carried out a research project to measure all the candidates against the group's values. They collectively designed questions to measure the school board candidates' views on such issues as affirmative action, racial diversity, and school hiring practices. They mailed the survey to the candidates, and followed up by phone and sometimes in person, and eventually got three quarters of the candidates to respond, including their main target. They graded each candidate on an A to F scale and distributed a booklet describing their questions, research methods, and grades throughout the area. Not only were they able to unseat the worst incumbent (who received an F grade from the group), but all the candidates who were elected had received an A or better. As a consequence, teachers now have access to diversity training, hiring practices have changed to include people of color on hiring committees, and the school district recognizes Martin Luther King Day.²⁷ Such a method can be enhanced by also researching stakeholders to determine their

support or opposition to your group's policy position, the amount of resources they control, their ability to mobilize those resources, and their access to decision makers.²⁸

Choosing an Alternative

The challenge with policy projects is the same as for service projects. How do you actually determine which of the policy options will best achieve the criteria you have set? In contrast to service projects, the field of policy research has developed highly sophisticated research protocols for judging policy options. Since policy prescriptions are necessarily part of a political process, they require supporting research that can convince policymakers that the policy will achieve the predicted effects, not cause overspending and not produce unintended side effects. Three forms of policy research have sprung up to address these three issues.

Predicting outcomes includes a diverse array of research methods.²⁹ It is beyond our task here to provide a manual on how each of these methods works, especially because some of them involve complex computer analysis. But we will look at what each purports to do. Many of the methods emphasize forecasting. In contrast to traditional social science research, conducted from an extensive research model (see Chapter 1) where prediction involves *ceteris paribus* assumptions that everything but one variable will stay the same, in policy forecasting an intensive research model is used and the assumptions themselves are varied to see what may result. For example, a group trying to develop a policy around access to health insurance may vary their assumptions on the effects of a natural disaster, or another terrorist attack, or an economic slump, or a variety of other factors that could lead to dramatically different forecasts on the cost of health insurance. Such forecasts can also draw on data from past events to *extrapolate* to the future—essentially assuming that economic changes will impact health insurance costs in the future the same way they have in the past. Less sophisticated, but sometimes more effective in a politicized environment, is scenario writing. Scenario writing relies more on telling a story of the future, in contrast to the dry and often numerical presentation of forecasting. Those policy advocates concerned about environmental destruction have done some of the most persuasive scenario writing, perhaps beginning with the famous book *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson.³⁰ Finally, computer modeling is the most sophisticated of all the forecasting methods. This is the method used by your increasingly accurate

meteorologist. Massive quantities of data on all kinds of variables are fed into a computer, which then makes a prediction on how all of that data will interact. Of course, you may have noticed that even with all of this technological sophistication, your local weather forecaster still is only accurate about four to five days out. We will discuss below the problems of trying to predict policy outcomes four to five *years* out.

Cost-benefit analysis is another way of comparing policy options. This is just your basic process of comparing the expected benefits of a policy option to the costs of implementing it. It is the same thing many people do when choosing a new car. Patton and Sawicki³¹ offer a set of formulas for measuring costs and benefits in the present and the future. Such measures are dependent on effective forecasting, however, since both future costs and future benefits can't be calculated without knowing future impacts of a policy alternative. Such analysis is also not just a matter of plugging numbers into a formula. Remember that the practicality criteria may include such things as political acceptability. It may not be politically acceptable to pass a policy requiring private insurers to provide discounted health insurance to low-income workers. But it may help to give those insurers tax breaks if they do so. That strategy will increase the costs of the policy but may also gain it more political support.

Another form of policy outcome evaluation and a cousin of cost-benefit analysis is risk analysis. Again dependent on accurate forecasting, risk analysis is literally an analysis of the risks of a policy alternative to different sectors of the population. This is the kind of research the government engages in to help decide how much air pollution is acceptable or how much automobile safety regulation to impose. The analysis attempts to predict such things as how much death and injury will occur at a given level of air pollution or with a given combination of automobile safety devices such as airbags and strong bumpers.³²

A final method that attempts to bring together forecasting, cost-benefit analysis, and risk analysis is decision analysis. This method is, in some ways, the most complex of all because it not only includes the complexity of the other methods but then combines them in a step-by-step process. In decision analysis you try to map out the decision steps involved in a policy process, charting the intended and unintended effects and their costs and benefits at each step. However, because this method depends on so much data gathering, all of which can include errors, this is also the method that has the least reliability. It may, ultimately, prove the least useful for groups doing policy lobbying because it is so easy to criticize.³³

LOOSE GRAVEL

Perhaps the most dangerous loose gravel in the entire project cycle lies on the path to a good prescription. So much can go wrong. You can make the wrong prescription, based on either the wrong diagnosis or on faulty knowledge of the available alternatives. You can be forced, by either political practicalities or funding practicalities, to compromise the prescription and risk splintering your group. We have dealt with the loose gravel involved in making a good diagnosis in the previous chapter, so here we will focus on challenges involved in making the prescription itself.

Solutions Looking for Problems

Prescription is the stage of the project cycle requiring the most flexibility. Too often groups at this stage will find themselves becoming attached to a single solution. Someone may have found a funding announcement that gives money for particular types of programming. Recently, I came across an announcement for a funder who will give money to new groups trying to do community organizing. The catch is that groups can only have a budget of \$100,000 or less. Well, I know of a community development corporation with a budget far exceeding that, but they have been unable to start up a community organizing project because they can't get funds for it. They did their diagnostic research and came up with a prescription for organizing their community. But now they are faced with trying to redo their prescription for this grant proposal and are scrambling to create some kind of quasi-independent group that can apply for the funds.

Another thing that happens is that some group within the community or organization will have a preferred solution, and they will push their favored solution. The planning process then becomes a referendum on that solution. It is very much the way our form of representative government operates. Instead of beginning with good diagnoses and then moving on to developing custom-made solutions, the bills brought to the legislature propose solutions. Liberals tend to want to subsidize the poor, and conservatives tend to want to subsidize the rich. Look, for example, at welfare reform policies passed during the Clinton administration. The research on the causes of poverty itself was ignored. Instead, the debate was reduced to the question of subsidizing employers to provide low-wage jobs for the poor or subsidizing the poor directly. A good diagnosis of poverty, however, would point in an entirely different

direction, requiring prescriptions for much more fundamental change in our economic system.

This also happens, on a smaller scale, in community organizations. I was recently working with a group planning evaluation research. A couple of people in the planning group had become enamored with a particular model of individual skill assessment, while others were much more interested in broader outcome measures such as changes in crime patterns and other social problem indicators.

Also beware of solutions posing as processes. The United Way, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, and funders such as the Kellogg Foundation have been pushing something called a "logic model" as the way to both plan and evaluate programs. The usefulness of such a model is that it helps groups focus on what resources they have, what they are going to do with those resources, and what they hope to achieve with those resources. But logic models have gone far beyond simply organizing information to prescribing what information, activities, and outcomes are desirable. They go so far as to designate what units of analysis an organization should use (specifying *outcomes* for individuals and *impacts* for organizations or communities). As with any method that becomes too popular too quickly, logic models are becoming reified. It has become a matter of filling boxes with words, and the process of planning is being neglected.³⁴

In cases such as this, working backward really helps. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, when I do planning with groups, we start at the end of the program. What does the group want to achieve? Then we talk about what strategies they are going to use to achieve those goals, which includes a discussion of what resources they need. The research part comes in as we discuss how the group will know whether they have achieved their goals, which gets them thinking about outcome measures, and how they will know whether it is their strategies that are causing the changes, which gets them thinking about process analysis methods. And sure, it is easy to say that is just another form of logic model, but it emphasizes the process of the group constructing their own logic model, not filling in boxes predetermined by a funder. Groups working on community change issues, for example, will often find the distinction between individual outcomes and community impacts to not fit very well at all. It is the planning process that is important to prevent a decision model created for one set of circumstances to be applied in other ill-fitting circumstances.

Another way to avoid getting stuck on a particular solution is to make sure that you have at least three alternatives for people to work with. A couple of decades ago I attended a workshop where the facilitator gave us a controversial issue to discuss and, rather than

allowing us to polarize ourselves in the usual pro-con debate, forced us to consider three positions on the issue. It was an interesting experience because it forced us out of dualistic thinking to come up with some creative alternatives. When groups have three options, they can develop their evaluation criteria and assess each alternative, often ending up mixing and matching parts of a number of alternatives.

Ultimately, the best way to prevent solutions taking over the planning process is to stick to the planning process itself. Planning processes can be tedious, and it is often very difficult to get continuous participation, even from the people who have the most to gain or lose. Especially if there are no funds available to implement the plan, making the plan is often considered a waste of effort. The planning processes described in this chapter may also seem as if they will take an enormous amount of time and effort—resources that may not be available to most community groups. It seems impractical to use the few resources available for such research and planning. And yet, if you remember the Cheshire Cat's conclusion to Alice at the beginning of this chapter, just doing anything without having a well-researched path may be the greatest resource waste of all.

The Problem of Prediction

Whether a group is developing a service project or a policy project, trying to accurately predict the future can feel like a futile exercise in fortune-telling. All of the policy research literature cautions against drawing firm conclusions from even the most sophisticated computer-based modeling. Predicting the future is an extremely difficult task. For one thing, it is difficult to get good data and, as we have seen, you often have to collect your own data. For another thing, there are many unknowns. Planning a program to reduce teen pregnancy is not simply about choosing educational materials. It is also about considering how peer groups may change, how economic changes may lead to changes in family stress levels or availability of other services, how terrorist events may affect self-perceptions, and many other possible variables.

It is easy to throw up one's hands and say it's impossible. Worse yet, you might say, since all of this research won't provide any firm conclusions, and it takes up time and resources that could be used in the projects themselves, let's just skip the research altogether. But the situation isn't quite that bad. The challenge is to not get caught up in the research—something we academics are particularly vulnerable to. Remember, the action is the important part, and you are doing the research only to support the action. You may find that a full-scale,

airtight scientific research program with the most sophisticated statistical analysis requiring the most high-end computer will get you no better data than a basic survey of community members.

Also remember that the planning process involving prescriptive research can serve a participatory agenda. The research provides opportunities for community or organization members to get together and discuss what they want to accomplish. A good planning process will help people learn, contribute their own wisdom, and build relationships with each other. Those things are valuable in and of themselves and may be reason enough to do a careful planning process and the supporting prescriptive research.

We Said, They Said

One of the other reasons to do careful research, particularly with policy projects, is because the opposition is almost certainly going to be doing their research. A small community organization going up against government or corporate bureaucracies with their own research staffs can be quickly scoffed at without their own research. I remember becoming involved in an issue on my own university campus as a young assistant professor. The university was proposing to build a fraternity and sorority house cluster on campus as a strategy to get some disruptive fraternity houses out of nearby residential neighborhoods. A student environmental group on campus was opposing the plan, arguing that the houses would destroy a natural floodplain. The progressive faculty organization—of which I was a member—lent support to the student group. But neither they nor we did careful research to determine how the floodplain would be impacted. We actually got a meeting with the university president, who laughed when we presented the floodplain argument. When we went to actually look at the proposed housing site, we understood why he laughed. The site was perched on top of the bluff above the floodplain, not on the floodplain itself. A simple five-minute walk to do basic observational research would have saved us all a lot of embarrassment.

Remember also that making airtight predictions about the future is extremely difficult. So even when you have done extremely sophisticated research and can establish your expertise, their experts will find every little uncertainty they can to undermine your policy proposal. This is one of those situations where creativity is as important as scientific certainty. For example, as flying has become a more and more popular form of travel, we hear more and more that flying is safer than driving. One of the airlines I fly, as the plane pulls up to the gate, even

ends the flight with the announcement “the safest part of your journey just ended.” But over a decade ago some General Motors researchers took the airline industry to task for overstating the case for airline safety, arguing that when you looked at the length of the trip and the skill of the driver, shorter trips by skilled drivers were actually safer in a car.³⁵ The more detailed and nuanced the analysis, showing the specific contexts where the research does and does not apply, the more difficult it will be for the other side to dismiss your claims.

The only thing worse than doing bad research for a policy battle is doing *only* research. Because it is so easy to get caught up in a “we said—they said” debate, you will need more than research on your side. You will also need organized support. This is why it is so important to do research not only on the policy issue itself but on the political context. That research then allows a group or organization to efficiently direct its resources to lobbying and organizing because they know which policymakers and stakeholders are on opposite sides and which are on the fence. Organizing the supporters is often the most crucial test of a policy effort. Remember that an organized coalition of neighborhood groups—because they were organized—passed one of the most sweeping banking reform policies in the history of the country with the Community Reinvestment Act.

CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on doing research for the prescriptive stage of the project cycle, including:

- Differentiating service prescriptions and policy prescriptions
- How to use a planning approach to develop prescriptions, which includes:
 - Researching alternative solutions
 - Developing criteria to evaluate possible solutions
 - Applying the criteria to the alternatives to choose a solution

We also looked at the special case of making policy prescriptions, including:

- How to find a good issue
- How to find or develop alternative policy prescriptions
- How to develop criteria to evaluate policies
- How to use the criteria to choose a preferred policy

Finally, we discussed the main challenges facing prescriptive research:

- Becoming overly attached to one solution
- Being able to predict outcomes
- Standing up against the other side's research

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Brainstorming and Visioning

Owen, H. (1997). *Open space technology: A user's guide* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, Minnesota Extension Service. (2001). *Guide to community visioning*. University of Minnesota, <http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/rlc/comm/object.htm>

Mycoted, <http://www.mycoted.com/creativity/techniques/index.php> has a large collection of visioning, brainstorming, and planning techniques.

Charrettes

CharretteCenter.net, <http://www.charrettecenter.net/>

The National Charrette Institute, <http://www.charretteinstitute.org/>

Segedy, J. A., & Johnson, B. E. (n.d.). *The neighborhood Charrette handbook*. University of Louisville, <http://www.louisville.edu/org/sun/planning/char.html>

Comparative Research

Ragin, C. C. (1987). *The comparative method: Moving beyond qualitative and quantitative strategies*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Policy Research Web Sites

The Center of Budget and Policy Priorities, <http://www.cbpp.org/>

The Electronic Policy Network, <http://movingideas.org/>

Stateline.org, <http://www.stateline.org/>, researches policy issues state by state.

Voluntary Sector Public Policy Toolbox, <http://www.ginsler.com/html/toolbox.htm>, helps nonprofit organizations research and impact public policy in Canada.

Policy Research Guides

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