Course Objectives:
Creating and “exercising” mathematical analysis in ways that inform policy and decision making is an art. One can acquire some relevant skills by taking “methods” classes or by reading and discussing case studies describing others’ models, but true mastery comes only with practice, notably practice starting with a blank sheet of paper and creating one’s own analysis from scratch. This course offers students the chance to practice that art in a “high-feedback” environment.

The primary goal is to improve modeling judgment (e.g., good sense about what should be included or excluded from a model or analysis), creativity (practice creating models from whole cloth), and strategy (weaving analytical insights into a coherent decision-relevant “story”). Students may also expand their repertoire of technical skills, but that is not a primary objective, and specific methodological approaches will neither be taught nor tested.

Course Structure:
This year analyses will revolve around one topic: marijuana legalization. It is described in more detail in the statement of work document associated I will distribute on the first day of class.

In most respects the class will work together to produce one collective analysis, as in a systems synthesis project, rather than having each person complete each assignment in parallel, although we will use some parallel work as a quality control mechanism.

The class activities will adapt in response to our changing understanding, opportunities, and how the policy debate evolves. Almost certainly there will be mid-course changes. If you are uncomfortable with that vagueness you should not take the class. I am confident that this will be an interesting and valuable learning experience, and as a professor I will make sure that there are chances to reflect on what we’re doing and to learn general lessons. However, we will do analyses that generate insight for the actual debate. Inasmuch as the debate is evolving and we do not know what insights we will discover, I cannot provide a detailed syllabus.

Course grade will consider class participation, internal policy memos describing analyses, and contributions toward final deliverables. However, the overarching paradigm is that you will be rewarded for creating insight that is useful for the policy makers and policy process we seek to inform.

Prerequisites:
The class is intended for MSPPM and MSHCPM students, but there are no formal course prerequisites. Anyone who is smart and creative will be able to find ways to contribute to the team. It is also important that you be a good team player.

The one firm prerequisite is an ability to approach the topic objectively, without prejudice concerning the policy outcome. You have to be able to “call them as you see
them” and to be emotionally detached from the policy implications that the analysis produces. If you have a strong prior position on marijuana legalization or are unwilling or unable to work within a consequentialist framework of policy analysis, please do not enroll in the course.