The Learning Curve: Contributor's Guide

The Learning Curve: A quick overview
The Learning Curve is a series of data-driven essays on timely education policy topics intended to inform and empower policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels.

Learning Curve essays contain original data analysis on a topic of policy interest. Essays are published as PDFs, accompanied by a comprehensive, accessible summary for readers who want to understand the key points quickly. In the interest of transparency and reproducibility, data and code will be made available (whenever possible) to readers who want to dig into the data themselves.

The Learning Curve publishes essays from Urban Institute researchers and outside authors. Essays are published in Urban's templates and promoted by Urban's Center on Education Data and Policy. Authors will have full access to Urban's team of research and communications professionals, and all content will go through a standard quality assurance process.

What makes the Learning Curve different?
Unlike traditional academic papers, Learning Curve essays are *timely, accessible, and narrowly focused*. Unlike blog posts, Learning Curve essays are *data driven* and spend some (but not too much!) time on methods and data concerns. And though we encourage authors to provide policy solutions based on their findings, the Learning Curve also emphasizes *making data transparent and available* so policymakers and other stakeholders can explore and come to their own conclusions.

Who is the audience?
Education decisionmakers at the federal, state, and local levels who are looking to advance system-level change to improve outcomes for students, particularly students who are underserved by the education system.

What does an essay look like?
An essay should be roughly 2,000 words, with a handful of charts and tables. Urban's team will work with authors to determine the right combination of charts and tables, including producing interactive data visualizations where it can help elevate a point.

Given the relatively short word count, essays should have one main point and should stay sharply focused on that point. Urban's team can help you hone that point and your writing.

Your essay will be published with a summary, written by Urban communications staff, and any code or data files you can make available.

What makes a good essay topic?
The ideal essay topic is something of current interest to policymakers where there is a gap in the public conversation. Essays typically analyze the effects of an existing policy (e.g., this essay on New York's free college policy) or the potential effects of a proposed policy (e.g., this essay on a student loan repayment proposal), though more descriptive approaches can also work well (e.g., this essay providing new data on changes in nonpublic schools during the pandemic).

Analyses should be relatively simple and should generate a clear takeaway that you can communicate in a sentence or two. **Essays must involve original data analysis.**

What kind of content is not a fit for the Learning Curve?

- summaries of existing research
- complex analyses (if it requires 1,000 words just to describe your methods, the analysis is too complex)
- opinion-driven commentaries
- essays that endorse specific legislation

What will the process look like?

- To get started, contributors should submit an idea to learningcurve@urban.org. This doesn't need to be a detailed proposal, but please give us a sense of the analysis you expect to do and why you think it's important. Urban staff will be in touch with feedback.
- Once you've gotten the go-ahead from Urban, we'll agree on a timeline for you to write a draft. Urban's research and communications staff will review the draft, and there's the potential for multiple rounds of feedback. This is an iterative process intended to make your essay as strong as possible.
- When everyone's happy with the draft, contributors will submit the text, charts, and code to Urban for quality assurance. Urban will copyedit the text, format the charts, put everything in an Urban template, and check the code.
- During the quality assurance process, Urban will draft a summary and other outreach collateral to promote the essay to target audiences. Contributors will be given a chance to review the summary and other content.
- Once essays and supporting content are published, authors are encouraged to promote their work and are welcome to cross-post on their own platforms. Authors are also welcome to build on their analysis in future work (including academic papers).

Who is funding this effort?
Our current funding is from the Walton Family Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Expectations, payment, and other details
Authors will receive honoraria of $1,000 to $2,500, depending on the analytic content, length, and timeline for the essay.

When applicable, analyses should source data directly from Urban's Education Data Portal (a one-stop shop for all major datasets on schools, districts, and colleges) using the built-in Stata or R package. Urban staff can provide support to authors who are unfamiliar with the Portal.

We expect that statistical code for all analyses will be provided in Stata or R. Authors who wish to conduct analyses in a different software package (e.g., Excel) should request approval before starting work.

We expect authors to be responsive and collaborative throughout the process. Payment will be issued upon publication. If we decide not to move forward with an essay, partial payment will be at Urban's discretion.

Essay structure and style
To meet our mission of *timely, accessible, and narrowly focused* essays, we encourage authors to adopt a less academic writing style than their usual work. Urban staff will work with authors to revise drafts, which should generally follow this outline:
- A brief introductory section that explains the topic and why it is important, provides necessary background, and briefly summarizes the findings. Any discussion of prior related research should be brief and can be expanded on in footnotes as needed.

- A section that describes the analysis and the key findings, using a limited number of charts to illustrate key points (additional findings can be included in an appendix). The data should be identified and the method briefly described, with details about data and methods included in footnotes or an appendix.
- A concluding section focused on the policy implications of the results. This discussion can bring in other relevant research but should focus on tying the results of the essay's original analysis to potential policy decisions.
- A one-sentence biography following the conclusion that includes your current position and your institutional affiliation.

Two notes on style:

- Include references as footnotes (not parenthetical citations or hyperlinks). Urban uses Chicago style, but our editing team can help format references at the copyediting stage.

- Figures and tables should have a title that communicates the figure or table's main point, as well as notes and source lines.