Overview

The Public Affairs Conversation (“PACON”) is a yearlong program for sophomores, juniors and seniors consisting of two courses (fall and spring) and an internship opportunity (in Interim, spring, or summer) that is supported with PACON funding. PACON engages students and faculty to develop an interdisciplinary perspective on American public policy that is informed by the connection between contemporary debates and foundational ideals. The program is distinctive in its particular interdisciplinary approach (bridging politics, economics, philosophy, and religion), in the way that it frames contemporary policy dilemmas in relation to U.S. intellectual history, and in its incorporation of practical work experience (via an internship) into the curriculum. It aspires, above all, to endow students with the capacity to engage rigorously, imaginatively, and civilly with intellectually and ideologically diverse outlooks on American public affairs. The internship opportunity provides students with a context for vocational reflection and further analysis of important issues grounded in practical experience.

Admission to the Program

Admission to the PACON is based on an application process open to all rising sophomores, juniors, and seniors on a rolling basis that begins in January and extends up to spring registration. The total number of students admitted is contingent on student demand and staffing availability. PACON is open to students of all interests and majors.

Course Equivalents for General Education Requirements

By successfully completing the two Public Affairs Conversation courses, a student fulfills the following general education requirements:

- Ethical Issues and Normative Perspectives [EIN];
- Studies in Human Behavior and Society [HBS] (one course);
- Writing in Context Courses [WRI] (one course)

Courses

**PACON 280: Public Affairs I: Foundational Debates**

This course examines American ideals and the tensions among them, ideals such as freedom, community, equality, democracy, justice, responsibility, and authority. The course analyzes the political, economic, moral, and religious dimensions of the debates and decisions that continue to shape American society. It considers classic founding documents, ideas that influenced the founders, and the major thinkers and events relevant to understanding the diverse range of models for government, markets, and society. Not open to first-year students. Offered annually in the fall semester.

**PACON 281: Public Affairs II: Contemporary Controversies**

This contemporary public affairs course examines normative commitments and empirical evidence relevant to the workings of government, markets, and society as applied to contemporary issues. Possible topics include immigration, abortion, education, sexuality, medical care, foreign policy, income inequality and poverty, affirmative action, and responses to climate change. Not open to first-year students. Offered annually in the spring semester.

**Prerequisite:** PACON 280.

The internship component of this program may be satisfied by: ID 295: Internship & Reflection Seminar or ID 294 Academic Internship (0.25, 0.50, or 1.0 credit)

Faculty

**Director, 2019-2020**  
**Michael A. Fuerstein**  
Associate Professor of Philosophy  
social and political philosophy; social epistemology; American pragmatism

**Jamie A. Schillinger**  
Associate Professor of Religion  
Christian thought and ethics; Islamic thought and ethics

**Brendon Westler**  
Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy