

PUBLIC AFFAIRS CONVERSATION

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Why do people disagree so deeply about public policies concerning gun control, healthcare, the environment, and abortion? Why are politics and public affairs more generally so controversial in the USA? The Public Affairs Conversation ("PACON") is a yearlong program for all incoming first year students (fall and spring) and an internship opportunity (following completion of the program) 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 open to all incoming first year students regardless of prospective major in accordance with the registration process for the First Year Seminar. No separate application is needed.

Intended Learning Outcomes for the Program

Courses

PACON 180: 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. Offered annually in the fall semester.

PACON 181: 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. Offered annually in the spring semester. Counts toward public health studies concentration.

Prerequisite: PACON 180.

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

Faculty

Program Director, 2024-2025

Jason T. Marsh

Associate Professor of Philosophy
bioethics; ethical theory and applied ethics; religion and cognitive science

Colin Harris (on sabbatical 2024-25)

Tomson Family Chair of Law and Economics

Brendon Westler

Assistant Professor of Philosophy