

PUBLIC AFFAIRS FOR STUDENTS MATRICULATED BEFORE SEPT. 7, 2021

Public affairs is a broad label that has been used for more than 40 years in higher education and the professions to describe an “eclectic” and “interdisciplinary” approach to the study of organizations and individuals that operate in what is considered the public interest and the social issues and problems with which they are faced. Students who are currently employed in public service or those who aspire to careers in public service might be served by an area of study in Public Affairs. The area of study is designed for those who are interested in serving and bettering society through public service, civic engagement, political and government careers, public communications or non-profit service.

Studies and faculty in Public Affairs often rely upon “input from economics, psychology, sociology, planning, business administration, statistics, law, engineering, and environmental science, in addition to the traditional fields of public administration and political science (1).”

Students interested in concentrations in such subjects or related subjects might consider Public Affairs as an area of study. Depending upon a student’s interest and focus, it might also be desirable or appropriate to consider a degree in Community and Human Services; Social Theory, Social Structure and Change; Business, Management and Economics; or Interdisciplinary Studies. An arts management concentration might also be a degree in The Arts; technology policy might come under a degree in either Science, Mathematics and Technology or Business, Management and Economics.

Students with a degree in Public Affairs should demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the following areas, as appropriate to the concentration. Students may address these competencies in various ways. They could be included in one or more studies or advanced standing components and might not necessarily appear as these explicit titles.

Students need not demonstrate that they have a separate study or course in each area.

Theoretical and Philosophical Concepts

The theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of subjects related to the student’s concentration should be explored. Knowledge of the philosophy of American government is essential for most students in Public Affairs.

Most introductory courses in political science, public administration, public policy, criminal justice, public communications and the like examine relevant theory. At the upper level, most disciplines include studies of theory (e.g., political theory, communications theory). Studies in international politics and international relations usually include an examination of relevant political theory. Organizational Behavior examines theories of how individuals behave in the workplace and other organizations. For criminal justice students, criminology is the study of theories of criminal behavior, and studies in penology or theories of justice (including restorative justice) examine the theory of corrections and punishment. Studies in ecology and global climate change are among the subjects that might meet this expectation for students in environmental policy. In addition, some studies include theoretical concepts that might be appropriate for any student in

Public Affairs. For example, the study of economics can provide an understanding of how markets work, when they don’t work well and how public sector interventions might improve upon market outcomes.

Historical and Comparative Perspectives

Knowledge of the historical origins of American government and the public institutions that are central to the student’s concentration should be demonstrated. The student should also have an understanding of how these institutions compare to those of other countries, of other times or of jurisdictions within the United States.

Again, most introductory courses cover the history of the institutions being studied. Studies that provide an understanding of federalism and the constitutional form of U.S. government are especially important to students in Public Affairs, including introductory studies in American politics and government and U.S. history and advanced studies in constitutional history and constitutional law. In addition, studies that compare American political and governmental systems and those of other nations or that compare different criminal justice, emergency management, media or other public systems or organizations ordinarily compare their origins and the structures within which they operate.

Social Context

Most studies in the various Public Affairs concentrations examine social issues and how they should be addressed.

Most policy, ethics and economics studies would satisfy this guideline, and studies dealing with race, class and gender; crime; environmental problems; disaster; the impact of media or technology on society; urban affairs; international affairs; health problems, and social welfare deal with social perspectives and issues.

Legal or Policy Environment

Public institutions operate within a legal environment and are affected by – if not part of the process of creating – public policy. Students should demonstrate an understanding of how these factors affect their areas of concentration.

Studies in constitutional law or constitutional history would satisfy this guideline for students in political science, public administration or public policy, although students in the latter two areas might be expected to have a greater concentration of competencies in this area. Knowledge of administrative law would also provide such competency for students in public administration, public policy or government. Students in public communications or journalism should understand the role that media coverage plays in influencing public policy. They might also meet this guideline by a study of communications law.

Economic, Financial or Budgetary Issues

Students in Public Affairs should understand the economic and financial environment in which they function.

Much of public policy is driven by economic and budgetary issues. Studies of public policy would address this competency for many students and others may need more depth in economics. The rationale should address the decision. For students who desire to function in governmental management positions, the study of

public finance and budgeting would be important. For others – such as those in public communications or criminology – a general study of economics would suffice. Private-sector finance and budgeting might be relevant for students in non-profit management as part of a degree in Public Affairs.

Ethics, Values and Diversity

Degree programs in Public Affairs should reflect a student's understanding of ethical concerns related to the area of concentration and the values – good, bad or indifferent – that society places on the development of public policy.

All policy studies examine societal values and how policy is developed to advance them. The extent to which public institutions meet or fail to meet the needs of a diverse population also involves consideration of ethics and values. Thus, studies which in some way address issues of race, class, gender, disabilities or discrimination against oppressed groups – including those related to human resources, affirmative action and employment law – provide knowledge and understanding of the need for diversity. The study of ethics might be accomplished through a study of general ethical principles, a study of professional ethics covering a number of different fields or a study which examines ethical issues and problems in a particular profession related to the student's concentration.

Communications Skills

The development of oral and/or written communications skills is important in all concentrations in Public Affairs.

Studies should demonstrate skills in writing, report-writing, interviewing or others relevant to the concentration through studies at the advanced level.

Research Skills and Information Analysis

Obtaining and evaluating information is a key skill for students in Public Affairs.

A student's program should demonstrate skill in the use of quantitative, qualitative, interviewing, investigative or other research skills relevant to the concentration, as well as the ability to analyze that information. Study beyond the introductory level should be expected. The study of social science research methods would be satisfactory for many students. Students in law enforcement might meet this guideline through study of investigative techniques. Students in journalism would show sufficient understanding of this competency through a study of investigative reporting. In emergency management or homeland security, environmental policy or health policy, familiarity and analysis of geographic information systems or crime mapping might suffice. Qualitative methods and historiography might be sufficient for students in public history.

Technical and Scientific Knowledge

For some students in Public Affairs, specific technical or scientific knowledge might be necessary.

Again, knowledge of geographic information systems might satisfy this guideline for some students. Basic knowledge of environmental science should be expected for those in environmental policy, and some understanding of health systems and the economics

of health care should be expected of those in health policy. For students in public health, knowledge of bio-statistics, epidemiology or nutrition might meet this guideline. A student interested in forensic investigation should have knowledge of biology and chemistry, and those interested in forensic accounting should have knowledge of basis accounting practices. A political science student who anticipates working with polling data will need knowledge of statistics that goes beyond what is offered in an introductory statistics course or a basic study of research methods. Emergency management students may need a variety of technical and scientific knowledge – geology, geography, climatology, epidemiology, risk management or information technology – depending up the focus of the student's program and the area of specialization. Journalism students and those in public communications or public relations should be expected to have advanced writing studies appropriate to their area of interest and, perhaps, technical production knowledge.

Public Affairs concentrations include, but are not limited to:

Government-related

- Public Administration
- Public Policy
- American Government and Politics
- Political Science
- International Affairs
- Women in Government
- Urban Planning

Law-related

- Criminal Justice
- Legal Studies
- Law, Justice and Society
- Homeland Security
- Social Justice and Peace Studies

Communications

- Public Communications
- Journalism
- Public Relations

Health-related

- Health Policy
- Environmental Policy
- Public Health

Other

- Emergency Management
- Public History
- Non-Profit Management and Leadership
- Gender Policy
- Technology Policy
- Urban Affairs
- Arts Management

These are examples of common majors or concentrations in colleges, schools and departments of public affairs in other institutions of higher

learning. Many others may be appropriate concentration titles for a degree in Public Affairs, as well.

1 Mackelprang, A.J. and A. Lee Fritschler. "Graduate Education in Public Affairs/Public Administration," 35 Public Administration Review 182-90 (Mar.-Apr. 1975)