

**To:** Students interested in majoring the Public Policy major  
**From:** Nathaniel Beck, Prof. Department of Politics  
**Re:** Why you want to major in Public Policy (and how you figure out whether you want to do this)  
**Date:** September 2015

Many undergraduates have a strong interest in public policy. And even if you don't think you have such an interest, it is quite likely that in your life you will be faced with either creating, implementing or understanding policy issues. And even if this does not come to pass, the skills and ideas that you learn in the major will stand you in good stead for whatever you do.

What do people do with a policy degree? As with most undergraduate degrees, you can do almost anything. Some students will work for a while in a policy position and then go on to a policy masters program; other may pursue the masters more directly. Students interested in a masters should consult CAS and Wagner about pursuing a joint BA/Masters degree at NYU. Others will go on to law school while still others will pursue their policy passions in any arena. Whatever you do the skills and tools you learn in the program will be very valuable, and their value will only grow as you advance in your career. Obviously if you want to go to a professional school after graduating you have to make sure to complete any requirements they may have.

### **The core**

The idea underlying the major is that there are a core set of skills and tools that underly the study of public policy. These tools are drawn from diverse disciplines such as economics, political science, law and statistics. The required courses in the major (coupled with some additional electives) are designed to get you those skills and tools. Sometimes learning skills and tools without substance seems a lot like being told to eat your spinach before dessert. Understanding the design of policy, all the required courses (perhaps beyond the two prerequisite courses) do a nice job of mixing spinach and dessert (and the strength you get from the spinach makes the dessert even better).

Since many of the tools are based on either political science or microeconomics, a course in each area is pre-requisite to declaring the major and to all the required courses in the major. Students will complete the microeconomics requirement by taking ECON-UA2, Introduction to Microeconomics. Students should note that MATH-UA9 or the equivalent is prerequisite to the microeconomics course. This is not a very serious math prerequisite, but if you both never did the math prerequisite in high school and vowed not to do it at NYU, perhaps Public Policy is not the right major for you. This said, the mathematics bar for the major is not very high.

The second pre-requisite is one of the introductory Politics lecture courses (Power and Politics, AKA American Politics, Comparative Politics or International Relations). All three serve a great introduction, but it is likely that most Public Policy majors will take Power and Politics. But any of these courses are not just for learning about political structures, but are, more importantly, great for understanding a few basic theoretical concerns that underly the study of public policy.

Students in the major will then build on these skills with three courses taught in Wagner. The Politics of Public Policy (AKA Introduction to Public Policy) builds on the analytic skills and theories in the context of what is important in public policy. The Economics of Public Policy builds on the microeconomics course. Both of these courses mix spinach and dessert, and focus on how the critical ideas relate to the analysis of public policy.

The third course is Statistics for Public Policy. Unlike many traditional undergraduate statistics courses, the focus is again on what is important for public policy. Thus as much attention is paid to how do we come to know that what we found may be correct (research design) as to the traditional statistical skills. Course projects will work on tasks relevant to analyzing policy. (Thus it is critical that policy majors take this course and not some other statistics course.)

Finally, there are important normative issues that are critical to understanding policy: what should be done? Thus students are required to choose a course which relates ethics or justice concepts to public policy.

## **Electives**

At this point students must take two elective skills related courses. These are chosen in conjunction with the program advisors, and should either deepen core skills or allow students to learn new skills relevant to their work. Thus students can do further work in political science, statistics or economics (choosing from a list of courses that are also relevant to public policy) or work on different skills such as ethnography.

Because both the normative course and the additional skills course draw on existing CAS courses, the program advisors will publish a list of acceptable courses before the registration period. At that point students must meet with the program advisors to find courses that best work for them.

Still looks like a lot of spinach? Now come the policy courses. Students must take four electives in one or more policy areas. Again, this is done in close consultation with program advisors (who again will make a list of acceptable electives available at registration time). Some students know that their policy interests are in, say, the environment, and may choose four electives in the environmental area. Others may be looking around, and so may choose electives four different policy areas.

## **The capstone and beyond**

Finally, students get to apply all that they have learned in a one semester capstone course. Here students will undertake a project that uses all that they have learned to devise/analyze/evaluate a policy of interest. The capstone course is taught as a small seminar which is devoted to helping students undertake their project rather than learn new skills.

Students are encouraged to do elective work (so other than the core and capstone) which take advantage of NYU's extensive global network. The most obvious site for such work is DC, but students with international policy interests can of course work at any appropriate global site. At this moment arrangements with some global sites are being worked out; as always, the choice of both a global site and specific courses at that site will be worked out in consultation with program advisors. Students who go to DC will do an internship. While the internship does not count towards the course requirements, it will give students an opportunity to start thinking about their capstone project. As always, the internship will be chosen in consultation with the program advisors.

Students may do an honors project which builds on the capstone. They would do this in an additional honors seminar which is again devoted to helping students complete the honors project. Usual honors rules apply.

## **What should you now**

If you are a current freshman, look over the prerequisites for the major. You would ideally take micro during this year, and also the politics general lecture course. If you are thinking of taking statistics, you **MUST** take the quantitative methods for public policy listed under Wagner. Remember, that is offered only every Fall, so if you do not take this fall you must take next fall. But if at the end of the year you have taken the basic micro and politics courses you are fine.

If you are a current sophomore, either you have taken micro or are taking it this semester (so you can take economics of public policy in the spring). You should also be taking the Wagner quantitative methods for public policy course this semester, since it is only offered each fall. By the end of this year you should have taken micro, economics for public policy, the required political science lecture course, quantitative methods for public policy and politics of public policy (offered both semesters).

If you are a current junior you should be well on your way in the major and should have clear plans for your coursework.

The major is **VERY** structured, so if you have any questions, you should contact either me or Prof. Carrie Nordlund (Wagner) or the advising office in Wagner.

Even if you cannot be a policy major you are welcome to take the policy courses so long as you meet the prerequisites.

## **Advising**

Academic advising for the program is done by Prof. Carrie Nordlund in Wagner and Prof. Nathaniel Beck in CAS. Please see details on the web page about contacting them. If your questions are related more to CAS rules you should consult a CAS advisor. Since this is a new major many details are yet to be worked out; this should not worry you. And if (when?) glitches occur, they will be dealt with and you will be fine. There is a lot of academic advisement in the program and we will take care of you.

## **Why major in public policy and not ....?**

There are lots of good relevant majors at NYU. If you love economics, do economics (taking as many policy related courses at possible). Same thing for Politics. Either of these majors will let you go deeper into some skills at a cost of flexibility in terms of policy courses. On the other hand, if you are really interested in the environment, Environmental Studies is a great option; there are similar options for other areas (the arts, global health). In those majors you have to have a clear interest in a single policy arena, and you will pick up more about that arena and fewer general skills than you would in public policy. Fortunately these are all great options and there is room in any undergraduate major to pursue courses outside the major. So policy students interested in more political science than is required are of course free to take such courses; similarly, political science majors are free to take public policy courses so long as they meet the prerequisites. The same is true for all the other majors (but do be careful on prerequisites). The program advisors are happy to discuss the pros and cons of the various options.

Since many of the skills and ideas stressed in the major show up in the Politics and Economics prerequisite courses, you will get a good idea very early if you will like the policy major. If you like the prerequisites great; go on and do the major, since you want some dessert after the spinach. If you are iffy with the prerequisites, remember that dessert is still to come. And if you hate the spinach, maybe the policy major is not right for you. At that point you will simply have taken two very useful courses and have discovered something about yourself.

## **In the end**

If you are interested in the major, consult either myself or Prof. Nordlund. The choice of a major is a very important one for you (though probably for reasons you have no idea about at this moment).

## **The legal boilerplate**

While you won't read the formal documents, the official rules of the major are governed by the bulletin copy which is on this web site. So if you are looking for a formal contract, go to the formal rules.