The Policy Research Shop at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Center bridges the gap between public policy research and civic engagement for undergraduates at Dartmouth College. Through the Policy Research Shop, a student-staffed, faculty-mentored research enterprise, our students gain experience in the public policy arena by providing high-quality, objective social science research and analysis on policy issues critical to policymakers and public officials at the state, county, and local levels in New Hampshire and Vermont.

To participate in the Policy Research Shop (PRS), students must complete one of two public policy research methods courses (PBPL 45: Introduction to Public Policy Research or PBPL 48: Policy Analysis and Local Governance) in which they undergo extensive training in the methods of public policy research and analysis. Students meet with policymakers at the state level in PBPL 45 and at the county and local levels in PBPL 48. These policymakers not only inform students about the policymaking processes at various levels of government, they also introduce students to current policy issues under consideration and assist the students in providing useful analysis to them on these topics.

Student teams (usually three students per team) design the research plans to undertake these policy projects. The teams present their designs and preliminary research to a panel of faculty mentors and to their classmates. Following the successful completion of these classes, students may continue to work, for salary or academic credit, on their projects by joining the PRS in subsequent academic terms. Once the projects are completed and students have developed effective formal presentations, the PRS students travel to the relevant state capitals (Concord and Montpelier) or to county and local government bodies to present formal testimonies. PRS students do not advocate for particular policy outcomes. Rather, the PRS provides nonpartisan, non-ideological social science research that provides policymakers with a variety of policy options on a pro bono basis.

About the Policy Research Shop

On Thursday, February 16, 2012, PRS students Chinedu Udeh ’12, Lorelei Yang ’15, and Andrew Clay ’12, meet with Vermont House Committee on Natural Resources and Energy Chairman, Tony Klein, after presenting their research findings on establishing an Office of Ombudsman in the State of Vermont.

On Wednesday, February 8, 2012, PRS students, Zheng-Yi Yang ’14, Danielle Unterschutz ’14, and Ayushi Narayan ’14, presented their research findings to the New Hampshire Legal Advice and Referral Center in Concord, NH.
The PRS model of teaching and learning seeks to engage students and to expose them to the public policymaking process in ways that reach beyond the traditional classroom experience. We aim to create a learning environment that is found “in and out of the classroom, on and off campus.” We have jettisoned the traditional learning model that entails individual efforts by students in the form of class papers, midterms, and final examinations in favor of group-based research enterprises that engage students with real world policymakers in efforts to produce useful policy analyses that will serve policymakers in their deliberations. The group efforts by students are guided by faculty mentors who assist them in focusing their research questions and in implementing their research designs. Faculty mentors also assist students in writing concisely for an applied policy audience and in crafting oral testimonies that provide the key findings of their research efforts. PRS student teams typically spend hundreds of hours outside of the classroom setting working on their policy projects. In addition to data gathering and analysis, PRS students deliver mock presentations of their findings to meet the time constraints established by the policy clients. The culmination of the team efforts is reached through formal testimonies before state legislative committees, statewide commissions, county commissions, or local select boards and councils wherein students provide clear and concise presentations of their findings and answer questions from policymakers following their formal testimonies.

“Working in the Policy Research Shop (PRS) has been an incredible experience that has enriched my academic life at Dartmouth. I began working for the PRS during my sophomore fall and was immediately exposed to quantitative and qualitative research methods. This experience has not only helped me with research projects in other courses but also assignments in my off-term internships. The PRS has also exposed me to different areas of public policy and has helped me to focus my interests. Through my work at the PRS, I developed an interest in criminal justice policy. I have pursued this interest in my coursework and internships, and I plan to attend law school after graduation to prepare for a career in criminal law.”

~ Grace Hart ’13

PRS students, Elisabeth Ericson ’11, and Brian Freeman ’11 and Alicia Modeen ’10, respond to questions from Rep. Bill Butynski (Chair) and Rep. Ricia McMahon (Vice-Chair).
The Policy Research Shop is a unique opportunity for undergraduate students at Dartmouth College that provides students with real life experience in public policy research and delivers high-quality, objective research on critical policy issues to public policymakers in New Hampshire and Vermont. The typical path pursued by Dartmouth students interested in public policy and the PRS entails taking PBPL 5: Introduction to Public Policy during the winter term of their first year. In any subsequent fall term (sophomore, junior, or senior year), students take PBPL 45: Introduction to Public Policy Research. This course is a hybrid in the sense that it is substantively focused on state politics and policy and is also focused on applied social science research methods. This course is project-based and includes two team-based projects—1) analysis of survey data collected by PRS students in the NH State of the State Poll several months earlier for real world organized interests in New Hampshire (e.g., realtors, state education association, AARP) and 2) analysis of a policy issue brought to the class by a state legislative committee in New Hampshire or Vermont, by a statewide commission in either state, or by an executive agency or department in either state. Each project entails student presentations before the class and a panel of faculty mentors.

Following the completion of the class, the vast majority of the PBPL 45 students move into the PRS to complete their projects for state policymakers and to begin new projects once the initial projects are completed. PRS students spend most of the months of January and February completing their policy reports and getting ready for their formal testimonies. These formal presentations begin in late January and continue through February, March, and April (in keeping the legislative calendars in both states). Once the initial projects are completed and presented, new proposals from state executive agencies as well as those not undertaken by students in PBPL 48: Policy Analysis and Local Governance during the winter term from county and local government entities are entertained by new PRS groups. These projects come to fruition during the spring term or are continued into the summer term. Professor Ronald G. Shaiko, senior fellow and associate director of the Rockefeller Center, teaches PBPL 5 and PBPL 45 and directs the Policy Research Shop. He is assisted by two post-doctoral fellows who co-manage the day-to-day operations of the PRS.

~ Lucy Pollard ’10
NEW HAMPSHIRE SPOTLIGHTS

RECENT NEW HAMPSHIRE PRS POLICY BRIEFS


DEPARTMENT OF SAFETY

On Thursday, March 8, 2012, three PRS students, Mike Danaher ’13, Amy Couture ’14, and Tina Meng ’14, from Policy Research Shop, traveled to the New Hampshire Department of Safety (DOS) in Concord, NH to testify before Commissioner of Safety John Barthelmes and the directors of the Division of Motor Vehicles, State Police, Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Fire Safety and Fire Marshal, Fire Standards and Training/EMS, Emergency Communications and 911, and Administration. The team summarized their findings from twenty-one case studies and many interviews with policy makers, and synthesized their findings by communicating “best practices” for the department and each division. This presentation was the culmination of more than five months of cooperation between the PRS students, NH DOS leadership, and professional strategic planning consultants. After the presentation the students responded to questions and comments from the Commissioner and the division directors.

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT WITH GOVERNOR

Following up on their testimony before the Department of Safety, Danaher, Couture, and Meng traveled back to Concord on May 10, 2012 to brief Governor John Lynch on the findings they had presented to the Department of Safety in their PRS Policy Brief, “Performance Measurement for State Governmental Agencies: Comparative Case Studies.” After the PRS testimony before the senior staff of the Department of Safety, Commissioner of Safety John Barthelmes contacted Governor Lynch to make him aware of the work of the PRS students on strategic planning models and performance measurement in governmental agencies. Governor Lynch then requested that the PRS students brief him on their findings. The PRS students met with the governor as well as his senior policy staff and representatives from the Department of Safety and the Department of Environmental Services to discuss the wider application of their findings across all state agencies and departments. Ben Schifberg ’13 co-authored the PRS Policy Brief with Danaher, Meng, and Couture but was unable to attend the briefings.
ONE VOICE CONFERENCE
Four Policy Research Shop students convened a day-long conference, “One Voice: A Conference and Discussion on Homeless Shelters in New Hampshire and Vermont,” for more than two dozen homeless shelter executive directors and state officials from New Hampshire and Vermont on Monday, May 24, 2010. The PRS students—Margaret Goldstein ’10, Nickolas Barber ’10, Kelsey Clark ’11 and Nina Brekelmans ’12—shared their analysis of the ways in which homeless shelters care for their guests in New Hampshire and Vermont based on the research they had conducted during the previous six months. The students presented their findings on how homeless individuals are cared for in the two states and helped craft guidelines for coordination and best practices among homeless shelters.

“This project provides a thorough, honest, and objective perspective on the homeless shelter system in New Hampshire and Vermont,” said Goldstein. “Our goal is to provide information and feedback in order to make this system as strong as it can be. These shelters are doing incredibly important work for homeless individuals; we believe that they can do even more if they collaborate, and we are hoping to be a part of that process.” The PRS took on the project at the request of Sara Kobylenksi, executive director at the Upper Valley Haven, a homeless shelter in White River Junction, Vermont. At the conclusion of the conference, Kobylenksi expressed her gratitude to the PRS team members, “The conference exceeded my highest expectations. Thank you for your great efforts.”

THE STATE OF HOMELESSNESS IN VERMONT
Representatives of the Vermont Agency of Human Services who attended the One Voice conference later approached the PRS to analyze all of the homelessness data available in the State of Vermont in order to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of the data gathering systems in place across the state. A PRS team of six students worked for more than eight months to compile and analyze the homelessness data and to organize the data by county. On June 21, 2011, the students presented their final report, “The State of Homelessness in Vermont: 2011 Annual Summary,” to officials in the Vermont Agency of Human Services.
Each spring term since 2008, the Policy Research Shop has undertaken a statewide survey of New Hampshire registered voters. Each New Hampshire State of the State Poll sample has included more than 400 respondents. Survey questions vary each year but focus on the current state of politics and public policy in the state and the nation. If ongoing PRS projects would benefit from statewide survey data, then questions are added to the survey instrument each year. In addition to PRS students participating in the survey design, telephone surveying, data input, and data analysis, students from PBPL 10: Statistical Analysis for Public Policy and a course offered by the government department at Dartmouth on political polling also participate in generating questions, telephone surveying, and data analysis. Survey results are circulated across the state and the nation with coverage by numerous media outlets including Politico, The Hill, Race for 2012.com, The Argo Journal, maddow.blog.msnbc.com, abcnews.com, realclearpolitics.com, talkingpointsmemo.com, The Huffington Post, The Valley News, The Concord Monitor, and The Boston Globe.

“The Policy Research Shop marked the first time in my college career that I produced work for an audience other than my peers or my professors. Although at first daunting, the process of conducting original research and presenting it before elected officials and stakeholders in a formal setting challenged me to rise to my greatest potential. The sense of achievement I felt after completing a project for the Policy Research Shop was different from anything I had felt in a classroom setting, and gave me the confidence to excel at internships and eventually my job.”

~ Karen Doster ’11
In addition to producing policy briefs for state legislative committees, state agencies, and statewide commissions, students in the PRS also conduct research and produce policy reports for county and local governments in New Hampshire and Vermont. PRS projects have been delivered to members of the Grafton County (NH) Commission, to local government officials in Burlington, VT, Windsor, VT, Norwich VT, Claremont, NH, Hanover, NH, and Lebanon, NH, as well as to the Vermont League of Cities and Towns and the New Hampshire League of Cities and Towns.

The work we did at the Policy Research Shop affected my entire Dartmouth experience. It strengthened my ability to do research in other areas. It made me think more critically about issues in other classes, and it improved my public speaking. My ability to collaborate and work as part of a team also improved because I learned how to do deal with different working styles.

When I was interviewing for jobs after graduation, my experience with the Policy Research Shop is the one thing that came up every time. Regardless of what career you pursue after college, the Policy Research Shop is directly relevant to everything because, let’s face it, you’ll always do research in something. You’re always presenting your work, whatever you’re doing. And you’re always asked to justify and defend what you’ve found. People who interviewed me were interested in my experience with the Policy Research Shop because they’re always looking for people who can solve difficult problems, work in a team, and defend what they’ve discovered. The Policy Research Shop does all of that. It changed my life.

David Lumbert ’12

On Tuesday, November 1, 2011, three PRS students, Michael Sanchez ’13, Marissa Greco ’12, and Rick D’Amato ’13, traveled to Haverhill, NH to address the Grafton County Commission and the Grafton County Jail Task Force.

PRS Projects undertaken for county and local governments have focused on a wide array of policy issues, including affordable housing, rural airports, first-responder communications, charter schools, renewable energy incentives, county correctional facilities, brownfield remediation, public transportation, regionalization of town services, poverty reduction strategies, flu pandemic planning, and sustainability incentives.
For students interested in public policy, the PRS is far and away the most significant opportunity at Dartmouth to see a real life application of things they learn in class. I have worked on a variety of different topics for the PRS, including homelessness in Vermont, legal aid in New Hampshire, and healthcare for the elderly in Grafton County. Each project I have worked on has been intellectually engaging and given me the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of how local politics work as well as a greater grasp of a number of today's salient topics. The PRS provides students with a unique opportunity to both learn a great deal about the way policy works in application and have the potential to have a positive impact on the lives of others.

The PRS has provided me with a number of tools and experiences that have helped me both inside and outside of the classroom. The experience I have gained doing data analysis, making professional reports, and giving presentations to state and local government organizations is far beyond anything I could have learned in a classroom. In addition to providing valuable presentation and research skills that have assisted me greatly in my classes, my experiences working for the PRS have been invaluable in my internships during off terms as well as helping start my career once I exit college. Overall, I consider the PRS to be the most valuable organization I became a part of at Dartmouth College, not only because it provided me with valuable skills, but because it gave me a chance to make a difference in the real world as an undergrad, which is an extremely rewarding opportunity.

FUNDING

The Policy Research Shop began in the winter term of 2005 with three students and one faculty mentor working on a single project. During the 2012-2013 academic year, more than fifty students will participate in the PRS guided by four faculty mentors. This growth over a fairly short period of time was facilitated by support from two foundations and the U.S. Department of Education. Initial funding for the PRS was provided by a small grant from the Surdna Foundation. In 2007, the Ford Foundation provided a $300,000 grant for three years to support the PRS. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education, through its Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), awarded the Nelson A. Rockefeller Center a $750,000, three-year grant to expand the PRS to its current levels of student participation and policy brief production.

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CONTACT

For more information about the Policy Research Shop, please visit our website—http://rockefeller.dartmouth.edu/shop/ or contact the PRS Director, Professor Ronald G. Shaiko, Senior Fellow and Associate Director for Curricular and Research Programs at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Center at Ronald.G.Shaiko@Dartmouth.edu or by telephone at (603) 646-9146. You may also contact the PRS Program Coordinator, Jane DaSilva, at (603) 646-2229.

2012-2013 PRS Faculty Mentors: Professors Matthew Cravens, Margaret Post, Ronald Shaiko, and Timothy Ruback.