

## Strategic Priorities

---

### UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PUBLIC POLICY CENTER

#### *Priority 1.*

The Center's top priority is to preserve our statewide reputation for excellence in policy relevant research and engagement while expanding our public policy impact across the nation (and, ultimately, internationally). Although we will continue to primarily address policy issues of importance to the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of Nebraska's government (the Center's practice of actively working with all three branches of government is unique among university policy centers), we will change from what heretofore has been a generalist strategy (work on virtually any topic of interest to the state, or at least link policymakers with expertise at the University of Nebraska) to a specific focus on five research/engagement areas:

- (1) Behavioral Health and Human Services;
- (2) Health Information Technology, Information Systems, and Health and Human Services Information and Referral Systems;
- (3) Deliberation, Democracy, and Policy Input;
- (4) Water Science, Law, and Policy;
- (5) Access, Equity, and Fairness in Government Services.

By focusing on these five areas – and not working much, if at all, in other areas – the Center will be able to connect even more strongly with the University's core values. The five specified policy areas are important locally, statewide, and nationally. They allow the Center to address important societal issues. The Center's current staff has the expertise to do excellent work in these areas: They are the foundation of our current projects, and each area links with expertise at the University. The five areas cover topics that are important to underserved and underrepresented groups. The work will allow the Center to broaden its opportunities to partner with those from diverse backgrounds because of the nature of the topics encompassed in the five areas.

The Center's strategic plan allows us to address a major problem the Center has been facing: We have the paradoxical problem of having become too successful. During the past year we have found that the Center has become too big in order to effectively handle all the needs associated with our numerous projects (particularly the large, federally-funded projects). Our office space is not large enough to house the 40 people currently on staff; consequently, we have subleased office space elsewhere in the same building. We do not have sufficient discretionary funds to hire the numbers and level of support staff needed to operate an enterprise as large as we have become.

The Center's intention is to reduce to a size of around 25-30 staff and maintain a portfolio of about 8-10 projects totaling approximately \$1.0-1.5 million. We can continue to be an excellent Center with present resources if we scale back.

**Internal actions** to be taken to achieve a reduction in Center size include eschewing opportunities to work on projects in areas other than the five specified areas; becoming selective and cautious regarding the projects we take on, even within the priority research/engagement areas, so that we do not have too much work; and reducing the numbers of people working at the Center. The Center will continue to be an entrepreneurial unit, but we will not be as ambitious as we have in the past in trying to expand the numbers and size of Center projects.

The **timeline** for beginning is immediate. We have rejected opportunities to pursue or participate in new projects (even those projects related to the five priority areas), and we have chosen not to replace staff members who have left the Center.

**Success** will mean:

- maintaining a portfolio of grants and contracts addressing the five research/engagement areas, totaling \$1.0-1.5 million – but not more – in annual external revenue by the end of 2005-06;
- increasing scholarship by 50% in 2005-06 (from four to six external publications) and by an additional 20-30% each year for the next three years;
- other indicia of national recognition, such as invitations to serve on national committees, and highlighting of Center's activities and work products by national or governmental organizations (in the past year, examples have included the Center's work being used as the basis for national standards for Information and Referral data systems, and the Center's disaster mental health training curricula being identified as a model by SAMHSA);
- strategically connecting with University departments (e.g., Political Science) and programs (e.g., Water Resource Initiative) and involving more faculty from the University in our work, as well as being asked more frequently by faculty to be involved in their research/engagement activities related to the Center's five research areas;
- maintaining the Center as a research service learning outlet for undergraduates and graduate students; and,
- maintaining or increasing our Climate scores as we downsize.

**Actions required by others** are only necessary if the Center is to grow.

### ***Priority 2.***

The Center's second priority relates to our education efforts. Regardless of whether the Center downsizes, grows, or remains the same size, we will continue to provide research and engagement service learning opportunities at the PPC for undergraduates and graduate students. We will expand our academic service learning opportunities. We would like to become more involved with classroom teaching opportunities, partnering with faculty from the University in co-

teaching small honors courses for undergraduates interested in policy issues. Finally, we will continue educating the public and students about policy matters via the Thomas C. Sorensen Policy Seminar Series.

## **A. RESEARCH AND ENGAGEMENT SERVICE LEARNING AND ACADEMIC SERVICE LEARNING**

### **1. Public Policy Center Assistantships and Internships**

The Center has provided research and engagement service learning opportunities for over 75 students since its inception in 1998. We plan to continue to provide these opportunities, as they relate to several of the core values of importance to the University. The Center provides real-world opportunities for students to learning about the value of research and engagement for policymakers. In the exit interviews we routinely conduct with students, they have told us about the benefits they have received from working at the Center. Students report the exposure to policy issues they have had, along with different kinds of work they have done and know about from others working at the Center on different projects, as well as the interactions they have had directly with policymakers have given them a depth of understanding and appreciation of policy that complements their coursework and the knowledge they obtain from their majors (undergrads) or training programs (grads). The quality and the range of experiences available from working at the Center have been pointed to by both undergraduates and graduate students as some of the most significant opportunities they have had at the University.

The Center's assistantship and internship experiences stimulate, in some instances, or solidify, in others, a life-long interest in and appreciation of the nuances of the policy environment. It is usual for students to further their education related to policy after working at the Center. Many of our undergrads have decided to study policy, law, and/or political science. A few of our grad students have been inspired to add the Master's of Legal Studies or the Political Science Department's Policy Certificate to their graduate program. Many students - both undergraduates and graduate students - have identified career opportunities related to policy based in part on their experiences. Indeed, the University may wish to highlight students' work opportunities at the Center to assist in student recruitment and retention.

The Center intends to begin developing academic service learning opportunities. We will begin modestly. In May, the Center and the Department of Political Science have agreed to hire someone who will teach the two course undergraduate policy sequence in the Department and will work as a .5 FTE Research Specialist at the Center. The Center will be a potential internship placement for a few appropriate students from the policy classes to augment their classroom experiences.

The numbers of students we will work with during any one semester or the summer period, whether as part of research or academic service learning, depends on the ultimate size of the Center. Regardless of the Center's size, we will continue to involve students in the Center's research and engagement activities as they benefit considerably and so does the Center's research staff.

No external actions other than the ones discussed in Priority 1 are required for the Public Policy Center's Assistantships and Internships, nor are any actions needed to open up selected academic service learning experiences at the Center. The timeline for each of these activities, other than those activities identified in Priority 1 that require external actions, is immediate: We will continue our on-going service learning activities and initiate new ones consistent with the amount of research and engagement efforts in which we are involved. Success for service learning experiences will continue to be determined by informal exit interviews, though the Center is willing to institute more formal evaluations should they be desired.

## 2. Nebraska-based Internships

The Center will continue to help those from the University - whether faculty or students - identify internships in Nebraska, whether with members of the Congressional delegation or with any of the three branches of government. The Center has many contacts, and we want to be of service if possible.

The Center can directly assist a modest number of students (up to five) obtain policy internships with federal, state and local government offices. As indicated in Priority 1, the Center will be focusing on five research/engagement areas. Because Center staff will be working with state and local policy officials in each of these areas, we can easily place five students in these policy offices and agencies. The Center will focus its Nebraska internship placements in these areas unless there is a decision to adopt an aggressive growth strategy for the Center, which would provide the Center with additional resources that can be applied, in part, to helping more students obtain internships as well as helping students find internships beyond the areas in which we will be focusing.

Regardless of its size, the Center will continue to partner on innovative projects like the NSF IGERT application that was a partnership with faculty from Law, Geosciences, School of Natural Resources, and the Law/Psychology Program. Under the IGERT application, the Center will be responsible for developing an internship program for graduate and law students studying water law, policy, and/or natural or social sciences relevant to water law and policy.

Given our intent to downsize, we are planning to discontinue a Nebraska internship program we initiated in the fall semester of 2004-05. We started a program to coordinate with the Offices of Senator Hagel and Nelson. The initiative was intended to offer joint internships with the PPC. Students were to spend half their internship time at the Senator's office and half their time at the PPC. The idea was to provide students with an opportunity to have two kinds of complementary policy experiences. In addition, the joint internship would allow the Center to better serve the Senators' offices by learning about the matters important to the Senators local offices through the shared intern.

We selected two law students for the initiative, and we placed one of the law students in each office. Although it is too early to tell whether the idea is worthwhile, the Center plans to discontinue the initiative after this year unless resources are allocated to allow the Center to undertake an aggressive growth strategy. The joint internship initiative is too time consuming to set up, and in a context of scarce resources the Center cannot expend them on creating joint

internships. Moreover, given the Center's decision to focus its research and engagement efforts, there is no reason to raise expectations of Center assistance or interest in working on issues simply because they are of importance to the Senators and their staffs.

### 3. DC Policy Internship Program

We believe the Center could add value to the University and its undergraduates by coordinating a Washington, D.C., Policy Internship Program. The purpose of the Program would be to provide undergraduates with an opportunity to understand more about national policy issues and policy career options through students' service learning work at an agency or office of the federal government (in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the US government), a not-for-profit organization (e.g., American Psychological Association, United Way of America, or the Urban Institute), or a private, policy-related firm (e.g., The CDM Group- a minority owned consulting group in DC - as well as lobbying and law firms). Students would be able to participate in an internship either during their summers or during one of the academic semesters.

Three aspects of the program would be especially valuable:

- 1) It will provide students with opportunities beyond the traditional stint in a Congressional office.
- 2) The opportunities will be substantive (i.e., not simply sorting mail or routing calls, which sometimes happens with internships), and
- 3) Students and supervising faculty will utilize modern educational technology - for example, Blackboard and other tele-learning tools - that will allow for appropriate academic oversight during the internships.

In addition, there would be UNL-linked coordinators in DC (possibly University faculty who would regularly meet with students in DC; possibly someone who already is working with Nebraska students, such as the coordinator for Senator Hagel's or Senator Nelson's offices; or possibly contracting with a coordinator already working with one of the other colleges or universities in DC that has such a program).

The PPC proposes to coordinate the DC Internship Program; however, there will be partners from across and outside the University. It seems there would be opportunities to use programs like UCARE to not only help to promote the internship opportunities, but also to provide students with some modest support as part of a UCARE-Internship experience.

Assessments of students' experiences will include:

- (1) Students will write about their experiences during their internship as part of what they are required to do for their academic credit (e.g., two page reaction papers every week). This will allow on-going evaluation of student experiences as well as an opportunity to provide feedback.

(2) We will conduct individual "exit interviews" or focus group interviews of students as they conclude their internship, to determine their satisfaction and ideas for improvement, and to get a better sense of "what works" and what does not.

(3) We will track students beyond their internship experience to determine how their experience was applied after college, and how it enhanced their education, employment opportunities, and career paths.

(4) We will routinely solicit formal feedback from internship hosts on program effectiveness and student quality from their perspectives.

As we develop these assessments more precisely, we will look to organizations such as National Society for Experiential Education to obtain tools that have already been created to assess internship experiential learning opportunities as well as other "real world" educational activities.

The DC Policy Internship Program would further the core values related to the experiential education of our students. It also would allow our students to engage with a wide variety of DC policymakers. This would potentially help the University establish a bigger presence in the pantheon of universities whose students participate in and contribute to policymaking during their undergraduate years, and it also could assist in the recruitment and retention of students attracted to a school that offers a wide range of policy opportunities.

Development of the DC Policy Internship program will require external actions. The cost to create and staff a committee of faculty, students, and administrators from across the University would be \$19,285. Twenty-seven potential committee members have already been identified and agreed to participate. The charge of the Committee would be to:

- 1) Develop the Policy Internship Program.
- 2) Initiate internships for a small number of students (two or three) as a pilot.
- 3) Make recommendations to the SVCAA regarding the Program's permanent operation.

The proposed timeline is to have the Committee members meet twice monthly for three months (with subcommittee meetings also a likelihood), then spend four months creating a pilot plan and begin recruitment of initial internship placements, implement semester-long pilot internships for a year, assess the experiences of interns and supervisors, and 18 months after the Committee first meets, make recommendations regarding the future of the program.

## **B. CLASSROOM OPPORTUNITIES**

The Center also has been involved in traditional classroom education. During the Spring 2005 semester, PPC Director Alan Tomkins and UNL Biology Professor Ted Parady co-taught Bios 398H: 'Genetically Modified Foods: Science, Controversy, and Public Policy,' a one-credit Biology honors seminar. The Honors Program contributed some funds to support undergraduate assistance from a PPC URA (Biochemistry and Political Science major). The students evaluated the course very positively, and they indicated they would like to take other one or more credit

courses in such policy areas as Medicaid, Social Security, and Global Warming. The possibilities of policy-topic courses are vast, and while some courses might involve PPC researchers as co-instructors, the PPC could host the classes and help identify appropriate guest speakers from the policy world regardless of whether we are involved in teaching of any specific course.

The core values implicated include preparing students to be life-long learners and synthesizers of disciplinary information (e.g., biology, genetics, technology of genetic engineering) and applied policy matters (e.g., Should labeling be required for genetically modified food products? Should the legislature step in, and, if so, how? What might a Governor's role be in this area? What are the ethical issues at stake, and what is their place in the policy discussion?). External actions required would be someone from the faculty to coordinate the courses. Continued support from the Honors Program would be essential as well. The timeline for further development of policy-topic courses depends on finding someone willing to coordinate the courses. If someone is available, then the courses can be organized fairly quickly. Success will be measured as with other courses: Student evaluation and peer assessment of teaching and the curriculum/course content.

### **C. PUBLIC AND CONTINUING EDUCATION**

The Center has presented nearly 25 policy seminars for students and the public since initiating the Thomas C. Sorensen Policy Seminar Series in the fall of 2000 with funding from the UNL College of Arts & Sciences. We have had hundreds of students and members of the public participate in the seminars. The seminars have addressed numerous topics: American Power in a Fractured World; Environmental Policy; Nation-Building: United States Involvement and Global Perspectives; Participating in the Public Policy Process; Policy Models and Innovations for Small Town Success; Public Policy Formulation and Analysis; Rural and Urban Economic Development; Rural and Urban Education Policy; Rural and Urban Health Policy; Rural and Urban Tax Policy; and Working With the Media.

Each spring/summer we hold a policy seminar on 'Political Leadership.' On March 31, 2005, we are co-sponsoring a policy seminar with Wayne State College on 'Economic Development and Native-American Sovereignty.' There will be participation from members of several different tribes as well as representatives from state, Congressional and other federal offices.

The core values include confronting students and other Nebraskans with a diversity of ideas and people, and promoting life-long learning opportunities. The way we have the Seminar Series currently structured, there are no external actions needed to continue this effort. We have cut down our offerings to just a few per year. We no longer charge even a modest amount to cover parking, food, and our direct expenses. We operate within the funds provided us by the Sorensen bequest through the College of Arts & Sciences. Success is measured by the quality of the programs and the willingness of participants to return to new seminars as they are offered.