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# THE PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE AT WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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## ANNUAL REPORT: 2013-2014

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### THE PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE: WHO WE ARE

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The WCU Public Policy Institute aims to empower the Western North Carolina region to effectively manage real policy problems by mobilizing students, community leaders, faculty, and citizens to discuss and develop viable policy options to create more effective policies.

The Public Policy Institute (PPI) was founded in 1999 as a nonprofit, nonpartisan, independent research and outreach organization. The mission of the PPI is to generate effective public policy responses and alternatives to important political, administrative and social problems that profoundly affect the quality of life in Western North Carolina. Faculty, staff, and students in the PPI use the tools of empirical social science to understand and address public policy problems. The PPI staff writes for multiple audiences, enabling research projects to reach as many constituencies as possible.

The PPI helps undergraduate and graduate students connect the classroom with real-world applications. The specific student contributions vary from project to project, but students frequently collect data, co-author reports and articles, and act as full partners in the research process. Students also interact with external constituents delivering policy recommendations and becoming part of the policy process.

As an explicitly collaborative organization, the PPI welcomes partnerships with local governments and non-profits as well as with faculty throughout the Western Carolina University campus.

Our goals are:

- *To help students* to become active participants in their communities.
- *To improve public policy in the region* by conducting rigorous research on major issues and making it available and understandable to a practitioner audience.
- *To exercise policy leadership* in the region.
- *To obtain resources* to carry out the mission of the institute, and to attract dedicated students, faculty, and staff to assist in carrying out that mission.

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### 2013-2014 SUMMARY OF PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS

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Our work covers a variety of opportunities in the Western North Carolina region, from partnerships with local governments and nonprofits, to graduate research, to community engagement. This year, we were fortunate to employ several talented undergraduate and graduate students, whose work has been a valuable contribution to this year's program of work.

### ***Fall 2013: Town of Maiden Parks Plan***

The PPI makes every effort to place graduate students interested in research into beneficial projects that allow them to manage and lead a project that benefits a local town or agency. This fall, one of our graduate students, Andrew Bowen, assisted the Town of Maiden with a parks plan that guided redevelopment and upgrades for three parks in the town limits. This plan allowed the student to improve organizational and communication skills; employ new research methods and tools such as GIS and environmental assessments; learn real-world budgeting skills; and build relationships with diverse groups to create a proposal that would meet the Town's needs.



### ***Fall 2013: Constitution Day Activities***

For the past several years, the PPI has been responsible for planning and hosting the Constitution Day Celebrations on campus. Constitution Day, celebrated at universities and schools around the country, provides an opportunity for students to increase their knowledge of the Constitution; to improve their ability to read, research and analyze laws; and to improve written and oral communication skills as well as event and project management skills. Students from the PPI and the Pre-Law Club participated in organizing several events across campus in 2013.

This year's events included a "Constitutional Game Show" on the University Center lawn; distribution of free U.S. Constitutions; and a public forum discussing the changes to North Carolina election laws. Held in the Bardo Center lecture hall, the forum included two Western faculty members (Dr. Chris Cooper and Dr. Todd Collins) and two representatives from statewide policy advocacy groups (Zeb Smathers representing *Democracy North Carolina* and Kory Swanson from the *John Locke Foundation*). The hall was overflowing with community members in attendance along with students and staff of WCU. We were also delighted to see some of our elected representatives in attendance.

To further enlighten community members of the changes in voting issues, the PPI created a short written summary of election law changes available in print and online.

### ***Fall 2013: Appalachian Women's History Museum Funding Study***

One of our graduate students, Alexandra O'Halloran, created a focused research project to assist the Appalachian Women's Museum in Dillsboro, North Carolina, in developing a long-term funding strategy. The study provided examples, background, and recommendations for future funding prospects to help restore and manage an historic property in Western North Carolina.

### ***Fall 2013-Spring 2014: Local Government Surveys***

The annual LoGoS (Local Government Survey) has been conducted by the PPI since 2012 and reaches out to all city and county managers in North Carolina to gauge their opinions on current issues facing local governments. This project allows students to improve quantitative, surveying, and communications skills, and provides one of the only recurring sources of annual data on local governance in the state.

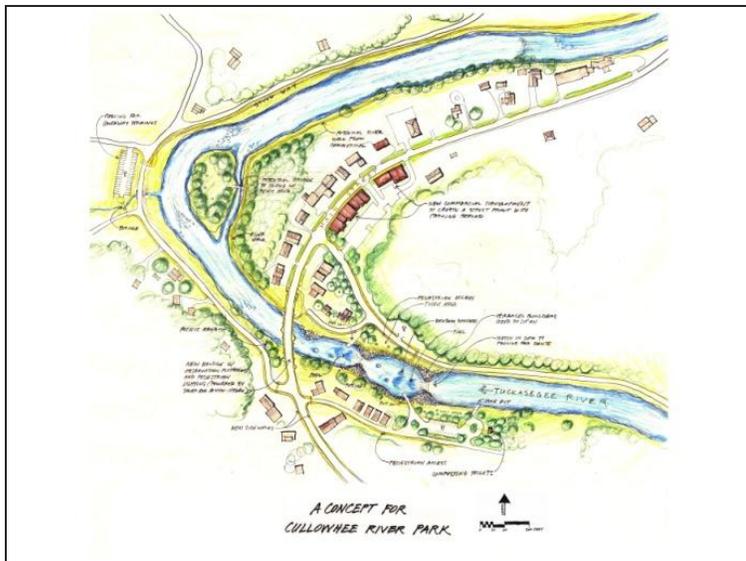
Our students choose the topic, develop questions, manage mailings, analyze results, and write reports based on the findings of the survey. The report is then distributed to local government leaders throughout the state. In 2013, our survey focused on citizen interactions and communications with local governments; in 2014, we chose to focus on personnel issues and policies in local governments.

### ***Fall 2013-Spring 2014: Henderson County Sheriff's Office Survey***

Surveying more than 4,000 citizens, the PPI assisted the Henderson County Sheriff's Office in conducting a Citizen Satisfaction Survey, obtaining survey results that demonstrated how people perceived crime in their communities and their level of satisfaction with law enforcement agencies. Students assisted in developing and distributing the survey as well as in analyzing the results. This allowed the PPI (and our graduate students) the opportunity to assist a local government partner that is working to improve the quality of life for all their residents.

### ***Fall 2013: University Emergency Services Survey***

Led by one of our graduate students, Austin Ritch, the PPI created and distributed a survey to all colleges and universities in the U.S. that focused on how their emergency services infrastructure is organized. The survey included questions on notification systems, funding sources, and other issues relevant to emergency management personnel.



### ***Spring 2014: Cullowhee Revitalization Endeavor (CuRvE) River Corridor Survey***

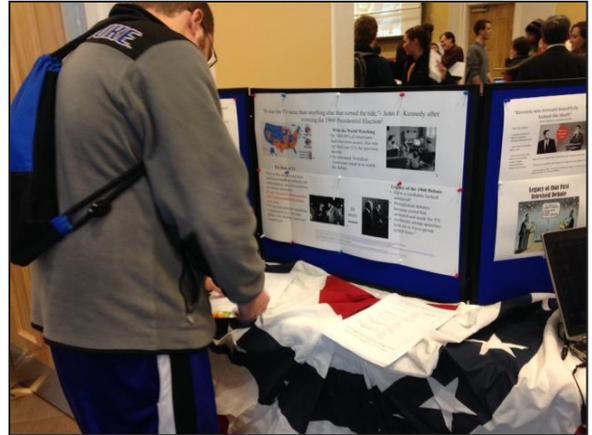
Our community partner, CuRvE, is a local nonprofit focused on revitalizing areas adjacent to campus for recreational and economic use. We created and implemented a survey for students, faculty, staff, and community members about user preferences for a river area along Old Cullowhee Road. Survey results will be used as part of a larger economic impact study and allowed our students to learn how their quantitative and surveying skills can be applied to larger issues, such as funding and economic development.

### ***Spring 2014: National Public Radio Project***

Supporting our goal of being a resource for other scholars in policy-based research, this spring we assisted Dr. Peter Nieckarz, a Western Carolina faculty member in the Sociology Department, in data collection. Dr. Nieckarz research examines the influence of budgeting and donations on radio coverage. Our students assisted with the collection of this data by making personal contacts with station directors.

### ***Spring 2014: Kennedy – Nixon Debate Display***

As part of Western Carolina's 2013-2014 interdisciplinary them, *The 1960s*, PPI staff members participated in the "Magical Mystery Tour!" This campus-wide event highlighted many of the important cultural and social events of the decade. One of our students, Natalie Chotiner, took the lead in researching the event and creating an informational display, while PPI staff broadcast a portion of the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon first debate, the first televised debate for the presidential election during the event.



### ***Continuing Programs: Western North Carolina Food Policy Council***

The PPI is a founding partner and host organization for the WNC Food Policy Council, an organization that aims to build more effective policies that strengthen WNC's food economy and increase economic security for all residents of the seven-county region (Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Swain, Jackson, Macon and Haywood). The WNCFPC brings together food producers, policy leaders, academic researchers, food security agencies, and local governments to address policy issues for agricultural development and food security, and acts as the state point of contact for many hunger alleviation and agricultural development programs. Several graduate students assisted with various projects, with former PPI graduate assistant and current staff member Emily Edmonds. In addition to providing administrative support for the council, the PPI also assists with:

- Outreach to stakeholders and partners;
- Funding opportunity research and applications;
- Mapping and research projects at the regional and county levels;
- Online and print media campaigns; and
- Policy research and recommendations.

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### MEET OUR GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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*Working with the PPI made me much more aware of various local issues in Western North Carolina. It also introduced me to some of the particularly vibrant people who are working to solve such issues as food insecurity and community building in the area. I was surprised to find how approachable so many of the organizations are in the region and how willing and interested they are in communicating with each other and with the wider community. I know my experience with the PPI will continue to be enriching and will make me a more viable workforce candidate after graduation.*



- Natalie H. Chotiner, Graduate Assistant

*My biggest takeaway from working in the PPI this semester would be that I learned how exactly a research project is done, in all its stages. Especially regarding the Henderson County project, I feel that it was quite beneficial to work hands-on in all aspects, from mailings to data entry. As a political science major who has yet to complete my own research capstone project, I feel that I have a leg up after my experience this academic year.*

*My research in the fall on Supreme Court cases was beneficial as well. Since I aspire to attend law school, it was enlightening to utilize actual legal research*

*websites, all while contributing data to the larger research project.*

- Garrett Whipkey, Undergraduate Student

*I honestly feel like the work I have done for the PPI has been more meaningful and more experientially valuable than the work I have done in my classes so far. The work is hands on, has real impact, yet is still based on an academic core. The opportunity to adopt and follow through on projects that interest me (and are relevant to my career goals) is invaluable as well. Simply put, this is probably the best GA experience I could have asked for.*

- Brian Burgess, Graduate Assistant

*Working in the PPI has been the greatest opportunity for me because it acted as a sort of practice run to see if I really wanted to continue on my PhD and teaching track. The PPI allowed me to run experiments, practice research and access experienced help if I had questions. I also got the opportunity to experience the other side of classroom work and get a feel of what being an instructor is like before I invest time, money, and effort only to realize that isn't what I thought it would be like and not want to continue. In my case it only solidified that yes, I do want to continue on and become a university instructor.*

- Austin Ritch, Graduate Assistant

*Working for the PPI for the past year has been a great opportunity for learning how a governmental organization creates and utilizes surveys for the betterment of that organization. Working on the Sheriff's Office survey has also reinforced previous undergraduate knowledge and current MPA knowledge in terms of those most likely to respond to surveys. The work has also helped in understanding ways in which a survey should be crafted in order to receive the best response rate. This kind of knowledge will be important as I move toward a career because surveys are commonly used in order for governmental organizations to gauge how they are completing their mission and goals.*

- Margaret Chandler, Graduate Assistant

*I would say that my overall experience in the PPI was great this year. The experiences I gained were invaluable. I would say that my largest project was the park planning project which I completed in February. This gave me a tangible project that I can put in my portfolio while hopefully bolstering the PPI's presence in the region as well. Overall, I am sad that I must go but at the same time realize that a new student can come to do great things for the PPI.*

- Andrew Bowen, Graduate Assistant