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Annual Report
2016-2017



Message from the Director

Once again the Public Policy Institute engaged in an active and productive year, providing educational experiences for our students, programming for the WCU community and the region, and aiding our community partners in their important missions in our area. The Local Government Training Program (LGTP) also conducted numerous educational opportunities for local government professionals in the 26 western counties of North Carolina. Highlights of this year's activities include numerous election-related programs, such as our candidate debates and voter registration efforts, coordinating Political Science students' visits to high school classes to discuss the elections, conducting a countywide survey for a regional partner, and hosting a workshop for regional leaders on "smart" communities. Student involvement was a crucial component in all of our projects. Our students served as the principal contributors from each project's initial planning to producing final reports. These projects not only delivered valuable services to the community, but also provided learning and networking opportunities for our students.

Below we provide a brief overview of who we are and summaries of selected PPI projects and activities from the past academic year. However, the PPI could not have provided any of these benefits to the students or our community partners without the assistance of many other individuals and departments. This year the PPI received support from many on-campus groups, including the Office of the Chancellor, the Office of the Provost, the College of Arts and Sciences, the Department of Political Science and Public Affairs, the Contracts and Grants Office, the Office of Communications and Public Relations, the Center for Service Learning, Creative Services, and the WCU Print Shop, among others.

The PPI also received assistance from off-campus organizations such as the UNC Research Opportunities Initiative, Haywood County, NC, and the Jackson County Green Energy Park. Thank you to all these groups, both internal and external partners, for your continued support.

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: Who We Are

Public Policy Institute

2016-2017 Staff

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Graduate Research Assistants

Travis Allen

Jesse Fowler

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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. 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 include:

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.



Students participate in voter registration efforts during “Constitution Day”

2015-2016 SUMMARY OF PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS

2016 Constitution Day

The PPI hosted several events in observation of Constitution Day. Students handed out pocket Constitutions and conducted voter registration activities on the University Center lawn. In partnership with the Center for Service Learning and the Andrew Goodman Foundation, we hosted “Constitutional Shark Tank” for student participants. With help from faculty judges Dr. Honor Sachs (History), Dr. Todd Collins (Political Science and Public Affairs), Janet Ford (Business Administration and Law), and Larry Trautman (Business Administration and Law), students developed one constitutional amendment that they would add to the U.S. Constitution and received five minutes to present their ideas to the judging panel, followed by up to five minutes of questioning from the judges. The best ideas and presentations, as selected by the judges, were recognized for their good work. Ideas for new amendments included such things as term limits for elected leaders, more protections for victims of domestic violence, and redistricting reforms. The winners (picture above from left to right) included Lauren Testerman, Jamie Whitfield, Erica Muesnterman, and Spencer Childers.



Voter Education and Registration Efforts



Staff from the PPI worked closely with the Center for Service Learning, the WCU’s Andrew Goodman Scholars, Student Affairs, and several other WCU departments in efforts to educate and register students and community residents. Activities included several voter registration drives in the fall leading up to the North Carolina general elections. The PPI also helped coordinate an early voting location in WCU’s University Center. In total, 2,570 voters were able to vote at the WCU location based on the combined efforts of many University departments and administrative agencies.

On November 1, the PPI helped sponsore a day of voter awareness, which included music, food, visits from local candidates for office, and other activities centered around the elections.

2016 Election Debates

As part of its mission to increase community involvement in the political process, the PPI and the Department of Political Science and Public Affairs hosted three debates for state and national offices. We facilitated the only debate for the 11th Congressional District seat between Mark Meadows and Rick Bryson on September 23th on the WCU campus.



The PPI also hosted a debate for the NC House of Representatives, District 119, between Joe Sam Queen and Mike Clampitt on October 12th, and the NC Senate, District 50, between Jim Davis and Jane Hipps on October 27th. These debates were broadcast live on WLOS-ABC13 TV on their web page and moderated by WLOS news anchors Frank Fraboni and Larry Blunt.



Questions for the debate were chosen from submission sent in by citizens in the region and WCU students. Overall, hundreds of community members attended the event in person while many others across the region were able to view the debate (both live or at a later time) through the WLOS web page.

Local Government Training Program Activities

Housed within the Public Policy Institute, the Local Government Training Program (LGTP) continued its important work training local government leaders in the Western North Carolina region. The LGTP facilitated many programs across the region, including several events at WCU's Biltmore Park location, including providing video conference options for our regional government officials. These workshops were targeted toward public officials and public employees, including (but not limited to) mayors, councilmembers, board members, town and county managers, finance directors, human resource department directors, clerks, planners, economic development directors, among others. Some examples of these workshops include:

ABCs of Purchasing
Conducting Public Meetings
Quasi-judicial Board Training
Zoning and Subdivision Regulations
Public Employee Law Update

Capital Financing
NC City & County Board Procedures
School Funding
Reducing Workplace Stress

In addition to University of North Carolina School of Government workshops, the Local Government Training Program also assisted in the planning of four quarterly WNC Managers Association Meetings.

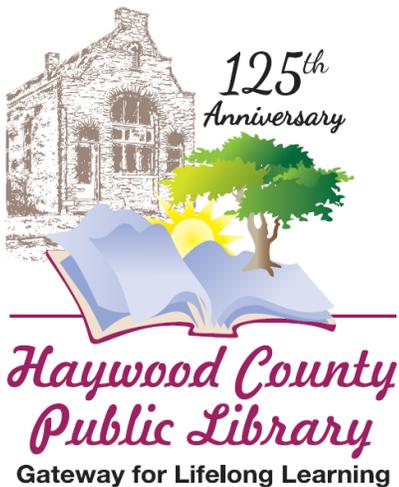
“Poli-Cats” to Class

Leading up to the fall 2016 elections, the PPI worked closely with area high schools and advanced undergraduate students in the Political Science and Public Affairs department to coordinate visits to the schools. WCU students Brandon Truitt, Benjamin Snedegar, Coleman Leopard, Shelby Davidson, and Jacob Lambert spoke to students at Smoky Mountain High School, Tuscola High School, and Macon County Early College. Our students provided nonpartisan descriptions of the current elections, biographies of the candidates, and spoke about some of the most covered issues of the 2016 elections. The students talked about elections at the national, state, and local levels while also fielding some intriguing questions from the high school students (and their teachers).

Overall, WCU students were able to build on their communication skills through synthesizing and sharing the substantive knowledge that they have learned in the class room to a younger audience. Our students conducted themselves well and our high school teachers were appreciative of the chance to provide different perspectives on the historic elections.



Haywood County Library Strategic Planning Survey



In the spring of 2017, the PPI worked closely with the Haywood County government and the Haywood County Friends of the Library in their strategic planning process. Graduate student workers in the PPI assisted in the development of a questionnaire for county residents to assess public opinion and current usage of the libraries, perceived needs, and the support for increased funding for the four library branches in Haywood County. The graduate students and PPI director worked closely with county administrators, library staff, and a special library task force in developing the county-wide survey, distributing the survey, data collection, and survey analyses. A representative sample of 4,500 county residents were contacted to share their thoughts on the library.

The PPI staff produced a report that included an analysis of what services and activities were currently being used at the libraries, how county residents find out about library news and events, what are the most needed improvements for the library, and whether residents would support a tax increase to create more funds for library services. The students also presented the results at a library taskforce meeting, which included library administrators, citizens, and elected county officials. This important survey will be used in the library’s long-term strategic plan which will be developed over the next few months and guide decisions about the county library systems for years to come.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES



Working at the Public Policy Institute at Western Carolina University has been a great opportunity. Over the past year, I have learned how to create surveys, code responses from citizens, and turn results into courses of action for local government entities. The PPI has allowed me to gain knowledge that goes hand in hand with what I am learning in the classroom. Learning new skills that will help me engage with public servants and officials is invaluable and I am thankful for the chance to further my knowledge of and love for local governments and nonprofits. I am excited to continue with the PPI next year and am confident that the tools I have learned, and will continue to learn, will serve me well as I look toward entering the public sector.

- Kaitlin Sines, MPA student and PPI graduate assistant

This past year, the Public Policy Institute was instrumental in providing students with direct learning opportunities with local and regional organizations, as well as being part of campus civic activities. I particularly enjoyed working on a survey done in collaboration with the Haywood County Library System. Meeting with the Library Board of Directors and being part of the project from beginning to end was arduous but afforded me a great opportunity to see how policy can be shaped. Volunteering with other students on voter registration drives was also engaging. I am very grateful for the experience the Public Policy Institute gives students like me.

-Faviola Olvera, MPA Graduate Student



I would say that the most useful experience that I had at the PPI was having the opportunity to sit in on the meetings with the library board and library task force of Haywood county. Analyzing the survey data discussed at these meetings was a great experience, but having the ability to see how that data might actually affect the decisions of passionate citizens was probably the most rewarding. It was clear that the work we were doing mattered.

- Jesse Fowler, MPA Graduate Student