

The Absence of a Public Policy Program is a Major Obstacle to the Academic Futures Vision

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The Academic Futures report is to be commended for its emphasis on the role of the modern university in serving “public good.” The report asks the campus to renew “its commitment to the democratic and civic purposes of public higher education.” The report asserts that “CU Boulder should embrace a core mission of furthering the public good.”

What is the public good? The report explains:

Public good, in the context of a top-tier comprehensive university, includes research, teaching and service that: (1) create knowledge for the public; (2) engage with problems that affect the public; and (3) enable each generation of citizens to remake our democracy by equipping them with skills of critical reasoning and analysis and a broad sense of civic obligation to the state, the nation and the world.

In the top universities across the nation, and indeed the world, working toward goals of securing public knowledge, engaging with public problems and enabling skills of critical reasoning in service of civic obligation are addressed, at least in part, by the academic tradition that is most centrally focused on these issues: interdisciplinary public policy.

Yet, the University of Colorado Boulder stands apart from virtually all major universities in the nation in its complete lack of any degree or program, much less institute or school, with a focus on public policy. This is a major issue for our campus. CU Boulder cannot claim to be a national leader in serving the public good in the absence of any program whatsoever on campus with a focus on interdisciplinary teaching, research and service in public policy. The presence of faculty members scattered across campus who conduct policy-related research is no substitute for a vibrant institution conferring degrees, helping to facilitate the connection of disciplinary and interdisciplinary departments and programs with matters of policy and integrating diverse areas of knowledge via education, research and outreach in service of the public good.

Simply take a look at our peers across the Pac-12 conference. Nine of them have schools of public policy, one has a major program (Stanford) and another has a major institute (Utah). All offer undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Colorado stands apart.

Table. Public policy programs at PAC-12 universities.

Arizona	School of Government and Public Policy https://sgpp.arizona.edu/
Arizona State	School of Public Affairs https://spa.asu.edu/mpp
California	Goldman School of Public Policy https://gspp.berkeley.edu/
Colorado	NONE
Oregon	School of Planning, Public Policy and Management https://pppm.uoregon.edu/
Oregon State	School of Public Policy https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/spp
Stanford	Public Policy Program https://publicpolicy.stanford.edu/
UCLA	Luskin School of Public Affairs https://luskin.ucla.edu/
Utah	Gardner Policy Institute http://gardner.utah.edu/

USC Price School of Public Policy <https://priceschool.usc.edu/>
Washington Evans School of Public Policy and Governance <https://evans.uw.edu/>
Wash State School of Politics, Philosophy and Public Affairs <https://pppa.wsu.edu/>

Our campus has considerable expertise, small units and opportunity to build a unit focused on a diverse range of policy issues. However, to build such an initiative would require strong leadership, resources (including a commitment to fund raising), creativity and a considerable degree of boldness. Numerous faculty members stand ready to work on building such a unit.

The bottom line here is not difficult to appreciate: the university is likely to fall well short of its potential with respect to the vision articulated in the Academic Futures report and remain far behind its peers until and unless it develops a significant program in public policy.