

# Humanities Students Engage in Public Policy Through the Baker Institute

Rice University is fortunate to have one of the country's best policy think tanks — the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy (BIPP). Founded in 1993, this premier nonpartisan institution offers a range of research opportunities to engage undergraduate students in the public policy world. These activities provide humanities undergraduates with opportunities to utilize their unique critical thinking, communication and research skills while exploring real-world issues and global questions that expand their learning far beyond the Rice classroom.

“The Baker Institute describes its mission as bridging the world of ideas and the world of action. Studying the humanities cultivates skills in short supply beyond the hedges — good writing, critical thinking and the kind of broad education needed in a globalizing world,” said Allen Matusow, BIPP's associate director for academic programs and the W. G. Twyman Professor of History.

Humanities curriculums built on extensive reading, writing and researching provide a strong foundation that can easily be applied to exploring questions of public, social or economic importance. Spanish and Portuguese major Kristin Foringer '14 participated in the institute's Latin American Initiative (LAI), which explores the cultures, economies, histories and contemporary affairs of Latin America.

“Since I have experience analyzing Latin American literature and art, working for the LAI allowed me to see replicated, in real time, the social conditions that so many Latin American writers and artists have discussed throughout time,” she explained.

By making connections between course work and the real world, issues that are studied in a theoretical form in the classroom can be given new dimensions when applied to the real situations. Austin Coe '14, a history major and Poverty, Justice and Human Capabilities minor, worked on the Health Policy Forum. “I research and compile information about school clinic and nursing programs in order to improve

the care provided to low-income students at private schools around the city,” Coe said. Having the opportunity to see firsthand how variable care quality can be and how much of that variety fluctuates with income, race and school, was eye-opening and reaffirmed much of what I had been learning in class.”

While distinctive research projects and internships with Baker Institute fellows provide opportunities to work on a variety of faculty-led policy issues, the institute also offers interdisciplinary programs that engage Rice students with their peers from around the globe. One such program, Public Diplomacy Global Policymaking (PDGP), links Rice undergraduates with their counterparts in the Middle East to discuss issues relevant to both sides. Kirsten Matthews, director of PDGP, believes the program allows Rice students from all academic disciplines “to better understand from multiple views political and diplomatic issues such as developing sustainable energy resources, the role of interfaith dialogues in diplomacy and U.S. intervention in the Middle East.”

While humanities students are learning about mutual cultural and political concerns with students in Egypt and Qatar, they're also approaching the subject matter from a comprehensive perspective. Through such shared experiences, these students can learn from their colleagues both across campus and around the world.

One of the most popular programs is the Jesse Jones Leadership Center Summer in D.C. Policy Research Internship Program. The program began in 2004 and provides summer stipends to conduct policymaking research at government agencies, private think tanks and nongovernmental organizations in Washington, D.C. The competitively selected applicants attend a public policy seminar, write a research report and are responsible for establishing internships in D.C. The program is led by Steven W. Lewis, the C.V. Starr Transnational China Fellow at the Baker Institute and associate director of the Chao



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Center for Asian Studies in the School of Humanities. “We might think humanities students would shy away from the more topical, more political and more real-time analysis of policy studies. But in fact, one out of three students who applied this year were humanities students, and consistently one-third of those we accept are from the humanities,” said Lewis.

“They have often made the greatest contributions to our seminars in which we read 18 classical political philosophy, political economy and public policy texts, as they are often quite used to seminars and critical thinking. It goes without saying their communication skills are some of the best of all Rice students, and these are skills highly prized in Washington, D.C., think tanks and agencies.”

The value of complementing a rigorous education with the exceptional opportunities of a top-ranked public policy institute is not lost on our humanities students. Every year, they apply the tools and knowledge gained in the classroom to real-world economic, political and social concerns that grow their understanding and broaden their perspective. ▶



**A policy of engagement:** Congressman Luis V. Gutierrez with Baker Institute interns after delivering a talk about immigration reform in October 2013.