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NEWS

Public policy program receives grant

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Macalester has been awarded a \$414,952 grant from the United States Department of Education to institute a new program in Quantitative Methods in Public Policy. Directed by Professor David Bressoud, this program takes an interdisciplinary approach to quantitative reasoning in the realm of public policy.

Existing courses in Economics, English, Geography, Mathematics and Political science will address quantitative reasoning through the issue of School Vouchers. Leading experts of public policy will address the efficacy of School Vouchers and if they are a good investment of public funds in Wednesday supplemental class sessions. Next year the program will address immigration policy.

Participating professor Danny Kaplan sees the program as an exciting opportunity for Macalester's politically-oriented student body. According to Kaplan, it is a vital means of "reaching the 50 percent of the student body who never enter Olin Rice." This program addresses learning goals developed in committees created last year by a grant from the Hewlett Foundation. A few of these goals include writing improvement, community involvement, civic engagement and quantitative reasoning.

The Quantitative Methods program is also being considered for a possible graduation requirement. Kaplan summarizes the goals of this program as "making sure Macalester students can read an article in The New York Times and understand the data presented." Basic terminology, ideas and pit falls of mathematical, statistical and economic techniques will be addressed.

This program is also a model for faculty cooperation across multiple disciplines. Kaplan notes, "Macalester College has great respect for the autonomy of professors, and yet professors have been able to give up this autonomy for a shared purpose. I find that very impressive." Interdisciplinary cooperation is also evident in the choice of program topic. "Unlike a topic such as energy policy, we intentionally picked a topic that would make students ask, 'What has math got to do with that?' Kaplan said. "I think that this issue has worked out really well."

Similarly, Professor Julie Dolan, who teaches Empirical Research Methods, says the program "gives students the opportunity to approach public policy problems from a variety of perspectives." If this program is successful, it may be taken up by other schools as well.



John B. Davis speaks about vouchers in the lecture hall named for himself
Photo: Peter Bartz-Gallagher

Macalester applied to the Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) for this grant. Typically about 70 grants are awarded per year out of 15,000 applicants. These grants can address any facet of the improvement of post-secondary education and usually award around \$415,000 over three years. Macalester's award will be used to hire a policy associate as a resource for faculty and guest lecturers.

This associate, who has yet to be hired, will assist professors in finding appropriate policy materials, developing examples relevant to each course and training faculty in quantitative methods.

The award will also be used to relieve a participating professor of one course per year in order to serve as a further resource for the program, and bring in public policy experts to lecture. On Sept. 25, Paul Peterson of Harvard's Kennedy School spoke at Macalester, and on Oct. 9, former Macalester president John B. Davis spoke. John Brandl, professor and former dean at the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota will address students on Oct. 30.

Courses involved in the program this fall include Introduction to Economics, Statistics, Empirical Research Methods, and Discrete Math. All but Empirical Research Methods require the Quantitative Methods Wednesday session. Ninety-four students are currently involved in the program and will write reports as interdisciplinary small groups on School Vouchers with recommendations to the Ramsey County School District. These reports will be presented to the Macalester community in an end-of-semester poster session. Members of the school board will also be invited.

In terms of student response, Dolan reports that of the ten students enrolled from her course in the program, all but one has since dropped out. The reasons they have stated include a lack of continuity in the lectures from week to week and an overload of homework for a one-credit course.

Dolan remains unconvinced as to whether or not Quantitative Methods should become a graduation requirement, but noted that this is only the first year of the program and changes are bound to happen. "I don't think that the presentations are that entertaining, or that I'm learning a whole lot," Kevin England '06 said. "It's an hour and half I go to because it's required, rather than because I desire to."

Anna Zaozerskaya, '06, says the program could be interesting, but that the topic of school vouchers is not workable for international students. "It's really hard to be in the course and not know what the hell they are talking about," Zaozerskaya said. "I've heard that next year's topic might be immigration, and this could be more applicable, especially since many of the students in the course are internationals."

Zaozerskaya has mixed feelings about the course in general. "I'm coping with it. I don't hate it. I can't say I'm

ecstatic about it either, but it's only once a week," she said. **MW**

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