University of Pittsburgh | Institute of Politics

Announcements:

- Nominations being accepted for the ***Coleman Award for Excellence in Community Service*** through August 11, 2024. To review past awardees and to submit a nomination please click here.
- ***Regional Progress Forum and Coleman Award Dinner*** to be held at the Heinz History Center on October 17th. Register for the dinner.
- ***IOP Board of Fellows Meeting*** on September 5, 2024. (closed meeting)
- The IOP is seeking a ***Senior Policy Analyst***. To review the job description and share with your network, please click here.
- The IOP is seeking students to become our next ***Policy Interns*** and ***Civic Engagement Intern***. For more information, please click here.

Congratulations!

Elsie Hillman Civic Forum 2023-2024 students hired by community partners:

Congratulations to 2024 Elsie Honors Scholar Dominic Victoria! Dominic was hired by his Honors Scholars community partner, Action Housing, as a Program Specialist. Dominic is from Pittsburgh and graduated this spring majoring in Politics & Philosophy and Public & Professional Writing. Dominic delivered a first-rate analysis of how insurance premiums are negatively impacting the affordable housing models including homeless shelters. He offered an innovative set of policy recommendations to address this pricing dilemma. Dominic's work will be further examined by Action Housing and the Institute of Politics.

(Dominic Victoria)

(Madison Kelly)

Congratulations to 2024 Elsie Honors Scholar Madison Kelly! Madison was hired by her Honors Scholars community partner, Persad Center, as an Outreach Manager and Executive Assistant. Madison is from Rochester, New York, and graduated this spring majoring in Legal Studies. While placed at Persad, Madison created a strategic outreach plan that engages the LBTQI+ populations in Lawrence County. She demonstrated that with intention and operational strategy, it is possible to build public awareness and also increase access to the lifesaving services offered by Persad. Congratulations Madison!

Congratulations to 2024 IOP Internship & Seminar student Carson Hawk! Carson was hired by his elected official placement office, PA Representative Arvind Venkat, as Campaign Manager for the 2024 reelection campaign. Carson is from Pittsburgh and graduated this spring majoring in Political Science.

(from L to R, Constituent Services Advisor Nick Monaco, Carson Hawk, Representative Arvind Venkat)

(L to R, Instructor Nello Giorgetti, Marian Kaelin, Instructor Dennis McManus)

Ann M. Dykstra Scholar Awardee

Congratulations to Marian Kaelin, the Spring 2024 recipient of the Ann M. Dykstra Award. Marian is an Urban Planning and Geographic Analysis major with a minor in Political Science. She interned with Pittsburgh Councilperson Bob Charland's office in Spring 2024 and wishes to pursue a career in local government after she graduates in 2026.

(Alea Tiberi)

The Dick Thornburgh Prize for Legal Service

The Dick Thornburgh Prize for Legal Service is awarded annually to a graduating Pitt Law School student, who has provided legal assistance to low-income individuals through a legal services organization (i.e. Neighborhood Legal Services Association, Southwestern Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network, Inc., etc.) while in law school and intends to continue in such service.

Alea Tiberi is a Pitt Law 2024 graduate who is deeply committed to her work. Alea has interned with the Domestic Violence Unit of Allegheny County District Attorney's Office, served as a legal intern for the Pennsylvania Innocence Project, and has volunteered in several legal services organizations including the Allegheny County Housing Court, Certified Legal Intern with the Family Empowerment and Legal Access Clinic, the Pittsburgh Pardons Project and a clinic organized by Neighborhood Legal Services and more.

Alea has secured a position at the Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo as a staff attorney in the Criminal Defense Department.

The J. Evans Rose, Jr. Prize for Legal Service

The J. Evans Rose, Jr. Prize for Government Service is awarded annually to a graduating Pitt Law School student whose goal is to pursue a career in government service, whether at the local, county, state, federal or international level. The award reflects the career of J. Evans Rose, Jr. who was one of Pennsylvania's most esteemed leaders in legal, political, and civic affairs at all levels and a longtime advisor to Governor Thornburgh.

(Ernest Rajakone)

Ernest Rajakone is a Pitt Law 2024 graduate. Prior to the start of law school, Ernest worked for five years in the municipal government at the City of Pittsburgh and remained deeply involved with local government and politics throughout law school. Ernest has also worked with the Executive Advisory on Legal Policy to Pittsburgh Mayor Gainey throughout the process of establishing the Office of Equal Protection for the City of Pittsburgh, a civil rights and public safety enforcement and compliance office that seeks accountability in workers' rights, civil rights, and public safety. Ernest has also worked as a Policy Extern in the Office of Congresswoman Summer Lee on a variety of local and federal policy issues including railroad safety and labor market regulation. Throughout law school Ernest has worked as an Advocacy Officer for People for Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL), which engages with Congressional Offices, the State Dept., NGOs, and other stakeholders to advance justice and self-determination for the Tamil people.

In 2023 Ernest began serving as Deputy Chief of Staff for Intergovernmental Affairs in the Administration of Allegheny County Executive Sara Innamorato.

(Ernest Rajakone)

The Dick Thornburgh Forum Disability Service Award

The Dick Thornburgh Forum Disability Service Award is available each year to a University of Pittsburgh student from any campus whose service has made a difference in the lives of children and adults with disabilities. Candidates for this award may be nominated by a University of Pittsburgh faculty member or staff member or they may apply themselves. The applicant may or may not have a disability.

Zachary Miller is a Swanson School of Engineering student with a 2025 graduation on the horizon. Zachary works closely with several organizations to enhance communications between the neurodivergent and neurotypical communities. At the conclusion of his first year in college, Zachary founded an organization called Spreading Neurodiversity Acceptance Project (S.N.A.P.). This platform established a platform that facilitated interactions between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals on an equal footing. Zachary is working on a device capable of learning and interpreting speech across different neurotypes. In collaboration with software engineers and the Geriatric Psychiatry Neuroimaging Lab, a neurol network model has been developed with plans for a rollout in 2025.

The Dick Thornburgh Forum Summer Fellowship Grant

(Laura Dvorkin)

The Dick Thornburgh Forum for Law and Public Policy and the University Honors College founded the Dick Thornburgh Summer Fellowships in 2011 to support undergraduate research into issues of governance addressed in Governor Dick Thornburgh's long and eminent service in national and international leadership. Using the Dick Thornburgh Archive Collection in the University's Archive Service Center and online archive materials, students conduct research for their projects using the collection which encompasses a comprehensive set of documents, thousands of photographs, and many hours of audio and video from Governor Thornburgh's career.

Laura Dvorkin is a student at the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences and the David C. Frederick Honors College majoring in politics and philosophy with an expected graduation of 2025. Ms. Dvorkin will work this summer using the Dick Thornburgh archive collection to research the potential successes and failures of platform law conceptually and in practice and evaluate its efficacy as a dependable, durable avenue for social media regulation and the protection of free speech online.

Laura will use the archive collection to research Dick Thornburgh's considerable experience in corporate standard development to make an invaluable historical comparison with applicable lessons to modern challenges, especially with Dick Thornburgh's work in the emerging new technologies of his time.

(Samantha Balbier pictured here with her family on May 17, 2024 at Acrisure Stadium. Photo credit: Pittsburgh Business Times)

PBT Regional Women of Influence

IOP and Elsie Hillman Civic Forum Director, Samantha Balbier named a Regional Woman of Influence by the Pittsburgh Business Times. Click here for information on the 2024 Awardees.

Tackling Regional, State, and National Policy Challenges Presenting Thought-Provoking Programs on Key Issues of the Day
&
Advancing Student Civic Engagement Opportunities

The Institute of Politics is comprised of three major programming components: our regional policy work, student civic engagement programming through the Elsie Hillman Civic Forum, and community education on key issues of the day through our Thornburgh Forum for Law & Public Policy. Leveraged together, IOP programs work to address the following five goals:

1. Promote Regional Economic Vitality and Opportunity
2. Support Healthy and Resilient Communities
3. Foster Responsive and Effective Government
4. Preserve and Strengthen Our Democracy
5. Build the Next Generation of Civic Leaders

Promote Regional Economic Vitality and Opportunity

On February 29, 2024, the Institute's Economic Development Policy Committee, chaired by Venango County Commissioner Chip Abramovic and ImbuTec CEO Richard Taylor, hosted a panel discussion on "Harnessing Regional Assets to Promote Shared Opportunities for Growth." Held in Hampton Township, the discussion highlighted the roles that various stakeholders in the community play in expanding access to economic opportunity. Representing these sectors were Andrew McElwaine, Vice President Sustainability; State Representative Rob Mercuri; Butler County Commissioner and former SPC Chair Leslie Osche; Lina Dostilio, Vice Chancellor of Engagement and Community Affairs, University of Pittsburgh; Shatara Murphy, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Anchor Initiatives; and Pressley Gillespie, CEO of Neighborhood Allies. Next steps include reconstituting the IOP's Economic Development and Fiscal Policy & Governance Policy Committees to examine HUB models as an effective means to build sustainable economic development plans and local government capacity in Western Pennsylvania. Richard Taylor, CEO of Imbutec, and Venango County Commissioner Chip Abramovic have signed on as the IOP Economic Development Committee co-chairs. These activities also relate to the organizational goal of fostering responsive and effective government.

On April 16 and 18, 2024, legislators and education stakeholders gathered at the two sites of the IOP's Dual Enrollment Promising Practices Pilot Project to learn more about the research and the interventions that are taking place through the generous support of the Benedum Foundation. Janet Toth, school counselor at Charleroi High School, and Dr. Nicole Smith, principal at Northgate High School, provided tours of their school and remarks explaining what they hoped to accomplish through the project, while researchers Dr. Jen Iriti and Dr. Danielle Lowry of Pitt's LRDC shared their research process and answered questions. A final report detailing the outcomes is due in early 2025 and is expected to provide guidance for state policymakers on how to support school districts in providing equitable access to dual enrollment programming for students who are minorities, from low socioeconomic households, and students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

Support Healthy and Resilient Communities

The IOP Health & Human Services Policy Committee: Inadequate caregiving for an aging and disabled population has severe impacts on the health and well-being of a community's population as well as its economic condition. The IOP's Health and Human Services Policy Committee, armed with a wealth of knowledge about the issue of family caregiving, has delved into a discussion on best practices and policy options that support family caregivers in Pennsylvania. In February 2024, the committee narrowed its focus to the topic of respite care, an issue with implications for caregivers as it relates to workforce participation, housing, and mental health.

In addition to compiling background research on the current state of the respite care system in Pennsylvania, IOP staff are arranging key stakeholder interviews with academic researchers, respite service providers, elected officials, public sector administrators, and those with lived experience to shed light on the current respite care environment. The interview findings, background research, and committee discussions will then be used to draft a policy report and develop recommendations for improving the respite care system in southwestern Pennsylvania. The report will be shared publicly by the end of 2024.

Race-Disability Intersectionality as a Health Equity Imperative

On January 30, 2024, the Dick Thornburgh Forum on Law & Public Policy hosted Pitt Law School's Interim Dean, Mary Crossley who is widely recognized for her scholarship in disability and health law. Professor Crossley has written broadly on issues of inequality in health care financing and delivery and has published articles in numerous law journals, including Columbia Law Review, Iowa Law Review, and Notre Dame Law Review. She is also the author of "Embodied Injustice: Race, Disability, and Health" (Cambridge University Press 2022). A Professor of Law and John E. Murray Faculty Scholar, Mary Crossley began serving as Interim Dean of the University of Pittsburgh School of Law in July 2023.

"At the root of many health-related injustices experienced by disabled people and Black people lie deeply ingrained and erroneous assumptions about intrinsic bodily difference and inferiority."
– Mary Crossley

(Mary Crossley, Interim Dean, Pitt School of Law)

Learn and watch this program using this link:

Watch Here

Co-sponsored by: Pitt Law, the Department of Disability Resources and Services, the School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, and the David C. Frederick Honors College.

Protecting our Region's Children from Gun Violence

On April 11, 2024, the Institute, in coordination with partners The Pittsburgh Foundation and the United Way of SWPA, released a report that encapsulates the group's work over the past year and a half to call attention to the issue of gun violence and its effect on children and communities. The three organizations hosted a webinar during which they summarized the three programs – held in November 2022, April 2023, and June 2023 – and outlined goals for moving forward. To learn more and review the report, visit The Pittsburgh Foundation's landing page. The IOP will be moving forward with assembling a committee to examine how to bring youth employment to scale, which according to the RAND Gun Policy in America Initiative can reduce gun violence among youth up to forty-five percent.

Criminal Justice Reform

The Institute of Politics continues its long-standing commitment to creating a safe city and region by addressing system improvements in the Allegheny County criminal justice system. In partnership with the office of the Allegheny County Executive, the City of Pittsburgh's Office of the Mayor, and the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, the IOP will be launching its next phase of work in summer 2024 by addressing new model development, increasing data transparency and evaluation, policy analysis, and encouraging changes to practices and procedures.

Preserve and Strengthen Our Democracy

Attack from Within: How Disinformation is Sabotaging America

On April 4, 2024, Barbara McQuade joined Chancellor Emeritus Mark Nordenberg in a lively conversation to discuss her new book, "Attack from Within: How Disinformation is Sabotaging America." McQuade is a legal analyst for NBC News and MSNBC and a professor at Michigan Law. She served as the US Attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan from 2010-2017.

(Barbara McQuade)

The conversation explored the far-reaching consequences of digital disinformation for democracy and the rule of law. McQuade emphasized the urgent need for a national conversation about the importance of truth, emphasizing the civic dangers associated with prioritizing political allegiance over factual accuracy. Noting the evolving threats to national security over her career, McQuade asserted that today, one of the greatest threats to our national security is the proliferation of disinformation.

Hosted by:
Pitt Cyber, the Dick Thornburgh Forum for Law & Public Policy, and the Institute of Politics.

Developing the Next Generation of Civic Leaders

Marc Cherna Fellowship

The Cherna Fellowship program is tailored to provide highly motivated students with an opportunity to address critical societal issues. Jessica Neal is the inaugural Marc Cherna Fellow and was placed at the Office of Behavioral Services through DHS for the 2023-24 academic year. Her research focused on hoarding disorder, aiming to enhance our understanding and management of this condition.

Learn More

(Jessica Neal)

(2023-2024 ACE Fellows: China McEachron (left) and Noah Manalo (right))

Learn More

Elsie Hillman Ambassadors for Civic Engagement (ACE) Fellowship

The Ambassadors for Civic Engagement (ACE) Fellowship offers graduate students the chance to apply their education and skills to enhance the quality of life for people in the Pittsburgh region. This year, our Ambassadors of Civic Engagement partnered with A+ Schools. These students, from the University of Pittsburgh Law School, wrote a research paper focusing on the decline in student enrollment within Pittsburgh Public Schools.

In the 2024-2025, the ACE Fellows will be an active part of the community-engaged learning and research that will support the newly launched “Pittsburgh Police Care” program. The ACE Fellows will be working with The Hear Foundation, City of Pittsburgh law enforcement, and grassroots organizations.

Elsie Honors Scholars

The Elsie Hillman Honors Scholars Program facilitates connections between students and regional community partners. Through this program, students can either join an existing project or develop one led by both students and the agency. These projects are designed to address issues that are significant to the organization and align with the social commitment embodied by Elsie Hillman. This year scholars worked with several community partners including Healthy Start, Ascender, United Way, POWER, The Children's Institute, NCJW, Pitt CECs, Persad, Action Housing, Adagio Health, Bidwell Training Center, and Women's Center & Shelter.

Learn More

(2023-2024 Elsie Honors Scholars)

(2024 Legislator for a Day students)

Legislator for a Day

On March 18, 2024, IOP staff and twelve exemplary University of Pittsburgh undergraduate students departed from Pitt's campus and traveled to Harrisburg for an overnight stay in preparation for an early arrival at the Capitol. Each student followed their legislator throughout various meetings and hearings throughout the course of the day on the 19th. Writing about the experience, one student participant said "I would recommend this program to anyone. Whether you're considering a career in politics, or just want to learn more about the legislative process, it will definitely leave you feeling more informed and motivated to make a difference." Thank you to all the PA legislators who worked with our Pitt students!

Learn More

All Angles – Affirmative Action Session

All Angles is a speaker and discussion series that offers students an out of the classroom opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of contemporary public policy subjects. On January 18 the All Angles session was Affirmative Action and Racial Equity: Navigating the Complex Political Landscape. Pitt's director of the Center for Race and Social Problems, Dr. Kyaien Conner moderated the session. National speakers included Dr. Thompson-Dorsey from the University of South Florida and Dr. Bernstein, Antonin Scalia School of Law Professor of George Mason University.

(Pitt student participant, All Angles January 18, 2024)

Learn More

(Spring 2024 Internship and Seminar Cohort)

Intern & Seminar Program

The Internship and Seminar program allows students to gain political experience working with elected officials. This term, the IOP placed 16 students in the offices of elected officials. The accompanying weekly seminar course is taught by two experienced government affairs professionals: Nello Giorgetti and Dennis McManus. The students earn four credits from Pitt's Department of Political Science within the Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences or the College of General Studies Public Service major.

Learn More

IOP in the News

- The Roddey Circuit: A Proposal to Honor the First County Executive's Legacy by Rebuilding Civic Trust
- Open Position: Senior Policy Analyst
- Sister Linda Yankoski, IOP Board of Fellows member and CEO of the Holy Family Institute, named Career Achievement Winner for the 2024 Pittsburgh Business Times Women of Influence
- The application window is now open for the Ambassadors for Civic Engagement (ACE) Fellowship
- Samantha Balbier, Director of the Institute of Politics and Elsie Hillman Civic Forum, selected as a 2024 Pittsburgh Business Times Woman of Influence
- Junior Zachary Miller won the 2024 Dick Thornburgh Forum Disability Service Award

Learn More

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