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Samantha Snively
Andrews University

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SERVICE THROUGH SCHOLARSHIP

WHY PUBLIC POLICY IS SO IMPORTANT

BY SAMANTHA SNIVELY

For Marcella Myers, an assistant professor of political science at Andrews University, her scholarship, teaching and spirituality are all connected. “My reading and research interests absolutely inform what I do in my classroom,” she says.

The people of Germany remember their former king, Frederick the Great, by leaving potatoes on his grave at Schonbrunn Palace. That this was what Marcella Myers noticed when she visited Germany last summer shows not only a sense of humor, but her long-standing interests in public policy as well. Among other things, Frederick the Great was known for introducing the potato to Prussia and stabilizing grain prices, creating new farmland, and abolishing torture — all key aspects of what we now call “public policy.”

While Marcella was in Berlin for a ten-day German studies seminar, sponsored by the Fulbright Program, she and a group of interdisciplinary American scholars discussed questions of European identity and various aspects of public policy — monetary values, trade relations, and budget and governmental reform.



Potatoes are placed on the grave of King Frederick the Great of Prussia at Schonbrunn Palace. Germans remember Frederick the Great this way because he introduced the potato to Germany, giving the region a staple crop.

Marcella Myers

While in Brussels, the Fulbright scholars met with representatives from European Union countries, states and interest groups. “It was very eye-opening to sit there and talk with people who are trying to navigate identity, policy and crises, and to get their perspective,” says Marcella. “It makes you think about the complexities of the European Union, and changes how you view the EU a bit.”

For example, the group asked a representative from Ireland why Ireland hadn’t yet signed the Schengen Agreement, which allows for the free movement of people across borders within

member states.

He said, “We would love to, but that would cause us a problem with the United Kingdom [who has not yet signed], so we probably are never going to.”

Marcella's research explores similar questions — she's currently looking at the effects on individual and national social policy when it's made at a centralized level of the European Union rather than at traditional state and regional levels.

Her time in Germany also has influenced her other research projects, one of which is a paper examining the effects of privatization of the National Health Service in the United Kingdom. "In some ways, it's an extension of the discussion about austerity measures," she says. "When people start talking about austerity measures, they often start looking for private solutions to public problems, and there's high pressure to contract out government services." When a country runs long-term private contracts like those of the National Health Service, the money usually ends up in private hands, thus contributing to income inequality, Marcella says.

Public policy, the system of environmental, housing, educational, welfare and healthcare policies that provide for the public good, has been an interest of Marcella since her graduate studies at Western Michigan University. "I'm very interested in issues of inequality, particularly in terms of economics, wage inequality and income inequality. I think if we as scholars understand those things better then, hopefully, we can educate people to understand them," she says.

Photos by Marcella Myers

Marcella admits it's unlikely policymakers will read her or her colleagues' papers but, when it comes to public policy, an educated public matters just as much as proper decisions at the top. And that's where her research can make a difference: by educating students and the general public. She crafts her research so it will be understood both by specialists and the general public: "It's very easy as an academic to write to your field, but if you can write in a way that non-specialists understand what you're talking about and educate students to understand the real consequences of policy choices, then you can really make a change."

Additionally, research into public policy helps the public sort out truth from propaganda as well as depoliticize issues that can prevent appropriate decisions from being made. "Public policy is very complex, complicated, disorganized and noisy," says Marcella, "but in the U.S., I think we've politicized it in a very negative way, so that it makes it very difficult to get anything done. There really aren't people out there who are living generationally on welfare and are happy doing it, for example. The politicization makes it very difficult for people to see the actual picture and make appropriate decisions."

"If we're Seventh-day Adventist Christians, then we need to be thinking about the consequences of our choices and how they affect the people around us," Marcella says.



Brussels Town Hall is located on the famous Grand Place in Brussels. Marcella Myers and her colleagues visited Brussels to speak with representatives from the European Union.



The European Parliament building is located in Strasbourg, Germany. Strasbourg is the official seat of the European Parliament, and considered the legislative and democratic capital of the European Union.