S220 Honors Law and Public Affairs challenges students to evaluate how public policy actors engage legal institutions in an effort to advance their agendas, and how competing concepts of justice and ethics, and foundational principles within the US Constitution, shape the outcome. There is no textbook for the course; students instead read primary legal source material at the federal, state, local, and international level – statutes, regulations, agency guidance, executive orders, judicial opinions, treaties and conventions, and some historical records – as well as scholarly commentary, a variety of policy materials including industry guidelines and standards, and some specialized and popular press articles.

In class, we use a combination of vigorous, Socratic-style discussion and role-playing scenarios to mine these materials for insights into how and why American law has framed the powers of different actors and institutions, along with various legal processes and certain core legal rules, to address public policy challenges. We assess at the same time the benefits and detriments of translating policy into law and employing law, rather than other mechanisms, to further a policy goal. We continually draw on and link to current examples of tensions in law and policy – past examples include gun control, education funding and curricular reform, immigration, health care reform, the war on drugs, income inequality and welfare reform, affirmative action, data privacy and security, abortion access, same sex marriage, campaign finance, voting rights, net neutrality, and copyright enforcement in a digitized world.

Students complete a series of in-class and at-home exercises requiring them to conduct research with legal and policy sources; discern and apply the rules and principles announced in those materials, to hypothetical and current cases; and participate in mock legislative, executive branch, and judicial proceedings. They also conduct a semester-long small-group research project on a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor, and develop a memorandum to advise an authentic decisionmaker engaged with that topic as well as a short public service video on the relevant legal and policy issues and options for action. In lieu of a final exam, the groups present the results of their research in an open session to which fellow students, faculty, staff, and members of the public are invited.