C228 Argumentation and Public Advocacy

Essay #3

“Defense of a Proposition of Policy”

Your final writing assignment this semester asks you to establish and defend a proposition of policy relevant to a significant social and/or political issue. As covered in lectures and discussion propositions of policy are the defining moment of public advocacy, the culmination of a public argument that answers the question: What is to be done? Propositions of policy are driven by “ought” claims: What should we do, how should believe and or behave in the future as a consequence of our agreement on particular value judgments concerning factual matters. As the culminating moment of such advocacy, propositions of policy are the most complex and difficult arguments to make for they build upon propositions of fact and value, and thus require mastery and demonstration of all of the skills of argumentation we have been working on this semester plus they require sophistication in understanding how to locate and stylize your argument in the most effective manner. As with prior assignments it is important to recall that agreement at the fact or value level does not necessarily entail agreement at the policy level. You and I could agree that laws prohibiting same-sex marriage violate constitutional rights to “equality” but that does not mean that we would agree on any particular remedy to that situation. One person might conclude that it is an issue for the states to handle, another might think it is a federal issue. One person might think it needs to be handled in the legislature, others might think it is a judicial matter. And even if we agree that it is a legislative matter it doesn’t mean that we agree on how legislation ought to frame the topic, what particular “law” should be crafted, whether and to what extent “enforcement” should be an issue in the law. And so on. So too with global warming. We might agree that it is a significant problem that demands urgent action, but that doesn’t mean that we would agree on what that action should be. National or international? Driven by particular laws? And what they should be? And so on.

This essay is different from the previous two also because you will be addressing an actual, specific public audience via a newspaper editorial. You do not have to submit the editorial to a newspaper to receive credit, of course, but you will have to identify a specific venue that you have in mind. Your writing ability will be weighted somewhat more heavily in this final assignment; you are looking for an argument that is both logically sound and rhetorically fluent/compelling. You will engage in audience analysis as well, adapting your language, organizational structure, and premises to the particular audience (venue) that you have chosen. Finally, because you are writing a newspaper editorial, your essay will be shorter than the previous two (4-6 pages, 1,000-1,500 words). While this is slightly longer than the average editorial, it still will present a significant challenge for you. You will have to condense all the relevant issues, and as much evidence as you can, into this space, while also making a genuine connection with your audience.

With this in mind, you essay will be evaluated according to the following minimum requirements and criteria:

1. The essay will be a defense of a proposition of policy, but it will draw where appropriate from fact and value arguments consistent with the V-model of argument. The proposition will need to identify the specific agent of action and the particular policy that you want enacted. You would not argue that “the U.S. government should institute laws that promote job growth” because (a) “the U.S. government” is a vague abstraction that does not act like an agent and (b) instituting “laws that promote job growth” doesn’t tell us what the policy is. Rather you might say that “Congress (a specific government body) ought to fund state highway repairs (a specific policy) in order to
promote job growth. Whether this proposition is expressed at the beginning or at the end of the essay will be a choice you will have to make, depending on your particular audience and goals.

2. You will be evaluated on the degree to which the value you prove warrants the policy you advocate, and conversely that the policy you advocate has the capacity to eliminate and/or implement the negative/positive values you prove.

3. The policy you propose needs to be (a) clearly and specifically articulated, (b) consistent with the rule of “minimum change,” (c) sensitive to the horizontal and vertical structures of power in the United States, and (d) workable and desirable (i.e., you need to demonstrate that it could actually accomplish the goals you set out for it and that it will not lead to greater problems than it solves).

4. You need to actuate your audience at both the value and policy levels. This means (a) carefully and strategically selecting the level of opposition at which you will argue and (b) offering a strong element of dramatism in your argument.

5. The essay must be carefully and clearly structured according to the standard parts: introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction should establish the significance of your topic for the audience, and frame the analysis to follow. You may include your thesis at this point, or you may decide (depending on your audience) that the thesis is best left for your conclusion. You may include a formal preview of your main points, or not. Regardless, the way that you frame the topic in the introduction should anticipate the arguments to follow. Your audience should not be surprised by the organization of the essay; it should flow well and make sense given the choices that you make in the introduction. The body should be a clear series of proofs, all related tightly and immediately to the proposition of policy. You will establish that a serious and inherent problem exists in the status quo, explain the specific policy that you are advocating for, and demonstrate that the solution is desirable/advantageous. You may organize these topics as you choose, and you may determine that one or more of them requires a greater deal of emphasis than the others. As always, these determinations should be based on your analysis of the particular audience you are addressing. The conclusion should summarize your argument and seek to actuate your reader by reminding them why the topic is significant and important. If you did not articulate the proposition explicitly in the introduction, make sure you do so in the conclusion.

6. Although you do not have as much space as you did in the proposition of fact and value essays, you must incorporate as many sources of relevant and credible evidence as you can. There are no specific requirements as to where such sources come from, and there is no specific number of sources that you must use. However, you will be evaluated on the strength of your evidence, and the failure to include important pieces of evidence, or to address important sources on the issue, will damage your credibility significantly. An essay that argues that the courts ought to uphold state level same-sex marriage laws that does not reference legal precedents and/or sources from the legal community would probably not be very credible. An essay that endorsed a specific policy on global warming that did not draw from scientific literature also would be problematic. In the essay itself you will cite sources in a manner consistent with the genre of editorial newswriting. This means that you will NOT follow MLA requirements for in-text parenthetical citations, as these are not used in newspaper editorials. You will instead note (informally) the source, the author (when available), and the date of all information that you use, and you will provide a hyperlink when referencing materials available online. (Source means the institution or organization responsible for publishing the material. The date does not need to be precise. You can say, for example, “According to an EPA
study published last spring…” Additionally, since you are turning this essay in for college credit, you will provide a Works Cited page with full bibliographic references in MLA style.

7. The essay will be 1,000-1,500 words (+ a works cited page) typed, double-spaced, with one inch margins on all sides. The essay should have a title page that includes the proposition of policy that you are defending; the name of the venue that you would (hypothetically) be submitting the essay to; the name of the course; the date; and your name, student ID number, and e-mail address. The pages should be secured by a single staple in the upper left hand corner. Do not use folders. (Note: You should also attach your in-class workshop sheets to the assignment).

8. Be sure to proofread your essay – or better yet, have a trusted friend or classmate review the essay after you have proofread it. Essays with extensive (5 or more) spelling/typo-graphical errors and/or common grammatical errors as defined by standard compositions books such as Harbrace's College Handbook (e.g., sentence fragments, noun-verb disagreement, misplaced modifiers, misuse of commas or other punctuation marks, etc.) can be penalized up to a full letter grade.

9. You will bring two copies of a completed draft of the essay to class where we will conduct a workshop on December 6 designed to guide you through the process of revising the essay before turning it in for a grade. You will receive feedback from two different classmates on worksheets that we will provide. You must include those worksheets with your final essay. Students who do not participate in the workshop cannot receive a grade higher than a “B” for the assignment.

10. Hard and electronic copies of the essay are due by the beginning of class December 9. The electronic copy needs to be turned in via Oncourse. Hard copies turned in after the beginning of class on the due date (listed below) will be counted as one day late. Late essays will be penalized at the rate of one letter grade per day until they are turned in.