Mansfield Center Public Policy Initiative

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The myriad societal factors contributing to the current state of our economy demonstrate the importance of fostering civic leadership in both the public and private sectors to bolster the long-term health of our democracy. Our country requires visionary leaders who can drive the policy innovation process, energize organizations, build inclusive coalitions and translate ideas into action. Toward this effort, The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center of The University of Montana has launched a Public Policy and Leadership Initiative as we revive one of the original Congressional mandates of the Center: to foster dialogue on domestic policy considerations.

The Mansfield Center was established in 1983 to honor Senator Mike Mansfield’s long and distinguished service. The Center hosts programs that embody the core interests and characteristics of Senator Mansfield’s career: Modern Asian Affairs and Ethics in Public Affairs. Mike Mansfield was the longest serving majority leader of the U.S. senate, serving in this role from 1961-1977. He also served as the U.S. Ambassador to Japan from 1977-1988, under both the Carter and Reagan administrations. Mansfield was a remarkable public servant who helped guide the United States through important transitions in the domestic arena and in its relationship with Asia.

Following on Senator Mansfield’s example, the Public Policy and Leadership program of the Mansfield Center emphasizes the global nature of responsible decision making, the ethical imperatives of leadership, and the skills necessary for careful policy analysis and development.
The Initiative serves as a resource to the community and to policy-makers by providing research on public policy issues, informing policy-makers and the public, and providing non-partisan community leadership on contemporary issues of import both to the U.S. and the global community. As a resource to students, the Initiative seeks to stimulate interest in public service and leadership and provide opportunities to gain practical experience in civic participation and public policy development. Finally, the Initiative serves as a resource for faculty across many disciplines by supporting policy research, stimulating curriculum development, and fostering service learning within the community.

As our elected officials debate and delay over vital issues such as employment and health care, observers question whether action is possible in the current political climate. Polls show that many citizens feel estranged from the political process and powerless to effect change. In an effort to elevate the level of public discourse on key issues, the Public Policy Initiative offers a Community Conversation series. The series is a carefully constructed dialogue that brings diverse stakeholders and community members together to discuss important public issues. Our intent is to engage people from all sectors of the community to discuss common goals, including representation from community organizations, various levels of government, and businesses big and small.

This year, the Mansfield Center has partnered Congressman Pat Williams, former Democratic member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and Bob Brown, former Republican Montana Secretary of State, in a series of bipartisan Conversations on the topic of whether the U.S. government has ceased to function. These two men reflect a commitment to civil, bipartisan discussion. Williams served nine terms in the U.S. House of Representatives from
1979 to 1997, while Brown spent nearly 30 years in the state Legislature before being elected Montana’s secretary of state in 2000. Their long history as effective legislators supports the intent of the Conversations to facilitate a citizen culture that is informed, constructive and bipartisan. By engaging citizens in a balanced discussion, we hope that both our citizens and our leadership will become better informed and open to compromise. It is not our intent to impose any solutions. Rather, we want to help foster open debate around key public policy issues as a way of helping local voices direct debate toward concrete action. To date, we’ve held Conversations in Helena and Great Falls. You can attend our third and final Community Conversation of the series here in Missoula on May 11 at 7:00 pm at the Todd Continuing Education Building. For more information, or to contact us to organize a Community Conversation for next year, please see our website at www.umt.edu/mansfield.

During the economic crisis of 1971, Senator Mansfield was not afraid to reach across the aisle in the best interests of the country. He said: "What we're in is not a Republican recession or a Democratic recession; both parties had much to do with bringing us where we are today. But we're facing a national situation which calls for the best which all of us can produce, because we know the results will be something which we will regret." Our Initiative hopes to promote such bipartisan leadership.

On behalf of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana, this is Deena Mansour. Thank you for listening.