

MPP *at* UNI NEWSLETTER

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA | MASTER OF PUBLIC POLICY | SPRING 2026

MPP PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

We maintain a core group of dedicated, interdisciplinary faculty, with backgrounds in business, geography, philosophy, political science and survey research.

Since 2017, over 70 percent of our admitted students are working professionals, and our overall persistent rate toward graduation for all cohorts stands at 80 percent.

BACKGROUND

The MPP program at UNI is a fully online program established in 2015 and accredited by **NASPA** in **2023**.

As stated in its **mission statement**, the purpose of the program “*is to enhance the public service values of emerging and mid-career public service professionals and equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to analyze, develop, and evaluate public policy and affairs at all levels of government.*”

Students move through the two-year program as part of a cohort, developing professional relationships with a network of colleagues. Recognizing that many of our students are working professionals, the curriculum is designed to ensure flexibility.

Students take two courses per semester, but the courses are offered sequentially, meaning

students take one course the first 8 weeks and the second course the second 8 weeks of each semester.

Courses meet via Zoom on Tuesday nights and focus on providing practical skills for students interested in working in the public and nonprofit sectors. Additionally, students are required to complete two practitioner-based courses, an internship and a capstone practicum, where students work in conjunction with policy practitioners to apply skills learned throughout the program to real-world policy issues.

Upon graduation, students will have developed skills in policy analysis, program evaluation and data analytics, among others, along with a portfolio of applied research based on interactions with practitioners in the field.

MPP UPDATES

PARTNERSHIPS *with* IOWA CITIES THROUGH CAPSTONE PROJECTS

As part of the curriculum, students are required to complete two practitioner-based courses, including a “Capstone practicum” course in their final semester.

The purpose of the capstone is to provide students with an opportunity to apply the data analytic and program evaluation skills learned throughout the program by partnering with selected organizations in surrounding communities to engage in policy analysis and decision making.

Our students have completed meaningful and substantive projects for cities and organizations throughout the state of Iowa, and we continue to seek out new relationships with cities and organizations.

If you are interested in working with our students, please feel free to reach out to the Program Coordinator, Chris Larimer, by phone (319-273-6047) or email (christopher.larimer@uni.edu).

Previous and current MPP partnerships for Capstone projects:

- Cedar Valley United Way
- City of Cedar Falls (summer 2026)
- City of Dubuque
- City of Fort Madison
- City of Oelwein
- City of Waverly
- Black Hawk County Department of Public Health
- Patricia A. Thomson Center for Violence Prevention at UNI

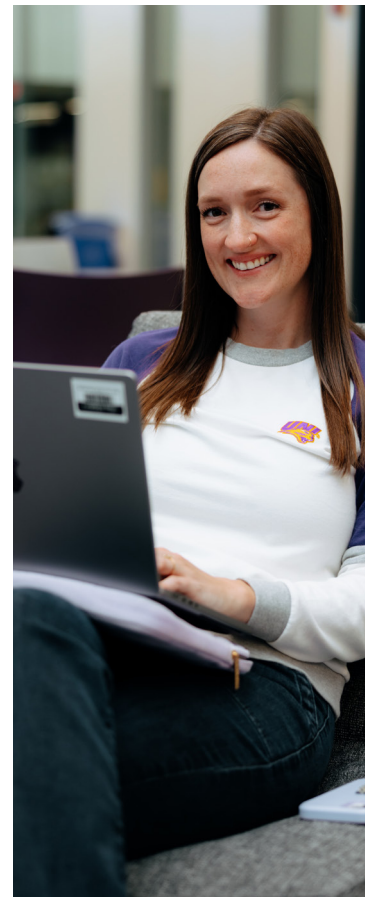
SPREAD THE WORD!

ANNUAL COHORTS, APPLY TODAY

We are still accepting applications for our upcoming cohort set to begin in August. Information about the application process can be found on our [program webpage](#). We have [scholarships](#) available!

To see some of the exciting fields our recent graduates are working in, check out the “Careers & Placement rates” tab on our Program [Fact Sheet](#).

>> online.uni.edu/public-policy



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



TYLER AVIS

EDUCATION

AA, Education,
Kirkwood Community College, 2008

BA, Geography – Urban and
Regional Spatial Analysis,
University of Northern Iowa, 2013

CURRENT POSITION

Building and Planning Director,
City of Grinnell

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THE MPP PROGRAM AT UNI?

I have to start off by saying I really enjoyed my time at UNI while pursuing my undergrad degree. After working in local government for a decade, I started to come to the realization that there were potentially better solutions out there related to bringing about positive changes resulting from the decisions made by local governments than what I was employing. After looking into the other options available in the State, UNI's online cohort setup for the MPP program was the best fit for not only my work schedule, but also my family and our activities throughout the year. Knowing the ins and outs of UNI was also a huge benefit for me, and I was stoked to be able to advance my knowledge and skills in this profession as a direct result of more experience with UNI.

HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED?

I started off by looking at what was available for my field and realized that in my current role I do more work that deals

with the regulations of what people can or can't do vs that actual management of people. In researching the program, I believed that because it had a heavier focus on the policy side of things rather than administration, that would be a bigger benefit to me. I regularly present new or updated polices and regulations to our City Council, and ensuring that I am doing so to the best of my ability and in alignment with current best practices was ultimately the main desire that I sought, and UNI delivered.

WHAT DO YOU DO IN YOUR CURRENT POSITION?

As Grinnell's Building and Planning Director, I deal with all things related to the construction of all structures in the community, as well as the regulations that generally apply throughout the City. That would include reviewing the plans for a building, issuing the permit, and then completing all the inspections from the footing all the way through to the certificate of occupancy inspection. I also manage nuisance abatement procedures, the zoning regulations and the boards associated with them, as well as play an active role in helping bring residential, commercial, and industrial developments to the community. Literally all of those things deal with policy in some way, whether it's building code or the local code of ordinances, every question I get and every action I take is all derived in a policy decision that was made at some point in time. The thing that I enjoy most about this career is working with the people and developing the relationships that I've been able to over the years. Also, because I wear so many different hats in working for a smaller local government, no day is the same, ever.

HOW DID UNI MPP PREPARE YOU?

With being part of the regulatory enforcement team, I am consistently working to either update ordinances and regulations or change existing ones to work better for the community's current

priorities or issues. Expanding upon my understanding of the historical ethics of public policy and learning about what the best practices (or worst) are to ensure that each possible perspective is taken into consideration before moving forward with a potential change or recommendation has been something that I now consistently think about to ensure whatever policy we are looking to bring about, is a good one for as many people as possible.

MOST MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE?

I really enjoyed the material presented throughout the program for each class. What I found that I enjoyed is the material that the professors presented almost always directly aligned with how things actually play out in the real world and working with the public. Even though the program is directed more upon policy creation and implementation, the Public Service Leadership and Management course helped shine a light on the possibilities for me in the benefits of potentially taking on an administrator role down the road. I'll also never forget about the adventures had while working through RStudio.

ADVICE FOR FUTURE PANTHERS?

I'll share some advice if I can for maybe those looking at UNI as a possible landing spot for a MPP degree, and that is this: You may come to UNI and start this program with a clear idea of how you want to use the degree and have an idea in your mind about what exactly it is that you will learn and be able to take forward, but I'd suggest you try to instead stay open to where it might take you. Public policy is broader than most people expect, and if you're like me, you may find areas of interest you hadn't initially thought of. Also, try to take advantage of the program's applied focus, because the more you connect coursework to real-world issues, whether that's through your job, internships, or community involvement, the more valuable this degree will become.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



JESSICA JORDON

EDUCATION

Master of Public Policy
University of Northern Iowa, 2025

CURRENT POSITION

Executive Speechwriter,
Virginia Commonwealth University

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THE MPP PROGRAM AT UNI?

I've always felt drawn toward public service, and, after decades in the private sector I knew that how I transitioned into public-facing work was important. To prepare for that transition, I wanted to deepen my understanding of how policy shapes institutions, communities, and everyday life. At the time, I was already working in executive communications, helping leaders navigate and communicate through complex issues involving risk, governance, and organizational change. I realized I wanted stronger analytical and policy foundations to complement my communications background and contribute more strategically to mission-driven work.

I was fortunate to have a mentor who helped guide me through the graduate school selection process, and UNI's MPP program stood out early. The program was rigorous, interdisciplinary, designed for working professionals, and structured around a cohort model that fostered connection and collaboration.

One of the aspects I valued most was learning alongside professionals already working across the public sector. Their perspectives and experiences added tremendous depth to classroom discussions and broadened my understanding of public service in practice.

HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED?

My interest in public policy grew gradually through both my professional experience and my personal interests. I've always been drawn to questions about systems, leadership, public trust, and how institutions communicate with people during moments of uncertainty or change.

As my career evolved, I found myself increasingly interested in the intersection of communication and policy - particularly how leaders translate complex ideas in ways that audiences of all types can understand and engage. That curiosity ultimately led me to explore graduate programs, and the MPP at UNI felt like the right fit because it balanced theory with practical application.

WHAT DO YOU DO IN YOUR CURRENT POSITION?

I work in executive speechwriting and strategic communications at my undergrad alma mater, Virginia Commonwealth University. My role is to support senior leadership by developing speeches, messaging, and communications strategies around complex organizational priorities.

Education has a transformative power in people's lives. What I enjoy most about my role is helping leaders create authentic connections, and communicate in ways that reflect the mission and values of higher education. Working in a university environment has allowed me to combine my background in communications with my passion for public service and community impact.

HOW DID UNI MPP PREPARE YOU?

One of the most valuable parts of the program was learning how to evaluate issues from multiple perspectives while grounding recommendations in evidence. That mindset has been incredibly useful in executive communications and speechwriting, where understanding context, audience, competing priorities, and institutional dynamics is essential.

I use many of the skills I developed at UNI every day, especially policy analysis, research synthesis, stakeholder analysis, strategic writing, and systems thinking. The program also strengthened my quantitative and research skills in ways, pushing me outside of my comfort zone in really valuable ways. Courses in statistics and program evaluation helped me become more comfortable interpreting data and using it to support strategic decision-making and recommendations.

MOST MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE?

One of the most impactful parts of the program was the relationships I built with faculty members and classmates during the program. As an out-of-state student balancing graduate school with a full-time career, that sense of connection and belonging meant a great deal to me.

Dr. Jayme Renfro had a particularly significant influence on my journey. She was one of the first people to encourage me to consider higher education as a career path, and her encouragement helped me begin to envision new professional possibilities for myself. Dr. Christopher Larimer also played an important role through his mentorship and guidance. I'm also grateful to Dr. Earle, who chaired my internship with UNI and helped connect academic learning with real-world policy and governance work.