

MASTER OF PUBLIC POLICY EVALUATION

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University of New Mexico - Public Policy

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INTRODUCTION

The Master of Public Policy (MPP) is an interdisciplinary program preparing students for careers as policy professionals for positions in the public, non-profit, and private sectors. MPP candidates complete a 42-credit-hour program curriculum composed of four primary disciplines: Economics, Political Science, Public Administration, and Sociology.

The MPP program was established in 2017, and sees three students graduate in Spring 2022.



Sam Hatch



Hannah Miller



Alex Shomaker

Graduating Students 2022

PEOPLE

The MPP is managed by the Program Director (Dr. Melissa Binder) with administrative work supported by the Graduate Coordinator (Emma Tomingas-Hatch). A Community Advisory Board made up of policy professionals assists in connecting the MPP program to the public policy sector in New Mexico. A Program Committee develops policies and procedures for the program, conducts the admission process, and advises MPP students.

The committee has a member from each of the participating units: Dr. Melissa Binder (Economics), Dr. Assata Zerai (Sociology), Dr. Tim Krebs (Political Science), and Dr. Agustín León-Moreta (Public Administration).

The MPP program trains students for a variety of opportunities, like professional policy work for government agencies, non-profit advocacy or research, and evaluation. Students are required to complete 42 credit hours of coursework that make up the curriculum, as outlined in the Curriculum page that follows.



Inspiring students
to make a
difference in their
communities

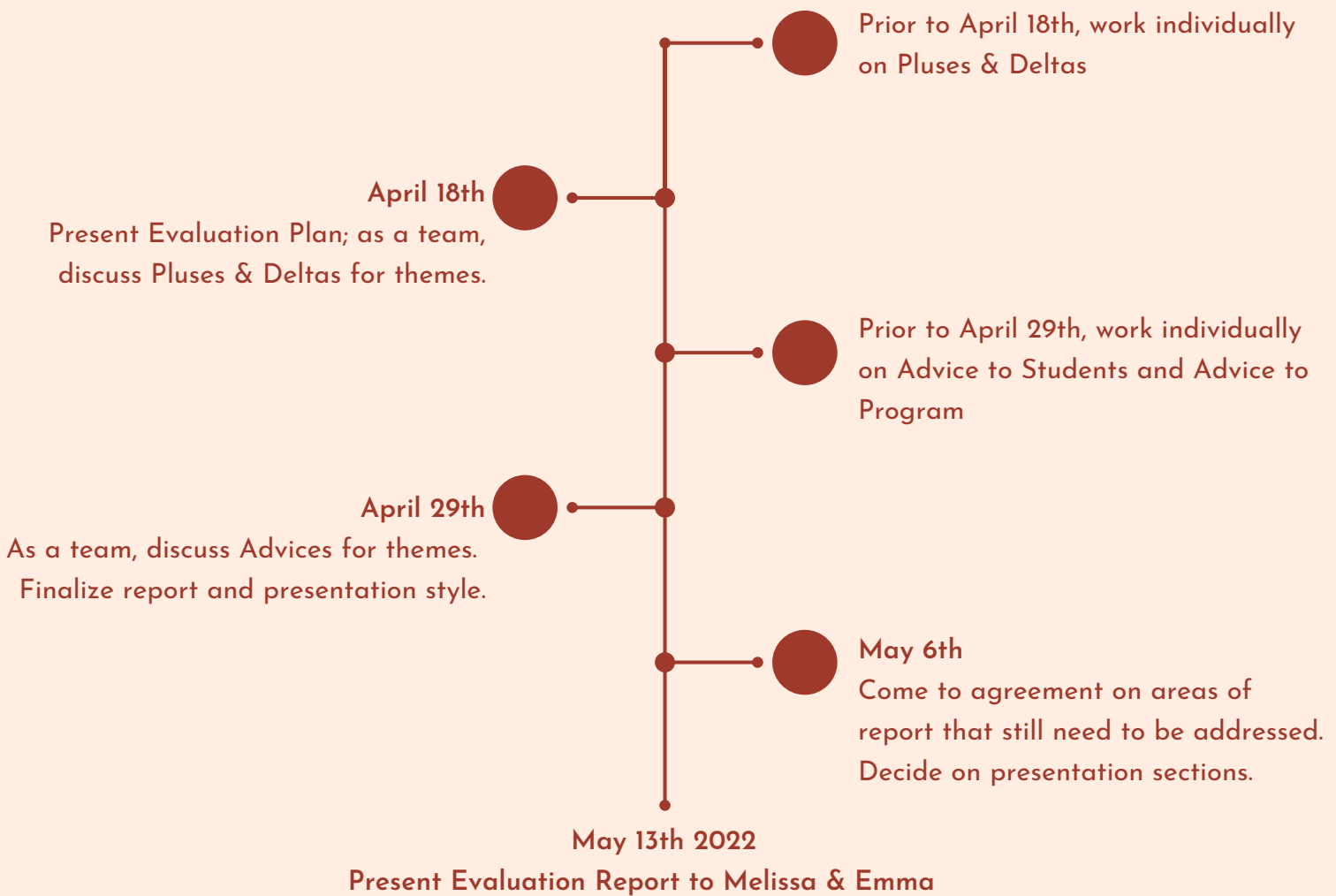
CURRICULUM

The MPP requires 42 total credit hours. Students master methodological and statistical skills and gain the substantive knowledge that prepares them to enter the workforce as qualified policy analysts. Most full-time students complete the program in 2 years.

 <p>Core</p>	<p>Students will develop key competencies in quantitative research and the fundamentals of public policy through 8 courses, including a required course on diversity.</p>
 <p>Complementary</p>	<p>Students choose three courses to gain expertise in a policy area, and are encouraged to take advantage of UNM's numerous graduate offerings across campus, aligning with (but are not limited to): Environmental Policy, Crime/Justice Policy, Education Policy, Public Finance, Health Policy, Economic Development, and other policy areas.</p>
 <p>Policy Seminar</p>	<p>The Seminar curriculum includes case studies in policy creation and implementation, and guest speakers from the New Mexico policy community. Guest speakers join Seminar classes to discuss policy, evaluation, and state/local/community works. The Seminar also provides support for writing the Policy Report and a venue for presenting it.</p>
 <p>Evaluation Lab</p>	<p>The Evaluation Lab serves the dual purpose of training students and providing high quality program evaluation services to community organizations in New Mexico. Students work in partnership with non-profit community organizations to develop and implement evaluation plans through collaborative and culturally competent problem-solving, robust data analysis, and creative means of communication.</p>
 <p>Policy Report / Portfolio</p>	<p>The MPP Master's Examination consists of a written Policy Report or Portfolio of Works, and an oral presentation of that choice. Students receive guidance in preparing the Policy Report / Portfolio and presentation in the Policy Seminar; students take one of the required Policy Seminar credits during the semester in which they plan to complete the Policy Report / Portfolio requirement.</p>

EVALUATION PLAN & METHODOLOGY

Our evaluation findings are the result of our evaluation plan; specifically, two discussions among the graduating MPP students. Discussions were held during the established class times for the final Public Policy Seminar. In preparation of each of these conversations, students independently wrote down their notes about course/program “pluses and deltas” (what worked well during the program and what did not), their advice to students, and their advice to the program itself. Discussion #1 focused on the pluses and deltas and was held on April 18th 2022, while Discussion #2 focused on the advice to students and to the program and was held on April 29th 2022. These notes and discussion were analyzed for overall themes and presented in our Evaluation Findings section and to the program on May 13th 2022.



NOTABLE FINDINGS

Noticeable benefits from group work in evaluation lab and policy seminar, especially at the beginning of the program when students are finding their legs.

Share past advisement doc's

MPP feels disconnected from PADM, despite large number of required courses

Coronavirus / Online

Finishing (Final PUBP presentation) mid-semester was a huge relief!

THOUGHTS
ON
PREREQUISITES

Potential for macroeconomics, & possible evaluative skill building through ECON 466

Students felt nervous, but prepared & supported by the final exam process.

FINDINGS

Disconnect between MPP and Public Administration Courses

Courses taken by MPP students that are housed within the School of Public Administration (hereafter referred to as PADM courses) are at times seen as narrowly specific in one focus area or even sometimes a “low bar”. MPP Students feel that PADM courses naturally teach to the PADM students enrolled in their courses, with MPP students as a secondary thought. And since many PADM courses fulfill MPP requirements, MPP students are required to take these courses even though the materials may only be tertiary connected to public policy. MPP students also feel that these courses are often taught (understandably) with PADM students’ work backgrounds in mind - many PADM students are those working in local government and have returned to school for their masters. So, PADM courses are often offered once-a-week at late hours to accommodate those with full-time jobs; by default, this can make the class offerings difficult for MPP students who do not have “9-5” work hours.

MPP feels disconnected from PADM, despite large number of required courses

Many PADM courses also feel extremely niche-designed, almost like professional development courses, to further skills in one highly specific area of public administration which is often not entirely relevant to MPP students (especially those outside of healthcare). Conversely, other PADM courses were highly generalized and the content often “started from square 1.” Students felt PADM instructors spent considerable time discussing basic nuances of graduate school - i.e., starting with how to conduct academic research searches, finding credible academic publications, how to craft an annotated bibliography, or how to write at the graduate school level. For MPP students, these are ingrained during the Public Policy Seminar, and make for a noticeable disconnect between PADM courses and others courses taken during the MPP program.

This is not to say PADM courses are not without merit or do not enhance policy-related skills; many of the technical skills taught in PADM classes are useful and applicable to policy analysis and especially evaluation. The unpacking of organizational specifics such as budgeting, behaviors, and functional values provides helpful insights that aids stakeholder outreach and building effective evaluation plans.

That said, during our discussion, we questioned to what extent MPP students can look outside the prescribed PADM courses and switch them for courses in other departments that better align with the student’s focus. This may be difficult as the School of Public Administration is one of the four units that oversee/co-administer the MPP program.

FINDINGS

Policy Seminar

The policy seminar helped establish invaluable policy analysis skills. Working with a group for the first semester was helpful for those with little to no prior experience in policy analysis because the group was able to feel its way through the objectives together. This established a stronger foundation for the second semester, when the analysis was done individually. Students found the detail and frequency of feedback provided across each stage of the policy process instrumental to their success, mentioning that “while it felt like Groundhog Day at times, that feedback was invaluable to my growth as a policy writer. When I had to write a memo external to the program I knew exactly what was needed, and, perhaps more importantly, what wasn’t!”

Evaluation Lab

Noticeable benefits from group work, especially at the beginning of the program when students are finding their legs

The Eval Lab provided a unique opportunity for students to approach policy from its application and practice rather than its creation. Not only did this provide a myriad of new learning opportunities, but it also forced a reflection on how policy is made, clearly highlighting its dysfunction when the policy does not include stakeholder involvement or adequately understand an organization’s mission.

Students worked in evaluation teams with former/current professionals as team leads. The team environment was most beneficial, “especially in the first semester, I had no idea how to even start an evaluation or what it consisted of.” Students highlighted the variety in team-lead expectations to those of the course instructor (Claudia Diaz Fuentes); students found it hard to decipher what took priority between the competing instructions, which led to some stress.

Overall students enjoyed the lab experience, finding it a great insight into practical policy work, commenting on how “useful” it was to be working with immediate stakeholders to gain a nuanced understanding of the consultation process. One potential recommendation is that the program could explore the benefits of ECON 466 to help support some of the more difficult aspects of the Evaluation Lab, particularly building evaluative knowledge and skills within the students.

FINDINGS

Mixed Results from Prerequisite Courses

Many students noted that ECON 300 is a difficult course for MPP students. This course is a prerequisite for required courses in the MPP curriculum, posing particular challenges if a student has difficulty or even fails the course. The online modality imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic has not helped this issue, as “online economics” is problematic for students, as are most math-heavy online courses. Discussions on this course brought up that the specific instructor for ECON 300 any given semester may cause more issues for students - some of our graduating cohort took the class with one professor and found it challenging but approachable, while others found their different instructor difficult to approach with specific questions on course materials. Some of the economics taught in the class also felt disconnected from the economics necessary within public policy - while the overarching theories are useful, the math in the course focuses more on derivatives/calculus, and less on, say, conducting economic feasibility tests of a policy or program. Likewise, students with an interest in global/national policy might be better served by a comparable macroeconomics course.

Meanwhile, some courses do not have a prerequisite that might be well-served by having one (or at least a course that should be taken at the same time to reinforce skills). The UNM Evaluation Lab is particularly daunting for students; while there is merit to throwing students in the deep-end of the pool, many students felt like they were treading water on both learning evaluation themselves while also being expected to be the experts in the room when working with outside organizations. One student took Public Sector Project Analysis (ECON 466) and found it meshed well with the focus of the Evaluation Lab courses. Again, the program could look into ECON 466 to see if it would be a beneficial suggested course for those students foreign to evaluation, that they could take alongside one of the Eval Lab semesters.

This said, ECON 466 did not focus on cost-benefit analysis as much as students felt was needed for future policy positions. Introduction to cost-benefit analyses might be something to include in one of the special topics during the Public Policy seminar courses.

Potential for macroeconomics, &
possible evaluative skill building
through ECON 466

FINDINGS

Program Connections

The organization of the program made it easy to feel closer to other students within the program (with a caveat for Covid-19 related disconnection). With the number of opportunities to get to know other students in the program, and the policy seminar and evaluation lab containing the same students, it felt more like an actual “cohort.” Taking other courses for the program, but not necessarily within the PUBP department, often led to one or more MPP students taking them together, which helped build connections further. This effect was more apparent for in-person classes. Online modalities still enable students to work together and get to know one another, but in-person classes facilitate that more naturally.

Program Advisors

A shared folder of program plans for students to see potential classes

Students from cohorts prior to 2020 had advisors external to the program, but some did not feel like the pairing was a good fit, with some stating that their advisor was “nothing more than a signature on a sheet each semester.” Cohorts 2020 onwards had program director Dr. Melissa Binder as their de facto advisor. This was helpful for students as she had a vested interest and understanding of course programs, curriculum and learning objectives. However, as program director her time is already constrained, arranging program assistantships, teaching PUBP 501, and liaising with the Community Advisory Board. Community mentors from the advisory board were also assigned to the 2020 Cohort, but this was met with mixed success. Some provided great external advice and practical guidance on possible courses and internships, while others were simply too busy in their roles as community leaders to offer in depth or relevant guidance.

While students prior to 2020 found external advisors dismissed, and did not understand the nuances of the program or the importance of certain course progressions, students from the 2020 cohort felt they lacked guidance on possible electives and external policy areas beyond the program. All students found communicating with fellow students/cohorts the most helpful in terms of course options and program progression. A recommendation going forward, to relieve the burden placed on Dr. Binder's time and to streamline the process, might be to have students further along share their program plans (excel sheets) in a shared folder for the current cohort to browse, and be available to answer questions/make suggestions when needed.

FINDINGS

COVID-19 Pandemic and Graduate School Cohorts

The reality of COVID-19 forced the MPP program online for the entire 2020/21 academic year, and a majority of the 2021/22 year. Both the program and students had to adapt to remote operations, making for an odd learning experience in a program that is so practical and lends itself to interfacing with internal and external stakeholders. Policy is after all for, and to better, people. The 2020 Cohort in particular struggled with this new normal, entering the program remotely with little to no on-campus connections, limited learning resources, and from environments that may have inhibited learning (i.e. quarantine dorm room without a desk for 4 weeks). The lack of tangible connections and available learning supports made for an isolating experience. Students also found it hard to apply and develop their skills in a practical sense. Particular challenges involved: not being able to practice effective outreach with community representatives or relevant stakeholders, creating a lack of primary data for analysis or evaluation. While Zoom, emails, and Google technologies closed this gap and allowed some connections, the loss of secondary or inferred information gained from in-person communication did create barriers to effective policy analysis and evaluation.

Though COVID-19 threw students and the program into the deep end in a less than ideal time frame, the lessons learnt in adaptation and remote learning will be invaluable going forward. For the program, it offers an opportunity to expand access; making the degree available to professional students outside of Albuquerque, for instance. Increased access may expand cohorts, including more professionals with applied policy skills and improving both the breadth and depth of the program's collective knowledge, building a richer experience for all. It may also establish program links with nonprofits and organizations in other states, potentially increasing the variety of policy areas students are exposed to.

For students, the benefits of building resilience through online learning will make them more apt to handle stress and professional situations that require creative thinking. While online stakeholder engagement produced information that at times lacked nuance or depth, it did enable a wider sampling of potential stakeholders, thus increasing breadth. Understanding this and taking these skills forward students will be uniquely prepared to engage across relevant groups to attain information that best serves their long term policy outcomes.

Like everyone throughout the pandemic, Zoom fatigue impacted students' learning comprehension and possibly contributed to a lack of engagement that would not have otherwise existed in a classroom setting. Students main complaint was the disconnect they felt to professors and how without a good connection they felt unable to ask clarifying questions of both course content and process. Professors did become better and explicitly addressed this as the pandemic became "the new normal" but it should be noted the possible loss of learning or comprehension of skills (particularly practical skills) due to this.

Overall students (particularly the 2020 cohort) felt a bit adrift early on in the program due to the forced online modality but all recognized the program's efforts to support them and increase this support and online accessibility as the pandemic went on.

FINDINGS

Exam Presentation

In the final semester of their graduate career, students take the final Public Policy Seminar course to focus on their Master's Exam project, portfolio, and/or presentation. All students graduating this semester felt like the flow of the course and the exam preparation was handled well and was helpful in getting ready for their final committee presentations.

Students found the front-heavy loading of the course (where Master's presentations were held in the first half of the semester) ideal, instead of adding to the end-of-semester scramble and competing with other courses. While this made for a hectic first half of the semester, "getting the presentation over with" was described as far less stressful in the long run.

One aspect that might be explored is if practice presentations could be incorporated into the schedule. Students are unsure how practice presentations could be incorporated given the compacted timeline, but might be possible if a cohort is ahead of schedule. Also, future students may be well-served by a walk-through of the committee's scoring rubric in the first class of the final Public Policy seminar, before they begin writing their portfolio narrative. Otherwise, the structure/process of the final seminar was well-received by students.

Finishing mid-semester was a huge relief!

The heavy lifting early on was worth it.

Students felt nervous, but prepared & supported by the process.

All endorsed the timeline, being "excited to finish early"

FINISH

RECOMMENDATIONS

To Students

1	<p>Adjusting to graduate school is difficult and different for everyone.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do not expect it to be like your undergraduate experience.• Take help offered by the program, the university, or outside sources.• Create a cohort text/message thread as soon as possible.
2	<p>Don't worry so much about needing to find a policy "niche."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The niche might just find you. If it doesn't, the program's foundational premise enhances skills that are useful for many future careers.
3	<p>Set aside more time than you expect for Evaluation Lab.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Working with outside groups is time consuming!
4	<p>Set aside more time for Policy Seminar edits following feedback.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Having a day to internalize feedback, then another time to act on the feedback can help a lot!
5	<p>Begin networking as early as possible, especially if you are a transplant.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Everyone knows everyone in New Mexico, and the program goes by fast.
6	<p>Attend happy hours, especially "post-covid" if you can!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The events help create a cohesive cohort, vent, and relax with students!
7	<p>Classes our group loved and highly recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• LAW Human Rights• POLS 520 - Security• CCS 594 - Race, Gender, & Sexuality in US Immigration History• POLS 511 - Public Policy & Abortion• ECON 466 - Public Sector Project Analysis

RECOMMENDATIONS

To Program

1	<p>The program could weigh applicability of some PADM courses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• If a similar course is being offered by a discipline more aligned with a student's interests, that could alleviate consistent PADM issues.
2	<p>Consider the applicability of ECON 300 as a prerequisite course for MPP.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Comparable macroeconomics course may be better suited for some.• ECON 466 alongside the Eval Lab can increase expertise in evaluation.
3	<p>Consider covering cost-benefit analysis more in the Policy Seminar.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Especially if ECON 466 is not offered alongside the Eval Lab.
4	<p>Incorporate practice presentations in the last Public Policy Seminar course.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Particularly if a cohort is ahead of the timeline.• Take some of the first class to walk through the committee rubric.
5	<p>Establish a commons of past cohort's advisement sheets/degree plans.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mitigate the time pressures on Dr. Binder as the sole program advisor.• Course plans and student discussions are helpful when selecting classes.
6	<p>Continue to offer Brown Bag Lunches with 2nd Year students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussed classes to take, internships, how to survive certain classes, etc.• Networking opportunity with graduated/soon-to-graduate MPP students.
7	<p>Explore networking opportunities with the Community Advisory Board.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Happy Hours are more student-focused.• Talking with members in a casual manner can jumpstart future careers.
8	<p>Establish a link similar to that between MPP and PADM with other relevant policy topic programs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• PADM system managed by Gene Henley creates an accessible system for MPP students, greatly reducing override rigmarole!• Overrides in other programs can often be excessively burdensome.• Law, Global, National, and Human Security (GNHS), School of Education, and Health Sciences all could be better connected!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contributors

Alex Shomaker, Hannah Miller, Sam Hatch

We thank the University of New Mexico Master of Public Policy program for the opportunity to further our education through practical and academic skill-based learning that has prepared us well for our professional careers.

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