MISSION STATEMENT

Planning at Iowa is a two-year master's degree program oriented toward educating professional planners. Planning schools generally approach urban and regional planning in one of two ways: from the perspective of physical design, or from that of policy planning, employing social science tools and techniques. The first perspective emphasizes how planners can shape the built environment; the second focuses on how planners can influence decisions, policies, and actions that affect the quality of life in cities and regions. Prior to 1974 Iowa's Program offered a physical-design-based curriculum. In 1974-75, the Program shifted primarily to a policy perspective based on the social sciences, although urban design is an interest of several of our faculty.

The field of planning serves a variety of constituencies concerned with improving transportation systems, housing, employment opportunities, air and water quality, and other aspects of life in our nation's cities and regions. By its curriculum design and faculty activities, the Planning Program falls squarely within the University's strategic priority of sustainability.

The Planning Program's mission has five elements:

- Maximizing the long-run career potential of graduates who will seek professional positions primarily in the U.S., providing them with entry-level skills as well as the depth and flexibility needed to progress in planning over a lifelong career;
- Providing graduates with basic competence in an area of emphasis within the field of planning so that they are prepared for specialized planning jobs;
- Challenging students to think about the roles they will play as planners, their ethical and moral responsibilities, and their commitment to improving the quality of life in our nation's cities and regions;
- Disseminating knowledge in the planning field through both graduate and undergraduate teaching, as well as through the professional and public service activities of the faculty. The latter includes active participation in applied research supporting the development and improvement of public policies at the local, state, and national levels;
- Advancing the state of knowledge through research on the nature of urban and regional economic, political, social, and environmental systems and on the effects of alternative public policies.

ADMISSION PROCESSES AND CRITERIA

Student Demand and Recruitment. There are approximately 80 accredited master’s programs in planning in the US. The master’s degree in planning is the professional degree for the practice of planning. Generally, student demand for graduate study in planning has been strong and growing, reflecting the overall demand for planners in the US. For the past several years, for example, US News and World Report has featured urban planning as one of the 30 best careers.

In comparison to our peer universities, student demand for our master’s program is strong, but capable of further growth. During the 2008-09 academic year a total of 51 graduate students were enrolled in the Planning Program, one of the highest numbers in the recent past. In Fall 2009, by enrolling 31 new students we have grown to 63 students. Our 31 new students in Fall 2009 is the highest entering class since the early
1990s and one of the four largest classes we’ve had since the late 1970s. The largest entering class was 36 students in 1992.

We compare well in size to our peer planning schools. In 2007-2008 at 50 students, we were at practically the same size as the University of Illinois-Champaign-Urbana (52 students) (generally considered the top planning school in the Midwest) and the University of Kansas (46 students). The same year we were larger than the University of Wisconsin-Madison (35 students), Michigan State University (31 students), the University of Nebraska (21 students), and Iowa State University (31 students). At the same time, we were smaller in 2007-2008 than the University of Minnesota (85 students), the University of Illinois-Chicago (191 students), Ohio State (130 students) and the University of Michigan (105 students).

Being the smallest public Big 10 university in the smallest Big 10 state, we will probably never grow to the size of a Ohio State. And while our enrollments are disproportionately large compared to the size of our state, we nevertheless believe that we have room to grow at the master’s level. Given the quality of the faculty and the quality of the University of Iowa, we certainly see the opportunity to grow to approximately as many students as the University of Minnesota enrolls.

In order to grow, in recent years we have begun an intensive recruitment campaign. This includes: 1) redesign in 2009 of our web site to be more attractive, 2) establishment in 2008 of a twice a year Open House for prospective graduate students, 3) development of a new poster in 2008 (the first since 2000) that was mailed to approximately 3,000 undergraduate departments, 4) 25 recruiting visits in 2008-2009 to colleges and universities in Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin as well as to departments on the UI campus, and 5) design in 2008 of a new recruitment brochure.

Criteria for Selection. Our formal numerical standards for admission are: (1) GRE scores of at least 500 on the verbal and quantitative sections, with a combined verbal and quantitative GRE score of at least 1,000, (2) an undergraduate grade point average (GPA) of 3.00, and (3) a TOEFL of 250 or higher for international student admissions. Each of these standards may be lowered under special circumstances, particularly in situations where other numerical or non-numerical factors indicate exceptional abilities.

We believe we have significantly improved the quality of students enrolled in our program over the past decade. Prior to 2000, our combined GRE scores for entering master’s students ranged between 1050 and 1073 (verbal and quantitative), while in the current decade the scores have ranged from 1116 to 1148. Similarly, undergraduate GPAs have risen from the 3.15-3.18 range to as high as 3.49 in the most recent period.

Success in Enrolling the Highest Quality Students Admitted. In both 2008 and 2009, the results are mixed as to whether the Planning Program is able to enroll the highest quality students admitted. This is based on a comparison of students awarded financial aid.

In Fall 2008 five admittees who were awarded financial aid declined admission to our master’s program. Their mean undergraduate GPA was 3.57 and their mean combined GRE was 1454. In the same year, nine admittees who were awarded financial aid elected to enroll. Their undergraduate GPA was slightly higher, at 3.61, but their average combined GRE was lower at 1250. Interestingly, one of the five students who declined admission, who had the second highest GRE of the five, has transferred to Iowa after one year at another university.

---

1 These numbers include students enrolled in our joint degree programs with Law, Social Work, Engineering, and Public Health and therefore may not be the same as the data sent to us, which appear to consist entirely of those students only seeking a Urban and Regional Planning degree.
In Fall 2009, eight admittees awarded financial aid declined admission. Their mean undergraduate GPA was 3.71 and their mean GRE was 1242. Thirteen admittees awarded financial aid accepted admission in Fall 2009. Their mean undergraduate GPA was 3.47 and their mean GRE was 1246. Hence the students who enrolled had comparable GRE scores to those who declined admission, but their GPA was lower.

**Success in Enrolling a Diverse Student Cohort.** In the past several years, we have had modest success in enrolling minority students. In Fall 2008, two of our incoming students were awarded Dean’s Graduate Fellowships. They joined two other minority students in that entering class from the US, as well as four international students. Similar numbers were reported for classes entering in Fall 2006 and Fall 2007. Fall 2009 has been more disappointing in this regard—we have one African-American student entering our program along with one student from India, China, and Korea each. We have attempted to increase our pool of minority candidates by doing the following: 1) participating in the Math Department’s NSF funded national alliance program which encourages minority math and science students to attend graduate school and 2) recruiting at venues that have relatively high numbers of minority students, including: the University of Illinois at Chicago, Howard University, and the Office of Diversity and Engagement at the University of Iowa. Efforts have also been made to develop a closer relationship with HBCU Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, although this effort has not yet borne fruit. The Program’s Director has also volunteered to serve on several University diversity committees as well as marched annually in UI’s entry into the annual Bud Billiken parade on Chicago’s South Side. The intent of these activities is to raise the visibility of the Planning Program both on campus as well as off campus as highly interested in enrolling and graduating minority students.

**Financial Aid Commitments.** Our standard financial aid commitment is the quarter time assistantship made possible through funds from the Graduate College. Commitments are typically made for one year at a time, although in exceptional cases we will commit for the full two years that our students are expected to be in the master’s program. We attempt to maintain a balance between first and second year students receiving awards. After their first semester, graduate students compete for financial aid based on their grade point average in the master’s program as well as the quality of their work performance.

In addition to financial aid received from the Graduate College, students are also supported through grants and through agreements with local planning agencies. In the case of the former, we currently have four master’s students funded through grants—one through an NSF grant obtained by two of our faculty (Fisher and Funderburg), two through a University Transportation Center grant obtained by Paul Hanley, and one obtained through the Road User Fee National Evaluation co-directed by Paul Hanley. In addition, four of our students are funded through arrangements with local planning or policy agencies whereby the student completes a professional internship with the agency while the agency supports between one-third and one-half of the student’s stipend. Currently, we have such arrangements with the Johnson County planning and zoning office (1 student), the Iowa Policy Project (2 students), and the UI Office of Sustainability (1 student).

For 2009-2010, 13 of our first year students and 13 of our second year students are receiving a quarter-time or greater assistantship. In addition, six first year students received a tuition supplement of $1,000 (5) or $2,000 (1). Overall, therefore 32 of our 63 master’s students are receiving some form of financial aid this year.

**PROGRAM OUTCOMES**

**Degree Completion and Time to Degree.** We collected data for the two most recent cohorts of students who have had time to graduate. Although ours is a two year master’s program, a number of our students are completing joint degrees and so their time to completion of degree is three or even four years in the case of law students. In the Fall of 2005 we had nineteen students in our entering class. Fifteen of those students graduated in the Spring of 2007. Two of the nineteen students left the Program and two were joint degree
students with Social Work and needed to complete one more year, which they did in the following year at which time they obtained employment in planning or social work.

In the Fall of 2006 we had twenty-nine students in our entering class. Twenty-eight of those students graduated in the Spring of 2008. The remaining student was an exchange student from Aalborg University who only planned to be here for the Fall 2006 semester.

Overall, therefore, nearly all of our entering students complete the master’s program, typically within two years, with the primary exception being students pursuing joint degrees who typically take three to four years to complete both degrees.

**Graduate Student Fellowships, Awards, Honors, and/or Publications.** In the past several years, we have increased our ability to attract Fulbright scholars into our master’s program, enrolling one student each in 2007 and 2008. In 2009, we were awarded another Fulbright scholar by the national Fulbright committee, but at the last minute the student decided to withdraw her application for personal reasons. In 2005, two of our graduates were awarded Presidential Management Fellowships with the federal government. In 2008, one of our students was an Obermann Center Graduate Institute Fellow. In 2007, one of our master’s students won an essay contest sponsored by the Iowa chapter of the American Planning Association. In 2008, one of our joint engineering-planning students won a US EPA sustainability award. Finally, in 2009 Iowa’s Great Places program awarded funding for construction of a bikeway project in Fairfield, Iowa that was planned by our students in 2006.

**Graduate Student Placements.** Students graduating with a professional degree in planning are expected to obtain professional employment as planners. At the same time, a few master’s students will go on for doctoral degrees, typically in urban and regional planning. For the cohort of students that entered in 2005, all but one of them secured professional positions upon graduation. For the cohort that entered in 2006, twenty-four of the twenty-eight that graduated had secured jobs to begin upon their graduation. The other four students elected to continue their education – one to pursue another Master’s degree, and three went on to pursue Ph.D’s.

**PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS**

**Appropriate Size of the Graduate Degree Program.** As suggested above, we believe a reasonable objective for our graduate program size is to approximate the size of the University of Minnesota master’s program—80 students. This presumes an entering class of about 40 master’s students, up from the 31 new students enrolled in Fall 2009 and the all time high of 36 students that enrolled in 1992.

We believe this is a reasonable expectation, given the size and strengths of our program. In 2009-2010, we have a total faculty FTE of 8.61 faculty members (including 0.61 FTE in adjunct faculty). The number is lower than our current complement of 9 faculty members because two of our faculty members have 50 percent appointments in the last year of their phased retirement. With 63 students, this gives us a student-faculty ratio of 7.32. According to our accreditation standards, master’s programs in urban and regional planning should not have a student-faculty ratio that exceeds 10.0. With the expected replacement of these two faculty members plus the addition of a third faculty member through the University’s sustainability cluster hire initiative, we should be at 10.61 faculty FTE in 2010-2011 and thereafter. If we were to grow to 80 master’s students, then our student-faculty ratio would be 7.54.

This student faculty ratio would enable us to continue to do a good job of serving our master’s students, but also give us room in our teaching schedules to teach more undergraduate classes, especially in the undergraduate sustainability certificate. We currently offer two to three courses per year that serve the
undergraduate sustainability certificate plus at least one course in sustainability that is taught in the winter term. With the hiring of new faculty this year, we expect this number to go up.

The Program has worked hard to maintain a diversity of research and teaching interests in the Program so that all of our areas of concentration are supported by typically two faculty members each. Our research agenda has been enhanced in the past several years through a renewed partnership with the UI Public Policy Center, which is the University’s primary public policy research center on campus. In the last two years, two of our faculty members have assumed joint appointments with the PPC, thereby enhancing their ability to attract outside funding for their research. In our current faculty search, we expect that two or three of the positions we are hiring on will have joint appointments with the PPC. The success of these faculty members in securing outside grants and contracts will better enable our Program to support graduate students with financial aid, thereby better enabling us to increase our enrollments.

**Program Comparisons.** As reported above, we compare well in our program size with other leading Midwestern research universities. Unfortunately, we lack information on national rankings. There is only one national ranking of urban planning programs, conducted biannually by Planetizen, a web based planning information service. The most recent edition of the Planetizen rankings, which appeared in May 2008, did not include the University of Iowa because the Planning faculty members under the previous program chair were philosophically opposed to participation in the rankings. The faculty now sees this as a mistake and therefore we look forward to participating in the next round of planning school evaluations, which should take place sometime this winter, for a spring 2010 publication.

Personally, I believe we will do well in these rankings. Comparing students with my previous university, where the planning school was ranked 19th in the nation (14th among public universities) out of over 100 planning programs in the US, based on GRE scores it is clear that our students are superior to that university’s planning students. In addition, the data provided by the Task Force indicates that our students’ GRE scores are most recently 126 points above the national average in the Social Sciences-Other category as well as 66 points higher than the national Social Sciences average. Moreover, the quality of our faculty is just as high, if not higher, than that university’s planning faculty.

**Brief, Candid Analysis.** When the Planning Accreditation Board’s site visitor team visited our program in 2006, they found a strong master’s program. Based on their recommendation, the Planning Program was given a seven year accreditation, the longest accreditation term that can be granted by the PAB. Our strengths include good quality teaching, good research, and a well organized curriculum. Our primary weaknesses at that time included a need for a clearer strategic focus and to consider more joint degree programs and undergraduate classes, a lack of minority students, and weak relations with the professional planning community. In the past three years we have addressed all these issues by inaugurating annual strategic planning retreats, proposing the addition of a new joint degree program with Public Health’s MPH program, increasing our efforts to teach classes that will contribute to the undergraduate sustainability program, increasing our efforts to attract minority students, and participating more fully in the affairs of the American Planning Association at the state, regional, and national levels, including the teaching of several continuing education courses for practicing planners.

Regarding weaknesses, our biggest challenge is the change in faculty that is taking place with the retirement of two senior faculty this year and the departure two years ago of two faculty for positions in Australia. It is for this reason that a senior faculty member was brought in to direct the program. We continued the transition this past year with a very successful hire of a recent Ph.D. graduate from the Harvard Graduate School of Design. The pool of applications for this position was very strong with about 45 applications received, many from highly qualified candidates. We expect to have a similar experience this coming year in adding three more faculty members.
One of the key weaknesses of the Planning Program was its general lack of visibility among the nation’s planning schools. While the Program has had strong faculty, it lacked a continuity of leadership that enabled it to be seen broadly as a leading planning graduate school. The faculty and the Graduate College have remedied this by bringing in a new director in August 2008 with significant national visibility and experience running a well regarded planning program. Since coming to the Program, the new director has been elected Vice-President/President Elect of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, thereby furthering the national visibility of the Planning Program.

**Opportunities for Potential Growth or Reorganization.** The Planning Program has spent the past year identifying and working hard on developing new opportunities. These include: developing a close working partnership with the UI Public Policy Center; successfully applying for a new faculty position as part of the University’s sustainability cluster hire; more generally, supporting the University sustainability initiative by launching partnerships with the UI’s Office of Sustainability, gearing its undergraduate classes to contributing to the undergraduate sustainability certificate, and focusing its second year Field Problems classes on sustainability in Iowa towns and communities through the Program’s Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities; increasing its recruiting activities by making 25 campus visitations at UI and other campuses to attract talented students; and increasing its efforts to recruit minority students both on and off campus.

We believe we also have the opportunity to launch a successful doctoral program, especially after we complete the hiring of new faculty this year. Demand for US doctoral programs in planning is worldwide and so we believe we would have no trouble developing a doctoral program that would eventually grow to 15 to 20 students. Of clear concern, of course, is our ability to fund doctoral students without jeopardizing our master’s program. Key to solving this problem is our ability to increase the volume of funded research. We believe our partnership with the Public Policy Center will help us address this need.

**Other Factors.** We think these have already been articulated.

**CONCLUSIONS.** We believe that we have an effective master’s program in planning that has done an outstanding job of attracting a growing number of highly qualified master’s students. While our faculty is in transition, we are confident that we have the growing visibility and stature that will attract high quality faculty candidates, as evidenced by our most recent hires. We therefore have the capacity to continue to grow, not only in enrollments, but also in the overall quality of our master’s program.