

The Minnesota Graduate Planning Co-op Program

Overview

The Minnesota Graduate Planning Co-op Program is a proposed workforce development initiative that is designed to support the planning profession through a pioneering earn-while-learn model. By integrating paid, part-time employment with graduate education, the program creates a debt-free, earn-while-you-learn pathway into planning careers for students from all communities.

Program Model

Unlike traditional co-ops that alternate between academic and work semesters, this model would embed consistent, part-time employment throughout the two-year master's program. Each student would be matched with a single employer for the duration of their studies, ensuring continuity, mentorship, and real-world skill development. Students would pay no tuition and graduate with both a degree and two years of relevant experience—without student debt.

Why This Matters for Workforce Development

- **Equity in Access:** The program removes financial barriers to graduate education, opening doors for individuals from all communities.
- **Talent Pipeline:** It builds a robust pipeline of skilled planners ready to meet growing demand in public and private sectors.
- **Employer Engagement:** Employers co-design the program and serve as long-term partners, ensuring alignment with workforce needs and community priorities.
- **Retention & Advancement:** Early and sustained exposure to the field increases retention and long-term career success for participants.

National Inspiration

This proposed model draws from the UK's Royal Town Planning Institute, which launched a nationally recognized planning apprenticeship in 2019. Over a dozen UK universities now offer this pathway. The proposed Minnesota Co-op model adapts this proven concept to the U.S. context, offering the potential to scale options beyond the Minnesota Planning community.

Partners & Support

The program design phase is led by the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, with strong support from:

- Six major planning employers across Minnesota
- Graduate and undergraduate students
- Research support from PhD student Sylvie Guezeon
- The University of Minnesota Center for Transportation Studies

Next Steps

Conditional on employer and University support, the program could launch as early as Fall 2027. Current efforts focus on finalizing the co-op structure, securing employer commitments, and developing sustainable funding models.

Get Involved

Minnesota-based employers, consider partnering:

- As an employer sponsor
- To support funding and policy advocacy
- To collaborate on research and evaluation
- To help scale the model to other sectors

Non-Minnesota employers and institutions:

- Stay tuned for more details on the program
- If you want something similar, approach your local universities to express interest in designing a graduate co-op

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