

Beginning my AmeriCorps service year during a pandemic was not in any of my plans. In January 2020, I was working toward completing my Master's thesis, and reaching out to current AmeriCorps members to ask about their positions and service opportunities. Although I had originally envisioned my service year connecting with community partners and educators face-to-face, the reality of Zoom meetings, webinars, and working from home became familiar to many as COVID-19 redirected everyday life. In spite of my service year "pivoting" to adjust to the often called "new normal," my AmeriCorps service through the Campus Compact VISTA program has enabled me to build capacity for anti-poverty service learning and helped me put a name to my future research and career interests: public administration. Subsequently, I believe continuing my education at the University of Nebraska at Omaha's (UNO) School of Public Administration doctoral program is the logical next step because of my research interests, UNO's esteemed public administration faculty, and my career aspirations.

A primary research area I am excited to explore in the doctoral program is public policy. With a background in communication studies, my previous research emphasized messages. Initially, I was fascinated with visual messages, and how pictures and physical objects communicated meaning that could be studied through the use of rhetorical theory and criticism. It helped me recognize that arguments could be made through actions and images without any verbal or written language. From there, my interest in messages expanded to political communication, where my mentor, Dr. [REDACTED], encouraged me to hone my research skills as I focused on political identities and hegemony. In studying political and social protest rhetoric, my research delved into white supremacy and the systems that enabled it. Then in 2018 when a far-right company began getting national media attention for its new children's merchandise, "MAGA Building Blocks," I knew I had discovered my Master's thesis topic. The product at the

center of this fleeting media coverage was a building blocks set—similar to LEGO—called “Build the Wall,” featuring a President Donald Trump figurine building a grey brick wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. The packaging of the toy also depicted a racist caricature of a Latin American, with words below the figurine reading, “Illegal immigrant not included.” The immigration policies Trump had been advocating for since the announcement of his presidential campaign were immortalized in toys advertised for children ages five and older. My thesis helped me recognize how policies can drive and influence political identities, causing my interests to expand into social policy. As a result, specializing in public policy will help me foster my political research interests and grow as a scholar.

A secondary research area I am interested to learn more about is nonprofit management. Volunteering first sparked my interest in working with nonprofits. I began volunteering in fundraising and public relations positions, which helped me recognize that community engagement is the cornerstone to successful nonprofit organizations. It was when I started working as a graphic designer for ██████████ as an undergraduate student that I saw community engagement spring to life through service learning partnerships. Collaborating with faculty, P-12 teachers, students, and community organizations to design materials for their projects allowed me to experience first-hand how community engagement can lead to transformative partnerships and mutual learning. When I studied organizational communication, I used ██████████ as a case study to analyze facilitative leadership and collaborative management in a real-world setting. Consequently, when I finished my Master’s degree, I was delighted by the opportunity to return to the ██████████ as an AmeriCorps member to create resources for their anti-poverty priority area. Serving as an AmeriCorps member helped me recognize what I was missing from communication studies: a meaningful purpose. There is a saying in communication studies that

“students can do anything with a communication degree,” which can be the best part about it because it is flexible, but also the worst part because there is no clear direction. While my communication degrees gave me research skills and professional knowledge, it was my AmeriCorps service that opened a path toward meaningful research in nonprofit management.

Beyond my research interests, another draw to the School of Public Administration’s doctoral program is the faculty and supportive academic environment. With a myriad of industry experiences, publications, and research interests represented, the School of Public Administration faculty reinforced my desire to apply because of the diverse backgrounds and knowledge that can shape doctoral students. Although my research interests align with several faculty members, I would be particularly interested in working with Dr. Jodi Benenson. Her research agenda coincides with both my past communication research and my future public administration specializations. Through a mass media lens, I studied young adults’ political socialization and civic engagement practices, which fits well with Dr. Benenson’s research about voter participation among college students. Dr. Benenson’s background in social policy and nonprofit organizations will also help guide me as I learn more about public policy and nonprofit management research. In addition to the faculty, another appeal of the doctoral program is the culture. Not every graduate program includes creating “a supportive, collaborative, and rigorous environment” in their mission statement, which sets the UNO School of Public Administration apart by not only having expert faculty, but also establishing an encouraging culture where students want to return each year of the program. Overall, an environment committed to support, collaboration, and rigor among doctoral students and faculty uniquely attracted me to this program.

The skills and knowledge that are provided through the doctoral program will prepare me for a lifelong career in public administration. Specifically, working in higher education or the nonprofit sector are my ultimate career goals. My prior experience as a graduate teaching assistant helped me realize my passion for working in education, both inside and outside the classroom. I enjoyed working with students, gaining their insights, and making specific changes based on their input. I also appreciated the cooperative, strategic planning environments associated with program and coursework development. Correspondingly, one career path I wish to pursue after completing the doctoral program is higher education administration. Directly training students to become better public speakers is a fulfilling experience, but I realized I could have a greater impact on students' lives by shaping the processes and opportunities that help them reach their future goals. A career in education administration will allow me to continue working in the lives of students through campus leadership.

Another potential career path I want to work toward is being a nonprofit director. From fundraising to community engagement, the nonprofit sector provides a collaborative, meaningful space to work. With coursework and research opportunities in nonprofit management, I know the School of Administration doctoral program will provide the academic and practical knowledge essential to contributing to today's nonprofit organizations. Even though nonprofit work supports a myriad of causes I am interested in, it would be amazing to find a cross-over between my passions in education and nonprofits. Working in a nonprofit that makes higher education more attainable and accessible would be my goal, because as much as I love education, I recognize the factors that can make it exclusive and insurmountable. Discovering a nonprofit career related to education would allow me to realize both of my passions in my work.

Before my service term with AmeriCorps, I had the misperception that in order to be prepared for a doctoral program, a student must have prior undergraduate and graduate experiences in the same academic discipline. However, I now believe a student with an educational background outside the discipline can contribute to the program in unique ways through diverse viewpoints and an openness to learn new concepts. In a time when facts are labeled “fake news” and uncertainty has become the norm, it can be a great advantage in the field of public administration to have knowledgeable people with experience in clear communication and public messaging. I not only believe that I have the drive necessary to pursue a career in public administration, but I am also convinced that the doctoral program at UNO School of Public Administration possesses the quality of support, collaboration, and diversity that can best help me fulfill my goals