



SPIA Community April Update

Dear SPIA Students, Faculty and Staff:

The current pandemic has caused disconcerting times for all of us as we deal with a condition of uncertainty. By the same token, however, it has also reminded us that we can stand adversity. As a school, SPIA has demonstrated that it is nimble enough to adjust to new, unprecedented circumstances. COVID-19 also proved to me that David Hume was right when he wrote in *Treaties on Human Nature* (1739) that “the fundamental grounding of morality is human sentiment (i.e., benevolence).”

SPIA is proud of the fact that we were able to help a number of our international students who were facing financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. I want to thank every member of the SPIA community for the care, integrity, and professionalism that they have exhibited.



Best wishes to all as you enter finals. If you catch yourself wanting the camaraderie of fellow SPIA students, consider tuning into or hosting [virtual socials](#) arranged and led by students.

With gratitude,
Mehrzad Boroujerdi
Director, VT SPIA

COVID-19 and SPIA

SPIA faculty demonstrated how their professional expertise can be of help during the current crisis. Professor [Stephanie Smith](#), our global health policy expert, has provided commentary on why we should focus on the [chronic conditions of deadly diseases like COVID-19](#), and why [funding the World Health Organization](#) is so important. Stephanie also received a grant from VT's Institute for Society, Culture and Environment (ISCE) for a research project entitled “Unpacking the global health agenda: Civil society priorities and their measurement.”

Professors [Shalini Misra](#) and [Kris Wernstedt](#) received a \$98,000 grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) for their “RAPID: Distancing & Digital Information in the Face of COVID-19” research project. Shalini and Kris (along with two other VT colleagues) also received an ISCE award to conduct a proof-of-concept study focusing on risk, resource management, and social informatics in the hiking community.

Professor [Stephanie Davis](#) published an [opinion piece](#) in Roanoke Times on COVID-19’s immediate financial impact on local governments. Stephanie has also been busy [helping](#) over 110 of Virginia’s local government finance experts who are trying to respond to the budgetary implications of the pandemic. Representatives from the Virginia Municipal League, Virginia Association of Counties, Virginia Local Government Managers Association, and the national Government Finance Officers Association spoke with our local government finance directors during our webinar sessions. Meanwhile, at the request and interest of the participants in the local government finance discussion webinars, **SPIA will be offering a “for continuing education credit” [webinar on April 30, 2020](#)**. Professor Davis and Dr. Sheryl Bailey, SPIA’s visiting professor of practice, will be leading this webinar. See SPIA’s webpage for [COVID-19 Local Government Financial Management Resources](#).

Finally, our Institute for Politics and Governance (IPG) has put together a [list of ways](#) to support vulnerable or disadvantaged populations in our communities.

Help Spread the Word!

SPIA is hosting virtual info sessions through June. If you know anyone who may be interested in the program, please let them know of the upcoming info sessions below:

- **Center for Public Administration and Policy:** [May 7th at 2 pm ET](#); [June 18th at 2 pm ET](#)
- **Government & International Affairs:** [May 21st at 2 pm ET](#)
- **Urban Affairs & Planning:** [June 4th at 2 pm ET](#)

Student & Faculty News

Joseph Castle (CPAP) completed his Ph.D. degree with a dissertation entitled “An Organizational Analysis of Publishing the People’s Code.” (April 2020). Congratulations Dr. Castle!

Congratulations, **Eunju Namkung** and **Ben Shannon**, for successfully defending their Master of Public Administration portfolios!

Professor **Ariel Ahram** co-authored an [article](#) entitled “Perspectives on the rebel social contract: Exit, voice, and loyalty in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria,” in World Development.

Provost Clarke has recommended approval of [Professor Ralph Buehler’s](#) promotion to the rank of full professor, and [Professor Steve Hankey’s](#) promotion to the rank of Associate Professor with tenure. Congratulations to Ralph and Steve.

I am saddened to also share the news that Professors [Thomas Skuzinski](#) and [Wenwen Zhang](#) will be leaving SPIA at the end of the summer. I thank them both for their teaching, research, and service during the last few years and wish them the best at their new institutions.

Program News

The Graduate School has approved our new Accelerated Bachelor of Arts in Public and Urban Affairs (PUA) and Master's in Public Administration (MPA) degree. This will enable selected EPP or SSC students to obtain a master's degree more quickly.

As a result of the pandemic, SPIA has had to cancel its Washington Semester and the Study Abroad program this summer.

Staff News



Myriam Lechuga came to Virginia Tech and SPIA in 2003 as the Graduate Student Coordinator for the Alexandria Campus (Greater Washington DC Area). Prior to coming to Virginia Tech, Myriam worked in student services for George Washington University's Center for Professional Development. She also worked for decades in student services for several off-campus university programs in the DC Metro Area, and as the manager of an international association's scholarship foundation. Myriam is planning to retire in October 2020. I want to thank her for her years of excellent service to the school and wish her a happy retirement.

Sweeping College Awards

SPIA faculty, staff, students, and alums earned more than half the College of Architecture and Urban Studies (CAUS) awards this year. Congratulations to the following awardees:

- Nicole Benincasa (UAP alumna) received CAUS Outstanding Recent Alumni.
- [Todd Schenk](#) (UAP) received CAUS Certificate for Excellence in Outreach.
- Stephanie Davis (CPAP) also received CAUS Certificate for Excellence in Outreach.
- [Thomas Skuzinski](#) (UAP) received the University Teaching Excellence Award.

- Huyen Le (UAP, PGG UEDP track) received CAUS Outstanding Dissertation Award.
- Steve Hankey (UAP) received CAUS Certificate for Excellence in Scholarship.
- Leigh Bower received CAUS Outstanding Administrative and Professional Staff Award.
- Leslie Day received the Elizabeth Roberson Staff Excellence Award.

