



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

W A S H I N G T O N , D C

American University
Washington, D.C

THE SEARCH

[American University](#) (AU) seeks an experienced, visionary, and strategic leader to serve as its next Dean of the School of Public Affairs (SPA). The new Dean of SPA will lead a nationally recognized school of public affairs within a newly designated R1 institution, with an opportunity to build on the university's and the school's long-standing reputations for excellence in teaching, research, and social impact. As part of the university's leadership team of AU President Jonathan Alger and Provost Vicky Wilkins, the Dean will play an important role in further elevating the profile and influence of AU and SPA nationally and internationally by supporting and developing the school's research profile and advancing its innovative approaches to public affairs education, community service, intellectual leadership, and public influence.

American University is a dynamic institution in Washington, DC, with a history of catalyzing impact-driven scholarship and teaching, fostering intellectual curiosity, supporting student success, and empowering lives of purpose, service, and leadership. [In the last five years](#), AU has doubled research funding, engaged in innovative cross-disciplinary scholarship, and developed advanced and applied learning opportunities for students. Through the successful completion of the Change Can't Wait campaign in 2024, the university established nine newly endowed faculty positions and launched or named four distinctive centers and institutes that will build on the strengths of the AU community to incubate innovative ideas. At the foundation of this remarkable upward trajectory is a community of passionate leaders who thrive on tackling the world's most pressing challenges.

SPA is well-positioned to capitalize on AU's strategic investments and the opportunities afforded by its geographic location in one of the world's most influential cities. A leading public affairs school and the top-ranked public affairs school in DC, SPA trains the next generation of civic and academic leaders through a diverse portfolio of undergraduate and graduate degree programs and professional training opportunities. With Washington, DC as its laboratory, SPA promotes a culture of innovation where faculty conduct cutting-edge public affairs research that builds bridges between the academic and policy worlds and shapes public understanding of the core challenges of our times. SPA's faculty span multiple

disciplines, including political science, public administration, public policy, criminology, criminal justice, terrorism, homeland security policy, economics, sociology, psychology, and law, and their work shapes debate and action at the local, national, and international levels.

As SPA's chief academic and administrative officer, the Dean provides intellectual leadership to SPA faculty, students, and staff, and leads planning, program development, fundraising, administrative, and personnel efforts to build and sustain excellence in the school's operations. Reporting to the provost and serving as a member of the President's Council and Deans' Council, the Dean works collaboratively with AU leadership, other administrators and deans, faculty, and staff to advance the university and the school. Additionally, the Dean serves as SPA's primary representative, engaging with external stakeholders to build visibility, reputation, philanthropic support, and revenue.

American University has retained Isaacson, Miller, a national executive search firm, to assist in this important recruitment. Confidential nominations, inquiries, and applications may be directed to the search team, as indicated at the end of this document.

ABOUT AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

[Chartered by Congress in 1893](#), American University is a private, student-centered research institution located on a 90-acre campus in a residential neighborhood, just a few miles from downtown Washington, DC. AU is home to prestigious schools and colleges, internationally renowned faculty, and a reputation for creating meaningful change in the world. Students distinguish themselves for their service, leadership, and ability to rethink global and domestic challenges and opportunities. American University's mission is, "To advance knowledge, foster intellectual curiosity, build community, and empower lives of purpose, service, and leadership."

Leveraging its location in DC, AU faculty and students are actively engaged in the world around them, and AU is a university where the leaders of today train the leaders of tomorrow. AU was founded to respond to the needs of a changing world, and in today's climate on campus and around the nation, the need to live up to those values has only become more important.

American University is one of the largest private employers in Washington, DC, and consistently ranks among the nation's leading universities. Throughout its history, the engagement, inclusiveness, and diversity of AU's community have been hallmarks of the university. AU's extraordinary faculty and staff, cutting-edge facilities, and focus on teaching, research, engagement, and action address today's most difficult challenges. Moreover, *U.S. News and World Report 2026* [recognizes AU as #5 for study abroad and #15 for co-ops or internships](#). AU is also proud to be the first urban campus, the first research university, and the largest higher education institution in the United States to achieve carbon neutrality, a goal achieved in 2018, two years ahead of an ambitious target.

With eight schools and more than 180 programs, including bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees, AU students choose a personalized curriculum of theoretical study and experiential learning taught by internationally recognized faculty in courses that take them from the classroom to the nation's capital, and all around the globe. The university's mission is advanced by more than 900 full-time faculty members. Among AU's hundreds of adjunct faculty are policymakers, diplomats, journalists, artists, writers, scientists, and business leaders. The university also employs term and continuing appointment faculty who teach, mentor, and may be research-active and/or hold administrative positions. Essential to all university activities and initiatives are the employees who tirelessly support and advance the institution's mission and deliver a transformative student experience at AU.

American University provides students with a solid foundation in the liberal arts and offers opportunities to pursue in-depth studies in their chosen field. In fall 2025, AU's enrollment was approximately 11,300 students, with 6,500 degree-seeking undergraduates, 3,100 degree-seeking graduate students, 1,400 degree-seeking law students, and 280 students in non-degree certificate programs. As of the most recent Fall census, AU's undergraduate first-year retention rate was 87 percent, and 75 percent of students graduated from AU within six years. The university offers a comprehensive financial aid program that recognizes both academic excellence and demonstrated financial need. About 80 percent of incoming students receive aid, and nearly \$100 million per year is awarded to undergraduates.

AU students earn numerous honors and awards, including Fulbright, Truman, Marshall, Jack Kent Cooke, Boren, Rotary, and Goldwater Scholarships; Pickering, Rangel, and Javits Fellowships; membership in the Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society; and appointments as Presidential Management Fellows and White House Fellows. Students use Washington, DC as a learning laboratory. To complement their classroom studies, 85 percent of students complete one or more internships and many take advantage of other experiential education opportunities by the time they graduate. More than 60 percent of undergraduate students participate in 100+ study abroad programs in more than 40 countries on six continents. Students also participate in student government, residence hall government, student media, more than 150 student groups, 23 social fraternities and sororities and three governing councils, and varsity, recreational, and intramural sports.

American University has a budget of approximately \$805 million for fiscal year 2026. The university also maintains financial resources, which include several reserve contingencies to manage unanticipated enrollment revenue losses, infrastructure needs, strategic initiatives, and compensation matters. For fiscal year 2025, the university's total change in net assets without donor restrictions totaled \$36 million. This measure is based on Generally Accepted Accounting Principles and represents the total net income of the university that is not based on donor-imposed stipulations.

American University is currently undergoing a [strategic plan](#) refresh, and the new strategic plan is expected to launch in January 2026. The 2026–2030 strategic plan is guided by a working framework represented by “the five Cs,” specifically community, career, civic pluralism, curriculum, and curiosity.

University Leadership

Jonathan R. Alger is American University’s 16th president and joined AU in 2024. President Alger is an experienced and visionary higher education leader who spent 12 years as president of James Madison University (JMU). Under his leadership, JMU created and implemented a bold and visionary strategic plan focused on engaged learning, community engagement, and civic engagement, and developed numerous new initiatives, including the Valley Scholars Program for first-generation students, the comprehensive and highly successful Unleashed fundraising campaign, and the comprehensive Task Force on Racial Equity. President Alger also led JMU to achieve the R2 national research university designation and helped to grow the university’s external research funding by 92 percent from 2019 to 2023.

Vicky M. Wilkins is AU’s provost and chief academic officer and a professor of public administration and policy. Before assuming this role, she served as the Dean of the School of Public Affairs, overseeing its academic, administrative, and financial functions. Under Dr. Wilkins's guidance, SPA experienced remarkable growth in undergraduate and graduate enrollments. She also implemented structures to effectively disseminate research to a broad audience, both within and outside academia. Driven by her commitment to innovation, she enhanced SPA's educational portfolio, introducing programs like the SPA Analytical & Management Institute, the Public Affairs Policy Lab, the Peace & Violence Research Lab, and the "Battleground" courses. These initiatives provided students with cutting-edge knowledge and practical experiences.

ABOUT THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The School of Public Affairs at American University has been a hub for policy-related research and teaching for over 90 years. Created during the depths of the Great Depression to train federal employees to implement President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “New Deal,” SPA builds a culture of excellence and transforms the student experience through personalized teaching and experiential education; empowerment to conduct and produce research for those who seek knowledge; and ongoing engagement and collaboration between the academic and policy-planning spheres.

AU’s School of Public Affairs has been [nationally recognized in multiple fields](#). SPA is ranked #9 overall among all Schools of Public Affairs in the 2025 *U.S. News and World Report* Best Public Affairs Schools ranking, the highest ranking the school has ever received, and is ranked #1 in the Washington, D.C area. SPA also earned recognition in several specialist areas, including #4 for Public Management and

Leadership, #4 for Nonprofit Management, #5 for International Policy and Global Administration, and #12 in Public Policy Analysis.

The pursuit of knowledge is at the heart of SPA's public service mission, and the school's faculty are highly regarded in their fields. Faculty delve into the most complex and pressing contemporary issues, yielding transformative insights and practical solutions regarding policy problems ranging from childcare policy to counterterrorism to the gender gap in political leadership. Their research educates, informs, and promotes change, reflecting a culture that encourages inquiry, exploration, and collaboration. Among the school's 122 faculty members, including 66 tenure-line and 56 term faculty, is a recipient of the John Gaus Award for lifetime achievement in political science and administration (two emeriti professors have also been recognized with this honor), as well as several senior-level executive branch appointees. Faculty regularly publish with leading university presses and in influential journals, including the most prominent outlets for discipline-driven and thematically focused scholarship. They help shape their fields through service on leading journals and academic press editorial boards and by holding leadership positions in professional associations across the United States and internationally, as well as holding joint appointments with leading international public affairs schools. Their influence resonates further through leadership in the following [centers](#): Center for Congressional & Presidential Studies, Center for Data Science, Center for Environmental Policy, First Ladies Initiative, Justice Initiatives, Metropolitan Policy Center, Peace & Violence Research Lab, Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab, Political Theory Institute, Postsecondary Education & Economics Research Center, Project on Civic Dialogue, Washington Institute on Public Affairs Research, and the Women & Politics Institute, as well as the Public Affairs and Policy Lab.

SPA is home to five research journals that span public affairs, government, and law. Its legacy, set by President Roosevelt's charge to promote "practical contacts between the collegiate and educational world, and the operations of government," continues to inform our values and approach, as 2,500 current students and more than 25,000 alumni tackle complex issues with thoughtful research that educates, informs, and promotes change across a multitude of fields.

SPA is home to four departments: [Government](#); [Justice, Law & Criminology](#); [Public Administration & Policy](#); and the [Washington Semester Program](#). SPA offers six undergraduate and 13 graduate degrees and a variety of certificates at both the undergraduate and graduate levels to its over 1,800 undergraduate students and nearly 700 graduate students.

Undergraduates pursue liberal arts-based degrees in Interdisciplinary Studies (Communications, Legal Institutions, Economics & Government); Justice and Law; Legal Studies; Political Science; Data Sciences for Political Science; and Data Sciences for Justice, Law, and Criminology. Students can also pursue undergraduate certificates in Dialogue, Digital Technology Generalist, Community-Based Research, Key

Undergraduate Leadership, Political Thought, Politics, Policy, and Law, and Women, Policy, and Political Leadership.

SPA was among the first schools at AU to develop an innovative three-year undergraduate degree program—Politics, Policy, and Law (PPL) Scholars—in which students work closely with faculty in a rigorous academic program that provides them with the tools to make an impact through action and knowledge. Undergraduates may also accelerate their studies with combined undergraduate and graduate degrees, including a combined BA/MPA, BA/MPP, BA/MA in Political Science or Political Communication, or BA/MS in Justice, Law, and Criminology; Terrorism and Homeland Security Policy; or Data Science.

SPA's extensive offerings at the graduate level include NASPAA-accredited Master of Public Administration (MPA) and Public Policy (MPP), an MS in Justice, Law, and Criminology, an MS in Data Science, an MS in Terrorism and Homeland Security Policy, an MA in Political Communication, and an MA in Political Science. The school offers an online Master of Public Administration and Policy (MPAP) as well as an online MS in Counterterrorism and Homeland Security. Doctoral programs include Justice, Law, and Criminology, Political Science, and Public Administration and Policy. Graduate certificates in Leadership for Organizational Change, Nonprofit Management, Public Financial Management, Cyber Policy and Management, Public Management, Public Policy Analysis, and Women, Policy, and Political Leadership are also offered at SPA. Additionally, the [SPA Analytics and Management Institute](#) offers zero- and one-credit courses to current students and alumni looking to further develop their practical skills.

AU's School of Public Affairs also offers Executive Degrees and Certificates through the [Key Executive Leadership Programs](#). Established in 1975, the Key Executive Leadership Program is a graduate course of study in the skills, knowledge, and values needed by top-level public executives and offers participants the perspectives and competencies necessary for effective performance in high-level executive work. Key is home to four leadership programs, including a NASPAA-accredited Executive MPA, an Executive Leadership Graduate Certificate, and two Executive Leadership Certificates. Key is the global public sector leadership program of choice because it challenges good managers to become extraordinary leaders who build an environment for organized success.

The school is home to numerous interdisciplinary programs that connect experts across SPA units to advance research, provide training of the highest quality, and shape public affairs matters at AU, nationally, and internationally. In addition, SPA faculty members partner with interdisciplinary centers and faculty members elsewhere at the university that build on faculty expertise and provide opportunities for scholarly collaboration and exchange. In many ways, SPA serves as a magnet supporting policy-related research originating from faculty housed throughout the university.

SPA has more than 25,000 alumni worldwide, approximately one third of whom live in the Washington, DC area. Alumni are engaged in international, federal, state, and local government, nonprofit and international NGOs, and in related areas, working as lobbyists, policy analysts, business executives, teachers, journalists, and attorneys. Thousands of them remain connected to the school as donors, mentors, and internship and employment partners. In particular, the School of Public Affairs Board of Advisors, comprised of SPA alumni and other influential partners, advises and counsels the Dean on the school's strategies, goals, problems and opportunities; interacts with students and faculty; assists the school in seeking philanthropic support; and through its advocacy efforts enhances the reputation of SPA's programs, faculty, and graduates.

THE ROLE OF THE SPA DEAN

Reporting to the Provost, the Dean is SPA's chief academic and administrative officer, responsible for providing strategic and intellectual leadership and collaborating with faculty, staff, and other stakeholders on the school's positioning and operations, including all program, department, and personnel activities. With the support of faculty and staff, the Dean serves as the school's principal representative for enhancing its profile and resource streams by addressing and building program demand and visibility. This entails managing and developing relationships with key stakeholders, including students, alumni, and local, national, and international civic leaders. The Dean also consults and collaborates with the SPA Board of Advisors and works closely with fellow AU deans and administrative leaders in contributing to the achievement of AU's strategic goals and academic direction. The Dean oversees a budget of \$22.4 million and an SPA community of nearly 3,000 faculty, students, and staff. Direct reports to the Dean include the senior associate dean for academic affairs, associate dean for undergraduate education, associate dean for research, assistant dean for graduate enrollment, assistant dean for administration, assistant dean for communications and marketing, assistant dean of development, director of inclusive excellence, associate director of events, four department chairs, and an executive assistant.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE DEAN

Develop an innovative, strategic, and timely vision for SPA

SPA requires a Dean with visionary and strategic leadership skills as well as an understanding of the public affairs and higher education landscapes and how the current moment affects all of SPA's stakeholders. The Dean will work closely with faculty, students, staff, AU leadership, and external stakeholders to define and articulate a vision and distinctive value proposition for SPA in a changing field and environment. The job market has shifted in Washington, DC, more universities are opening DC campuses, and international student enrollments are down across the country. In an increasingly competitive market, the successful dean will articulate a clear identity for the school and augment its capacity to compete for students, faculty, financial resources, and recognition.

While charting a course for the future, the Dean must also keep a sharp focus on the day-to-day operations of current academic departments and programs. The Dean will be a skilled manager of human and financial resources, ensuring that the offices under their purview continue to provide efficient and effective support for faculty, staff, and students. To be most effective in the leadership and management of their office, the Dean should be a known and visible presence throughout the school and should embody the ideals of open communication, trust, transparency, and collegiality. Additionally, the successful Dean will be an advocate for SPA across the university, while also modeling and promoting interdisciplinary and cross-school collaboration.

Recruit, develop, and retain a distinguished faculty and staff

SPA's faculty members are talented scholar-teachers who care deeply about the success of their students and advancing the university's mission. The Dean must foster an intellectual and financial environment conducive to retaining world-class scholar-teachers and collaborate with department chairs to assess the appropriate mix of tenure-line, term, and adjunct faculty, ensuring that all faculty are appropriately supported and recognized for their contributions to the school. The Dean will also uphold AU's institutional commitment to diversity as the faculty composition continues to evolve. The next Dean will also work closely with their leadership team and build trust that allows for effective delegation.

SPA staff are key to SPA's success, and the next Dean will model strong management, empowerment, and professional development of their staff. Staff and faculty are experts in their work, and their knowledge should be built upon to create broader connections and break down silos across the university to provide the best possible academic experience.

Elevate SPA's visibility and lead the School's fundraising efforts

SPA's location in the nation's capital is a tremendous asset and a platform from which partnerships can be built with a wide range of external stakeholders. While SPA has garnered increased attention and visibility over the last decade, there are still many opportunities to further SPA's brand in DC and around the world. Increased visibility will help to further position SPA as a world-class public affairs school that takes full advantage of its Washington, DC, location. The Dean will build and maintain relationships with government agencies, research enterprises, nonprofit organizations, industry, and other entities to apply research findings in real-world settings and to help develop institutions and their leaders. Many of SPA's alumni are located in the DC area and are leaders in their fields. The next Dean will deepen relationships with alumni and further engage them in various aspects of the school's strategic growth.

AU recently completed a successful capital campaign, and fundraising remains a key part of the next Dean's role. The Dean is the public face of SPA, enthusiastically telling its story to diverse audiences, including alumni and potential donors. In collaboration with University Advancement and the SPA Board

of Advisors, the Dean will increase business, philanthropic, foundation, and government funding and strengthen alumni engagement. The Dean will deliver a compelling message about SPA's programs and achievements, strategically engaging donors in discussions, demonstrating the relevance of the school's vision and mission, and motivating constituencies within and beyond the AU community to invest their resources and time to ensure the School's success.

Leverage and continue to grow SPA's strong reputation in the field to attract top students

The next Dean will be expected to continue SPA's positive momentum and leverage its rising profile in the rankings with continued success in student enrollment. Student interest and SPA enrollments have remained strong even with enrollment challenges affecting higher education. Historically, SPA has been able to leverage its location in Washington, DC, as a magnet for students interested in public affairs and public administration. As the landscape evolves significantly, the Dean of SPA will need to provide thoughtful leadership that's both proactive and entrepreneurial and responsive to positioning students to gain relevant insights from the curriculum, as well as co-curricular learning opportunities through internships and experiential learning opportunities. Finally, the successful Dean of SPA will explore international student markets to recruit students to AU.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The successful candidate must possess a demonstrated record of leadership, strategic thinking, and management, as well as scholarship and administrative accomplishment in complex organizations, including fiscal and personnel management, in academic, government, or nonprofit sectors. AU seeks candidates with exemplary teaching experience and significant research contributions to be meritorious of the rank of full professor, or equivalent experience that enables them to support and evaluate teaching and scholarly research. The successful candidate will have the ability to work effectively with a broad range of constituencies within the school, across the university, and externally.

While no single individual will possess all the desired experiences and qualifications, the successful candidate should possess many of the following professional and personal attributes:

- A PhD, JD, or other terminal degree; a record of successful scholarship, teaching, and experiences to qualify as a professor in a relevant program within the school.
- Significant leadership experience pertinent to disciplines of relevance to public affairs scholarship; a dedication to improving society through the practical application of academic theory and to conveying to external audiences the strengths that SPA can offer.
- Leadership skills and the ability to collaborate with colleagues to promote research and academic excellence in a highly interdisciplinary environment that embraces both theoreticians and practitioners.
- An aptitude, ability, and eagerness to friend-raise and fundraise on behalf of the School.

- Interpersonal skills that enable effective relationships with all stakeholders, including other university leaders, alumni, advisory boards, government officials, and leaders in public policy.
- Appreciation and support for faculty governance and faculty entrepreneurialism in research, teaching, and service, as well as a passion for engaging undergraduate and graduate students.
- A demonstrable commitment to enhancing diversity and promoting inclusion; experience in recruiting and developing excellent faculty, staff, and students, including women and members of racially and ethnically underrepresented groups.
- A record as a consensus-building leader with a demonstrated history of diagnosing organizational strengths and weaknesses, knowing how to deal effectively with them, successfully bridging internal and external stakeholders, and forging unity and loyalty across divisions.
- Financial acumen and proven abilities in budget and financial management.
- A track record as an effective manager of people with a management style built upon respect, two-way communication, collaboration, and fairness.
- Experience forging partnerships with a variety of public and private organizations and universities, both nationally and internationally.
- Entrepreneurial and creative spirit.
- Unimpeachable integrity and the highest standards of ethical behavior.

COMPENSATION

The salary range for this position is \$325,000 to \$375,000. The President and Board of Trustees reserve the final determination of the selected candidate's actual pay, considering their experience and qualifications for the role.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Screening of complete applications will begin immediately and continue until the completion of the search process. Inquiries, nominations, referrals, and CVs with cover letters should be sent via the Isaacson, Miller website for the search: <https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/american-university-school-public-affairs/dean>.

Sean Farrell, Partner
Pam Pezzoli, Partner
Janette Martinez, Senior Associate
Drew Chang, Senior Search Coordinator
Isaacson, Miller

American University is an equal opportunity, affirmative action institution that operates in compliance with applicable laws and regulations. The University prohibits discrimination and discriminatory

harassment (including sexual harassment and sexual violence) against any AU community member on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including pregnancy), age, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, personal appearance, gender identity and expression, family responsibilities, political affiliation, source of income, veteran status, an individual's genetic information or any other bases under federal or local laws (collectively "Protected Bases").

This document has been prepared based on the information provided by American University. The material presented in this leadership profile should be relied on for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this information, the original source documents and information provided by American University would supersede any conflicting information in this document.