One year into my tenure as Dean of the School of Public Policy, I was recently asked what brought me to Maryland. With a year to listen and learn under my belt, the answer has never been as clear to me as it is today. Our community is a pioneering lot, who have created a distinctive educational experience – what I am increasingly thinking of as public policy “the Maryland Way.”

We are part of a strong public university with public-mindedness wired into our DNA. SPP is a unique public policy asset that serves our students, our state, our country and our world. A “land grant” university, UMD was founded to expand opportunities for segments of the public that have not had equal access to education. We continue in that tradition today. While all public research universities are under immense fiscal pressure, the University of Maryland retains almost one-third of our funding from the State, a high percentage relative to many of our peers, enabling us to pursue our inclusive, public mission at a very reasonable cost. The University was named a Top 10 Best Value College by Kiplinger’s Personal Finance this year. UMD recently received the 2015 Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award from INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine, a fact which both reflects our public mission and enriches the educational experience for all.

Second, we use our position in the National Capital Region to provide a unique hands-on education which directly exposes students to global, national and local policy-making opportunities. Put simply, we get our hands dirty. Our location makes it possible, our mission to educate the best policymakers makes it imperative. Currently Professors Steve Fetter and Nate Hultman are working at the White House, and three of our students are interning there. MPP second-year student Shannon Kennedy recently helped design President Obama’s climate pledge for University Presidents around the country to sign ahead of the Paris Climate conference. UMD’s President, and SPP faculty member, Wallace Loh helped lead the way with an ambitious UMD pledge. This semester US Senator Ben Cardin, ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and member of SPP’s Board of Visitors, came to the School to discuss the US-Iranian nuclear deal with SPP students and faculty before voting on the issue. The discussion was enriched by cutting-edge work done at our Center on International Security at Maryland (CISSM) on US and Iranian public opinion about the deal.

We not only bring policymakers and policymaking into the classroom, we also bring the classroom to the field. Our project courses have long enabled students to work for clients in the government, and across the width and breadth of the National Capital Region ecosystem of institutions. Just in the last year, our students have helped author new domestic violence policy in Prince George’s County and designed a Small Town Energy Program to help the city of College Park continue to shrink its carbon footprint. Former Student A. Paul Massaro III worked with CISSM faculty to place an Op-Ed in the Baltimore Sun about the relationship between Russia and the US. These types of opportunities will only expand as our new curriculum emphasizes the practice of public policy for real-world clients from the day a master’s student enters to the day of graduation.

A third distinguishing feature of the Maryland Way derives from the fact that we are a school of public policy at the only Tier I research university in the National Capital Region. Our students and faculty are increasingly building the nexus between the policy world and the immense research capacities available to us on UMD’s campus. Indeed, SPP, drawing on a wide range of UMD capacities, will host a Climate Action 2016, a global summit, next spring that will draw national and international leaders from government, business and civil society. Opportunities also abound in fast-growing areas such as cyber policy due to unique capabilities at UMD and in our region.
Public Policy the Maryland Way (continued)

Fourth, the State of Maryland itself informs the Maryland Way. Our history, captured in the distinctive state flag that flies above our school, is one that represents a long tradition of freedom of thought and belief (welcoming Catholics when that was not done in neighboring colonies), as well as one of bridging divides. Once a “border state” between North and South, Maryland epitomized division, with some of its sons marching off under black and gold colors with the Union army, while others marched in the Confederate Army under the white and red colors. Following the war, the modern-day Maryland flag became a symbol of bridge building, of overcoming division to achieve unity. Today Maryland has gone from border state to crossroads of the nation and world, under a flag of inclusion and bridge building.

Fifth, SPP embodies the Maryland Way by educating and impacting policy from local to global on a daily basis. Our students live, study and get jobs in Annapolis, Washington DC and a wide range of global institutions in the neighborhood. The ability to move seamlessly from local to national and global and back again is increasingly required in the policy world writ large, and is a hallmark of our students. Alumni like Ruby Marcelo ('07), who is currently finishing her first tour as a vice consul at the U.S. Consulate Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, developed her policy experience at the local level in Montgomery County (Md.) where she worked for five years. Similarly, Taylor Moore ('13), a Robertson Fellow, started in Annapolis but is now working at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing for the US Commercial Service. Lisa Calise ('92) started at the federal level, before spending years leading multiple departments for the State of Massachusetts, and is now at a prominent educational nonprofit institution. Our graduates, can and do cross boundaries that others find difficult.

Sixth, the Maryland Way involves taking a multi-stakeholder approach to policy. Our School still places a higher percentage of graduates in federal government jobs than almost any other policy school (34% of our December 2014 and May 2015 graduates work in the federal government). At the same time, we also prepare and graduate students capable of making and shaping policy at the state and local government level, in the philanthropy and nonprofit sphere, and where the public and private sectors meet. In November, the Food Recovery Network, an NGO founded by former student Ben Simon coming out of the Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership’s Do Good™ challenge, witnessed an amazing milestone -- 100 million pounds of food recovered! Our students and our alumni do good, a lot of good, from every platform imaginable. And last month, our Center for Public Policy and Private Enterprise hosted a major conference highlighting our unique relationship with Lockheed Martin, a Fortune 500 company that is interested in serving the greater good by tapping into our ability to cross-walk public and private sector expertise.

Ultimately, the Maryland Way is embodied by our people -- those who founded the School (including Professor Allen Schick who continues to inspire and mentor students across every decade since our founding), our graduates who do well and do good in every sphere of human endeavor, and the students, faculty and staff who walk through our doors every day. We are a living community that remakes itself with every new student. As public policy the Maryland Way evolves, I can’t imagine being anywhere else, right here, right now.

Dr. Robert C. Orr
Dean, University of Maryland School of Public Policy

Orr serves as dean of the University of Maryland School of Public Policy, United Nations under secretary-general and special advisor to the UN secretary-general on climate change. Prior to joining the University of Maryland, Orr served as the assistant secretary-general for strategic planning in the executive office of the United Nations secretary-general from 2004 to 2014, and was the principal advisor to the secretary-general on counter-terrorism, peace building, women’s and children’s health, sustainable energy, food and nutrition, institutional innovation, public-private partnership and climate change.

Orr joined the United Nations from Harvard University where he served as the executive director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government. Prior to this, he served as director of the Council on Foreign Relations Washington, D.C.

Orr has served in senior posts in the government of the United States, including deputy to the United States ambassador to the United Nations and director of global affairs at the National Security Council, where he was responsible for peacekeeping and humanitarian affairs.