



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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VICE PRESIDENT FOR COMMUNICATIONS

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

THE SEARCH

The University of Minnesota (the University or U of M), the state's land-grant university and one of the most prestigious public research universities in the nation, seeks a collaborative, innovative, and strategic leader to serve as its Vice President for Communications (VPC). This is an exceptional opportunity to join a Big Ten university at a pivotal time in its history and under the direction of a new president.

Dr. Rebecca Cunningham became president of the University on July 1, 2024, serving as the leader of the [five-campus system](#). Reporting directly to President Cunningham, the VPC will play a critical role in continuing to emphasize the University's contributions to local communities and the state, while also elevating its reputation as one of the nation's preeminent public research universities. The University's service to the state can be measured across multiple areas: its five campuses, which serve 68,000 undergraduate and graduate students; its over 600,000 [alumni](#), 62 percent of whom live in Minnesota and contribute to its economy; its [health care enterprise](#), which serves over 1.3 million patients annually in hospitals and clinics across the state; and its [Extension](#) programs, which provide solutions, practical education, and training for all Minnesotans. Similarly, the University's impact in national and international spheres can be measured by [\\$1.2 billion in annual research funding](#), its National Science Foundation rank as 12th among U.S. public research universities, [Times Higher Ed Sustainability Impact Ranking](#) as 5th nationally and in the top 10 percent globally, and its [global programs and strategy alliance](#).

As a key member of the President's cabinet and leadership team, the VPC is also a trusted and reliable partner to the Board of Regents, all four campus Chancellors, and other senior leaders on all issues related to the University's reputation, communications, marketing, and branding. This is an excellent opportunity for a dynamic and accomplished communications and marketing professional to build on the University's existing strengths and success, further elevating its reputation and support for its mission and programs. To that end, the VPC will develop and implement a comprehensive communications, marketing, and reputation strategy—building upon the strong [Driven to Discover](#) brand—that clearly defines systemwide priorities and messages and, simultaneously, influences communications and marketing efforts across the campuses through collaboration and partnership. This work will result in a strategic platform that unifies messaging and branding for the University; supports and furthers the goals of the entire institution, as well as the individual campuses and units; and engages constituencies both on and off campus.

The successful candidate will have a clear record of accomplishments as an innovative and collaborative leader in a large, complex organization with local, national, and international reach. The VPC will possess substantial experience developing and implementing multifaceted communications and marketing efforts that position and elevate the awareness and understanding of an institution with multiple audiences – internally, externally, and with a variety of politically and culturally diverse communities and stakeholders. This person will possess exceptional diplomacy, judgment, and integrity; a full understanding of the communications, marketing, and branding process from conceptualization to implementation; expert knowledge of traditional, digital, video, and emerging media; experience and savvy in crisis communications and issues management; and demonstrated success fostering an inclusive team culture and building an efficient, cohesive, and collaborative team. The VPC must be able to articulate a vision for communications, marketing, and branding that advances the University’s reputation with all its diverse audiences and inspires internal communications partners across the organization. Equally important are a collaborative, collegial orientation and the flexibility to navigate a large and complex university community. A bachelor’s degree and at least 12 years of demonstrated senior leadership are required.

The University of Minnesota has retained Isaacson, Miller, a national search firm, to assist in this important search. All inquiries, applications, and nominations for this opportunity should be directed in confidence to the University or search firm as indicated at the end of this document.

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

[The University of Minnesota](#) is a comprehensive public research university ranked among the world’s most respected institutions of higher learning. The University has scholars of national and international reputation and a strong tradition of education and public engagement. With 68,000 students enrolled across five campuses located throughout Minnesota—the Twin Cities, Duluth, Morris, Crookston, and Rochester—the University advances discovery and innovation to improve society for all. The U of M has the special distinction of being both a globally engaged R1 research institution and Minnesota’s land-grant university, creating a unique capacity and responsibility to improve the lives of Minnesotans and drive the state forward. You can learn more about the unique distinction of each system campus [here](#).

The University of Minnesota is situated and built within the traditional homelands of the Dakota, the Ojibwe, and scores of other Indigenous peoples who have walked on these lands from time immemorial. It is important to acknowledge the peoples on whose land we live, learn, and work as we actively seek to improve and strengthen relations with the 11 sovereign tribal nations of Minnesota. The University also acknowledges that words are not enough. We must ensure that the University provides support, resources, and programs that increase access to all aspects of higher education for American Indian students, staff, faculty, and community members.

Twin Cities Campus

Nearly 55,000 students are enrolled on the flagship [Twin Cities](#) campus in the heart of Minneapolis-St. Paul, which is the 16th largest metropolitan area in the country. A research university of exceptional

breadth and depth with expansive interdisciplinary opportunities, the U of M advances education, research, and outreach across schools and colleges, spanning the broad fields of [liberal arts](#); [biological sciences](#); [dentistry](#); [design](#); [education and human development](#); [food, agriculture, and natural resource sciences](#); [law](#); [business](#); [medicine](#); [nursing](#); [pharmacy](#); [public affairs](#); [public health](#); [science and engineering](#); and [veterinary medicine](#). As one of only a few land-grant universities that also are world-class research universities and one of few major land-grant research universities situated in a central metropolitan area, the University of Minnesota has consistently advanced the land-grant mission with exceptional vigor—distinguished by a comprehensive commitment to integrating public engagement deeply into teaching and learning, research, and discovery.

Health Sciences

The U of M trains over 70 percent of Minnesota’s health professionals, and health sciences research accounts for over \$200 million in externally funded research annually. [University of Minnesota Health Sciences](#) unite education and research across six schools and [patient care](#) across the state.

In January 2023, the University announced the “UMN Health” [Five Point Plan](#) proposal, which will:

- Sustain and advance a world-class academic health system
- Enable governance and control of campus facilities
- Provide opportunities for strategic partnerships
- Create a new state-of-the-art hospital
- Continue to invest in current facilities This vision hinges upon a strong partnership between the State and University. The University’s aim is to advance the University’s mission of teaching, research, and public service, and support the health of the entire state.

In January 2024, the Governor’s Task Force on Academic Health at the University of Minnesota released its [Recommendations to Support World-Class Academic Health Professions Education, Research, and Care Delivery](#). The development of a [strategic plan](#) is one of the priority recommendations included in this report. The University and its affiliate [University of Minnesota Physicians](#) work with [Fairview Health Services](#) to deliver clinical care through a joint clinical enterprise. Ultimately, the University will want to ensure Minnesotans have access to a first-rate academic health system, bringing them the benefits of integrated research, teaching, and top-level care.

Research & Innovation

The University averages over [\\$1 billion in research expenditures](#) annually, ranking 13th nationally among public universities. Its faculty and experts are considered some of the best in their respective fields. The U of M currently boasts 26 Nobel Prize-winning faculty, recipients of prestigious awards such as Guggenheim and MacArthur Fellowships, and many National Academies and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences members.

Division I Athletics

The Twin Cities campus is home to Golden Gopher Athletics, a founding member of the Big Ten, where more than 600 Division I student-athletes compete on 21 (9 men's, 12 women's) teams. Student-athletes not only compete at the highest level in their sports, they also maintain an average 3.44 GPA, one of the highest among public institutions. The U of M Intercollegiate Athletics department generates a high level of public interest and media coverage. Golden Gopher student-athletes are featured on television, radio, websites, and in magazines and newspapers nationwide.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The University strongly embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion as foundational values and has made engagement and diversity central to strategic planning across the system. Students on the Twin Cities campus include 29% Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students and 9.5% international students (from over 140 countries), and roughly one in four students of all undergraduates are first-generation students. The University is a nationally recognized leader for students learning abroad and offers programs in more than 70 countries. The Twin Cities campus has been recognized nationally for excellence in diversity and global learning, research, and engagement in the last five years.

The Twin Cities campus is located in a diverse and economically vibrant region at the heart of an increasingly global Midwest. Minnesota has 11 federally recognized tribal nations, the largest urban American Indian population in the country, a dynamic Black community, and significant African, Latinx, and Asian American populations. The links between Minnesota communities and communities worldwide are notable: the Twin Cities has the largest number of people of Somali descent outside of Somalia and the nation's largest urban Hmong American population.

Economic Impact

With an annual operating budget of \$4.5 billion, the University generates an estimated economic impact of \$9 billion for the Minnesota economy. The state's seventh-largest employer, the University has over 27,000 faculty and staff and encompasses regional [Extension](#) offices, research and outreach centers, clinics, labs, professional education outreach, and K–12 educational engagement programs throughout the state, as well as world-class performing arts facilities, museums, and galleries. *Forbes* has also ranked the University as one of the country's 20 best educational employers.

UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP

President Rebecca Cunningham

The University of Minnesota Board of Regents selected [Dr. Rebecca Cunningham](#) as the 18th President of the University of Minnesota System, effective July 1, 2024. The Board chose Cunningham following a thorough and public search that engaged thousands of students, faculty, and staff in listening sessions and public forums on all five campuses.

Dr. Rebecca Cunningham most recently served as the vice president for research and innovation at the

University of Michigan, where she was responsible for fostering excellence and upholding the University's public mission in research, scholarship, and creative practice across three campuses and a health system. During her leadership tenure, U-M expanded its research volume to a record \$1.86 billion annually as Dr. Cunningham led the design and implementation of the first comprehensive review of the U-M research, scholarship, and creative practice enterprise.

A faculty member in the U-M Schools of Public Health and Medicine since 1999, Dr. Cunningham previously served as the associate vice president for research-health sciences, where she oversaw research faculty affairs and partnered with colleagues across disciplines to facilitate and energize the University's research agenda. Dr. Cunningham served in various leadership positions earlier in her career, including as associate chair of emergency medicine and director of the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-sponsored Injury Prevention Center at U-M. As a researcher, Dr. Cunningham has earned continuous federal research funding for more than 25 years as a principal investigator and is a National Academy of Medicine member.

Dr. Cunningham holds a bachelor's degree from Fairfield University and a medical doctorate from Jefferson Medical College. She completed her residency in emergency medicine at the U-M Health System in Ann Arbor and a postdoctoral research fellowship with the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Board of Regents

Established in 1851 at the founding of the University of Minnesota, the [Board of Regents](#) is the University's governing board. Regents articulate a vision for the University and work to ensure the University of Minnesota fulfills its mission of education, research, and outreach for the benefit of the people of Minnesota, the nation, and the world. There are 12 regents who each serve six-year terms. There is one Regent from each of the state's eight congressional districts as well as four additional Regents from the state at large.

[The Board of Regents Special Committee on University Relations](#) was established to advance the critical work of building strong relationships within communities vital to the University's success. The Special Committee has oversight of the University's government relations function at the local, state, and federal levels, as well as efforts to build stronger neighborhood relations in communities where the University is located. The Special Committee will provide the administration with input on the University's public relations efforts including areas like marketing and brand development.

The current chair of the Board is Janie S. Mayeron; her term will expire in 2025.

VICE PRESIDENT FOR COMMUNICATIONS

Reporting to President Cunningham and serving as a key member of her cabinet, the Vice President for Communications (VPC) is charged with creating the vision for and leading the implementation of a

proactive, innovative, and comprehensive communications, marketing, and branding strategy that highlights the University's academic strengths and research; demonstrates its commitment to an environment in which all students can flourish; reinforces its commitment and contribution to local communities and the wider state; and champions its impact at national and international levels. Ultimately, the VPC will establish a framework for fostering connection between the University and its constituents, both internally (e.g., prospective and current students and families, faculty and staff, employee groups, alumni, donors, University supporters, and affinity groups) and externally (e.g., communities across the state, media, government at all levels, peer institutions, associations, influencers, and thought leaders).

To this end, the VPC will provide leadership and oversight of the [Office of University Relations](#), 60 staff members, and a \$8.5 million budget. The VPC will also partner with [marketing and communications leads](#) across the university to help create and define holistic communications and marketing strategies that serve the needs of the overarching system and respect the significant and varying needs of specific campuses, colleges, schools, divisions, and units.

The VPC will join the University during the [PEAK Initiative](#). The PEAK Initiative began in April 2021 and currently includes the following work function areas: Finance, Human Resources, Information Technology, and [Marketing and Communications](#). PEAK Phase 2, which includes the Office of University Relations, is scheduled for implementation during Fiscal Year 2024-2025. The VPC will need to be a strategist with a strong vision for the future and the ability to identify and implement University-wide innovations and solutions that can be scaled into the future.

The VPC must be able to engage in the University's collaborative leadership model, including active engagement with and respect for the University's unique form of faculty, staff, and student [governance](#), while also moving projects forward through decisive decision-making.

The VPC will interact with a broad swath of University communities, both on campuses and across the state. The VPC must be a clear communicator, able to interact with constituents at all levels of the University's structure, and able to establish credibility, confidence, and trust to create a culture of proactive service and strategy.

Following are the responsibilities and duties of the vice president for communications:

- Conceive and implement an overarching strategic communications and marketing plan that is innovative, progressive, and proactive, resulting in cohesive messaging and a brand identity that extends across all media and vehicles in ways that appropriately support and reflect the goals and objectives of the University.
- Serve as senior counselor to the President, Provost, Campus Chancellors, and other university leaders on all communication matters and messaging, internal and external, as well as governmental issues and actions that impact the University.

- Provide leadership to anticipate and respond to crises that threaten the health, safety, and reputation of the University and its community members, including crisis communications policies and procedures. Provide real-time crisis management, counsel, and support to University leadership.
- Work with staff and key stakeholders to proactively reinforce and protect the university's reputation; anticipate and mitigate potentially negative and high-profile issues or crises that may impact the U of M.
- Advise deans and other senior university leaders in their efforts to translate and communicate academic, research, and service accomplishments to the university community and external audiences.
- Partner with campuses, academic units, and administrative units including the [University of Minnesota Foundation](#), [Alumni Association](#), [Office of Native American Affairs](#), athletics, undergraduate and graduate enrollment, [Office of Student Affairs](#), [Research and Innovation Office](#), and government affairs to support their strategic initiatives and ensure alignment in outreach efforts.
- Intentionally work with colleagues to develop marketing, communication, and engagement strategies that reach out to and connect with traditionally underrepresented and underserved communities to support and enhance diversity in the University community.
- Build and manage an outstanding strategic communications and marketing program that incorporates all traditional and digital channels and media, and that can be considered best-in-class compared to its peers across higher education.
- Utilize data captured from CRM and other systems to evaluate the effectiveness and success of communications vehicles with different internal and external audiences on an ongoing basis.
- Establish a digital ecosystem that reflects the University's brand, creates a cohesive strategy across platforms, while also recognizing the breadth and diverging needs of campus units, and emphasizes compliance with accessibility and user experience standards.
- Convene, support, and inspire collaboration and coordination among decentralized communication and marketing professionals across the University. Build strong, collaborative, and collegial relationships with all unit-based communications and marketing teams, understanding their specific priorities and how those integrate with the university's brand, strategic communications, and goals. Provide appropriate levels of support and service to those individuals and teams.
- Ensure that the Office of University Relations is a collaborative, responsive partner that can address both opportunities and concerns from diverse stakeholders and that staff are sought out as respected thought leaders. Foster excellence with respect to client collaboration and partnership, customer service, and problem-solving.
- Thoroughly evaluate current marketing and branding efforts across the University. Strategically invest time and resources in market research, competitive landscape analysis, brand and marketing

refinement, and creative execution. Working with direct reports and other key stakeholders, assess how best to leverage internal resources, external counsel, agencies, and services.

- Maintain and refine an organizational structure that ensures ongoing integration and cohesion across the Office of University Relations. Set clear direction and priorities for professional and administrative staff alike. Continually assess staff strengths; recruit and retain a high-quality, diverse communications and marketing team.
- Maintain and promote a diverse and equitable workplace environment. Similarly, promote a professional workplace culture of mutual respect and collegiality for all members of the institution.
- Inspire and motivate staff through transparency and direction, placing staff members' work within the context of the University's strategic priorities and goals. Provide professional development opportunities as appropriate and encourage staff to set and reach personal growth targets.
- Have a leadership style that is open and empowers staff through active communication, delegation, and accountability. Manage expectations and resources to ensure that overall marketing goals and activities are challenging and realistic.
- Foster an environment that rewards new ideas, creativity, and risk taking; builds confidence; and encourages teamwork and collaboration within the office and across the University. Celebrate achievements and set clear expectations for future success.

Qualifications and Experience

The University of Minnesota is a large, complex public research university. While direct experience in higher education is not required, the VPC must be familiar with the needs of a large, complex organization with local, state, and national audiences spanning urban and rural areas, and possess the political savvy to navigate the environment, opportunities, and constraints of a public university system.

The vice president will bring many of the following professional qualities and experiences:

- At least 12 years of experience leading, envisioning, and implementing a strategic communications, marketing, and branding program that was successfully leveraged across an enterprise with multiple constituencies and a wide variety of audiences – internal and external, local and national.
- A record of success as an innovative and collaborative leader in a large, complex, mission-driven organization with numerous and distributed stakeholders, shared decision making, and often rapidly shifting priorities.
- Advanced knowledge of the strategies and industry best practices for all aspects of communications, marketing, positioning, and messaging, including sophisticated and creative use of brand content, social media, analytics, and other forms of digital communications (paid, owned, and earned).
- Substantial experience evaluating the strengths of existing communications and marketing programs and identifying opportunities for improvement. An aptitude for using data and metrics in decision making and evaluating the success of programs and campaigns.

- Broad experience in strategic communications, crisis and issues management, communications planning, media relations, public relations, perception management, and internal communications.
- Proven effectiveness in engaging and working directly with local, national, and international media on background and on the record.
- Experience in institutions that are subject to political and public scrutiny, whether legislative or regulatory.
- The ability to intuit the implicit dimensions of messages and messaging. Exceptional diplomacy, discretion, and judgment.
- Engaging and persuasive in written and oral communications, clearly able to serve as a professional and trusted representative of the University.
- Collaborative and collegial orientation, eager and skillful in engaging diverse stakeholders and building strong professional relationships. Demonstrated experience serving as a resource to others and obtaining their input, thereby being able to synthesize many ideas and produce work products that address a variety of goals and objectives.
- Experience managing and inspiring teams in a complex organization, leading by influence and unifying the work of communications and marketing professionals across the enterprise. The ability to encourage change and growth in people and programs. Persuasive, persistent, and determined.
- A strong commitment to personal and professional development and the ability to build, lead, mentor, motivate, and retain high-performing, diverse professional teams to create a robust and collaborative communications and marketing ecosystem.
- Outstanding management, operational, and planning skills, including the ability to handle multiple projects simultaneously in a decentralized environment.
- High degree of integrity, character, and emotional maturity, demonstrating respect for individuals at every level of an organization; humility, a sense of humor, and life balance.
- Sharp eye for operational efficiency and optimal use of resources; understanding of budgets and cash flows as well as proven success managing them.
- An understanding of the land grant, research Tier One university environment.
- A deep appreciation and passion for the mission, values, and culture of the University of Minnesota.
- A desire to deeply engage in the local and University communities; a keen understanding of the role diversity and intercultural understanding play in achieving excellence.
- Bachelor's degree is required.

The annual salary range for this position is \$325,000 to \$375,000. The stated hiring range represents the University's good faith and reasonable estimate of the possible compensation at the time of posting.

TO APPLY

Interested candidates must submit a letter of interest and a current resume to be considered for the position. Confidential inquiries, nominations, and application materials should be directed to the Isaacson, Miller website: <https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/university-minnesota/vice-president-communications>

Jack Gorman, Partner (he/him)
Elizabeth Neustaedter, Principal (she/her)
Sandeep Kaur, Search Coordinator (she/her)

The University of Minnesota shall provide equal access to and opportunity in its programs, facilities, and employment without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, gender, age, marital status, familial status, disability, public assistance status, membership or activity in a local commission created for the purpose of dealing with discrimination, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. This document is available in alternative formats upon request.