MPA Professional Work Experience Guide

I. Purpose
The MPA Professional Work Experience (PWE) Practicum is an essential component of the Master of Public Administration (MPA) curriculum, providing students with an opportunity to further develop their competencies in a public service work environment and to gain additional experiences for career and professional development. The PWE Practicum also sets the stage, as outlined in Table 1, for the PUBA 745 course (“Professional Work Experience”).

The PUBA 745 course requires students to produce a series of short written products that address selected competencies of the MPA program, which is accomplished by integrating their student learning from previous core classes with the PWE Practicum experience. Therefore, students must have completed six core MPA courses and the Practicum prior to taking PUBA 745 (see Table 1 below for more details on the prerequisites). The written products from the PUBA 745 course also support portfolio development. Therefore, PUBA 745 must be completed prior to registering for the PUBA 746 – MPA Portfolio course.

II. Competencies

III. Prerequisites

IV. Requirements of the Professional Work Experience Practicum

V. Contracts

VI. Interim Evaluation

VII. Employer Guide – Elements of Success

VIII. Preparing for Success in the PUBA 745 - Professional Work Experience Course

Appendix 1: The Employment Contract
Appendix 2: The Learning Contract
Appendix 3: Progress Report
Appendix 4: PWE Waiver Policy

Table 1: Sequence of Events

Step 1: Complete six MPA core courses from the following:
  - Five Required Core: 709, 710, 719, 720, and 721
  - One Additional Selected Core: 723, 731, or 760

Step 2: Online format students will be notified directly when they become PWE Eligible by the Associate Director of Alumni Relations and Professional Work Experience.

Step 3: Identify the Professional Work Experience (PWE) Practicum.

Step 4: Complete, acquire signatures, and submit the employment contract for approval before beginning the Practicum.

Step 5: Complete, sign, and submit the learning contract for approval before beginning the Practicum.

Step 6: Begin the Practicum.

Step 7: Participate in a check-in process to evaluate the progress and success of the Practicum, when it is about 40-50 percent complete.
Step 8: Complete the Practicum.
Step 9: Register for and take PUBA 745, the Professional Work Experience Course. It is recommended that you take the PUBA 745 PWE course immediately following the term in which you do the PWE Practicum.
Step 10: Integrate the classroom learning with the work experience through the reflective learning process in the PUBA 745 Professional Work Experience Course.

II. Competencies
The Practicum provides each student with an opportunity to apply theory to practice and to further develop key competencies while working in an appropriate position for a public service organization.

The five competencies that must be addressed in the paper are:
1. Analyze organizations and their environments from multiple perspectives, and apply that analysis in assessing alternative courses of action.
2. Know and apply public service values, legal, and ethical principles.
3. Create and use project management and program plans.
4. Read, listen, and think critically.
5. Write and speak clearly, concisely, and unambiguously.

Students may choose to discuss additional competencies in the written product. Of course, students may well use other competencies in their work. This list of the five required competencies is not meant to be exclusive or all inclusive.

III. Prerequisites
The Practicum provides students an opportunity to reflect on how they apply and integrate their learning from six required MPA courses in professional public service work. Students must have completed six MPA core courses prior to beginning the required Practicum. Students should work directly with their academic advisor regarding their academic plan and sequencing of courses and PWE practicum work.

Students must complete these five required core courses:
1. PUBA 709: Public Administration Institutions and Values
2. PUBA 710: Organizational Theory
3. PUBA 719: Public Administration Analysis and Evaluation I
4. PUBA 720: Public Administration Analysis and Evaluation II
5. PUBA 721: Professional Communications

Students must have completed one of the selected core courses:
1. PUBA 723: Human Resource Management
   - or -
   PUBA 731: Public Financial Management
   - or -
   PUBA 760: Law for Public Administration

It is highly recommended that students register for PUBA 745 the term immediately following the completion of the Practicum.
IV. Requirements of the Professional Work Experience Practicum

To obtain approval of a proposed Practicum opportunity the student must demonstrate the public orientation of the proposed work experience. Public service is defined as work performed for the benefit of the public, somehow working for the greater good of our communities. Typically, the employer is a governmental or nonprofit organization. In limited circumstances, consideration may be given to private sector employers that offer a public service project or feature a public service dimension. The employment contract must specify how the proposed project serves a public function.

There are two options for structuring the Practicum:

1. 400 hours over 10 weeks (a full-time, time-limited Practicum.)
2. 300 hours over 15 weeks (a part-time, time-limited Practicum.)

Experienced public sector employees currently holding a position of significant responsibility may continue in their current positions for the Practicum if the work is generally outside of their regular job responsibilities and it meets the following criteria: In the PWE public service employment position, we expect the student to manage complex work, report to advisory or elected boards, and/or assume primary responsibility for project management. Examples of acceptable positions range from budget analyst to assistant city/county manager to program director.

The approval process of the Practicum begins by gaining pre-approval based on an initial conversation between the student and the Associate Director of Alumni Relations and Professional Work Experience. The student then develops and acquires signatures of approval for the employment and learning contracts.

In certain circumstances, students may be eligible for a PWE waiver. Students with prior experience in a professional or managerial level position in a government or nonprofit organization may seek to apply for a waiver from the Professional Work Experience Practicum requirement. For further information on the PWE Waiver, visit the Professional Work Experience Waiver page on our website (http://www.mpa.unc.edu/professional-work-experience-pwe-waiver).

V. Contracts

The student drafts two contracts: (1) the employment contract and (2) the learning contract. One original signed copy of each contract is turned in to the Associate Director of Alumni Relations and Professional Work Experience for approval prior to the start of the Practicum.

The employment contract is signed by the student, the employer, and the Associate Director of Alumni Relations and Professional Work Experience. It clarifies how the following criteria will be met:

1. Each student will report to a supervisor within the organization. The student will be assigned specific projects and responsibilities.
   - Define the scope of the work;
   - Describe the context of the situation;
• Clarify the purpose of the project, its audience, student responsibilities, expected outcomes or products, and time frame in which the work will be completed; and
• Identify and provide contact information for the organization (address and website) and the student’s supervisor.

The employer demonstrates that the organization has the necessary resources and focus to ensure that the student has a reasonable likelihood of achieving the agreed-upon goals of the work experience.

The employer will provide the student exposure to the organization outside the student’s immediate work group, encouraging opportunities to observe how the organization works at different levels, interacts with various stakeholders, and makes decisions.

Students are expected to be paid a professional salary by the employers for their work. Exceptions might be considered if the student can demonstrate that the professional benefit of the work experience outweighs the value of the salary.

The employer and student will participate in an evaluation of the progress and success of the Practicum, to be initiated by the MPA program, when the Practicum is approximately 40-50 percent complete. Outside of this schedule, either the student or the employer will notify the MPA program if the expectations related to the Practicum change or if either party is not upholding the employment contract.

The learning contract is signed by the Associate Director of Alumni Relations and Professional Work Experience and the student. The student may choose whether or not to share it with the employer. In addition to describing the work to be accomplished, the student defines his or her personal goals for learning, within the context of the professional setting.

The learning goals are to be accomplished in the work setting but do not have to involve a specific job responsibility. Table 2 provides an example where a student who is a budget analyst might choose to observe and analyze the leadership styles present in the work setting, then discuss in the written product how that experience and classroom concepts apply to his or her own professional development.

Table 2: Examples of Practicum and Learning Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks or Functions of the Professional Work Experience Practicum</th>
<th>Potential Goals:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Serving as a budget analyst</td>
<td>Observing and analyzing successful strategies for communicating both the content and implications of the annual budget report with the public, during a time of polarized politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing staff support to an advisory board that makes nonprofit funding decisions</td>
<td>Observing and analyzing the leadership and communication practices of the nonprofits that are most successful at obtaining funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Observing and analyzing how the government designs and implements a new strategy for citizen engagement for a bond referendum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working in the Public Information Office of local government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working for the director of a nonprofit agency</td>
<td>Observing and analyzing the multiple values and legal or ethical principles that come into play in the work setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing a new public change project</td>
<td>Observing and analyzing how leaders navigate through and transform resistance to change by the employees or citizens affected by the change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working for a Human Resources Department</td>
<td>Observing and analyzing how the organization develops the leadership capacity of its employees in a new program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**VI. Interim Evaluation**

The Associate Director of Alumni Relations and Professional Work Experience will check-in with the student and the student’s direct supervisor approximately 40 to 50 percent into the PWE. The purpose of the check-in is to verify that the expectations of both the student and the employer are being met and to evaluate the overall progress of the Practicum. The Associate Director of Alumni Relations and Professional Work Experience will contact the student to schedule the check-in. The student will coordinate the schedule with their direct supervisor. The Associate Director of Alumni Relations and Professional Work Experience will ask the student and supervisor a series of questions pertaining to the Practicum and write a summary of their responses to be shared with the MPA Director and placed in the student’s file. The check-in will either be in person or via telephone interview depending on the student’s work location and all participants’ schedules.

**VII. Employer Guide - Elements of Success**

Supervisors are especially important in helping MPA degree candidates integrate classroom learning with professional work assignments. We have found that the most successful work experiences contain the following elements:

1. Opportunities to develop and hone multiple skills, such as analysis, writing, and oral communication. This suggests that a variety of projects is preferable, or, in the alternative, one project that involves multiple skills. Having multiple tasks also develops time management skills. Ideally, there should be some mix between working independently and working in groups. Another important skill is learning how to function within an organization, so working on projects that involve interaction with the regular employees of the organization is beneficial. It is also important that the student be given an opportunity to learn about the whole organization, including its mission and its current projects, not just the specific department or area to which the student is assigned.

2. A supervisor who is willing to be a mentor. This means the supervisor takes the student to meetings, lets the student observe various projects and events, and asks for the student's evaluation of those events. A mentor will explore issues in public service with the student, and expose the student to all aspects of a job as if the student were a regular employee.
3. Adequate physical facilities. The student should have a comfortable space in which to work. This does not mean a private office, necessarily, but an appropriate space with a decent computer is essential to a productive experience.

4. Opportunities for the student to speak in front of a group (e.g., managers, clients, or public officials) and respond to questions.

5. An environment in which the student feels comfortable asking any question, from questions on protocol or substance to career advice.

6. Clear expectations communicated as early as possible (even before work starts).

7. Regular feedback - e.g., a biweekly meeting to assess not only progress on projects, but also to assess work relationships and performance strengths and weaknesses. This also includes a formal feedback session at the end of the professional work experience, in which the supervisor recognizes accomplishments and skills and identifies areas for improvement.

8. The chance to participate in fieldwork, conferences, and other interactions beyond the office can be beneficial.

VIII. Suggestions for Success:

Preparing for PUBA 745 - Professional Work Experience Course

During your Professional Work Experience, you should collect information that will make your reflective learning and writing process easier once you enroll in the PUBA 745 – Professional Work Experience Course. You are not expected or advised to begin your writing early. You will be glad, however, if you collect the data, tools, or artifacts that might inform your writing later.

Here are some easy practices to employ:

- At a minimum, keep your notes, agendas, minutes, calendars, project schedules, etc., for reference.
- Keep images, print materials, or other artifacts that hold symbolic importance for you, the organization, or the community.
- Save media coverage of key events or projects.
- Make notes about key conversations, particularly if they provide explanations (background, the-rest-of-the-story, or what-just-happened?) about the dynamics or decisions you witness.
- Pay attention to the key personalities who affect the pace or direction of the work.
- Journal as you go, to document and consider your PWE, about both free-range and focused topics.
Reflective learning and writing activities in PUBA 745 are organized around the following focused topics:

- **Understanding organizational context and environment.** Review material from PUBA 710, specifically Bolman and Deal’s four frames, Rainey’s environmental factors, and models to explain organizational collaborations and organizational change. Use your journal to make real-time connections among these models and what happens in the environment around you.

- **How the organization structures and executes project management.** If you are not directly involved in a project, ask to join a project team as part of your PWE. Consider strategies for success from the project management unit in PUBA 710. What better practices of project management does the organization employ? What are areas for strategic improvement? If you are unable to join a project team, journal on how the organization handled the “project” of hosting you during the PWE.

- **Consider how public service values (general and administrative) are identified, prioritized and balanced in the strategy and priorities of the organization.** Also, journal on the ethical practices and behaviors occurring in the organization.

- **How does the organization engage in research design and data analysis for decision-making and program improvement?** Create journal prompts that will help you draw conclusions about how the practices used in the organizations aligned with lessons you learned in PUBA 719/720.

- **Similarly, review your learning outcomes from PUBA 760, PUBA 723 and PUBA 731.** What connections can you make among your learning outcomes from Law and Legal Processes, Human Resource Management and Public Financial Management and practices within the organization?

- **Finally, reflect on your public service motivation.** How does this experience shape your career goals and areas of future interest? What areas for future development or gaps in learning might you identify based on this experience? In other words, what have you learned about making yourself more relevant as a public service leader in the future?

On a regular basis, respond to one or more of each of the questions in the following four groups (Note: the journal is not a course deliverable but this will help you remember events and experiences):

- **Describe:**
  - What happened? Try to report your actual experience without interpretation.
  - What did I see and/or hear?
  - What were my thoughts and/or feelings at the time?

- **Reflect:**
  - What meaning do I make of this situation/experience? How do I interpret it?
  - How do I feel about it now?
  - What surprised me about this situation/experience?

- **Expand:**
  - What have I learned in my MPA courses that might apply to this situation/experience?

- **Apply:**
  - What insights have I gained? What have I learned that is new to me?
  - How might I use what I learned in the future as a public service leader?
Appendix 1: The Employment Contract

(When preparing the employment contract, delete the italicized sections.)

The purpose of this contract is to describe the expectations between the student, the employer, and the MPA Program during the Professional Work Experience Practicum. It must be signed, turned in, and approved prior to the student beginning the Practicum.

1. Name and contact information of the student:

2. Name, website, and contact information for the employer:

3. Name, title, and contact information for the student’s immediate supervisor:

4. Expected dates and timeframe for the duration of the professional work experience:

   There are two options for structuring the Practicum:
   
   1. 400 hours over 10 weeks (a full-time, time-limited Practicum)
   2. 300 hours over 15 weeks (a part-time, time-limited Practicum)

5. Describe how the proposed work experience serves a public purpose, as well as the specific projects or responsibilities that will be assigned to the student:

   (Scope of the work, context of and stakeholders involved with the situation, purpose of the project, expected outcomes or products, student responsibilities, etc. Work performed for any public organization – governmental or nonprofit – is assumed to serve a public purpose. Work performed for a private sector organization might be allowable if the project serves a public purpose.)

6. How will the employer provide the student exposure to the organization outside the student’s immediate work group, encouraging opportunities to observe how the organization works at different levels, interacts with various stakeholders, and makes decisions?

7. What salary, benefits, or other considerations will the employer provide the student during this Professional Work Experience?

8. What kinds of additional resources will the employer provide to ensure that the student has a reasonable likelihood of achieving the agreed upon goals of the work experience?

   (Examples include physical space, equipment, training, time, focus, attention, opportunities, etc.)

The employer and student agree to participate in an evaluation of the progress and success of the Practicum, to be initiated by the MPA program, when the Practicum is approximately 40-50 percent complete. Outside of this schedule, either the student or the employer will notify the MPA program if the expectations related to the Practicum change or if either party is not upholding the learning contract.

Signatures and date:

Student ________________________________________________________________
Employer _____________________________________________________________________
MPA Program Representative __________________________________________________


Appendix 2: The Learning Contract

(When preparing the learning contract, delete the italicized sections.)

The purpose of this contract is to describe the student’s personal goals for learning within the context of the professional setting. This contract is between the student and the MPA program. The student may choose whether or not to share the learning contract with the employer. The learning contract must be signed, turned in, and approved prior to beginning the Professional Work Experience Practicum.

The goals may be defined broadly in the beginning (i.e., communication styles of successful leaders) and then narrowed for the final paper based on the opportunities that happened during the work experience (i.e., how one leader successfully communicated with the public during a crisis.) If the Practicum presents unanticipated opportunities for learning, the student may amend the learning contract up until the mid-way point of the Practicum.

1. Name of Student:

2. Name of Employer:

3. Describe, in general terms, the position to be held and work to be accomplished by the student:
(Example: Assistant to the Duplin County Manager. My primary focus will be on supporting a planning process that will result in the consolidation of the Social Services and Public Health Departments. There are likely to be other miscellaneous projects of smaller scale requested by the Manager.)

4. Define your personal learning goals for the Professional Work Experience Practicum:
(Example: I am interested in learning how stakeholders react to a change process, how leaders successfully facilitate the different kinds of learning and functional tasks that are required by the change, how the progress and content of the change is best communicated inside and outside the organization, and how individual leaders can enable the success of change processes.)

5. Signature of Student: _____________________________________________________________

6. Signature of MPA Program Representative: __________________________________________
Appendix 3: Progress Report

(This form is completed by the Associate Director of Alumni Relations and Professional Work Experience, reviewed by the MPA Director, and placed in the student’s file.)

MPA Program – The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Professional Work Experience Practicum – Interim Evaluation

Name of Student: ________________________________
Name of Employer: ______________________________
PWE Term: _____________________________________
Evaluation Date: ________________________________

I. STUDENT EVALUATION OF EMPLOYER

1. The Practicum aligns with your employment contract?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If not, please explain: ____________________________________________________________

2. I am confident that I am gaining substantive professional experience in this role:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If not, please explain: ____________________________________________________________

3. I am accomplishing the learning goals as defined in my learning contract:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If not, please explain: ____________________________________________________________

4. Please note any concerns you have at this stage of the practicum:

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________
II. EMPLOYER EVALUATION OF STUDENT

1. This employee conscientiously adheres to our professional work schedule (e.g., work hours, meeting times, attendance expectations).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. I am favorably impressed with the quality of his/her work on assignments so far.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. He/she possesses the skills I anticipated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If not, please explain: ______________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

4. Please note any concerns you have at this stage of the practicum:

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

III. SUMMARY OF CONVERSATIONS:
(provide a brief summary of conversations with student and employers)

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________
IV: RECOMMENDED PROGRAM FOLLOW-UP

- No follow-up needed
- Follow-up recommended
  
  Please explain:

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

Completed by: ____________________________________ Date: _______________________

___________________________________________________________________________

This evaluation will be retained in the student’s record and can be reviewed by faculty and staff upon request.
Appendix 4: MPA Professional Work Experience Waiver

Minimum Qualifications to Waive PWE Practicum Requirement:

- 5+ years of public service work experience
- Student must be currently working, and have worked for the past 2+ years in a position and in an organization that qualifies for the PWE Practicum Waiver
  - Organizations that qualify:
    - Typically, governmental or nonprofit organizations
  - Positions that qualify:
    - Positions that benefit the public, somehow working for the greater good of our communities
    - Manage complex work
    - Assume primary responsibility for project management
- Meet with Associate Director of Career Services to discuss career goals and how the student’s current position qualifies for the waiver.
- Complete Waiver form and appendices of support

PWE Practicum Waiver Process:

1. Once students complete the 5 core courses required before the PWE practicum may begin, the Associate Director of Alumni Relations and Professional Work Experience communicates to students that they are eligible to initiate the PWE practicum process
   a. If a student has 5+ years of public service work experience, he/she may qualify for the PWE Practicum Waiver and, if interested in pursuing this possibility, should set up a meeting with the Associate Director of Career Services to explore this option.
   b. During this meeting, they will have a broader discussion of how the PWE fits into their general career development.
2. If the Associate Director of Career Services determines the student may qualify for this waiver, they will advise the student that he/she may submit the waiver paperwork to the MPA Program Director.
   a. The student must complete the waiver.
   b. In addition, the student will attach in a memo, how current work has met the objectives of the Professional Work Experience. Additionally, attach a resume and other supporting documentation from employer including: job title, employer’s name, and time in position, number of employees supervised, and specific projects, products, or other examples of work outputs.
3. The waiver application is reviewed by the MPA Program Director and approved or denied
   a. Upon PWE waiver approval, the student will be eligible to take PUBA 745
   b. If denied the student must complete the PWE and then take PUBA 745

[Diagram of waiver process]