Professional Work Experience Gets Students Out of the Classroom and Into the Workplace

UNC Master of Public Administration students gain the opportunity to apply their skills and knowledge in the real world by completing the Professional Work Experience (PWE). A required part of the MPA curriculum, the PWE helps students explore new projects and experience working at different public service organizations, while also deciding what areas of public service are the best fit for them.

“The PWE has been and remains an important component of the curriculum and marks a pivotal stage of MPA learning,” said Willow Jacobson, director of the UNC MPA program. “It gives students a chance to apply, test, and explore how theories and course concepts work in practice. It is an opportunity to refine knowledge, skills, and competencies and develop insights into strengths, interests, and areas for continued development. Moreover, students often make lasting relationships that shape their careers.”

Below, several current MPA students discuss their PWEs, what they learned about themselves, and where they want to take their careers moving forward.

**Kinsey Beauclair**
Community Empowerment Fund (CEF), Chapel Hill
“I worked with community members toward their goals of gaining employment, housing stability, and financial savings. I also contributed to the development of CEF’s homebuyer program, which supports low-income and first-time homebuyers in Chapel Hill.

“Additionally, I conducted a research project to evaluate the impacts of Chapel Hill’s Inclusionary Zoning Ordinance. This provided me valuable insight into housing in Chapel Hill and our duty as public administrators to make affordable housing more accessible. My time with CEF also exposed me to the ins and outs of nonprofits and encouraged me to continue working with equity-focused nonprofits in the future.”

**Scott Powell**
Budget and Management Services, Wake County
“The most rewarding experiences of my PWE all included elements of change management, whether internally for a 16-person team or countywide for 4,500-plus employees. For example, I witnessed—and played a very small part in—the shift to zero-based budgeting for contractual services for all departments to right-size contracts. This involved new work products, process improvements, training, and mass communications, to say the least. On a smaller scale, I worked with budget staff to re-tool our office’s graduate internship process, enhancing our ability to recruit and retain top talent.

“I was fortunate to continue my PWE part-time through the fall after beginning in the summer.”
We are at a different point in time now, one in which for our ability to create an outstanding online format that work alone, we would not have been able to online experience. I believe that, had we tried to do Working with 2U allowed us to create an exceptional expertise, capacity, and technology to this partnership. flexibility of an online MPA. 2U brought significant long partnership benefiting students who need the online format. We have enjoyed a robust, decade-when we needed. We began a partnership with the online program, two formats.” Over the years we have kept this value as a central tenet in our decision-making, ensuring that we have the same admission standards, curriculum, competencies, thesis substitute, career services, and the list goes on. When we decided to move into the online space it was still an emerging area, and we did not have the expertise and experience to build the program that we needed. We began a partnership with the online program management partner 2U, Inc., to support the online format. We have enjoyed a robust, decade-long partnership benefiting students who need the flexibility of an online MPA. 2U brought significant expertise, capacity, and technology to this partnership. Working with 2U allowed us to create an exceptional online experience. I believe that, had we tried to do that work alone, we would not have been able to overcome the hurdles in entering online education. I’m grateful for that partnership, and what that has meant for our ability to create an outstanding online format for our program.

We are at a different point in time now, one in which we have an opportunity and the skills and resources internally at the School of Government that can support a transition in the operating model of the online format. Starting Fall 2024, we will no longer work with 2U as the online program management partner. Though 2U remains a partner across the UNC-Chapel Hill campus, the MPA program’s administration will be brought in-house and carried out by the MPA program and School of Government. We are excited about this transition and what it means for the program, and our students, faculty, and staff. As part of this change, we have the long-term opportunity to: 1) provide a more unified MPA program experience—on campus and online, 2) enhance the student experience; and 3) make our MPA program more accessible and affordable, for more North Carolinians, aligning the tuition model with that of our on-campus program. This transition reinforces our commitment to “one program, two formats.” I am excited about the strategies it will open to us to continue to enhance experiences for our students. Like any change, it does not come without its challenges. I am very grateful for the dedication and tireless work of the MPA staff as we have prepared for this transition. The work behind the scenes has been tremendous and done with professionalism, skill, grace, and lots of coffee. I’m also thankful to Dean Aimee Wall for her support and leadership during this transition.

Sincerely,
Willow Jacobson
Director, UNC MPA

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In winter, I took on a full-time position with the county. I believe the strongest component of my application for a full-time role was my understanding of and fit with the team’s culture. To that end, I credit Dr. Jacobson’s organizational theory course with giving me the tools and perspective to identify aspects of a team’s culture, buy-in, and ultimately to create it. “At each step of the journey, I encountered and learned from UNC MPA alumni at all levels of the organization who took the time and initiative to answer all my questions, sharing the thought process behind their actions and leadership.”

Wendy Welsh
Manager’s Office, Town of Carrboro

“Throughout my PWE, I was fortunate to spend time with each department director to understand their jobs and the challenges experienced in Carrboro. I was able to help with pressing issues for the town manager by researching peer municipalities’ ordinances on road connectivity, stormwater management, and police traffic-stop benchmarking. I attended council meetings, created and distributed bi-weekly Council-Manager updates, and compiled council priorities with comprehensive goals for the management team to better understand priorities going forward.”

“For a career in public administration, this experience provided valuable insight into a town’s management team and what it takes to make a town operate smoothly with high demand from its council and residents. This talented staff left a lasting impression on me and encouraged me to continue my work in local government.”

2023 ICMA Conference
Thoughts From an MPA Student

by Micah McRea ’25

As an on-campus, first-year UNC MPA student, I started the program immediately upon completing my undergraduate studies at Lemon-Rhyme University. Although I am certain about pursuing a career in public service, I am still exploring specific areas of interest. Attending the 2023 International City and County Management Association (ICMA) Annual Conference was an incredible way to kick off my MPA journey—the opportunity to build my network and attend inspiring keynote and educational sessions made for a valuable experience.

The conference provided a unique opportunity to interact and connect with various local government professionals. The generous support from MPA staff, faculty, and alumni throughout the conference cannot be overstated. It was evident that our success as students mattered, and they would assist in any capacity. The generosity of MPA alumni allowed 22 other MPA students and me to enjoy the convenient location of adjoining Airbnbs less than a mile from the conference center. It was only a short walk, though many of us elected to use electric scooters as a fun means of transportation. The scooters also proved to be fantastic for exploring downtown Austin. Being able to immerse ourselves in Austin’s culture briefly and have some fun together was a bonus of being in such a coastal city.

The camaraderie that developed among the MPA students during our time in Austin is something I’ll remember for years to come. One moment that stands out to me was being there to encourage my fellow MPA students during their presentation on mayoral effectiveness. Presentations at this conference by students in the UNC ICMA Chapter were a great moment for the MPA program to stand out. My experience during this year’s ICMA conference strengthened my interest and commitment to work in the public service field. It reinforced the importance of public service value and highlighted the significant difference an individual can make while working in this field. I am genuinely grateful for the opportunity, as it has reaffirmed my choice to pursue my MPA at Carolina. I am confident my connections and takeaways from the conference will have a lasting impact on my career.

To support the MPA program, visit GiveToMPA.unc.edu.

McRea at the ICMA conference in Austin
Dear UNC MPA Alumni Community,

As I step into the role of incoming president of the UNC Master of Public Administration Alumni Board, I am both honored and excited to continue the remarkable work of past presidents and board members. The Alumni board’s mission, at its core, is to advance and support UNC MPA alumni by fostering strong connections among alumni, students, and faculty. I am committed to enhancing the ways in which our alumni can connect, engage, and contribute to the MPA program and, equally importantly, to each other. We have one of the best UNC alumni communities, with graduates creating lasting connections that provide support throughout all stages of their professional and personal journeys.

As president, I hope to build on the board’s past and current work and create strategic goals and activities that can carry over each year. I believe this will help create a sense of continuity but will also provide alumni and current student members with a set of activities they can rely on each year. By focusing our efforts on connection, collaboration, and contribution, we can amplify the impact of the UNC MPA program and reinforce our commitment to the core values of collaboration, diversity, stewardship, integrity, professionalism, and exploration.

I am excited about the journey ahead and the opportunity to work together to strengthen our community and the broader field of public service! Sincerely,

Toney Thompson ’18
President, UNC MPA Alumni Board
Life

Events

On the Move

Barry Reed '83
Chief of Party, Creative Associates International, Chevy Chase, MD

Pat Pate '84
Manager, City of Winston-Salem, NC

Ann Wall '86
Deputy Executive, Albemarle County, VA

Brendan Burke '87
Director, Mosley Center for Public Management, Suffolk University, Boston, MA

Ben Durant '88
Chief Operating Officer and Senior Vice President for Finance and Operations, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ

Teresa Derrick-Mills '90
Director, Mosley Center for Public Management, Suffolk University, Boston, MA

Emily Adair '15
Manager, NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, Raleigh, NC

Hannah Osborne '17
Airport Authority, Norfolk, VA

Molly Boyle '12
Planner II, Town of Apex, NC

Carrie Henderson '08
Advisor, TSG Advisors, Tallahassee, FL

Erik Aldrich Miller '08
Stewardship Coordinator, U.S. Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, Cincinnati, OH

Del McCleod '07
Director, National Consulting Services Group, City of Raleigh, NC

Marilyn Perry '17
Senior Vice President of Development, UNC-Chapel Hill

McKenzie Archibald '15
Graduate Teaching Assistant, School of Social Work, UNC-Chapel Hill

Travis Crayton '18
Senior Director of Planning, Research Triangle Park, NC

New Additions

Wren Davison '13
and Michael Gilbert welcomed Julia Davison Gilbert on October 24, 2023.

Renisha Howard Jones '13

Kat Thompson Gardner '15
and Josh Gardner welcomed Juliet Anne Gardner and Lillian Jenny Gardner on December 5, 2023.

Lauren Brune '16
and Ben Labe welcomed Penelope Iris Brune Labe on August 31, 2023.

Heather Curry '17
and Patrick Curry (and big sister Carina) welcomed Jude Arthur Curry on May 21, 2023.

Ricky Ruvio '17

In Memoriam

Steve W. Raper '74
Class of ’74 alumnus Steve Raper passed away on December 28, 2023. A commissioned Navy veteran and Carolina double alumnus, Steve was a dedicated public servant, serving more than 35 years in local government, including his final 16 years as city manager of Rocky Mount. Steve was also a dedicated mentor and advocate for the UNC MPA program, even serving as an inspiration for others to attend the program. Mike Ruffin ’82 recalls, “I met Steve in 1975 when we were both working for the City of Rocky Mount. He was an intern in his second year of the MPA program. It was the first time I’d heard about the program, and thanks in part to Steve, I entered in 1982. It was the best I decision I ever made.” To view his full obituary, please visit go.unc.edu/steve-raper

Patricia J. Wright
Patricia J. Wright passed away on December 5, 2023. “Pat” to UNC MPA alumni, faculty, staff, and friends who were fortunate enough to know her will remember that she was Deil Wright’s partner in all things for more than 50 years. MPA alumni will remember Pat cоhosting the annual kick-off picnic. For more on the life of this beloved faculty spouse, please visit go.unc.edu/patricia-wright
Upcoming EVENTS

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

GiveUNC 2024

March 26th is GiveUNC, the University’s annual day of giving! This year, UNC MPA will be raising support for the UNC MPA Director’s Innovation Endowment Fund, established to provide unrestricted funding that supports student and program opportunities.

Since the start of GiveUNC, the School of Government has finished near the top University-wide in the number of individual donors. Contributions to UNC MPA are key to that success, and we hope you will help us continue to lead in this effort!