



IMPACT Alumni Newsletter



Fall 2024 Immersion Experience

Exploration of Artificial Intelligence and Public Administration

Each year, UNC MPA offers students the opportunity to connect, learn, and grow their networks through the Immersion Experience. This three-day-long intensive course combines classroom learning, real-world problem solving, and in-depth discussion from scholars and professionals through the Deil S. Wright Public Service Forum. The experience is a valuable learning and networking opportunity for both current students and alumni of the program.

The Immersion covers a timely topic in the field of public service. This year's topic, *Exploration of Artificial Intelligence and Public Administration*, was led by John Stephens, associate professor of public administration and government. Sessions explored generative artificial intelligence, how it intersects with public service values, and the risks and opportunities it presents. "In a short amount of time, the Immersion

enabled me to significantly expand my subject matter knowledge of AI," said Tyler Thomas '09, an alumnus who attended immersion events this year. "While I only scratched the surface of AI and its use, it certainly lit a fire in me to learn and know more. It was also refreshing to re-connect with faculty and staff and to spend time with current students from all over the United States."

This year, MPA alumni could apply to participate in the Friday of the Immersion as a full-day professional development opportunity, an excellent way to connect with students and the program. "The Immersion offered a unique and invaluable opportunity to engage with current students and their forward-thinking perspectives," said Michael Evans '17. "The discussions were thought-provoking and highlighted the vast potential of AI to reshape our field and the ways in which this technology can be leveraged to address complex public

sector challenges."

Alumni are encouraged to attend the forum and reception. Each year, scholars and professionals from the field of public administration lead a discussion on a timely topic affecting the field. This year, the Forum featured David Yokum, North Carolina's chief scientist in the Office of State Budget and Management, professor of the practice, and director of the Policy Lab at the UNC School of Data Science and Society. He led a discussion on the promise and pitfalls the increased use of artificial intelligence poses for public officials. Additionally, two UNC MPA alumni, City of Sanford Mayor Rebecca Salmon and Thomas Mirc, ShadowHornet Strategic Advisors managing director, participated in a panel discussion with Yokum, each giving their perspective on the future use of AI from the public and private sector. For a full summary of this year's Forum, visit sog.unc.edu.

From the Director



Willow S. Jacobson, Director • 919.966.4760 • jacobson@sog.unc.edu

This fall, I had the opportunity to attend the annual Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) conference. NASPAA is the

accrediting body for public administration programs, and we were pleased to be re-accredited for another seven years last fall. The conference draws faculty and MPA directors to learn and share together.

Attending the conference got me reflecting on how wonderful it is to be part of a field so deeply committed to preparing individuals for careers in public service. While I still believe that UNC has the best MPA program, I am profoundly grateful to be part of this community of talented, dedicated, and kind individuals who collectively strive to have a meaningful impact.

Public administration is an applied degree that prepares students for careers and leadership in public service. One common topic at the conference was applied and engaged scholarship, focusing on bridging theory and practice. Several schools presented how their faculty were expanding their work outside the classroom with government and organization officials. During these presentations, I reflected on the strength of our MPA program, where all faculty are engaged daily with both graduate students and practitioners. The bridge between theory and practice is well-established and continuously tested in the UNC MPA program.

Last year, the School of Government offered 285 courses, webinars, and specialized conferences to more than 16,000 public officials. Faculty members respond to thousands of phone calls and email messages annually on routine and urgent matters. Having faculty truly committed to engaged and applied scholarship means these experiences are

brought directly back to the MPA classroom for our students to learn from. Simultaneously, faculty continue to conduct research and draw on theory to provide the most theoretically grounded and rigorously researched responses to the questions and needs of students and practitioners alike.

At a recent dinner with members of the class of 1974, I was delighted to hear stories from their time in the program. As these amazing alumni spoke of Donald Hayman, who connected with practitioners in local governments across the state and whose recommendations helped set the course of many careers, it was clear that the commitment to engagement with the state and practice has long been part of the DNA of our program (and profession). This commitment has only grown and become further supported through having a home at the School of Government.

The vision for the MPA program is to be “a nationally recognized leader in engaged scholarship whose faculty, students, and alumni transform thought, organizations, communities, and lives.” As I observe our faculty, students, and alumni, I am confident we are living this vision. It is clear to me that the MPA faculty and the broader School of Government faculty are truly national leaders in their work and areas of expertise. We often say that we should not brag, but it is hard not to when thinking about the great things being accomplished by those associated with the MPA program.

Sincerely,

Willow S. Jacobson

Director, UNC MPA

Associate Dean for Graduate Studies

Robert W. Bradshaw Jr. Distinguished Professor of Public Administration and Government

UNC MPA Students Shine at the 2024 ICMA Annual Conference

Thirty-two UNC MPA students from both the online and on-campus formats attended the 2024 International City/County Management Association (ICMA) Annual Conference in Pittsburgh. With over 500 speakers and more than 250 sessions, students immersed themselves in professional development through engaging workshops and valuable networking opportunities.

The conference also allowed students to strengthen their bonds with peers and connect with UNC MPA alumni from across the country, particularly during the annual UNC MPA ICMA Happy Hour.

A highlight of the conference was a graduate student workshop focused on ethical decision-making in local government. More than 15 UNC MPA students attended the event, working in teams that analyzed ethical scenarios and developed strategic solutions, with panelists providing feedback.

This annual event continues to foster community among students, alumni, and friends of the program. Special thanks to the 28 alumni and supporters whose generosity provided students with a \$200 lodging stipend, helping make this transformative experience more accessible.

Fall Career Discovery Series Career Insights with Alumni and Students

This fall, the program held its first annual Career Discovery Series, featuring over 20 alumni discussing the diverse sectors in which they work. They shared their career paths, pivotal career decisions, and essential skills for success in public administration. This initiative connected students and alumni, providing an invaluable opportunity to learn about various career options and applying an MPA degree across fields.

The series attracted more than 50 students, each eager to gain insights and make connections that could shape their future. Micah McRea '25 highlighted the program's impact: “The series was a great opportunity to learn about the various jobs that are out there for MPA graduates. Hearing directly from alumni about how they utilize their degree felt highly relevant for how I plan on leveraging what I am learning from the UNC MPA program.”

The program will build on this success moving forward. It will organize the series around topics that apply across various professional environments so students can explore how these issues play out in real-world settings.

Alumni interested in sharing career expertise or moderating a discussion are encouraged to reach out. The MPA Career Discovery Series is a growing program that depends on the generous support of alumni, and the program is looking to expand the variety and depth of perspectives offered to students.

Thank you to all alumni participants for making this series possible and to the students who attended.

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—Micah McRea '25

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

MPA Student Hallie Springer

Shaping Policy and Building Relationships through ncIMPACT



Since joining the UNC MPA program in August 2023, Hallie Springer has embraced hands-on opportunities that bridge classroom learning with real-world impact. As a research assistant with the ncIMPACT Initiative, Springer has been at the forefront of projects that provide data-driven insights and innovative policy solutions for public leaders across North Carolina.

Springer's current project reflects ncIMPACT's mission to empower civic leaders through sound research and analysis. Working in partnership with NCGrowth, she is evaluating North Carolina's economic development tiers system, a structure designed to channel resources into economically distressed counties. Initially developed to incentivize job creation, the system has grown to impact school funding, healthcare loan forgiveness, and more.

Through this collaboration, Springer has conducted and coded approximately 20 interviews with state and local leaders in economic development, providing her with invaluable insights into policy processes and community needs. Her work contributes to a comprehensive draft report aimed at informing policymakers about whether the tiers system

is fulfilling its intended purpose—and offering evidence-based recommendations for improvement.

"Our goal is to ensure the system effectively advances distressed communities by directing resources where they're needed most," Springer explained. "Right now, our research aims to streamline the system and make it more impactful."

Through her work with a small but dynamic team, Springer has learned to navigate diverse working styles, communicate effectively, and contribute meaningfully in collaborative settings. "One of the most valuable things I've learned is how to communicate professionally while ensuring my voice is heard," Springer shared. "Working with teams from both ncIMPACT and NCGrowth has taught me how to balance input from diverse perspectives and prioritize effectively."

This experience has also helped her build confidence in engaging with high-level professionals. "Before, I thought talking to people who work for the state would be intimidating," she admitted. "Now, I realize that they're just people, and it's all

about mutual respect and clear communication."

As Springer prepares to graduate in spring 2025, her experiences with ncIMPACT have shaped her career aspirations. She envisions herself working for government-adjacent organizations or nonprofits that bring together diverse stakeholders—local, state, and community-level entities—to tackle complex challenges.

"I love the collaborative nature of ncIMPACT's work," Springer said. "It's exciting to be at the intersection of different organizations and to see how they align their efforts toward shared goals. I want to continue building these kinds of connections in my career."

Springer's journey demonstrates the UNC School of Government's commitment to equipping MPA students with the tools, knowledge, and experiences needed to become leaders in public service. Her work with ncIMPACT is more than a research assignment—it's a testament to the power of collaborative problem-solving and a clear example of the School's role in shaping North Carolina's future.

ALUMNI GIVING



UNC MPA Alumni Coates Society Effort Surpasses \$1M Milestone

The UNC Master of Public Administration program continues to experience remarkable and unwavering philanthropic support from its alumni. Since January 1, 2021, the program has witnessed extraordinary giving, with more than 450 donors contributing over \$1.4 million supporting the program and its students.

In that same year, an initiative was launched inviting UNC MPA alumni to join the School of Government's Coates Society by making annual contributions of \$5,000 or more. We are thrilled to report that, since this effort began in 2021, 41 MPA alumni have joined the Coates Society for at least one of those years, collectively contributing \$1 million and establishing five new endowments. This generous support has grown the program's funds and endowments—over 40—providing valuable resources dedicated to supporting the program and its students.

With a vibrant community of over 1,500 in the United States and in several countries, our alumni demonstrate their generosity and deep commitment to nurture the next generation of public service leaders. Thank you to all who continue to support the future of public service leadership.

Giving Circle Challenge

The UNC MPA Alumni Association Board launched a Giving Circle Challenge to gather 140 gifts between the UNC MPA Alumni Picnic (August 24) and Immersion and Alumni Reception (October 25). Despite falling just short of their goal, they received 137 gifts, including 128 from alumni, raising over \$62,000. The Alumni Association Board, Contribution Committee, and the program deeply appreciate the generous support and look forward to sharing limited-edition Giving Circle Challenge puzzles with contributors.

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN



Dear UNC MPA Alumni,

I am thrilled to serve as the incoming president of the UNC Master of Public Administration Alumni Board. It is a privilege to take on this responsibility, and I am eager to continue the incredible work laid out by past presidents and board members. Their dedication has shaped this community, and I am grateful for their leadership and commitment to the growth and success of our Association.

As we look ahead, I want to emphasize the strength of our alumni community. Our collective expertise, passion, and engagement are vital to the continued success of our Association. One of the areas I am most passionate about is our Alumni Mentorship Program. As a student, this resource—and my mentor, Susan Austin—were integral to my overall experience, shaped my career, and led me to my current role in the Town of Holly Springs.

I believe deeply in the meaningful connections between alumni and current students. In this next year, my hope is that we continue to focus on growing our Alumni Mentorship Program as we create a network of support that enriches both our professional journeys as alumni and the educational experiences of future MPA graduates.

I look forward to continuing our work to strengthen the cohesion within our alumni network and to deepen our connections with the current student body. Together, we can continue to build a robust and supportive community that supports the MPA vision to "transform thought, organizations, communities, and lives."

Warm regards,

MaryBeth Spoehr '22

President, UNC MPA Alumni Board

Congratulations GRADUATES



Winter 2024

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| Alex Canan | Cristina Ortiz |
| Stacey Conner | Mary Propst |
| Olivia Jessup | Will Summer |
| Jenna Kubiak | Krystal Wallick |
| Malasia McClendon | Audrey Wheeler |
| Madeline Milligan | |

Summer 2024

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| Michael Beauregard | James Hirsch |
| Mariya Carrier | Keegan Kennedy |
| Melissa Cordell | Thomas Persico |
| Natalee Dally | Fernando Santillan |
| Laura Gomez-Nichols | |

Life Events

On the Move

Gary Brown '78

Retired, Lone Star College-Montgomery

Mike Shealy '81

Practitioner of Public Administration, MPA Program, University of South Carolina

Dudley Watts '89

Retired Manager, Forsyth County, NC

Beverly Thorpe '92

Elected, Board of Directors, North Carolina Associations of Alcohol Beverage Control Boards

Brian Brooks '99

Director of Executive and Board Services, North Texas Municipal Water District

Sharon Paynter '01

Chief Innovation and Engagement Officer, East Carolina University

Justin Powell '01

Secretary of Transportation, South Carolina Department of Transportation

Mark Bondo '02

Assistant State Budget Officer, North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management

Mike Branum '03

Attorney, City of Mesquite, NV

Kevin Etheridge '03

Director, South Carolina Executive Budget Office

Kari Feinberg Thomas '04

Chief of Organizational Effectiveness, Houston Independent School District

Richard Grogan '04

Chief Financial Officer, Evernorth

Brandon James '04

Operational Audit Manager, Internal Audit Division, North Carolina State University

Tim Love '04

Assistant Manager, Buncombe County, NC

Johanna Foster '05

Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs, UNC School of Data Science and Society

Trina Matta '05

Vice President of Policy Implementation, The Recycling Partnership

Justin Amos '06

Executive Director of Intergovernmental Relations, Gaston County, NC

Ryan Davidson '06

General Services Administration Director, Wake County, NC

Ryan Ewalt '06

Chief Operating Officer, Variable, Inc.

Amanda Stafford McReel '12

Doctoral Candidate and Research Associate, University of South Carolina

Kyle Haney '13

Deputy Manager, Forsyth County, NC

Mark Mallon '13

Assistant Professor, Florida Atlantic University College of Business

Ebony Perkins '13

Managing Director, Investor Relations and Capital Aggregation, NeighborWorks Capital

David Goldberg '15

Attorney, Gaston County, NC

Trevor Lobaugh '16

Manager, Government and Public Services, Deloitte

Chaz Offenburg '16

Chief Financial Officer, Town of Carrboro, NC

Thomas Rhea '16

Product Sales Specialist, Pearson

Will Hagerty '17

Assistant Manager of Airport Operations, Norfolk Airport Authority

Eric Marsh '17

Manager, Town of Rolesville, NC

Travis Crayton '18

Vice President of Planning and Public Policy, Research Triangle Park

Daniel Harden '18

Management and Budget Analyst, Metro Nashville Government

Kevin King '18

Technical Account Manager, Quickbase

Griffen Rice '18

Solar Consultant, Sunrun

Agata Chydzinski '19

Co-Founder, Athena Advisory Collective

Jim Hemphill '19

South Carolina and Georgia Manager, East Coast Greenway Alliance

Dan May '19

Operations Officer, 4th Ranger Training Battalion, U.S. Army

Laura McBryde '19

Senior Management and Budget Analyst, Mecklenburg County

Matthew Van Epps '19

Principal, Darkhorse Strategy, LLC

Thomas Bennett '20

Public Assistance Eastern Branch Team Lead, North Carolina Division of Emergency Management

Catesby Denison '20

Project Manager, City of Wilson, NC

Alice Mahood '20

Director of Integrated Services, Guilford County, NC

Maddie Powers Spencer '20

Senior Consultant, BerryDunn

Rebekah Appleton '21

Operations Facilitator, John Rex Endowment

Molly Gaskin '21

Budget Manager, Budget and Management Services, Wake County, NC

Hallee Haygood '21

Budget Analyst, Budget and Management Services, Wake County, NC

Hanna Whitehurst '21

Community Partnerships and Special Project Manager, City of Davenport, IA

Lori Armstrong '22

Federal Program Specialist, CDC Foundation

Alex Norwood '22

Budget and Management Analyst II, Orange County, NC

Tiffany Oliva '22

Assistant Administrator for Operations, Town of Brookline, MA

Greg Waugh '22

Chief of Response and Air Operations Officer, U.S. Coast Guard, Sector San Diego

Michael Beauregard '24

Budget Analyst, City of Durham, NC

Shelby Lamm '24

Executive Management Coordinator, City of Raleigh, NC

Anna Naples '24

Budget Analyst, North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management

Nuptials

Molly Gaskin '21 and Justin

Marcarelli were married October 12, 2024.

Chase Loudermelt '22 and

Dylan Miller were married October 17, 2024.

New Additions

Carrie Cook '07 and Marc

Wilson II welcomed Kai Chastin Wilson on September 8, 2024.

Amanda Stafford McReel '12 and

David McReel welcomed Dorothy Anne McReel August 5, 2024.

Brian Farkas '13 and Cameron

Farkas welcomed Holland Ruth Farkas on May 28, 2024.

Stephanie Olson '17 and Kevin

Olson welcomed Carter James Olson on September 30, 2024.

Jonathan Holt '18 and Samantha

Lockwood welcomed Emily Anne Holt on January 25, 2024.

Katie Fiely '19 and Zac Lawton

welcomed Mercedes Elaine Lawton on August 18, 2024.

Jennifer Fox '19 and Dean Fox

welcomed Dean Charles Fox III on August 22, 2024.

In Memoriam

Kelly Alexander, '70, a double

Tar Heel and cofounder of UNC-Chapel Hill's Project Uplift, passed away on September 6, 2024. Learn more about his legacy at unc.edu/posts/2024/09/18/kelly-alexander

Awards and Certifications

Stephanie Fowler Benson '82

received the 2024 ICON Honors award from the *Rochester Business Journal*.

Bobby Fitzjohn '18 earned

the Certified Public Finance Officer designation from the Government Finance Officers Association.



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2025 Upcoming **EVENTS**

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

GiveUNC 2025

March 25

Year in and year out, the School of Government is a university leader during the UNC annual day of giving, GiveUNC. UNC MPA alumni and friends play a huge part in the School's success.

We have a great opportunity to get a head start by accepting gifts early that will count toward our GiveUNC totals. To make a gift today, scan the QR code or visit **go.unc.edu/WinterIMPACT2025**.



If you decide to wait until the day of GiveUNC, mark your calendar for March 25 and plan to make a gift of any size!

**Give
UNC**
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