

# PROFESSIONAL WORK EXPERIENCE

## Connecting Employers to Student Talent

The Carolina MPA program attracts students who share a passion for public service and capacity for leadership. Employers who work with students in the Carolina MPA program have access to students who are critical thinkers and problem solvers. MPA students can provide staffing for projects that might not otherwise be completed, and employers have the opportunity to invest in a future colleague in the field.

Many of our students choose Carolina because they are interested in practical scholarship and experience. Before beginning the practicum, students have completed six MPA core courses. These courses focus on specific competencies, including organizational analysis, public service values, project management, critical thinking, and administrative writing. They have also completed at least one “real-world” project for a government or nonprofit organization.

### The Purpose of the PWE Practicum

The PWE practicum is an opportunity for students to apply theory to practice in a professional setting that allows students to further develop their competencies in public administration and lay the groundwork for career advancement. It is our recommendation that students are paid for their work.

**Employer Guidelines:** The PWE is an agreement between the student and the employer. Students are expected to complete 400 hours of work over the course of the work term.

- The work should be substantive in nature
- The work must be public service related and consist of complex, specialized work demonstrating competence in key areas of public administration
- The PWE must be supervised by a qualified professional who is able to monitor student progress and provide feedback on student performance

### 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 imperative that the student be given an opportunity to learn about the entire organization, including its mission and 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. Remote work can be negotiated between the student and the supervisor.
- 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 what can be improved.
- 8. The chance to participate in fieldwork, conferences, and other interactions beyond the office** can be beneficial.

Thank you for your support of Carolina MPA students. If you have questions, concerns or would like further guidance please do not hesitate to contact me.

Regards,



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