Gordon Whitaker: The Heart and Soul of the MPA Program

By Safa Sajadi

There are certain timeless elements that are so much a part of the MPA program’s mission and identity that it’s difficult to envision the program without them. These include the MPA cohort experience, the education of future public servants, and Professor Gordon Whitaker, who has announced his plans to retire in the summer of 2012.

For well over 30 years, Whitaker has taught, directed, and been an instrumental force for the MPA program. His impact has been felt in the classroom, in North Carolina communities, and around the world. His accomplishments extend well beyond his required course work, capstone meetings, and the occasional MPA social get-together.

Whitaker grew up on a farm in Bloomington, Indiana. Gardening—one of his favorite pastimes—developed as a direct result of working in his family’s fields. After obtaining an AB from Cornell College, Whitaker spent time in Somalia with the Peace Corps. “At the time, there was a great deal of interest in trying to make the world better and the belief that government played a role in that,” he says. He attended graduate school at Indiana University, where his dissertation chair was political economist Elinor Ostrom, who was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences.

Whitaker’s doctoral dissertation focused on how public service organizations like police forces could better meet the needs of their citizens by evaluating their own organizational frameworks. Understanding the experiences of citizens, how they evaluated their police forces, and how those differences factored across city and county lines were paramount factors in his research. As a result of this research, Whitaker and his colleagues were awarded a National Science Foundation grant to study the organization and delivery of police services across the country.

“For many years Gordon has been critically important to the MPA program—he has been its heart and soul.”

—Mike Smith, Dean, School of Government
As I prepare to turn the keys to the MPA director’s office over to Bill Rivenbark in August, I’ve been asked to reflect on highlights of the past four years as well as on the future direction of the program. I will devote my last two Director’s Columns to these assessments.

In my first Impact column (Summer 2006), I noted that “this is an exciting time for all of us who are committed to preparing public sector leaders and improving the lives of citizens through good government!” We did not anticipate the “excitement” caused by the Great Recession and the formidable challenges to public service since then, but UNC’s MPA program has proven resilient during these tough times. We are well prepared to continue to successfully bridge the worlds of public affairs education and practice. This is due to at least six key program strengths.

- **Focused Mission:** The program’s mission statement was revised in 2005 to promote, in the words of David Ammons, “truth in advertising” by clarifying our emphasis on local government management. Through this action, we better aligned our work with the mission of the School of Government, and positioned the MPA program to benefit from its close connection with the School’s faculty and staff who are engaged daily in working with public officials on real-world problems, an asset no other MPA program in the country can claim. These connections helped boost our U.S. News & World Report national rankings in 2008 to number five in City Management.

- **Relevant Curriculum:** In recent years a number of steps have been taken by the MPA Curriculum Committee (Professors Ammons, Berner, Jacobson, Rivenbark, Stenberg, and Whitaker) to make our course offerings more relevant to the demands of the contemporary field of public service and expectations of employers. Core courses were added on Collaborative Governance, Strategic Information Technology Management, Economics, Decision Analysis, and Introduction to Law for Public Administrators. Last summer, the MPA program was reaccredited by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, with only a few recommendations for fine-tuning.

- **Alumni Network:** We take great pride in our alumni network and have called upon it frequently throughout the years, but especially during the Great Recession. Alums have responded in a variety of helpful ways, such as providing assessment center counseling, individual student mentoring, job advising, internships, and entry-level jobs. Our alumni have been generous with their time and money, and their willingness to give back has been a powerful asset in promoting the program with promising candidates for admission.

- **Cohort Character:** The size of the MPA program has grown modestly from approximately 25 to 30 students in recent years without a sacrifice in the richness of the cohort experience or quality of the admissions pool. Recent entering classes have been diverse, academically gifted, and committed to making a difference through their careers. Each year the quality bar has been raised in evaluating candidates for admission.

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A few years later, his path took a turn toward the University of North Carolina when Deil Wright contacted him about an open position for a visiting professor in the Political Science Department at UNC-Chapel Hill. Whitaker began teaching program evaluation and statistics, but ultimately his interest in organizational management aligned with the MPA program's need for someone to teach organizational theory and management. Over the next few decades, he continued his research, served as the MPA program director (1980–1992), implemented the MPA Assessment Center, helped to develop the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, and organized the School of Government’s Public Intersection Project. “We are doing important work at the School of Government,” Whitaker says.

Whitaker says there have been changes to the field of public administration over time. “The boundaries between government, business, and nonprofits are more blurred; there is not a sense that government needs to produce all public services and can work with others to produce them.” Understanding these blurred boundaries and working with them is a common theme with the Public Intersection Project. “Instituting the collaborative governance course for MPA students and practicing collaboration with local government officials are some ways we are preparing public officials to face these issues effectively.”

Through his involvement with the North Carolina City/County Managers Association’s “Civic Education Project” he wrote Local Government in North Carolina, an introduction to civics for all North Carolina public schools. “In comparison to the 1960’s, the public seems more skeptical about government,” says Whitaker. “Though these beliefs and ideas do happen in cycles, there is an overwhelming distrust in government resulting in a real need for civic education and engagement.”

According to Whitaker, civic engagement is an ongoing practice throughout one’s life. “That’s the great thing about living in a democracy,” he says. “People are engaged in governing themselves, letting government know what they need, and working with government to get things done.”

In the moments when he is not working (which seem few), Whitaker enjoys reading, gardening, and traveling. He has visited France, Italy, Turkey, Cyprus, India, Romania, and South Africa. Although his desk is littered with papers and books, his office walls are adorned with items he’s purchased overseas, including a rug from Romania.

Retirement will present a major change for Gordon Whitaker. Though things will continue to change, the MPA program and students, the state of North Carolina and beyond will forever be inspired and impacted by his countless years of service. “As I look back on my career the one thing I value most is my connection with the MPA program, and it is where I have put my greatest effort.” Perhaps Dean Mike Smith captured it best when he said, “For many years Gordon has been critically important to the MPA program—he has been its heart and soul.”

“As I look back on my career, the one thing I value most is my connection with the MPA program, and it is where I have put my greatest effort.”

Mark your calendar: November 3
Make plans to join us for Gordon Whitaker’s retirement celebration at the School of Government. Check the next issue of Impact for details.
Many thanks to Professor Gordon Whitaker and second-year student Kevin McLaughlin for organizing this year’s assessment center and to the following alumni for giving of their time to make it a success.

Raymond Allen
Justin Amos
Stephanie Ashton
Jess Aylor
Jerri Bland
Robin Broadnax
Lukas Brun
Tony Caudle
H. Lee Clyburn
Lyman Collins
Jason Damweber
Ryan Davidson
Larry Davis
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Ryan Fehrman
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W. Patrick Pate
Stephen Raper
Ed Regan
Matt Roylanсе
Roger Stancil
Phil Strach
Bill Stockard
Sybil Tate
Fred Thomas III
Bill Webster
Kory Wilmot
Lee Worsley
Margaret Valyou

“The Assessment Center was a safe place to practice interviews and presentations. I appreciate the concrete feedback the alumni were willing to provide, and I have already started incorporating some of their suggestions into my job interviews.”

—Claire Long, MPA student
With the beginning of the 2011–2012 academic year, William C. Rivenbark will succeed Carl Stenberg as director of the MPA program.

Bill Rivenbark has been a faculty member at the School of Government since 1999. He teaches courses on public budgeting and financial management to public officials and to MPA students. He holds a BS from Auburn University, an MPA from Auburn University at Montgomery, and a PhD from Mississippi State University.

Prior to joining the School, Rivenbark worked for the City of Greenville, South Carolina, in various management positions. His research at the School of Government is focused on performance and financial management in local government and has appeared in many national publications including Public Administration Review, Government Finance Review, and Journal of Government Financial Management, among others. He is coauthor of Performance Budgeting for State and Local Government (M.E. Sharpe, 2003). In 2010, he was selected for a Fulbright Specialist Award that allowed him to spend six weeks at the University of Palermo in Palermo, Italy, where he taught regional and local government officials, PhD students, and public officials from 10 different countries.

Rivenbark helped to develop the County and Municipal Fiscal Analysis tool, a web-based dashboard designed to help North Carolina local governments analyze their fiscal condition. He has also helped to develop a new board game that helps public officials, citizens, and students gain a better understanding of the local government budget process.

Dean Mike Smith said recently, “Leadership always is important, but it may be more important now than at any time in recent memory. We will see more cuts to our state budget next fiscal year—and inevitably some of them will trickle down to the MPA program. Private fundraising will be the margin of excellence in maintaining and improving the program. Bill’s energy, creativity, and commitment to the program—and its continuous improvement—will make him effective in fundraising and in the other critical dimensions of leadership.”

On the Road
Beginning this summer and continuing during his tenure as director, Bill Rivenbark will be on the road, talking with alumni about their student, career, and alumni experiences. Watch your mail for more information.

Events at the School
Meet Bill at the following events at the School of Government:

- April 20, 2011—Capstone Conference
- November 4, 2011—Public Administration Conference
TRUe CAROLINA BLUE: EMILY ROSCOE

by Safa Sajadi

Emily Roscoe’s memories of her hometown of Sanford, North Carolina, revolve around the “deep-rooted goodness of small-town people,” where the ethic of reliability is held sacred. An experience in 1996, when neighbors helped her family with the cleanup of 47 fallen trees after Hurricane Fran, is indicative of many that shaped Emily’s decision to enter public service.

As a political science major (with a history minor) at Carolina, Emily took Politics of Bureaucracy, an undergraduate course taught by Michele Hoyman, who also teaches in the MPA program. During this course, Emily decided to pursue a public-sector career. “I want to help government organizations tackle difficult issues,” she says, “in order to provide services more efficiently.”

As a native North Carolinian, Emily was aware of the vital function the School of Government provides to local and state public officials. “I found the mission of the School to be inspiring, and I wanted to be a part of an organization that seeks to help real people solve real problems.”

When she entered the MPA program in 2009, Emily learned of the ES0PI-21 fellowship, which is awarded to dual-degree MPA/MLSs (Master of Science in Library Science) students. “Initially I misinterpreted the School of Information and Library Science (SILS) curriculum as IT-heavy and aimed toward computer and programming skills,” she says, “but then I realized that a library science degree is closely tied to art and museum management, fields in which I am also interested.”

The dual-degree program allows MPA/MLSs students to approach the same topics—program evaluation, decision-making, and financial analysis—from different perspectives. “SILS emphasizes the mastery of a specialized field of knowledge and skills, as well as emerging technologies,” says Emily. This mastery has been a key component of her research with MPA faculty member Chuck Szypszak.

While taking Szypszak’s Law for Public Administration course, which she regards as her favorite, Emily became interested in the register of deeds function in local governments. Both she and Szypszak saw a connection between register of deeds functions and the library science field.

“We decided to merge the two fields and produce tailored and informed guidance to registers in the form of a bulletin related to public records requirements,” Emily explains. Registers’ Public Records in the Digital Era, by Emily Roscoe and Charles Szypszak, was published as Land Records Bulletin #34 in November 2010.

Emily’s collaboration with Chuck Szypszak has also included teaching a public records course in the School’s Basic Register of Deeds School and several classes in the Advanced Register of Deeds School. “Emily has combined the opportunities made possible by the MPA and UNC Library Sciences programs in service of the School’s role in educating and counseling public officials,” says Szypszak. “She is conducting groundbreaking independent research into the intersection of public records, security and privacy concerns, and public policy issues concerning public access to information about government.”

Emily Roscoe has worked with the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Government Records Branch, where she conducted research and policy analysis on a variety of issues involving public records and recordkeeping responsibilities. She has drafted policies and guidelines for North Carolina state and local governments regarding social media, metadata, and long-term digital preservation. In summer 2010 she held an internship with the Office of Management at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), a branch of the National Institutes of Health located in Research Triangle Park.

“Two themes that run through my academic work and my work with public officials are investigation and the sharing of knowledge,” Emily says. “It has been particularly satisfying to put those concepts into practice in a way that benefits all North Carolinians.”
Life Events

On the Move


B.J. Collins ’01 relocated to Newark, Delaware, and is working for the US Environmental Protection Agency in Philadelphia.

Bree Bean Coplen ’05 was a budget analyst with the City of Jacksonville but has relocated to Clayton, where her husband accepted a new position.

Major Sean J. Gallagher ’08 has been deployed to Afghanistan with the US Army.

Dan Goetz ’76 is taking a sabbatical from his position as director of the local government finance division at RTI International to conduct research in Africa and Central America.

Ursula Hairston ’98 has accepted a position in the Office for Equal Opportunity at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

Jonathan Jordan ’02 was elected to the NC General Assembly.

Randall Lyons ’06 joined Guilford County as a budget analyst in November 2010.

Jennifer Mahan ’03 has been named director of government relations for the Autism Society of North Carolina.

Hallie Schenker Mason ’93 has been named director of public policy on the staff of West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin.

Katie Densford McCoy ’01 has accepted a new role with the City of Charlotte as evaluation manager.

Charles Penny ’80 has been named city manager of Rocky Mount.

Charles Perusse ’92 has been named vice president for finance of the 17-campus University of North Carolina system.

Gary Shope ’77 has been named interim economic development director for Orange County.

The prior issue of Impact announced that Bryan Steen ’92 had retired as manager of Stokes County, NC. Ah, plans do change! Bryan decided to put retirement on hold and has accepted the position as manager of Burke County.

Andy Willis ’94 has accepted the position of budget director for the North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management.

Kent Wyatt ’02 is currently serving as senior management analyst with the City of Tigard, Oregon.

Accomplishments

James Howerton ’72 has written The Unstoppable Leader, a biography of W. N. Porter, an educator, civil rights activist, and humanitarian from Harnett County, North Carolina.

New Arrivals

Carol Cooley Hickey ’06 and her husband, Matthew, welcomed their son, Ian Daniel, on August 26, 2010.

Sybil Tate ’07 and Roy Mars announce the birth of their daughter, Terra Carolyn Mars, on February 1, 2011. Terra weighed 6 lbs. 8oz. and was 20 1/2 inches long.

“I am putting lessons learned in the MPA program to excellent use as an intelligence officer for the 101st Sustainment Brigade. Essentially, we are a giant resource management organization supporting the 101st Airborne Division in eastern Afghanistan.

For instance, I am often bombarded with statistics on IED trends and I call on lessons from Maureen Berner’s classes. I have brought my textbooks along to assist, most notably David Ammons’ Tools for Decision Making.”

—Sean Gallagher ’08

News for the Life Events section, along with comments or suggestions for Impact, should be sent to Jean Coble at coble@sog.unc.edu.
• Student Placements: In a dismal economy, our placement record has remained strong. Nearly all students have been placed in paid summer internships, and almost all of our second-year students have been employed within four months of their graduation. This impressive track record has also been a powerful recruitment tool for the admissions committees.

“In a dismal economy, our placement record has remained strong.”

• Financial Support: Contributions to MPA scholarships have steadily grown during times when private fundraising has been under severe stress. New scholarships were established and major strides were taken to increase contributions to longstanding scholarship funds. While the need remains great—we have more students than ever and tuition has increased—the program has a good endowment base to build on. We are grateful for the support of the Alumni Board and network. These efforts will continue to prove critical to diversifying and strengthening our academic budget and student support capability.

Faculty, staff, students, and alumni should be proud of what our MPA team has accomplished and optimistic about the future. There are challenges ahead, however, and I will pose some of them in my final column in the summer issue.

Thanks again for your ongoing encouragement and support!

Carl Stenberg

MPA Alumni Association Board
JANUARY 1 – DECEMBER 31, 2011

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Student Representatives
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John Rible, Class of ’12
jrible@email.unc.edu
Greetings, alumni! Your MPA Alumni Association Board has another great year in the works. At our meeting on January 28, 2011, the board joked about developing our top priorities: our challenge felt a little like figuring out how to make a championship team even better. We persevered to recommend three areas where we think the board can be stronger. I hope you will join us in these exciting efforts!

**Strengthen Alumni Connection**

Our connection to the MPA program, to students, and to fellow alumni is paramount to the program’s overall success. This area has been one of our traditional strengths, yet the board felt opportunities remain:

- Increase networking opportunities for alumni and students at the annual Conference on Public Administration. This year’s event is scheduled to begin Thursday afternoon, November 3, and end Friday, November 4. Make plans to join us.

- Explore opportunities for fun “satellite” alumni gathering opportunities across North Carolina and in Washington, DC.

- Encourage alumni interaction with students throughout the school year (e.g., informational interviews, internships, job shadowing, etc.)

**Strengthen Scholarship Support**

Our scholarship support for students has increased greatly over the last 10 years. Our alumni have been generous, and the program is grateful for your financial support. Still, these challenges remain:

- Due to state budget cutbacks, the program will experience a reduction in the number of student tuition remissions starting this upcoming school year.

- Our level of scholarship support trails the levels from comparable public administration programs. It is our desire that we never lose a bright student to another MPA program over a few thousand dollars of scholarship support.

**Update By-Laws**

The Association’s by-laws were last updated in 2004. In particular, the board will focus its review on these questions related to board composition:

- Is the board at an optimum size?

- Is the diversity of our alumni appropriately represented on the board?

- Do the roles of the officer positions adequately reflect the responsibilities and role of the Alumni Association?

If you have ideas or suggestions about how we can best advance the above priorities, please don’t hesitate to contact me or other board members. I can be reached by e-mail at rjharrington@ci.charlotte.nc.us.

“**These goals will help us continue to strengthen the MPA program and ensure that great students become great alumni.**”
2010 Donors Make a Difference

The MPA program gratefully acknowledges alumni and friends listed below who have contributed to another successful year. Your generosity allows us to continue to offer valuable tuition scholarships and services to MPA students. Thank you.

Donors are distinguished in two categories of giving. The “A” Honor Roll recognizes donors whose cumulative giving has crossed a threshold of $5,000. “Sustained Givers” are alumni whose cumulative giving has reached a threshold of $500.

“A” Honor Roll
These donors have taken a leadership role in supporting the MPA program’s mission to prepare students for leadership careers in public service. Those names shown in bold were added to the list in 2010.

Russell Allen
David Ammons
David Cooke
William Flexner
Barbara Gunn
Donald Hayman
Wally Hill
Cal Horton
Ed Kitchen
Robert and Geraldine Laport
Ellen Liston
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Richard and Jere Stevens
Glen Stine
Hardin Watkins
Malchus and Amanda Watlington
Gordon Whitaker
Kenneth Woodcock
Richard and Patricia Woodcock
Edward Wyatt
Deil and Patricia Wright

Sustained Givers
The following individuals give consistently to the MPA program and join a group of prior donors recognized on the “Sustained Givers” plaque located in the MPA program suite.

Alethea Bell
Stephanie Benson
Maureen Berner
Lynn Burleson
Carolyn Carter Maness
John Cooper
Chris and Catherine Foca
Michael Halford
Brian Hiatt
Kate Irvin
Alan Lemke
Francesca O’Reilly
Matthew Owens
Chris Reykdal
Christopher Riddick
Christina Ritchie
Jennifer Smith
Jesse Springer
Michael Stepanek
Wright and Elizabeth Williams

Your Gift Matters
The individuals below have demonstrated a commitment to providing a quality graduate education to future public service leaders by making an annual gift.

Julia Davis Allred
Stephen Allred
David N. Ammons
Justin Matthew Amos
Emily Urso Anderson
Richard Nelson Apling
Marshall Courtney Ashcraft
Gerald L. Asher
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