

MPA Professional Work Experience Guide

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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 actual work experience for career advancement. The PWE Practicum also sets the stage, as outlined in Table 1 for PUBA 745 (“Professional Work Experience”).

PUBA 745 requires students to produce a written product that addresses selected competencies of the MPA program, which is accomplished by integrating their classroom instruction with the Practicum. The written product also becomes part of the portfolio. Therefore, PUBA 745 must be completed prior to registering for PUBA 746 (“MPA Portfolio”). Students must have completed five core MPA courses and the Practicum prior to taking PUBA 745.

Table 1: Sequence of Events

Step 1:	Complete five MPA core courses including the following required courses (709, 710, & 721) and any two of the following core courses (711, 719, 720, 723, 731, & 760).
Step 2:	Identify the Professional Work Experience (PWE) Practicum.
Step 3:	Complete, acquire signatures, and submit the employment contract for approval before beginning the Practicum.
Step 4:	Complete, sign, and submit the learning contract for approval before beginning the Practicum.
Step 5:	Begin the Practicum.
Step 6:	Participate in a check-in process to evaluate the progress and success of the Practicum, when it is about 30-40 percent complete.
Step 7:	Complete the Practicum.
Step 8:	Register for and take PUBA 745, Professional Work Experience Course.
Step 9:	Integrate the classroom learning with the work experience by writing a paper that will be evaluated on the basis of the five competencies.
Step 10:	Upon successful completion of PUBA 745, the paper becomes part of the student portfolio. Grades are awarded on a Pass/Fail basis.

II. Competencies

The Practicum provides each student with an opportunity to develop key competencies while working in an appropriate position for a public service organization. Following that work experience, each student produces a written product as part of PUBA 745 that reflects on and further develops those competencies.

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 five required MPA courses in professional public service work. Students must have completed five MPA core courses prior to beginning the required Practicum.

Students must complete all three of these core courses:

1. PUBA 709 (Public Administration Institutions and Values)
2. PUBA 710 (Organizational Theory)
3. PUBA 721 (Professional Communications)

Students must also have completed any two of the following core courses:

4. PUBA 711 Public Service Leadership
5. PUBA 719 & 720 Public Administration Analysis & Evaluation I & II
6. PUBA 723 Human Resource Management
7. PUBA 731 Public Financial Management
8. PUBA 760 Law for Public Administration

Students register for PUBA 745 as early as the term following their 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 they meet the following criteria: In the PWE public service employment position, we expect the student to manage complex work, supervise staff, 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 student will focus on a particular responsibility, skill, or project in the paper.

The approval process of the Practicum begins by gaining pre-approval based on an initial conversation between the student and the designated MPA staff. The student then develops and acquires signatures of approval for the employment and learning contracts.

V. Contracts

The student drafts two learning contracts: (1) the employment contract and (2) the learning contract. These contracts will be included as Appendices 1 and 2 in the written product required for PUBA 745. One original signed copy of each contract is turned in to the MPA program prior to the start of the Practicum.

The employment contract is signed by the student, the employer, and the MPA program. It clarifies how the following criteria will be met:

1. Each student will be assigned and report to a supervisor within the organization.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.

5. 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.
6. 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 30-50 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 MPA program 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	
Tasks or Functions of the Professional Work Experience Practicum	Potential Goals:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not have to, but may involve a specific job responsibility. • Take advantage of the work environment in which the student is placed. • Should be oriented around a specific skill, process, or knowledge base that is relevant to a career in the public sector. • Should be oriented around leading and managing public projects or processes.
Serving as a budget analyst	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
Providing staff support to an advisory board that makes nonprofit funding decisions	Observing and analyzing the leadership and communication practices of the nonprofits that are most successful at obtaining funding
Working in the Public Information Office of local government	Observing and analyzing how the government designs and implements a new strategy for citizen engagement for a bond referendum
Working for the director of a nonprofit agency	Observing and analyzing the multiple values and legal or ethical principles that come into play in the work setting
Staffing a new public change project	Observing and analyzing how leaders navigate through and transform resistance to change by the employees or citizens affected by the change
Working for a Human Resources Department	Observing and analyzing how the organization develops the leadership capacity of its employees in a new program

VI. Interim Evaluation

The Career Services Director will check-in with the student and the student's direct supervisor approximately 30 to 40 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. It is the student's responsibility to schedule the check-ins. The Career Services Director 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. 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 what can be improved.
8. The chance to participate in fieldwork, conferences, and other interactions beyond the office can be beneficial.

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 completed before the student begins the Practicum. It will be included as Appendix 1 in the paper written for PUBA 745.

- 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 30-50 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 and turned in prior to beginning the Professional Work Experience Practicum. It will be included as Appendix 2 in the paper written for PUBA 745.

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 Career Services Director, 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?

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
0	1	2	3	4	NA

If not, please explain: _____

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

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
0	1	2	3	4	NA

If not, please explain: _____

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

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
0	1	2	3	4	NA

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).

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know	
		0	1	2	3	4
			NA			

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

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
0	1	2	3	4	NA

3. He/she possesses the skills I anticipated.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
0	1	2	3	4	NA

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.