

**North Carolina Office of Strategic Partnerships
Government Research Partnerships Learning Forum
Speaker Biographies**

This list of speaker biographies was compiled by the [NC Office of Strategic Partnerships](#) as a follow-up to the 2024 Government Research Partnerships Learning Forum on April 11. Biographies come from online information and appear in the order in which speakers are listed on the [agenda](#).

Welcome and Overview of Learning Forum



Jenni Owen

Director, NC Office of Strategic Partnerships (OSP)

Jenni Owen is the Director of the NC Office of Strategic Partnerships. In this role, she identifies and launches strategic partnerships between and among state government, universities/colleges, philanthropy, and other entities. This includes increasing and expanding state government connections with external research experts and increasing agency capacity to conduct and use evidence to improve policy and practice. Jenni was previously Policy Director for Governor Roy Cooper and Director of Policy Engagement and on the faculty of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.



Dr. Tonya Smith-Jackson

Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (N.C. A&T)

Dr. Tonya Smith-Jackson is Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs at N.C. A&T State University. Dr. Smith-Jackson is a research engineer with extensive academic leadership experience, including a stint as a program director at the National Science Foundation. Prior to this role, Dr. Smith-Jackson was the university's Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs.



Jennifer Mundt

Assistant Secretary of Clean Energy Economic Development, NC Department of Commerce

Jennifer Mundt is the Assistant Secretary of Clean Energy Economic Development at the NC Department of Commerce, where she leads efforts to secure clean energy economic and workforce opportunities for North Carolina, including offshore wind. Jennifer has more than 17 years of State service. Before joining Commerce, she served as the Senior Policy Advisor in the Department of Environmental Quality. Prior to that, Jennifer worked for more than a decade as a nonpartisan senior legislative analyst for the NC General Assembly.

Cross-sector Partnership Features and Q&A Part 1

[Jenni Owen](#), *Director, NC Office of Strategic Partnerships*



Dr. David Yokum

Chief Scientist, NC Office of State Budget and Management (NCOSBM)

Dr. David Yokum is Chief Scientist at NCOSBM where he focuses on improving the state's capacity for evidence-based policy and decision-making. David also serves as a Professor of the Practice at the School of Data Science and Society at UNC Chapel Hill. David was previously Director of The Policy Lab at Brown University. He holds a Ph.D. and J.D. from the University of Arizona and an M.A. from the University of South Florida.



Tania Connaughton-Espino

Farmworker Health Operations and Data Specialist, NC Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS)

Tania Connaughton-Espino leads evaluation efforts and coordinates data collection, analysis, and reporting for a variety of projects at the NC Farmworker Health Program at NCDHHS. She also serves as Project Director for the National Institutes of Health-funded Agricultural Workers Digital Equity Initiative, a community-led, health equity structural intervention focused on transforming internet access and enhancing digital health resources. She previously managed statewide reproductive health programs, provided training and technical assistance on implementing evidence-based curricula, and worked extensively with the Latinx community on reproductive health and justice issues.



Dr. Joseph Lee

Professor, College of Health and Human Performance, East Carolina University

Dr. Joseph Lee is a professor in the College of Health and Human Performance at East Carolina University. In his research, he seeks to document, understand, and reduce unfairness in health by building evidence for policy interventions that make a difference. He is responsible for over \$23 million in current research funding within his team's administration infrastructure.



Dr. Catherine LePrevost

Associate Extension Professor, NC State University

Dr. Catherine LePrevost is an Associate Extension Professor at NC State University. Her research interests include science education that takes place outside of the classroom, especially with rural and agricultural communities on topics related to pesticides and environmental toxicology.



Dr. Leslie Cofie

Assistant Professor, College of Health and Human Performance, East Carolina University

Dr. Leslie Cofie is an assistant professor at East Carolina University. His research focuses on understanding and addressing the root causes of health inequities experienced by vulnerable populations. As part of this work, he examines disparities in chronic diseases between foreign-born and US-born individuals, with a particular focus on cancer control and prevention.



Dr. Alyssa Spence

Associate Director, North Carolina Agromedicine Institute

Dr. Alyssa Spence is the Associate Director of the NC Agromedicine Institute. Her primary responsibility is working on the Institute Member program, working with faculty and community partners on collaborative research, facilitating the Institute's Board of Partners and coordinating education/outreach and prevention/intervention programs in farm safety.



Dr. Emily Yeager

Interim Director, Miller School of Entrepreneurship Crisp Small Business Resource Center, East Carolina University

Dr. Yeager's current research focuses on sustainable tourism development with an emphasis on rural destinations. She is an assistant professor in the Department of Recreation Sciences and directs the Crisp Small Business Resource Center at East Carolina University.



Dr. Mark Holmes

Director, Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research, UNC Chapel Hill

Dr. Mark Holmes is the Director of the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research as well as a Professor in the Gillings School of Public Health at UNC Chapel Hill. His interests include hospital finance, rural health, workforce, health policy, and patient-centered outcomes research. Previously, he was Vice President of the NC Institute of Medicine, where he gained experience in North Carolina health policy. He previously served on the board of the NC Health Insurance Risk Pool. His state policy work led to his

2010 Health Care Hero "Rising Star" award from the Triangle Business Journal. He is a member of the Editorial Boards of the Journal of Rural Health and the North Carolina Medical Journal.



Adam Linker

Vice President of Programs, Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust

Adam Linker is vice president of programs at the Kate. B. Reynolds Charitable Trust. In this role, he serves as a key strategist and works with the executive team to envision and execute strategies that move the Trust's missions forward. He also oversees and manages the grantmaking process and leads the program team as it works to invest in systems change work that increases equitable access to health, education, and economic

opportunity. Prior to this role, he was a senior program officer at the Trust. Adam joined the Trust in 2016.

Dr. Amy Braun

Program Strategist, NC Wildlife Resources Commission

Dr. Amy Braun is the Program Strategist for the NC Wildlife Resources Commission in the Office of Conservation Policy & Analysis. She conducts and coordinates evaluations of agency programs, opportunities, and policies, using social and evaluation data to guide strategic planning and program development. Amy has a PhD in Geography from UNC Chapel Hill and worked in the nonprofit sector before joining state government.



Carrie Ruhlman

Policy Development Manager, NC Wildlife Resources Commission

Carrie Ruhlman is the policy development manager for the NC Wildlife Resources Commission where she works to build programs, manage complex projects, lead cross-functional teams, and collaborate with stakeholders to improve policy outcomes. She holds a bachelor’s degree in biology from Lycoming College and a master’s degree in biology from the University of West Florida.



Dr. Joy Bhadury

Professor, Bryan School of Business and Economics, UNC Greensboro

Dr. Joy Bhadury is a Professor of Supply Chain Management in the Bryan School of Business and Economics at UNC Greensboro. Prior to that he was the Dean of the Davis College of Business and Economics at Radford University, Virginia and the Dean of the School of Business and Management at SUNY–Brockport and also served as the and Associate Dean of Research and Graduate Programs for the Bryan School of Business and Economics at UNC

Greensboro.



Dr. Erick Byrd

Dean, Bryan School of Business and Economics, UNC Greensboro

Dr. Erick Byrd is an Associate Professor in the Department of Marketing, Entrepreneurship, Hospitality, and Tourism at UNC Greensboro. He is the Dean and Tracy Priddy Dean’s Notable Scholar for the Bryan School of Business and Economic. His research interests include agritourism, wine tourism, and tourism stakeholder understanding and participation.

Cross-sector Partnership Features and Q&A Part 2

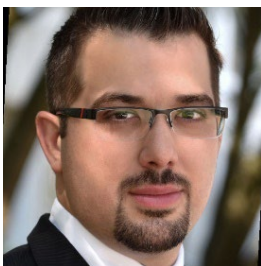


Dr. Holley Nichols

Associate Director of Research and Evaluation, Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, NC State University

Dr. Holley Nichols is associate director for research and evaluation at the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at NC State University. Her research experience includes quantitative and qualitative methodologies with a focus on policies related to transfer students, adult learners, and rural student populations. Before joining the Belk Center, she worked for over a dozen years in university enrollment, financial aid,

and admissions.



Zach McLawhorn

Director of Innovation, NC Department of Adult Correction

Zach McLawhorn is the Director of Innovation at the NC Department of Adult Correction. Prior to this role, he served in auditing roles with the NC Office of the State Auditor and the NC Department of Administration.



Kenny Gibbs

Chief of Employment Services and Program Development, NC Department of Health and Human Services

Kenny Gibbs is the Chief of Employment Services and Program Development for the NC Division of Vocational Rehabilitation at NCDHHS. Gibbs has been with NCDHHS for more than 30 years.



Mehdi Lamssali

Doctoral Student, N.C. A&T State University

Mehdi Lamssali is a doctoral student at N.C. A&T State University where he works to translate scientific findings into actionable solutions, especially benefiting underserved communities. He dedicates his career to addressing pressing challenges related to water quality, environmental resilience, and the impacts of urbanization and climate change on water resources.



Samantha Cole

Child Care Business Liaison, NC Department of Commerce

Samantha Cole is the Child Care Business Liaison for the NC Department of Commerce. Prior to joining NC Commerce, she served as Director of Workforce Partnerships with the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Coalition for Asheville-Buncombe County, where she led the organization's initiatives to connect people experiencing significant barriers to employment with rewarding opportunities and helped area employers engage with innovative workforce development solutions.

Previously, Samantha served as Deputy Press Secretary in the Office of Governor Roy Cooper and at the NC Department of Justice.



Cyndi Soter O'Neil

Senior Policy Analyst, ChildTrust Foundation

Cyndi Soter O'Neil is the Senior Policy Analyst for the ChildTrust Foundation. O'Neil began her career as a high school English teacher in Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools and has spent the past 15 years working in public education advocacy, policy, and engagement.



Emily Roach Pandich

Director of Policy and Strategic Planning, NC Department of Commerce

Emily Roach Pandich is the Director of Policy and Strategic Planning for the NC Department of Commerce where she leads the policy and legislative affairs team at Commerce, which is responsible for advocating for policies to advance the Department's mission and First in Talent strategic plan. Prior to joining the Commerce team, Emily was the Policy Analyst and Strategy Officer for the NC Department of Administration (NCDOA). She was responsible for NCDOA's strategic plan and providing policy support to

internal divisions and state boards and commissions, including the Andrea Harris Social, Economic, Environmental, and Health Equity Task Force. Additionally, she served as NCDOA's interim Legislative Liaison.

Compiled by the NC Office of Strategic Partnerships

April 2024

Before joining state government, Emily worked in education and held various roles that blended classroom instruction and administration. Emily is a native of Raleigh, NC, and holds a Bachelor of Arts from Wake Forest University.



Danielle M. Carman

Executive Director, Council for Women & Youth Involvement, NC Department of Administration

Danielle became the Executive Director of the NC Council for Women and Youth Involvement in June 2021. Prior to joining the Department of Administration, she served as the Deputy Director of the NC Administrative Office of the Courts and led the Court Programs Division. Before that, she was the Deputy Director of the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, where she supported and promoted the criminal and youth justice and voting rights programs. From 2001 to 2016, Danielle served as the founding Assistant Director and General Counsel of the statewide NC Office of Indigent Defense Services (IDS). In that role, she supported the work of the IDS Commission and was instrumental in reforming and improving the state's indigent defense system. For almost four years after law school graduation, Danielle was an assistant appellate defender in the NC Office of the Appellate Defender, where she represented indigent criminal defendants on direct appeal to the state Court of Appeals and Supreme Court. Danielle attended UNC School of Law as a Chancellors Scholar and graduated with high honors in 1997. After graduating, she taught four semesters of legal research and writing to first-year law students as an adjunct professor.



Dr. Beth Moracco

Chair of Faculty, UNC Chapel Hill; Associate Director, UNC Injury Prevention Research Center

Dr. Moracco joined the faculty of the Department of Health Behavior in 2008 and has served as director of the master's program since 2012. She is actively involved in public health research and practice in NC and globally. As a researcher and a public health practitioner, Moracco is skilled in intervention development and evaluation research and an expert in engaging with communities and community-based organizations. She is a member of the NC Administrative Office of the Court's Domestic Violence Committee and a research fellow at UNCG's Center for New North Carolinians, and core faculty at UNC's Injury Prevention Research Center.



Dr. Sambit Bhattacharya

Professor of Computer Science and Director of the Intelligent Systems Lab, Fayetteville State University

Dr. Sambit Bhattacharya has a PhD in Computer Science and Engineering from the State University of New York at Buffalo. He is a tenured Full Professor of Computer Science at Fayetteville State University, North Carolina, and he is Director of the Intelligent Systems Laboratory. In 2023 he was honored by the University of North Carolina (UNC) Board of Governor's Award for Teaching Excellence. He is a winner of NASA's Space Tech Catalyst prize in 2024. While on teaching leave from the university, he has served as faculty fellow in research labs of the US Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community, and he is now a part-time Visiting Scientist at the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency. He works on use-inspired research in Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, and Cybersecurity. Dr. Bhattacharya leads projects funded by national agencies and local government. He is a Senior Member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers.

Partnership Features – Wrap Up



Meka Sales

Director of Special Initiatives, The Duke Endowment

Sales joined the Endowment in 2007 after working as the childhood obesity program officer at the NC Health and Wellness Trust Fund in Raleigh. Prior to that, she worked as the program director for the U.S. Postal Service Headquarters Health Promotion Program. Sales is a certified health education specialist, and her areas of expertise include prevention and health equity. In 2018, Sales was appointed by NC Governor Roy Cooper to serve on the state's Early Childhood Advisory Council.



Eliza Edwards

Deputy Director, NC Office of Strategic Partnerships (OSP)

As Deputy Director, Eliza oversees OSP operations to ensure the team is successful in identifying, developing, launching, and enhancing partnerships between state agencies and non-governmental partners. She also plays a critical role in doing this work. Other aspects of her role include providing leadership to and support for OSP's portfolio of cross-sector research partnerships; coordinating and managing a range of OSP convenings and communications deliverables; managing OSP's intern program; providing supervisory support to the Director of OSP; representing OSP at speaking engagements/presentations; and contributing to OSP's overall strategic planning and implementation efforts.

Agency Research and Evaluation Capacity and Expertise: Examples from NC State Government



Meihui Bodane

Assistant Secretary for Policy, Research and Strategy, NC Department of Commerce

Meihui Bodane serves as the Assistant Secretary of Policy, Research and Strategy, overseeing the Labor and Economic Analysis Division of the NC Department of Commerce. Meihui joined the Department in 2007 and has since taken on progressively more responsibility in various roles, supporting the Department's work in business recruitment and expansion, workforce development, community planning, international trade, economic research, and labor market analysis. In her current role, she oversees and manages over 30 research and technical professionals who carry out data collection and information processing, research and statistical analyses, evaluation and reporting for the state of North Carolina on topics such as economic and labor market conditions and the impacts of workforce and educational programs.



Dr. Curtis Bradley

Research and Development Manager, NC Department of Transportation (NCDOT)

Dr. Curtis Bradley is the Research and Development Manager for the NC Department of Transportation's Research & Development Unit, which oversees transportation-related research for NCDOT. He was previously the Research Implementation Manager for the Unit. Dr. Bradley received a BS in Architecture and Environmental Design from Morgan State University and MS in Transportation Planning from South Carolina State University. In 2016 he was awarded the doctorate in Civil Engineering: Transportation Engineering from the University of Massachusetts Lowell.



Tim Griffith

Evidence Advisor, NC Office of Strategic Partnerships (OSP)

As an Evidence Advisor, Tim helps lead efforts to maximize discretionary spending on evidence-based policies and programs in NC. His role includes working with North Carolina state agencies to conduct evidence reviews of discretionary spending and identify areas and opportunities for evaluating policy and program effectiveness through rigorous evaluation methods such as randomized controlled trials (RCTs). Prior to joining OSP, Tim worked in several evaluation roles at non-profit and private sector research organizations. His work included conducting evaluations and providing evaluation technical assistance for clients at the federal, state and local level focused on workforce development and unemployment insurance policies and programs.



McKinley Wooten

Assistant Secretary for Tax Processing, Research & Equity, NC Department of Revenue (NCDOR)

McKinley Wooten is the Assistant Secretary for Tax Processing, Research & Equity at NCDOR. He has served in several senior level positions in state government, including inspector general, deputy secretary of the NC Department of Administration as well as director and deputy director of the Administrative Office of the Courts. Wooten also serves on the advisory board for the Alexander YMCA in Raleigh, the NC Museum of History Foundation Board, and the UNC School of Government Foundation Board.



Rachel Wright-Junio

Director of the Office of Learning Recovery and Acceleration, NC Department of Public Instruction

Rachel Wright-Junio is the Director of the Office of Learning Recovery and Acceleration where she works to translate research to practice and provide the necessary evidence and support to districts to implement effective programs that move the needle for students. She entered this role after serving for three years as the Migrant Education Program (MEP) Administrator for the Eastern side of North Carolina. She also transitioned from a role as a K-5 English Language Arts (ELA) Consultant where she advocated for migrant and EL students under the broader umbrella of reading and ELA curriculum.

What Philanthropy Wants in Partnerships with State Agencies



Whitney Davis

Program Officer, Foundation for a Healthy High Point

Whitney Davis joined the Foundation in May 2019 and serves as the Program Officer. Prior to joining the Foundation, she was an evaluator at Wake Forest School of Medicine, the Chief Mission Officer at Prevention Partners, and a lobbyist for the Basic Education Coalition in Washington, DC. She earned an MPH in Health Behavior from the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health and a BA in French from Davidson College. Whitney was also recognized as a Davidson Game Changer in 2017.



Juli Kim

Philanthropy Liaison, NC Office of Strategic Partnerships

As Philanthropy Liaison, Juli helps philanthropy and state government agencies connect with and learn from each other and identify opportunities to collaborate for greater impact. Juli brings to this role over 20 years' experience working with policymakers, funders, practitioners, and researchers to identify, develop, implement, evaluate, and communicate problem-solving strategies related to a range of policy issues. Her career includes roles in state government and the nonprofit and private sectors. Juli has worked closely with philanthropic organizations, as program director at the NC Network of Grantmakers and as a K-12 education consultant. Juli is a graduate of UNC Chapel Hill where she earned both her bachelor and law degrees.

[Adam Linker](#), *Vice President of Programs, Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust*



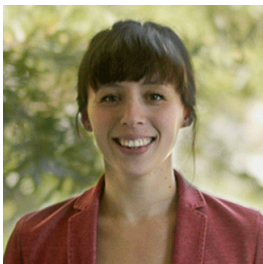
Ted Lord

Senior Vice President & General Counsel, Golden LEAF Foundation

Ted Lord joined the Golden LEAF Foundation in 2005 as a program officer and now serves the Foundation as senior vice president and general counsel. Ted works with the SITE Program, Community-Based Grants Initiative, the Open Grants Program, the Economic Catalyst Program, and a variety of special projects and initiatives. Ted assists with development of grant programs and other initiatives of the Foundation and identifies and addresses legal issues related to Golden LEAF grants and programs. Before joining Golden LEAF, Ted was a fellow and special projects coordinator for the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem, served as law clerk to the Honorable James A. Beaty, Jr., US District Judge, and practiced law with a firm in Greensboro. Ted was born and raised in North Carolina. He attended Swarthmore College and Wake Forest University School of Law.

[Meka Sales](#), *Director of Special Initiatives, The Duke Endowment*

The NC Office of Strategic Partnerships and the NC Collaboratory: Partnerships in Action



Dr. Greer Arthur

Research Director, NC Collaboratory

Dr. Greer Arthur is the Research Director for the NC Collaboratory, playing a significant leadership role in accomplishing the Collaboratory's mission of using university research to inform and assist state and local government decision-makers. In 2016, after moving to the U.S. from the United Kingdom, she joined NC State University as a postdoctoral researcher specializing in molecular biology and respiratory medicine. During this time, she also worked as a science communicator for numerous NC State departments and institutes. In 2018, she became the program manager for the NC State College of Veterinary Medicine's global health program, and later served as a research administrator and project manager in the college's research office.



Dr. Ganesh Bora

Associate Vice Chancellor of Research and Innovation, Chief Research Officer, Fayetteville State University (FSU)

Dr. Ganesh Bora has served as FSU’s associate vice chancellor for research and innovation since August 2022. Bora comes to FSU from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) where he served as the national program leader of data science and biological engineering at USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Bora earned his Ph.D. in biological and agricultural engineering from Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas.



Dr. Dongyang “Sunny” Deng

Assistant Professor, N.C. A&T State University

Dr. Dongyang (Sunny) Deng is an assistant professor at N.C. A&T State University. She received her Ph.D. degree in Civil and Environmental Engineering from West Virginia University in 2017. She has published in peer-reviewed journals and presented research in professional conferences.

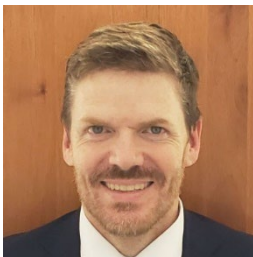
[Eliza Edwards](#), *Deputy Director, NC Office of Strategic Partnerships*



Rachylle Hart

Program Coordinator, NC PFAS Testing Network, UNC Wilmington

Rachylle Hart is the program coordinator for the NC PFAS Testing Network where she focuses on communications and operations coordination activities for the Network. She is a graduate of UNC Wilmington with a degree in Chemistry and Environmental Science.



Dr. Peter Kuhns

Director of Clinical Services and Programs, NC Juvenile Justice Division, NC Department of Public Safety (NCDPS)

Dr. Peter Kuhns is the Director of Clinical Services and Programs at NCDPS where he helps to ensure appropriate clinical treatment and youth development interventions for youths served in juvenile justice facilities and programs. Clinical treatment/programming includes medical, psychiatric, dental, psychological, substance abuse, recreational, spiritual, and case management services.

State Agencies Share Opportunities for Research and Philanthropy Partnership



Carrie Hollis

Principal Program Analyst, NC Office of State Budget and Management (NCOSBM)

Carrie Hollis is a Principal Program Analyst at NCOSBM. She is engaged in various initiatives to enhance evidence-informed decision-making, including Results First and the state’s regulatory impact analysis process. Before joining the budget office, she assessed community health needs for hospital systems using public health and demographic data. Carrie completed her Master’s degree in Public Policy at Duke University.



LaQuana Palmer

Deputy Director of Communications and Engagement, Medicaid at NC Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS)

LaQuana Palmer is the Deputy Director of Communications and Engagement for Medicaid at NCDHHS, where her leadership has led to high performing teams and innovative strategies for health and human service policy. She holds a bachelor's degree from UNC Greensboro and a Master of Public Administration from NC Central University.



Caroline Valand

Deputy Secretary for Partnership Engagement, NC Department of Public Safety (NCDPS)

Caroline Valand was named Deputy Secretary for Partnership Engagement in 2021. In this position, she provides oversight for the Governor's Crime Commission (GCC); Private Protective Services Board and Alarm Systems Licensing Board; and Victim Compensation Services. Valand was previously the executive director of the NC Governor's Crime Commission, which is the chief advisory body to the governor and the DPS secretary on crime and justice issues. Before joining GCC, Valand served as chief of staff to the President and CEO of 3D Systems, the largest 3D printing company in the world. Valand holds a bachelor's degree in political science and history from UNC Chapel Hill and a master's degree in legislative affairs from George Washington University.

Researchers Share Ideas for Responding to State Government Priorities



Dr. Nick Carnes

Professor, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University

Dr. Nick Carnes joined the faculty at the Sanford School in July 2011. He is a political scientist whose research focuses on American politics, economic and social class inequality, and political representation. Carnes is currently working on a book that examines the shortage of people from working-class backgrounds in national legislatures around the world.



Dr. Julie Edmunds

Director, Early College Research Center, UNC Greensboro

Dr. Edmunds is Director of the Early College Research Center at SERVE, where she leads a team doing research on the early college model and related topics. She has been studying early college and dual enrollment for almost 20 years; her research includes a 17-year experimental study of the impact of early colleges and evaluations of multiple large-scale efforts across the country to apply early college principles to traditional high schools. She is also Principal Investigator of a \$5 million grant examining the impact, implementation, and cost of NC's dual enrollment program, as well as a grant examining the transferability of college credits earned in high school. Dr. Edmunds also conducts evaluation and research on other school improvement topics using designs ranging from randomized controlled trials to developmental, formative approaches. She has published multiple award-winning articles and has written, with colleagues, a book on Early Colleges as a Model for Schooling.



Dr. Jennifer Gerz-Escandón

Associate Vice President for Academic Programs and Research, UNC System Office

Dr. Jennifer Gerz-Escandón is the Associate Vice President for Academic Programs and Research at the UNC System Office. Dr. Gerz-Escandón was previously the Associate Dean for Interdisciplinary Education and Fellowship Programs at UNC Chapel Hill. She has approximately 20 years of faculty and administrative experience at private liberal arts colleges, public research universities, and a university system. She holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Miami.



Dr. Oliver M. Thomas

Director of External Affairs, N.C. A&T State University

Oliver M. Thomas, Ph.D., MDiv, is the Director of External Affairs at N.C. A&T. He is a gifted servant-leader with 16+ years of experience in preparing future leaders, strategic planning, and community building in the public and ecclesial sector. Dr. Thomas has held roles in higher education as a faculty member and administrator. Prior to serving as the Director of External Affairs, Dr. Thomas taught African American History in the Department of History and Political Science at N.C. A&T. As the Director of External Affairs, his primary responsibility is to develop and enhance relationships with local, regional, state, federal, and elected officials, as well as key stakeholders, alumni, and the community at large. Dr. Thomas holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from N.C. A&T, a Master's degree in Divinity from Wake Forest University, and a Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies with a concentration in Cultural Foundations from UNC Greensboro.

From Part-time Intern to Career: Opportunities for Students

[Eliza Edwards](#), *Deputy Director, NC Office of Strategic Partnerships*



Kiya Edwards

Digital Equity Manager, NC Office of Digital Equity, NC Department of Information Technology

Kiya Edwards is the Digital Equity Manager at the NC Office of Digital Equity where she is committed to bridging the digital divide and empowering underserved communities. She holds a bachelor's degree from UNC Greensboro and a Master of Public Administration from NC Central University.



Olu Rouse

Undergraduate Intern, NC Office of Strategic Partnerships

Olu Rouse is an undergraduate intern with OSP. Olu is an honors student and February One Scholar at N.C. A&T State University. He is majoring in Political Science and Economics. With this education, he intends to pursue a career in Public Policy and Government Administration.



Candace Settle

Talent Acquisition Manager, NC Department of Environmental Quality

Candace Settle is the Talent Acquisition Manager at the NC Department of Environmental Quality. She has previously held multiple roles for the NC Department of Administration, including the State Internship Coordinator, and was an educator. She graduated from N.C. A&T with a bachelor's degree in child development and family studies.



Dr. Neva Specht

Senior Vice Provost, Academic Affairs, Appalachian State University

Dr. Neva J. Specht has served as the Senior Vice Provost, Academic Affairs at Appalachian State University since 2021. She previously served as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 2017 to October 2021 and as a professor of History at Appalachian State University since 1996. Specht received her Ph.D. in United States history and material culture studies from the University of Delaware, where she also earned her Master of Arts in United States history with a certificate in museum studies. She received her bachelor's degree from Grinnell College, with a double major in history and American studies.