The Gerald G. Fox
Master of Public Administration Program
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Executive Summary

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte announces the naming of its Master of Public Administration Program (MPA) after esteemed public servant, Gerald G. Fox. The formal naming coincides with the 35th anniversary of the MPA Program, and will take effect July 2012.

This testimonial to Gerald G. Fox’s career was produced by MPA students in their capstone course, the course Mr. Fox co-taught from 2000 to 2010. The information herein was collected by the students via personal interviews with individuals with whom Mr. Fox worked, MPA faculty members, previous students, and Gerald Fox himself. Information was also gathered from newspaper articles and other relevant written documents.

The MPA team found during their research a tremendous amount of respect for Gerald G. Fox from his contemporaries. He was seen as a compassionate individual of the highest integrity and a consummate professional. He constantly strove to develop both his managerial skills and those of his employees so that they could best serve the democratically elected representatives for whom they worked. Most importantly, he recognized that collaborative approaches generally produced the greatest results, so he worked tirelessly to bring people together to solve community problems.

Gerald G Fox’s list of accomplishments is extensive. During his career he faced many challenges including rapid growth, infrastructure and land use planning, and functional consolidation. He also spent time nurturing partnerships between the public and private sectors, public and nonprofit sectors, and community-wide. His efforts to improve the Charlotte Region continue to this day, eleven years after his retirement as manager of Mecklenburg County. His commitment to public service keeps him active, and he seldom turns down a request to give of his time to local arts and nonprofit organizations seeking his advice.

According to Mr. Fox, his greatest legacy comes in the form of the many young professionals and students he mentored throughout his career. His hard work in this regard has gone a long way to help professionalize the public and nonprofit sectors wherever he worked. His commitment to teaching and mentoring, experience and skill in the concentrated areas of study offered by the MPA Program at UNC Charlotte (Urban Management & Policy, Nonprofit Management, Emergency Management, Arts Administration, and Public Finance), and devotion to his students epitomizes everything the MPA Program stands for. We, therefore, proudly name this program after Gerald G. Fox as a monument to the potential and importance of a life in public service.
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The Gerald G. Fox Master of Public Administration Program

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte) proudly celebrates the 35th anniversary of its Master of Public Administration (MPA) Program by announcing the naming of the program in honor of distinguished public servant Gerald G. Fox. Gerald “Jerry” Fox, earned local, state and national recognition as an effective public manager during a career spanning over 50 years. His managerial skills, professionalism, respect for the democratic process, and personal integrity exemplify the values the MPA program works to instill in its students. Mr. Fox’s success as a leader in the public sector is an inspiring example to UNC Charlotte’s MPA students as they pursue careers in government, nonprofit, and arts administration.

Gerald Fox’s public career began in the 1950’s, and never really ended as he continues working today with several nonprofit and arts organizations in the Charlotte Region. Throughout his career, Mr. Fox developed a reputation as a highly professional manager with a knack for bringing people together to solve difficult community problems. Colleagues, coworkers and employees from all parts of his career describe him as the consummate public professional – calm and considerate even under pressure, respectful and responsive to elected officials, willing to listen and consider multiple perspectives and then pursue his final decision with confidence and compassion. Helen Lipman, Mecklenburg County Director of Quality Assurance, praised him as a consensus builder who earned the respect of others by always being the most prepared and well-informed person in the room, but also by being willing to listen to others. Jake Jacobsen, former Mecklenburg County Director of Social Services, added that Mr. Fox was “a class act example for any professional coming into the public or private sector to model after. He was a shining example to people all over the county and state of not only what you should be but what you can be.” His personal integrity, commitment to his staff, and respect for American municipal government has elevated public administration as a career and enhanced citizens’ confidence in local government.
Mr. Fox’s career illustrates the importance of a Masters degree in Public Administration. The knowledge and skills that students learn in the Gerald G. Fox MPA program provide a critical foundation for their future careers. However, like Mr. Fox, students will hopefully graduate with a desire to continue to build upon that foundation with new skills and approaches to problem solving that will help them become the highly successful leaders that Gerald Fox became. The UNC Charlotte Gerald G. Fox Master of Public Administration Program is honored to have Mr. Fox as its namesake.

A Glance into Gerald G. Fox’s Career

Gerald G. Fox’s first experience with public management came at an internship during his undergraduate studies at Beloit College. The internship had him working with a city manager and, as he puts it, “exposed me to something I really liked and thought I could be successful in.” The appeal of working for government was enough that, after completing his military service, Mr. Fox chose to enroll in Kansas University’s (KU) MPA program instead of returning to a marketing job with IBM.

While he was at KU, Mr. Fox took advantage of another internship opportunity offered through his MPA program as an administrative assistant to the city manager of San Antonio, Texas. He credits San Antonio’s city manager for mentoring him on many of the key aspects of effective city management. Mr. Fox internalized these lessons of professional city management and carried them throughout his five decades of public service.

After completing his MPA, Mr. Fox accepted his first city manager position in Ennis, Texas (population of 10,000). Being a very young city manager, he was able to learn a lot from his staff about the ways that local governments function. At the same time, he began to apply and fine-tune some of the technical and managerial skills that he had learned as an MPA student.

Mr. Fox managed Ennis, Texas from 1959 to 1963 before accepting a city manager position in Camden, Arkansas (population of 18,000) until 1966, and then the neighboring city of Fayetteville, Arkansas (population of 35,000) until 1969. From 1969 to 1980, Mr. Fox was the city manager of Wichita Falls, Texas (population of 100,000). During his time in these communities, Mr. Fox established a reputation as a true professional who stayed on the front edge of innovative administration by employing new budgeting techniques and computer technologies.

“My internship exposed me to something I really liked and thought I could be successful in.”
-Jerry Fox
In fact, it was his reputation for functional budgeting and professional management that caught the attention of Mecklenburg County’s Board of Commissioners. In 1980, Mr. Fox accepted the county manager position in Mecklenburg County where he proceeded to lead the County through twenty years of rapid growth and change. Jim Hunt, who served as NC governor for 12 of those years, recalls that, “Whenever you worked with Mecklenburg County, you worked with Jerry Fox.” It was Mr. Fox’s able management during this volatile time period that solidified the County’s national reputation as an extremely well-run local government. Former Cabarrus County Manager, Mike Ruffin, confirmed that, “Jerry’s tenure as Mecklenburg County Manager helped Mecklenburg County gain a national reputation. He led his county through a tremendous period of growth in both population and services. Mecklenburg County government would not be the great organization it is today had Jerry not built a solid foundation on which future county managers could build.” Mecklenburg County continues to receive recognition for the innovations Gerald G. Fox oversaw in Charlotte-Mecklenburg parks, libraries, schools, and environmental programs.

Finally, the UNC Charlotte MPA program was lucky to have Mr. Fox as an adjunct professor from 2000 to 2010. In this role, he shared his immense knowledge about working as a public manager with students in the program. His vast network of professional ties to the government and nonprofit sectors allowed him to lead a capstone class where students could apply the skills they had learned in the program to address problems facing government, nonprofit, and arts organizations in the Charlotte Region. Mr. Fox continues to be an important resource for the university today.

Keys to Success: Skills, Style and Commitment to Public Management

Gerald G. Fox’s success as a public leader was a product of his deep knowledge of how local governments work, extensive skills as a manager, and collaborative style. His career was built on a strong foundation of knowledge about government functions, the budgetary process, and community planning that he developed as an MPA student and in his early government jobs. As he gained experience in tackling the challenges of government management, he began to create a management style that helped him effectively navigate those issues. He excelled at building partnerships that could collaborate to solve big problems. Ahmad Daniels, former Executive Director of Mecklenburg County Office of Minority Affairs, believed “Jerry’s greatest contribution was his ability to achieve consensus. He had a knack for showing the value of both sides of an argument and then coming down the middle in many cases.”

Mr. Fox ended his twenty year management career in Mecklenburg County government to “retire” to a life still dedicated to public service. Since retirement, he has volunteered for numerous nonprofits and advisory boards. His involvement in these organizations means that he is still having a large positive impact on the well-being of the community, especially in his service to seniors, the homeless, and children.
Technical Skills

After deciding on a career in public management, Mr. Fox began to seek out the necessary training to become an effective manager. He entered Kansas University’s MPA program where he received training in public finance, budgeting, and public works. He was also exposed to the general organization of local governments and learned what a manager’s role in such organizations should be. Just as important as the class work, Mr. Fox took advantage of a long-term internship opportunity with the city of San Antonio, Texas, that was offered through KU’s MPA program—one similar to the fellowships offered by UNC Charlotte’s MPA program. It was in this internship through the mentoring of the San Antonio city manager, Steve Matthews, that Mr. Fox had the opportunity to apply the skills learned during his graduate studies and begin to develop his own skills as a public manager.

In the process of completing his MPA thesis and degree program, Gerald G. Fox accepted his first city manager position in Ennis, Texas. According to Mr. Fox, this city manager position was critical to his professional development because the Ennis administrative staff were willing to mentor their young city manager in the workings of city government. They taught him about the day-to-day operations of local government and introduced him to the nuts and bolts of public works, police and fire. Mr. Fox goes as far as to say that the staff in Ennis “taught me everything I needed to know about city government” and he credits the accountants especially for teaching him to prepare and adhere to a single budgetary system, a skill that would serve him well for the rest of his career.

Mr. Fox carried lessons learned in Ennis about preparing, presenting, and getting a budget accepted by elected bodies to his manager positions in Texas, Arkansas, and Mecklenburg County. His well crafted, forward-looking budgets for Mecklenburg County helped maintain a AAA bond rating throughout his twenty year tenure. Budgeting professor, Dr. Gary Rassel, stated that when Mr. Fox came to Mecklenburg County the budgeting process was lacking in structure. According to Professor Rassel, “The structure of the budget would change from year to year, and sometimes within a fiscal year. It was nearly impossible to track the County’s spending over time. Jerry put an end to all of that.” As County Manager, Mr. Fox systematized the process, introducing zero-based budgeting to the County, which helped give the Commissioners more information with which to set priorities, and also helped Mr. Fox hold his department heads accountable for their respective activities. This commitment to systematizing Mecklenburg County’s budgeting process demonstrates the importance he placed on the budget process as a mechanism for planning and accountability. Helen Lipman, Quality Assurance Department Director in Mecklenburg County, said, “Putting together the annual budget was his favorite thing to do because it let him translate the community’s priorities into actual policy.” Mr. Fox’s ability to swiftly institute such a complex budgeting system in Mecklenburg County demonstrates how completely he was able to absorb and apply the skills he had learned in both his MPA program and early career.
Managerial Skills

In addition to his technical skills, Mr. Fox also had some innate managerial skills that were critical to his success. He had a powerful ability to listen to the thoughts and ideas of others. Early on this helped him learn important lessons and skills about local governments from more experienced public managers. As he moved through his career, these listening skills enabled him to understand why people held the views that they did and what was needed to achieve compromise. Former Mecklenburg County Commissioner, Fountain Odom, explains that the Commission greatly appreciated this skill: “If we had any disagreement with him or we had some of our own ideas, he would listen. He was a great pleasure to deal with.” Finally, by listening to his staff members he signaled to them his compassion and investment in them, gaining their trust. These listening skills were critical as he built the teams he managed.

Mr. Fox was also reflective, good at asking penetrating questions, and had the capacity to think through various proposals and consider all possible outcomes. One nonprofit leader noted, “He could anticipate all the things you need to consider when making decisions and was invaluable in thinking through the pluses and minuses of all our options.” He placed a high value on information and always expected his staff to keep him well informed and back up their recommendations with solid data. He saw his role as a city and county manager as providing the elected officials with as much solid information as he could so that they could make intelligent decisions for the community.

Finally, Mr. Fox had an ability to admit mistakes when he made them. He keeps a list of what he calls “Fox’s Follies” which documents some of the larger missteps in his career. By his own account, one of his biggest follies was a garbage incinerator that Mecklenburg County built and operated while he was county manager. Mr. Fox recommended the incinerator project to the commissioners based on projections of use that forecast profits. However, a few years after it began operating, it became evident that the projections were incorrect and the incinerator was costing the County a considerable amount of money. Instead of trying to continue the project in the hope that things would turn around, he was able to look at the data objectively, admit his mistake and recommend the discontinuation of the project. His humility and sense of humor in the wake of setbacks allowed him to make necessary corrections and helped earn him the respect and trust of his staff and colleagues.

Collaborative Style

While his technical and managerial skills were a prerequisite for his success as a manager, it was his ability to combine these skills with a highly effective collaborative management style that set Gerald G. Fox apart as an exceptional public leader. One of the defining characteristics of his management style was his ability to cultivate a cooperative policy-making environment among the major decision-makers of the community. Mr. Fox talks about how his most important job as Mecklenburg County manager after the election of a new Board of Commissioners was to make sure that he was able to foster a team mentality between the county staff and the elected officials. Despite perhaps large ideological differences between different members of the Commission, or despite the cultural and institutional differences between county staff and county commissioners, Mr. Fox was able to bring people together around the idea that they were all there for the same reason, to help tackle the challenges facing the community.

“If we had any disagreement with him or we had some of our own ideas, he would listen. He was a great pleasure to deal with.”

-Fountain Odom, Former Mecklenburg County Commissioner
Once this premise was accepted, the members of the “team” were better able to discuss their differences from a place of mutual respect. Parks Helms, a former Chairman of the Mecklenburg County Commission, articulates this point as he recalls that, “Jerry was able in those years to create a strong bond between various members of the Board and get them all to recognize the importance of moving forward, helping this community to be the best it could.” This ability to cultivate a professional approach to problem solving among community leaders served as the foundation for Mr. Fox’s major accomplishments as city and county manager.

A team-approach to management was evident in other aspects of Mr. Fox’s career. As county manager, he gave his department heads the authority to lead their units as they saw fit, without his daily interventions. Cornita Spears, the Internal Audit Director during Mr. Fox’s tenure in Mecklenburg County, recalls: “Mr. Fox ... did not believe in micro-managing. He relied upon staff to do the jobs for which they were hired, acknowledged and looked to their expertise, and gave them the flexibility needed to get the job done.” In return he had high expectations for his staff’s performance and insisted on being kept informed so that he would be aware of the state of the organization as a whole. When large decisions ended up on Mr. Fox’s desk he sought input from those staff members who had a stake in the decision and involved them in the decision-making process. This combination of continual engagement with his staff while avoiding micromanagement of their decisions facilitated a team environment where everyone involved shared in the successes and failures of the organization.

His team approach also extended to his relationships with people beyond his immediate community. He served as vice-president and board member of the International City and County Managers Association during his career, reflecting the value he placed on getting input from other members of his profession. He also fostered relationships with surrounding cities and counties in an effort to deal with the growth issues occurring while he was county manager. According to one of his staff members, “He demonstrated not only an intimate knowledge of the County and facts surrounding the matters at hand, but an ability to develop networks with key players and entities needed for building partnerships and consensus in addressing county issues.” The professional relationships that he developed throughout his career allowed him to bring the right people to the table when problems needed to be solved. This was not only true when he was managing government but also in his retirement when he was working with nonprofit and arts organizations.
Commitment to Public Management

Mr. Fox was able to pull off this team approach so effectively because of his utter commitment to professional public management. Parks Helms emphasized this point when he said, “One of the defining characteristics about Jerry Fox was his strong professionalism. He was the epitome of a professional manager.” Nobody ever questioned Mr. Fox’s motives as being self-aggrandizing or self-serving. It was obvious through his daily dedication to his job, his well-researched and reasoned decisions, his personal integrity and compassion, and his deep respect for the responsibilities he had been given, that his only motivation was to serve the communities in which he worked as effectively as possible. He always understood that he worked for the elected officials who had been put there by the people. Even when he believed the commissioners made a bad decision, he felt it was still his responsibility to carry out what they asked of him because of his deep respect for the democratic process. As he says, ninety percent of the time the commissioners would realize their mistake and make a change, but it was not up to him to preempt the will of the elected body.

“One of the defining characteristics about Jerry Fox was his strong professionalism.”
-Parks Helms, Former Mecklenburg County Commissioner

His commitment to public management made people working with him comfortable and confident in his leadership. Parks Helms affirmed this sentiment when he expressed, that, “When I became a county commissioner, I always felt fortunate to have Jerry Fox as county manager.” Mr. Fox had a way of focusing people on the idea that they were there to solve the problems of the public, and quietly inspiring them to find ways to do that together. Whether working with staff, elected officials, businesses, nonprofits, or community members, Gerald G. Fox’s combination of skills, style, and commitment to public management allowed him to galvanize support and build the partnerships needed to take on countless community challenges.

Accomplishments in Community Problem-Solving

Managing Growth and Change

Throughout his career, Gerald G. Fox built a professional reputation for ably managing intense growth. While community leaders welcomed growth, it came with its share of challenges. As manager, Mr. Fox’s job was to seek creative solutions, balance competing interests, and leverage limited resources in order to overcome these challenges. Rapid growth put a lot of pressure on him to find ways to meet increasing demands for public services. At the same time, it provided countless opportunities to facilitate the development of the surrounding community. The fact that he was able to continually succeed in managing such growth is a testament to his foresight and abilities as a leader.

Infrastructure and capital investment

Mr. Fox cites investment in infrastructure as one of the overarching accomplishments in all five communities he served as manager. He combined his skills in urban planning with those in budgeting and financial management to implement capital improvement projects. His leadership helped maintain and develop the infrastructure needed to accommodate current demands as well as future growth in the jurisdictions he worked for.

Examples of this can be found as far back as his first city manager position in Ennis, Texas where he developed a plan for a more sustainable source of water that could meet the
needs of a larger population. Another early project was in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where Mr. Fox advocated the construction of a new terminal at the airport. Further, he developed a plan for rebuilding after a tornado devastated the city of Wichita Falls, Kansas. His leadership in the aftermath of this disaster and throughout his career exemplified his emphasis on planning and capital projects, and the implications that these have for future growth.

The rapid growth experienced in Mecklenburg County presented his greatest challenge in capital investment. The County's population almost doubled during his tenure from 400,000 to 700,000 residents. At the same time, the County’s budget increased from $177 to $867 million, while its workforce doubled in size to reach 4,500 employees. Former Assistant County Manager Wanda Towler spoke of his success in managing this intense growth with her assessment that, “He achieved a vision of investing in the community, both in physical infrastructure and in human services, and in continually improving county government's performance and services, so as to increase the community's rate of growth, its ability to serve its population, and the quality of life.”

During his 20 years as county manager, the single largest capital investment made by Mecklenburg County was in construction for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School system. Former County Commissioner Parks Helms noted that, “The Board was faced with keeping up with growth and providing adequate funding for schools. We couldn’t build schools fast enough.” Mr. Helms credits Gerald Fox’s leadership and creative approach to problem-solving for the County’s ability to gain approval for new school bonds, keep tax increases to a reasonable amount, and keep up with the dramatic pace of growth. Governor Jim Hunt echoed this tribute, “With Jerry Fox’s good leadership, the County was able to successfully stay ahead of the explosion of new students.” This leadership helped Charlotte -- Mecklenburg Schools become recognized three times by the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation as one of the top urban school districts in the nation (Burkins 2011).

Mr. Fox worked on many other infrastructure projects in Mecklenburg County including a new 2,000-bed jail, the planning of a new courthouse, and construction of five regional libraries. In addition, to accommodate the waste generated by a growing population, he pushed to acquire land in various areas throughout the county for landfills, one of which is now named after him. The Foxhole landfill is a prime example of the less glamorous aspects of public service that he refused to shy away from. While it was not the most politically popular move of his career, Mr. Fox made sure that politics did not preclude his recommendation which he believed was in the best long-term interest of the County. As a result, the Foxhole landfill and recycling center continues to serve as one of the major waste-management facilities in Mecklenburg County. Harry Weatherly, who served as County Finance Director and witnessed all these challenges with growth management, identified garbage disposal as one of Mr. Fox’s greatest contributions to Mecklenburg County.
In the years following his retirement as county manager, Mr. Fox contributed to decisions concerning infrastructure and capital investment in the nonprofit community. As a Board member of St. Peter’s Homes, Inc./McCreesh Place, he was able to establish a partnership with the Charlotte Housing Authority that enabled the organization to expand its supportive housing facilities. In addition, Dale Mullenix, Executive Director of the Urban Ministry Center, stated that Mr. Fox’s “wisdom was critical” when the Center made the decision to expand by purchasing land and constructing a new facility.

**Land use and transportation planning**

Rapid growth also forced Mecklenburg County to confront challenges of land use and transportation. To address these issues, Mr. Fox had to utilize his considerable skill in building partnerships, including a good measure of political savvy. An example of this can be seen in his ability to implement a plan for future annexation in the County. Annexation was always a politically sensitive issue. Mr. Fox worked with the City of Charlotte and the County’s six other municipalities to craft a schedule for annexation based upon pre-approved spheres of influence. This plan insured that future annexation occurred according to an intentional system of planning, whereas it would typically be dictated by unpredictable political currents.

His ability to craft collaborative solutions also served him well as he sought to encourage a regional transportation system. Mr. Fox worked with city, town, state and federal authorities to secure funding for roads, including Charlotte’s second beltway (Interstate-485) and to bring light-rail transit to the region. Further, in what he calls his “most satisfying partnership,” he oversaw the creation of the Metropolitan Transit Commission by working with managers across the County to create an equitable system of managing new revenue from a voter-approved transit sales tax. The tax provided revenue which could be shared in a fair manner by the County and its municipal governments, making it possible for government officials from around the region to come to the table for more holistic solutions to the region’s transportation needs. Illustrating the challenge of this undertaking, Mr. Fox said, “The details of the agreement involved a lot of compromise, but it has survived.”

**Quality of life**

In addition to meeting the basic needs of citizens, Mr. Fox also had a broader vision to provide services that improved the community’s quality of life. In Mecklenburg County, one does not need to look far to find examples of quality of life infrastructure projects he worked on. He helped build several new branch libraries. He initiated a system of greenways that now spans over 175 miles, providing a place for recreation, mitigation of flood water and a natural buffer for the County’s waterways (Mecklenburg County 2011). Additionally, he worked with the Charlotte city manager to build a new Government Center that stands as a symbol of his vision of a functionally consolidated city and county government that could more efficiently meet the increasing demands of a rapidly growing population. His vision and leadership contributed to the growth of a vibrant community.
Fox played a critical role in functionally consolidating several services. He is one of the reasons the City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County are nationally recognized as a model of collaborative governance by the City Mayors Foundation." Mr. Fox orchestrated successful consolidations to achieve an efficient and effective delivery of public services.

Once consolidation of services was approved, the true challenge of functional consolidation began, merging two different organizational cultures and integrating them into one organization. Mr. Fox exercised superior leadership while managing the evolving organizational culture. In a time when change and uncertainty elevated workplace stress, he worked to build employee morale and always maintained an open door policy for his employees to address any concerns. Richard Vinroot, recalled that, “He lifted the morale of county employees and citizens. Everyone knew that, even in change, Mecklenburg County was in good hands with Jerry.”

Functional consolidation

One of Mr. Fox’s most significant accomplishments in managing the growth of Mecklenburg County was to structure and implement the functional consolidation of many county and city services. Prior to Mr. Fox’s arrival, Mecklenburg County had a long history of efforts to consolidate city and county government, many of which failed due in part to mistrust between city and county officials. Mr. Fox fostered an atmosphere of trust and political cooperation that replaced a history of competing interest. Richard Vinroot, former Charlotte Mayor, said that, “Mr. Fox never achieved something at the expense of the City or County. He always came up with a solution that compromised for the City and County. The City never felt that the County achieved something at the expense of the City or vice versa.” Consolidated services included parks and recreation, building standards, elections, tax administration, planning and zoning, police, solid waste disposal, public transit, water and sewer, animal control, community relations, historic landmarks and districts, cable television regulations, and purchasing.

Although political consolidation was never achieved, a majority of the City and County’s services were completely merged during Mr. Fox’s tenure in Mecklenburg County. Professor Suzanne Leland, an expert on local government consolidation, remarked that, “In his twenty year tenure as manager of Mecklenburg County, Jerry
Building Partnerships in the Broader Community

Gerald G. Fox’s leadership extended into the broader community. By building trust and partnerships with community leaders, he was able to effectively employ a collaborative approach to work across sectors to address seemingly intractable community challenges. Stephen Keener, former Mecklenburg County Health Director, described Mr. Fox as, “…statesman-like in his professional relationships with other government entities, businesses, and non-profit organizations. We always had the sense that whatever issue or crisis appeared, Jerry had it covered.” Throughout his career, Mr. Fox promoted public-private partnerships, public-nonprofit partnerships, and community-wide collaborations to enhance economic development, deliver services more efficiently and tackle complex community problems.

“When Jerry Fox was] statesman-like in his professional relationships with other government entities, businesses, and non-profit organizations.”
-Stephen Keener, former Mecklenburg County Health Director

Public-private partnerships

In Mecklenburg County, he formed public-private partnerships to promote urban revitalization and economic development. When he first arrived in Mecklenburg County in 1980, a strong group of the community’s corporate leaders already had a distinct vision for the growth and development of Charlotte, particularly the urban core, and were investing significant corporate dollars into achieving that vision. Under Mr. Fox’s leadership, the County became a respected partner in this development.

When asked about economic development projects, he described a successful partnership to put together the land needed for the construction of a professional football stadium in Charlotte. The City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County owned the land on which the stadium was constructed and leased it to the Carolina Panthers. The stadium itself was constructed entirely with private funds, and generates over $2.5 million per year in property tax revenue. The County was one of the first to employ this method of funding a major stadium construction project, which is now quite popular.

Mr. Fox also promoted more unusual collaborations to promote economic development. In the late 1980s, he initiated a partnership with the German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, the birthplace of the City’s namesake, Queen Charlotte. He traveled to Germany to establish the partnership and participated in an exchange of government leaders. The collaboration supported economic development in the County, home to over fifty German businesses, by creating a working relationship with a local government in Germany and promoting the international image of Mecklenburg County.
Public-nonprofit partnerships

Mr. Fox also leveraged public-nonprofit partnerships to more efficiently deliver health and human services. Wanda Towler noted that, “Paralleling the investment in the physical infrastructure was Jerry’s commitment to improving access to services and the quality of those services. He did not hesitate to let go of county departments and services if the private sector or a not-for-profit could do a better job.” During his tenure, both community change and changes in state legislation served as an impetus to finding creative solutions to providing basic services for public health, poverty, and quality childcare.

Changes in state Medicaid legislation made it cost prohibitive for Mecklenburg County to provide basic health services to many of its citizens. Assistant County Manager Marie Shook proposed a partnership with Carolinas Healthcare Systems to manage health department services for the County. Ms. Shook recalled, “I thought we should take this bold step and talk to the hospital. These are things that other counties didn’t do. Jerry gave me the green light…he was so supportive of me.” Mr. Fox’s trust in his staff and ability to build consensus within the County Commission resulted in a successful contract for more effective and efficient delivery of health services. For many years, this collaboration resulted in a flat county budget for mental health, public health, and indigent care.

This same model of public-nonprofit partnership to privatize county services was used successfully in the delivery of other services as well. In 1985, Mecklenburg County and the United Way initiated a partnership with the nonprofit organization, Crisis Assistance Ministry, to be the central location for the distribution of emergency assistance and basic household items to families in need. The agency continues this role today by disbursing several local, state, and federal emergency funds. Also in the 1980s, another change in state legislation made it costly for Mecklenburg County to continue to directly operate childcare facilities. With recommendations from the United Way, input from Department of Social Services Director Jake Jacobsen, and support from the County Commission, Mr. Fox formed a partnership with the nonprofit Childcare Resources, Inc. to deliver childcare services for the County. Mr. Jacobsen recalled, “Jerry was always willing to try new things that his employees suggested.” Again, Mr. Fox’s ability to think through a variety of solutions, his trust in his staff, and his skill in bringing together a range of community partners led to this successful collaborative solution that is still in place today.

“...commitment to improving access to services....”
-Wanda Towler, Former Assistant County Manager

Community-wide collaboration

After his retirement from Mecklenburg County government, Mr. Fox continued to use his collaborative approach to tackle community problems. In the early 2000s, he co-chaired two community planning processes that brought together a wide range of partners and stakeholders. First, Mr. Fox dedicated the first year of his retirement to chairing the Task Force on Homelessness. The 26-member Task Force consisted of representatives from the faith and business communities, service providers, neighborhood associations, community advocates, the United Way and other nonprofit agencies, the City and County Managers' offices, citizens at large, and homeless individuals. Throughout the planning process, Mr. Fox used his skills in building partnerships to create consensus around controversial issues and ultimately deliver a comprehensive plan to address a seemingly intractable community problem. In 2003, he utilized the same approach when chairing the Task Force on the Status of Seniors Issues.
Over the last decade, Mr. Fox has led numerous other successful collaborations across sectors and the community to help find solutions to important challenges. Many of these, including the School Building Solutions Committee and the Citizens Transit Advisory Group, are an extension of work that he began as Mecklenburg County manager and continue to demonstrate his ability to build partnerships around contentious issues. Even in retirement he remains a widely respected community leader able to effectively apply his skills, commitment to public management, and collaborative approach to help address difficult problems.

These community plans were created through broad collaborative effort, but the implementation of the plans required even greater collaboration. In the years since the plans were created, Mr. Fox has continued to volunteer his time with nonprofit organizations to implement the plans and to create community change around these issues. He serves on the boards of and volunteers his service to several organizations that address the challenges of homelessness and aging. The executive directors with whom he has worked describe his invaluable contributions to their organizations in helping to promote collaboration with government agencies and with other nonprofits to more effectively serve the Charlotte region. Mr. Mullenix of the Urban Ministry Center noted, “He has been able to help find creative solutions, connect our organization to resources, and help open doors in the community.”
Helping the Next Generation of Public Managers Become Public Leaders

Elevating the Value of Public Management

The impressive accomplishments of his career demonstrate Gerald G. Fox’s capabilities as a public leader, but he saw his responsibilities as going beyond his own accomplishments. As he has said, “Success in a management career depends upon nurturing the talents of many other persons and entities.” Therefore as a manager, he made a deliberate effort to prepare both the administrators and institutions of local government for the challenges they would have to confront. He did this by professionalizing the local government workforce, mentoring his staff members, and passing his knowledge and experience on to students of public management.

“Success in a management career depends upon nurturing the talents of many other persons and entities.”
- Jerry Fox

As a manager, he went out of his way to highlight the achievements of his employees to the elected officials. This acknowledgement caused elected officials to take note of high quality employees and make efforts to retain them by keeping salaries competitive. This, in turn raised the prestige and appeal of working for the relevant city or county, thus creating a better, more professional local government. The professionalization of the Mecklenburg County workforce under Mr. Fox has left the County with a nationwide reputation for excellent local government. He cites this professionalization as the most important legacy of his service as Mecklenburg County Manager.

Mentoring

Over the years, Mr. Fox has mentored colleagues, students, nonprofit leaders, and many others. Former staff member, Craig Weinaug, recalls Gerald G. Fox as being an amazing mentor. Mr. Weinaug began his career in municipal government as an intern for Mr. Fox in Wichita Falls. One thing that Mr. Fox taught him, along with other interns, was that timing is everything. By leading by example, Mr. Fox demonstrated to his interns that sometimes a person has to wait for the opportune moment to advocate for change. Prematurely advocating for change before the necessary conditions are in place can stall or prevent progress. Colleagues and peers have highlighted his ability to lead by example as well.

After spending time learning from Mr. Fox, Wichita Falls interns knew that working for the City was just the beginning of their careers. Many of his former interns have prospered as city managers and county administrators in various locales. This is certainly true for Mr. Weinaug, who later became assistant city manager in Wichita Falls and has worked in municipal government for thirty-five years. Many of Mr. Fox’s former interns have revealed that their internship with him inspired them to be a mentor to other young professionals. Mr. Weinaug shares this sentiment and hires interns from the MPA program at Kansas University, just as Mr. Fox hired him during his graduate studies.
Mr. Fox not only has a commitment to mentoring his employees, but he has also worked as a mentor to nonprofit organizations by offering his management expertise to assist the organizations in operating more efficiently. One of the organizations that he assisted in Mecklenburg County is the Community School of the Arts. He was the nonprofit’s interim executive director. Ed Dalrymple, the school’s Chairman of the Board, wanted Mr. Fox because of his previous experience with nonprofits and his reputation of having excellent managerial skills. Not surprisingly, he showed great leadership for the nonprofit, providing stability, prioritizing issues, and respecting the bounds of his decision-making ability within the organization. Mr. Dalrymple credits him with bringing the organization to a level at which it could afford to be meticulous in its search for a full-time executive director.

**Teaching**

Gerald G. Fox’s success as a leader and a mentor spanned to the MPA students at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He co-taught the group capstone course, MPAD 6187, for over 10 years, mentoring students by guiding them through real world projects. These projects required students to work as evaluation teams, applying the skills they developed in their coursework to make important recommendations to public and nonprofit agencies in the region. Under Mr. Fox’s guidance, the student capstone projects were of high quality, producing actionable information. For example, one class proposed that the Town of Huntersville institute a solid waste fee to cover the increasing costs associated with its collection of garbage, recycling, and yard waste. Huntersville adopted the proposal. Another project done for the Town of Cornelius resulted in the creation of a brand to bolster the Town’s economic value and market recognition. It also encouraged the Town to widen its roads and redevelop parts of its downtown area.
The capstone courses led by Mr. Fox gave the students invaluable experience working in groups, networking with local officials, and tackling difficult problems. More than once students have used these experiences to help them secure jobs upon graduation. For example, during the Fall 2009 semester the capstone course produced a report for the Town of Davidson regarding alternative housing options. MPA Alum, Salima Thomas, recounts that while she had no other experience in the area of housing, she was able to draw upon her work on this project to win a position as the Housing Coordinator for Partners Ending Homelessness in Guilford County.

Through this process, Mr. Fox’s legacy helped inspire future public managers, just as his mentors inspired him. His students graduated from UNC Charlotte’s MPA program with invaluable experience and important contacts. Graduates not only applied the skills they learned in their classes, but they gained a healthy appreciation for the demands placed on public administrators and the ability to use well constructed evaluations to produce change.

**Conclusion**

The Master of Public Administration program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte was established in 1976 as the Master of Urban Administration. It is now an accredited MPA program with concentrations in Non-Profit Management, Urban Management and Policy, Arts Administration, Emergency Management, and Public Finance.

Mr. Fox’s breadth of experience does not end with the obvious connection with the program’s Urban Management and Policy concentration. In fact, it spans across each of the program’s concentrations. His success in Emergency Management ranges from organizing the response to tornadoes in Wichita Falls during the late 1950’s to Hurricane Hugo in the 1990’s. Likewise, his reputation for success in budget preparation and institution of zero-based budgeting serve as examples for students seeking careers in Public Finance. Finally, in retirement, his willingness to employ his knowledge and professional skills on behalf of local Arts and Nonprofit organizations is a testament to his commitment to public service.

Ultimately, his career began with earning a Masters in Public Administration, but he did not succeed simply because he held this degree. Clearly, his MPA provided him with invaluable tools. However, he was successful because he went beyond simply mastering the subject. He invested his time in the people around him, building relationships and fostering a culture of teamwork. In this way, he has exemplified the values and aspirations of our MPA program at UNC Charlotte, which is to train public managers and set them along the path to become public leaders and effective community problem-solvers. And for this, we name the program after Gerald G. Fox as a monument to the potential and importance of a life in public service.
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