Dear colleagues,

One of my social work heroes is Harry Specht, who served as dean of the School of Social Welfare at University of California at Berkeley for many years. He described our profession as “the caretakers of the consciousness of the community.” I’m taking that charge to heart, not only for our profession, but also for my new role as dean of UNC School of Social Work. I am a caretaker of our consciousness as an academic community of scholars and researchers and social work professionals. But I am more than a caretaker: I am also a cultivator, working to help our community grow and prosper.

Our School has an amazing history — you’ll read more about our first 100 years in this special printed issue of Contact magazine, which celebrates our centennial. That history is now the foundation for our next 100 years, and my focus is on our shared future.

In advancing our work in social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion, my interest is in leading bold and courageous communication, conversations, and actions. We will effect change using our research, teaching, and our engagement with local, national, and global communities. Whitney Moore Young Jr. reminded us that, as social workers, we “support the strong, give courage to the timid, remind the indifferent, and warn the opposed.” As social work educators, we can do the required work by first deconstructing our historical roles in perpetuating bias and harm and then using those lessons to spark change. We must continue to be repairers of the breach.

As we work toward achieving our research, teaching, and service goals, my interest is in positioning our profession to engage in culture transformation. Culture transformation is dismantling systems of oppression and creating cultures and environments where everyone is seen, is heard, has meaning, feels valued, and contributes to our mission.

We are not short on public sentiment and expressions about the need to change systems, behaviors, practices, human conditions, and social circumstances. Our generation is not different from those of the past who have called for transformational change. The challenge that lies ahead is not our ability to center on what must change; the real work is cultivating the courage and wherewithal to move from rhetoric to action.

So, what does the future need from social work? What will be our greatest accomplishments in our next 100 years? My commitment to you is that I will lead and lean forward, using my abilities and my position to spark change for good. And I invite each of you to join me. Let’s create the future we want.

Thank you for welcoming me into this academic community. I am glad to be here.

Ramona Denby-Brinson, Ph.D.
Dean and Kuralt Distinguished Professor
More than 100 years ago, North Carolina lawmakers faced perhaps one of the most important decisions of their time. Following the end of World War I, the U.S. economy was on the verge of expanding rapidly and, along with it, American wealth. But in the South, the narrative was a bit more complicated.

In North Carolina, more than 75% of residents lived in rural areas, and most were farmers who were facing the nation’s rapid shift from agriculture to manufacturing. For these families, many of whom already lived in homes without running water, electricity or indoor bathrooms and whose children were out of school by the fifth or sixth grade, the struggle to eke out a living was becoming even more challenging.

Understanding that the state’s overall success depended on the well-being of all of its residents, including its poorest, North Carolina’s General Assembly forged a plan in 1919 to establish a statewide system of public welfare. This system would deploy trained welfare workers and superintendents to all 100 counties, with a focus on strengthening services and the livelihoods of children, families and communities across the state.

A year later, this plan would crystallize with the partnership of University of North Carolina President Harry Woodburn Chase. Like state lawmakers, Chase was well aware of the ramifications of ignoring the needs of rural communities. Moreover, Chase believed the University had a moral and civic responsibility to address the social problems of the time. With Chase’s full support and in cooperation with the N.C. Department of Charities and Public Welfare and the American Red Cross, the University launched its School of Public Welfare in 1920.

The mission at the time, according to state historical records, was to educate and develop a clinical workforce of “country social workers,” individuals trained with the hard and soft skills to work in the rural South. Sociologist and Kenan Distinguished Professor Howard W. Odum, who specialized in the social problems of the southern United States, was tapped as the School’s first dean and guided its growth for the first decade.

Over the following 30 years, the School’s name evolved several more times before officially becoming UNC School of Social Work in 1950. Although initially founded as a training program for largely inexperienced public welfare workers, the School gradually grounded its expertise in social work practice across a range of fields, including health, mental health, community practice, administration and policy practice.

The decision to build a research program in the mid to late 1980s solidified the School’s rise to national attention as social work research faculty came to introduce the production of and use of empirical evidence in practice settings. These early researchers helped to transform the School’s curriculum and lay the groundwork for additional partnerships to address some of North Carolina’s most pressing social and economic problems, including violence prevention, substance use, and care for the aging. They also initiated the path forward for a new Ph.D. program that, for the last 30 years, has produced preeminent social work scholars who embrace cutting-edge research design to improve practice and advance social interventions.

The journey to become one of the nation’s best social work schools has, like most historical narratives, included ups and downs. The 1995 completion of the School’s $10 million building certainly deserves mention. After years of bouncing around different spaces on campus, the School moved into its new 75,000-square-foot building, which finally gave the program the long-awaited physical presence and the national clout to attract top-dollar donations and top-notch students and faculty.

Other historic milestones include the appointments of social work professor Hortense McClinton, UNC-Chapel Hill’s first Black faculty member, in 1966; School of Social Work Dean John Turner, UNC-Chapel Hill’s first Black dean, in 1981; Kimberly Strom, the School of Social Work’s first female (interim) dean in 2000; Travis Albritton, the School of Social Work’s first associate dean for diversity, equity and inclusion, in 2003; Mimi Chapman, the School’s first female (interim) dean in 2008; and Donald Graham, the School’s first Black faculty service professor to receive the Edward Kidder Graham Faculty Service Award in 2016 and the first social work professor elected faculty chair in 2020 and Dean Ramona Denby-Brinson, the School of Social Work’s first Black female dean, in 2021.

Still, as former Dean Gary Bowen noted in a message to students, faculty and staff in June 2020, the School has fallen short in realizing its commitment to racial justice and to dismantling structural racism. Even after 100 years of historic growth, professors and students of color continue to remind our School that much more work is needed to identify and address internal legacy systems that have created and maintained patterns of oppression. These systems have prevented faculty, students and staff of color from sharing their voices and having access to resources and opportunities of all kinds. Collective efforts to reshape the School in more equitable ways began in earnest last year and will continue for the foreseeable future.

Ultimately, social workers are driven by a passion and commitment to do good. So, for every accomplishment...
achieved over the last 100 years, there
will no doubt be many more to come,
said Dean Denby-Brinson.

UNC School of Social Work has been
at the heart of advancing the profession
of social work. We have blazed new
trails and, in partnership with many,
we have accomplished so much. What
excites me now is the story that
will be written about the next 100 years.
What will social workers of the future
say about this time? What will be the
meaning and impact of our work? It is
now our time to lead the profession.
We can create the future we want to
see. Let us do so driven by our values,
courage, and conviction.

TEACHING

When the School of Public Welfare at
UNC-Chapel Hill emerged during the
early years of the 20th century, it was
considered the first collegiate school of
its kind in the South and one of only 17
formal social work training programs
across the country. Social workers
from the previous century were largely
untrained and often volunteers who
served individuals and families living in
poverty. But by the 1920s, practitioners
served individuals and families living in
untrained and often volunteers who
considered the first collegiate school of
social work and focused on
educational service for the American
nation’s armed forces. In fact, the need
for Red Cross social workers remained
so great at the time that the charity
offered scholarships of $75 per month
to students who committed to serving
with the organization one year after
completing their training.

Red Cross leaders also advocated for
the academic training of social workers
and for the elevation of the profession.
One of the School’s first professors, J.F.
Steiner, a former national director
of educational service for the American
Red Cross, argued that universities
should be just as responsible for
educating social workers as they
were for educating lawyers, doctors,
engineers, and teachers.

A professor of social technology,
Steiner was among the School’s initial
handful of faculty, which included
members with expertise in sociology,
rural social science, and community
organization. The School, once housed
in the basement of Alumni Hall, also
drew faculty from across campuses,
including those with experience in
economics, psychology, history and
government, and sanitary engineering.

From the beginning, School and
University leaders emphasized pairing
classroom instruction with training in
the field, giving students the chance to
learn hands-on skills in real time. In those early years, students were most likely to work in direct practice and were assigned to public welfare agencies mainly in counties
adjacent to the university. Today, students have the opportunity to
work in public and private agencies
across North Carolina, including
in departments of social services,
community providers of mental
health services, substance
abuse agencies, hospitals, domestic
violence agencies, homeless
shelters, and public
schools. Those interested
in programming, administration,
policy development, and advocacy
are also placed with state and national think
tanks, nonprofits, and other organizations.

Although the School initially
drew students interested in a
helping profession, many of today’s
graduates enter the MSW program
with a wealth of volunteer and practice
experience including global service,
and they are committed to changing
social and political systems from within.

“Many of these students have
enjoyed successful careers in
advertising, project management, and
other corporate solutions,” said
Tina Souders, the director of
the School’s 3-Year MSW Program
in Winston-Salem. “We’ve found these
students to be very driven and focused
on their educational goals.”

Over the years, the MSW curriculum
evolves as well. Early core courses
were organized under five themes: state
and public institutions; the community;
family and the individual; methods
of organization and administration;
and field work. Founding-year classes
familiarized students with a variety of issues
including social movements
and social reform, rural
economics, the
development of community
as a social
phenomenon, and family
well-being. Students
were expected to specialize in one
of the recognized
departments of
social work, such as child
welfare, mental hygiene, industrial
problems, housing, public health, home
economics, or delinquency.

As the School’s enrollment increased
and new faculty were appointed, the
curriculum adapted to respond to
society’s changing and complex times.

For example, as desegregation
slowly spread across the
South, particularly
within public
schools, social work
professor Hortense
McClinton created and
launched a new class on
institutional racism and implications
for human services. Other new courses
followed on marriage and family,
social work and the law, social welfare
policy, citizen participation and
government, substance use
and addictions, mental health, and the
criminal justice system, among others.

In more recent years, courses have
been updated to include content on
welfare reform, the Affordable Care Act,
trauma, immigration, practice in global
settings, critical race and queer
theory, history of oppression, and
environmental justice. Other specialized
areas of study have also been added,
including the Child Welfare Education
Collaborative program, Substance
Use and Addiction Specialist program,
and UNC-PrimeCare, an integrated
healthcare program that trains and
prepares students for practice within
the medical community.

“Our curriculum continues to
expand and evolve to ensure that
our social work graduates are the
most competent and prepared as they can
be,” said Lisa de Saxe Zerden, senior
associate dean for MSW education.

“Students have to be made aware
of policy changes as they happen
and how they impact individuals,
communities, and social work practice.”

A growing need to accommodate
working professionals and parents has
led to more degree options in the MSW
program over the last half century. In
addition to the full-time 2-Year MSW
Program, students have the choice
of applying to a 3-Year MSW Program
(in either Chapel Hill or Winston-Salem)
or an Advanced Standing MSW Program
(either 12 or 20 months).

Moreover, students can pursue dual
degrees in public health, divinity, public
administration, and law.

Perhaps one of the most significant
advances has involved how students
are educated to think about treatment
models. Early class readings taught
students to follow current models
of therapy without question. Today,
students must think critically about
issues, examine the evidence
behind psychodynamic approaches
and consider new and innovative
interventions.

Over the years, students have
challenged the School to strengthen
its teaching around institutionalized
oppression, discrimination, and
racial equity and inclusion. Under
the direction of Associate Dean
Travis Albright, the School’s newly
created Office of Diversity, Equity,
and Inclusion has been working
with faculty, staff, and students since
2018 to create inclusive excellence
within every function of the School,
including curriculum and co-curriculum
development.

Such changes further strengthen
the School’s commitment to the social
work profession. Over the last 100

Images: (Far left) Florence Soltys teaches the course Death and Dying in the summer of 1989. (Middle, top
to bottom) J.F. Steiner, students in the Reading Room in 1978, Marilyn Ghezzi classroom, Michael Lambert
classroom, Tina Souders classroom.

“This program’s balanced curriculum, wise counsel from
its professors, and authentic fellowship with my cohort
gave me the knowledge, skills, and confidence required.
As a technical expert lead at JBS International, I help rural
communities build capacity throughout the entire spectrum
of behavioral health services: prevention, harm reduction,
treatment, and recovery. I continue to draw upon my MSW
training – ever mindful to keep my work person-centered,
community-based, and context-driven – inclusive of the
voices of those whom our rural communities serve.”

— Donald McDonald, MSW ’16
yearns, more than 5,600 students have earned their degrees from UNC School of Social Work. Without a doubt, these students have been prepared to make a difference, said Valerie Arendt, executive director of the North Carolina Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

“The contributions that the UNC School of Social Work has made to our society are immeasurable,” Arendt said. “The School has taught thousands of social workers over the last hundred years to be competent, ethical professionals who provide essential services to their community in North Carolina and throughout the United States.”

RESEARCH

Historically, social work relied largely on research and theory from other professions and disciplines. But this approach began to change in the 1980s and 1990s, when leaders in the profession committed to strengthening the bases of social work practice by developing the capacity to conduct high-quality original research.

Schools of social work across the country responded to this challenge, including at UNC Chapel Hill. The march to the forefront of this effort began under the visionary leadership of Dean John Turner (1981–1992), who began under the direction of Dean John Turner (1981–1992), who began under the direction of Dean John Turner (1981–1992), who

The School’s first distinguished professor, Fraser was instrumental in developing grantwriting support for faculty to help strengthen the School’s research portfolio. He also served as the first director of the School’s Jordan Institute for Families, an initiative funded through a $1 million gift from Michael Jordan, his mother Deloris Jordan, and the Jordan Family. Originally conceived to promote evidence-supported programs across the state and the country, the Jordan Institute continues to connect communities and social work research and policy to advance strengths-based support families across the lifespan.

By the early- to mid-1990s, under the direction of Dean Richard Edwards and with nationally known faculty on board, research and practice initiatives began to flourish, including those focused on issues such as success, violence prevention, child welfare, and aging. At the same time, faculty members were instrumental in founding peer organizations, including the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR), which promoted research scholarship within the profession. SSWR support, UNC-Chapel Hill launched the Journal of the Society for Social Work Research, one of the profession’s leading research journals.

It was a frothy time, with great debates on methodology, challenges. This is all exciting stuff that takes us into new territory, both as a school and as a profession.”

Moreover, students and faculty continue to pursue cutting-edge research that will have a global impact in advancing equity, transforming systems, and improving lives, Chapman added.

“That is a recipe for success and growth,” she said. “I’m excited about what comes next.”

SERVICE

Public service and engagement with North Carolina communities is a core mission of UNC School of Social Work that dates back to its very beginnings. Social work education is inextricably tied to the need to educate and train welfare workers for a growing economically and socially diverse state. Over the last 100 years, our School faculty, students, and staff have produced programs and provided consultations, trainings, evaluations, resources, and research aimed at improving communities from the mountains to the coast.

At the forefront of this effort is the School’s long-standing relationship with public, private, and nonprofit agencies that provide hands-on field education opportunities for MSW students. These internship experiences are integral to a student’s whole education and give them the chance to develop and practice the knowledge and skills they learn in the classroom in real-world situations. In return, these students keep employers informed of innovative education and research practices, and help to fill critical workforce needs. Altogether, students complete 130,000 service hours annually in the field as part of their educational and professional preparation and contribute services valued at more than $1.2 million annually to North Carolina.

“The work that these students provide demonstrates our School’s commitment to investing in our communities and supporting organizations that are assisting some of our state’s most vulnerable residents,” said Rebecca Brigham, assistant dean of field education.

“While the faculty and the coursework certainly helped me learn about social work research and practice, the doctoral program at UNC offered the challenge to develop my leadership skills. I had so many opportunities: helping to found a social work doctoral student organization, writing a successful course development grant, serving on the College’s doctoral program committee, and working with the Center for Teaching Excellence to strengthen education across the university. These early experiences of organizing, development, advocacy, and interdisciplinary collaboration helped position me for a future in academic administration.” — Lori Messinger, dean, College of Social Work, University of Tennessee Knoxville
"I am most proud of the legacy of our School’s faculty and graduates, who understand and value life-changing work and who continue to impact the lives of people at every stage of life. Through teaching, research, and service, our School of Social Work brings positive change to individuals, families, and communities across the world. With such a rich history, I can only imagine what the next 100 years will bring."

— Louise Coggins, chair of the School’s Board of Advisors and a 1980 MSW graduate

For employers, the opportunity to be exposed to new theories of practice from interactions with social work students is essential for the continued learning of agency employees, said Lindsey Arledge, MSW ’94, chief of social work service for the Durham VA Health Care System.

"Everyone benefits from ‘fresh eyes’ and new perspectives, and students most definitely bring that," Arledge said. "They also have a way of highlighting some of the social work values that can get challenged when you work for a bureaucratic agency.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY

Decades before the Americans with Disabilities Act became law, the School was working to protect people with disabilities. For example, in 1963, the Developmental Disabilities Training Institute (DDTI) launched as part of the Jordan Institute for Families to ensure the well-being and inclusion of people with intellectual, developmental, and co-occurring disabilities. Much of the institute’s focus centered on providing training and technical assistance to those serving the state’s intellectual and developmental disability population and to further support the transition of individuals from institutions back into their own communities.

By the late 1970s, the School also began offering trainings and workshops to help intensify the interest of social workers in the Black experience. Assistant professor Audreie Johnson (Johnson, a founding member of the National Association of Black Social Workers, created, organized, and launched a long-running series known as the Black Experience Workshops. These seminars brought together academic, state, and national leaders to participate in critical conversations about racism in America and touched on various topics such as health, economic, and social welfare issues.

School faculty have also played a significant role in meeting the needs of the state’s older adults. Professor Gary Nelson created and launched the Center for Aging Research and Educational Services (CARES) in 1987 to provide education, community engagement, and policy analysis to empower vulnerable adults and their families to experience choice and dignity in their lives. Most recently, CAREs was awarded a $4 million state contract to help increase the state’s availability of affordable and accessible housing and community services for older adults and people with disabilities. The goal is to ensure that people with disabilities have the same access to housing and community living as anyone without a disability.

The School has been just as critical in helping to strengthen programs and services for children and families in the state. For more than three decades, the Family and Children’s Resource Program (FCRP) has worked closely with federal and state agencies to improve interventions for reducing the number of children in foster care and to strengthen services to foster care families. In addition to developing custom training and coaching programs, FCRP staff also evaluate program effectiveness; facilitate discussions involving community organizations, clients, and stakeholders; and partner with the N.C. Division of Social Services to share best practices in child welfare and foster care.

TRAINING ON BEST PRACTICES

In addition, the School of Social Work has a history of meeting the continuing professional development needs of the state’s behavioral health professionals. For the last 30 years, the School has partnered with the North Carolina Area Health Education Program to provide the latest training to the state’s mental health, substance use, and developmental disabilities practitioners. In total, School faculty, adjunct faculty, field instructors, and doctoral students provide more than 450 hours of continuing education programs and research-based training to nearly 4,000 participants annually.

The School’s partnership with the NC AHEC program is such a valuable service to the state because our faculty and continuing education trainers can share their research and expertise with professionals in the field, keeping them up to date on the latest practices and helping to better the lives of the people of North Carolina,” said Sherry Mergner, clinical associate professor and AHEC liaison for the past 25 years.

For the past 17 years, the School has also offered a Clinical Lecture Series to students, professionals, community members, and those caring for individuals and families. These lunchtime trainings focus on social work best practices that are therapeutic, anti-oppressive, intersectional, and centered on self-determination. Thousands have participated in nearly 200 workshops in person, via livestream, or using self-paced options.

Additional training and resources for families with premature infants or children with, or at risk for, developmental disabilities, behavioral disorders, or chronic illnesses have also been added over the years, as well as a free lecture series for field instructors in Winston-Salem.

Over the years, the School has been especially active in strengthening the state’s support services in the behavioral mental health and recovery communities. Through the Behavioral Health Springboard (BHS), the School has trained tens of thousands of the state’s practicing behavioral health professionals, including nearly 4,000 certified peer support specialists — people living with everyday with mental illness or substance abuse disorder who offer support to others who can benefit from their lived experiences. In addition, BHS brings teams of health care, justice, and social services professionals together to address the needs of our communities, such as supportive nursing care for infants born exposed to opioids.

That the School will continue to provide support, education, and training to improve the lives of families in crisis is beyond doubt. However, the future of this work depends on continued innovation and entrepreneurship, added Gary Nelson, the director of the School’s Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Lab. Such a vision promotes partnerships where agencies and clients learn from each other and lean on each other’s expertise, he said. “We remain committed to serving vulnerable and marginalized populations in North Carolina and around the world,” he said. “But the only way we succeed in this mission is by spending time in our communities to better understand individual and family narratives and to address the questions that are important to them. This kind of work, which requires a holistic framework, will be vital in the years to come to developing solutions and driving outcomes that best serve a family’s needs.”


Timeline provides historical highlights

UNC School of Social Work has witnessed significant growth and achievement during its 100+ years as one of the nation’s leading schools of social work. Over the last year, our communications team worked together to produce a timeline that will introduce you to some of the key people, events and accomplishments that have marked turning points in our School’s history. Through each decade, you will see how the story of our School is woven into the extraordinary social history of our nation and world. You can find this timeline on our School’s website at: sww.unc.edu/about/our-foundation/our-centennial/historical-highlights.
D uring its first 60 years, UNC School of Social Work was stretched across campus in several buildings, without a permanent home. In 1980, the School launched its new advancement office, and a transformation began — a new building, scholarships, named professorships, and more — leading to the School’s current position as one of the nation’s top schools of social work.

“The name on the building [Tate-Turner-Kuralt] embodies the transformation,” explained Daniel Lebold, one of the School’s first advancement officers. The School’s home is named in honor of Charlotte businessman John “Jack” Tate Jr., then-Dean John Turner, and journalist Charles Kuralt, three men who played key roles in transforming the School.

Turer led the initiative, establishing the SSW Foundation and hiring Elizabeth Benefield to lead advancement on a half-time basis. The School’s first donation was a $75 gift, Lebold remembered. Later that year, the School received its first $75,000 in funding from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation.

Tate endowed the School’s first professorship, the John A. Tate Distinguished Professorship for Mental Health and Human Development. He was followed by other professional focus, including health, legal practice, and business. As he twisted the cube, he explained how social work collaborated with each profession to improve lives in North Carolina.

At the School of Social Work, McClinton taught casework, human development, and family therapy. After encouragement from her students, she created a class on institutional racism, helping to lead early social work discussions and education on America’s legacy of white supremacy. During her nearly two decades on the faculty, she also provided leadership through her work on the Committee on the Status of Women, Carolina Association of Distinguished Students, and the Chancellor’s Committee on the Status of Minorities and the Disadvantaged.

By Susan White

Q: WHAT DO YOU RECALL ABOUT THE COURSES YOU TAUGHT?

A: I was in the 8th grade, and someone came from the Children’s Bureau and talked to us during an assembly one Friday about social work and I thought, ‘Well, that’s what I want to be!’ My homeroom teacher at the time told me I couldn’t be a social worker because I didn’t have any money. But I told my uncle, who was a physician, about it and he said, ‘You can be one!’ So, I went on to Howard University [in Washington, D.C.] and then to the University of Pennsylvania [where she earned her master’s degree in social work].

Q: WHAT DO YOU RECALL ABOUT THE STUDENTS AT THE TIME?

A: It was just nice working with them. So many of them wanted me to be their supervisor. I loved teaching because of the students. I loved talking to them about how to use the agency that they had to empower other people.

Q: WHAT IS YOUR SECRET TO LONGEVITY?

A: I feel you just do unto others as you would have them do unto you. You treat everybody the same, and you live a good life.
The path ahead of us energizes me.
— Ramona Denby-Brinson

Recognized nationally for her research on culturally adapted child welfare services, Denby-Brinson joins UNC-Chapel Hill with more than 27 years of experience in social work education and 17 years in administration, scholarship, and mentorship. She is also a wife and a mom, with three children (ages 15, 16, and 24). She's a native of Las Vegas, Nev., with nine siblings including a twin brother. She's a social worker who has been licensed since 1989.

Simply put, Denby-Brinson is someone who cares about people and their well-being. When she was offered the deanship, her first thought was, "Can I add value there?"

Students, faculty, and staff are positive that Denby-Brinson will, and they have already adopted "Dean Ramona" as their preferred name for her.

INTENTINAL AND INNOVATIVE

Denby-Brinson began her new responsibilities at a sprinter’s pace, and she hasn’t slowed for a moment. "The path ahead of us energizes me," she says. During her first 100 days at the School, she embarked on a "listening tour" — a mix of in-person meetings, Zoom meetings, and road trips to communities across North Carolina — to learn more about how people perceive the School.

She met with students and faculty in the 3-Year MSW Program at their Winston-Salem site in classrooms at Forsyth County Department of Social Services. She joined Zoom-based "town halls" where students, faculty, and staff shared their concerns about returning to campus after the COVID-19 lockdown. She visited donors in Greensboro, Charlotte, and other cities.

Denby-Brinson planned a three-part retreat, beginning in November 2021, for associate deans, assistant deans, and directors in a commitment to transformational leadership. She also met with current and retired faculty members who have deep understandings of the School’s history, including Iris Carlton-LaNey, Ph.D.

Strengthening the School’s sense of community is important, she explains: "We’ll have to spend time building connections, getting the climate right, and earning trust."

Denby-Brinson has also begun to explore areas of focus in which the School might expand its efforts. One of these areas is online education, a popular trend among MSW programs nationwide.

Although the School has never offered an online degree option, faculty and students relied almost entirely on online classes as the COVID-19 pandemic began. On-campus classes resumed in fall 2021, but after 17 months of online classes, there's more interest in pursuing an online degree option.

Online education is an area in which Denby-Brinson has considerable experience. At Ohio State University (OSU), she was responsible for an asynchronous online degree program that served students from 34 states and three countries, with options for traditional and advanced standing students. As part of that program, students completed field placements at agencies in their home communities.

A PASSION FOR RESEARCH

Denby-Brinson has an impressive record of accomplishments in research, both as an investigator and as an administrator.

Throughout her career, she’s focused on research as a catalyst for action — policy changes, new practices in the field, and curricula that extend the reach of her findings.

She has served as director of social science research and senior resident professional for more than 30 years. Here are a few of her career highlights:

PREPARATION

Ph.D., The Ohio State University (OSU)
BSW, University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV)
LSW and ACSW credentials, with social work experience in Tennessee, Nevada, and Arizona (including roles as medical social worker, guardian case manager, and assessment counselor)

ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP

Associate dean of academic affairs and graduate studies chair, OSU College of Social Work
Associate dean of research, ASU Watts College of Public Service
Director of social science research, UNLV
Director, University of Nevada Las Vegas Center for Urban Partnerships

Full professor at UNLV, ASU, and OSU
Assistant professor at University of Tennessee (UT)
Past president, National Association of Social Workers-Nevada
Treasurer, Society for Social Work Research
Board member, Specialized Alternatives for Families and Youth

RESEARCH AND SCHOLARLY WORK

More than $36 million in research funding
Principal investigator on 16 projects
Lead author or co-author on eight published books
More than 70 published scholarly works
More than 65 conference presentations

HONORS (SELECTED ACCOLADES)

Senator Harry Reid Silver State Research Award
The Ohio State University College of Social Work Hall of Fame
Child Champion—Child Welfare Legislative Award
Child Welfare Advocate of the Year — Court Appointed Special Advocates
Denby-Brinson is keenly aware that individuals, families, and communities are at their best in environments that are nurturing, affirming, healthy, psychologically safe, fair, equitable, collaborative, and growth-producing. During her first 100 days at the School, she spent hours convening her teams to openly and honestly discuss and set in motion plans to enhance organizational strength by investing in the School’s best resource: its people.

"The future requires our profession to lead boldly, collectively, and without compromise." — Ramona Denby-Brinson

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Denby-Brinson expects to bring her collaborative spirit into every aspect of the School, from admissions to community-building to research. "The future requires our profession to lead boldly, collectively, and without compromise," she explains, adding that UNC School of Social Work will continue to lead nationally and globally. "This is the best place to effect change," she said. "Who’s with me?"
Students’ hopes for a changing profession

Compiled by Susan White

AMANDA B. ALSTON, 12-MONTH ADVANCED STANDING MSW PROGRAM

Over the next 100 years, I hope that practitioners in the social work profession become more involved in the political arena and serve as elected officials. Micro and macro social work practitioners are at the forefront of understanding social issues and advocating for individuals, groups, and communities. Social work is the profession best suited to reimagine policy solutions and create laws that improve the human condition and address institutionalized discrimination and injustices within our society, which will ultimately restore human rights and repair communities.

YURIDIANA ALSTON, 3-YEAR CHAPEL HILL MSW PROGRAM

In the next 100 years, I hope to see the social work profession funded to meet client and community needs. I hope that the profession will change, and power will be shifted to the communities that we serve. Dreaming big, social workers would be serving in political roles and providing communities with the resources and tools needed for every person to have a healthy and stable life.

JEREMY FINAZZO, 2-YEAR FULL-TIME MSW PROGRAM

For clinical social workers in behavioral healthcare settings, I hope the profession will see an increase in demand for practitioners who can serve specific populations of in-patient and outpatient clients. I especially hope there will be an increased demand for social workers who serve geriatric, LGBTQ, substance users, or any combination of these communities, especially as the needs of these populations increase as they age.

ROEI SHAUL HILLEL, 2-YEAR FULL-TIME MSW PROGRAM

I’d like to see social work become more professionalized and integrated with psychodynamic psychotherapy. I think social work has the potential to lead revolutionary ideas in the world of psychodynamic psychotherapy with its social justice awareness. And I think that the profession should go in that direction rather than concentrate mostly on evidence-based interventions.

EDITH GALVAN LOPEZ, 12-MONTH ADVANCED STANDING MSW PROGRAM

I hope the field of social work continues to grow in diversity. Our field largely does not reflect the makeup of our client population, and I do believe that as we become more diverse, not only could we serve our clients better, but it could widen the door to more innovative and cultural humility interventions.

RACHEL MAGUIRE, 2-YEAR FULL-TIME MSW PROGRAM

In my ideal world, in 100 years, social workers will become a thing of the past because everyone will be so supported in their work, home, and personal lives that the need for social workers to connect people with resources is simply nonexistent. While I do not think that is possible, I deeply hope that social workers in the future are funded ten times over and have a plethora of resources at their fingertips to help every person with every need.

FANI MWASITI, 2-YEAR FULL-TIME MSW PROGRAM

In the next 100 years of the social work profession, it would be incredible to see an increased in integrated behavioral health practice to enhance well-being for all patients/clients. Additionally, I would like to see more Black people, more races, and people from a greater variety of backgrounds holding higher positions in different fields of social work.

MACKENZIE PHILLIPS, 12-MONTH ADVANCED STANDING MSW PROGRAM

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DARNISHA PULLEY, 2-YEAR FULL-TIME MSW PROGRAM

Over the next 100 years, I hope to see the social work profession at the forefront of decision-making processes, especially for social determinants of health. I hope to see more social work practitioners in political office or on advisory boards ensuring that equity is centered.

ALLISON STERSIC, 20-MONTH ADVANCED STANDING MSW PROGRAM

Over the next 100 years I hope the social work profession will experience a reduced need for our profession. I hope we will see a society that values people’s well-being over profits and GDP. And I hope we see a society that provides free access to health care, mental health care, and wages that enable all people to live dignified lives and pursue their passions and dreams.
School faculty are leading the future of social work research

By Susan White

Over three decades, UNC School of Social Work faculty have conducted research that has been vital to improving policies and practice and strengthening the well-being of individuals, families, and communities through evidence-based research. But what about the future of social work scholarship? How are today’s researchers using new discoveries to advance knowledge and solutions that address some of the most pressing social problems of our time?

For faculty members Gina Chowa, Emily Putnam-Hornstein, and Trenette Clark Goings, the future of social work will involve more global innovation, further examination and use of big data, and research and practices that center racial equity and racial justice. These researchers are innovators of systems and social change.

GLOBAL IMPACT

For all the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic created over the last two years, including limiting the ability of her research team to travel, Gina Chowa, Johnson-Howard-Adair Distinguished Professor, has never been more optimistic about the direction of her research and its growing impact in the international arena.

“What excites me about the future is not only the knowledge that is being produced but that our research outcomes have the potential to guide policy and program development and to strengthen the delivery of services to the marginalized and vulnerable populations we work with.” — Gina Chowa, Johnson-Howard-Adair Distinguished Professor

Most of her attention is focused on helping youth and their families gain economic security and stability, including through the development of holistic and impactful interventions that address youth unemployment and financial exclusion. This work largely targets youth in Sub-Saharan Africa where tens of millions of young people are unemployed. Their barriers to work are complex and can depend largely on access to employment resources, gender, youth skillset, whether youth live in a major metro or rural area, a family’s ability to afford a post-secondary education, and an individual’s social networks, Chowa said.

“Employment is a multidimensional phenomenon that requires an equally multilevel approach,” she explained. “My work focuses on fostering gainful employment for young people through a workforce development lens. We believe that in order for employment to be a tool for economic security and a pathway out of poverty, workforce development programs must be available and accessible to those in great need, including poor and low-skilled youth.”

At the same time, these programs must cater to the needs of the workforce and ensure that youth are trained with the skills that industries and entrepreneurs require, Chowa said. Over the last few years, through current partnerships with community agencies, nongovernment and development organizations, Chowa has helped to develop workforce training programs that provide youth with life, work readiness, entrepreneurial, and technical skills, as well as support services, including job counseling and workplace experience.

Strengthening a family’s economic security is also connected to their ability to save money.

In recent years, Chowa’s research and that of her GSDI team has also focused heavily on financial inclusion and ensuring that hard-to-reach populations, including those with limited incomes, have access to affordable and user-friendly banking services and other financial products. As the School’s associate dean for global engagement, Chowa is equally optimistic about the future of preparing social work students for global practice and rigorous research. She’s encouraged, in part, because of the growing number of international students enrolling at Carolina — nearly 2,200 for the 2022 academic year, an all-time high. Perhaps just as important, more are increasingly aware of our connections as global citizens and recognize that present-day societal challenges and solutions transcend borders, Chowa added.

“Students are interested in seeing how the pandemic has impacted marginalized populations across the world and what solutions we can develop to address the needs,” she said. “Students seem more aware of academic or student global collaborations that would have been impossible before but are now commonplace. Students, I believe, have become more engaged global citizens than before and are eager to engage.”

TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS

Emily Putnam-Hornstein, who joined the School’s faculty in 2020, has built her career around the analysis of public agency data. Such work is well-suited for a profession committed to social, political, and economic change.

“Our School’s mission includes transforming systems to improve lives and advance equity. In my mind, there is no better way to drive system improvements than by studying how they currently operate, and the outcomes they produce through examinations of the data they collect,” said Putnam-Hornstein, John A. Tate Distinguished Professor for Children in Need.

For her scholarship, Putnam-Hornstein uses information gathered by public welfare agencies, including details from child maltreatment reports and findings, to study which children are at a higher risk for future abuse or neglect and which families have more complex service needs. This process involves the use of “machine learning” to develop

“...a workforce development lens. We believe that in order for employment to be a tool for economic security and a pathway out of poverty, workforce development programs must be available and accessible to those in great need, including poor and low-skilled youth.” -- Gina Chowa, Johnson-Howard-Adair Distinguished Professor
“We’re trying to bring science to the risk assessment process through better methods, data, and technology.”

— Emily Putnam-Hornstein, John A. Tate Distinguished Professor for Children in Need

Together, the researchers are working to help agencies better protect children from maltreatment by helping them to identify early those families who may need additional resources and support.

“We ask our child protection system to consider both immediate safety concerns and a child’s future risk of harm,” Putnam-Hornstein explained.

Risk assessment tools currently used by frontline staff have very little predictive accuracy, are time-consuming to complete, and can be very subjective.

However, algorithms can help structure information to provide a more consistent picture of risk and needs, she added. “We’re trying to bring science to the risk assessment process through better methods, data, and technology.”

When child welfare caseworkers receive a call about potential abuse or neglect, there is a broad spectrum to determine if the worker should launch a formal investigation, dismiss the report, or refer the family to community services. These decisions can be based on a review of previous case files, family demographics and history, including a family’s interactions with the child welfare system. However, because agencies collect data differently and given the complexity of the information they may need to consider or have immediate access to, the decision to intervene is often imperfect, Putnam-Hornstein said.

What is clear is that historically, more than one-third of children in the United States are subject to an investigation for child abuse or neglect at some point during childhood. Additionally, Black families and children continue to be overrepresented in maltreatment investigations and foster care placements. There is little doubt that change and reform is needed, Putnam-Hornstein said.

“I think that one-third number reflects that our system has grown into something that it was never really designed to be,” she added. “We are flooding the system with calls that must be screened as only some should be investigated, but we have failed to equip social workers with the tools needed to do that work.”

Still, some groups have been reluctant to view predictive risk modeling as a solution to a more equitable system. These skepticism worry about the potential of a computer algorithm using agency data to perpetuate stereotypes and disparities — that the model would be used to predict, for example, who enters foster care.

Some of these concerns have focused on screening tools that Putnam-Hornstein and Vaithianathan co-designed for Allegheny County, Pa. The tool, which has been in use since 2016, was created to help strengthen the process for screening maltreatment reports received through the agency’s hotline. An independent evaluation from Stanford University has shown that the screening tool helps workers better identify high risk cases and refer families with a lower risk of maltreatment to community services.

Putnam-Hornstein and Vaithianathan see opportunities for using algorithms to improve the consistency of decisions and reduce human errors. The researchers currently work on a pilot project in Los Angeles, Calif., where among other efforts, they are using a predictive risk model to better understand why some Black families were screened in for an investigation despite a low overall risk.

That predictive risk modeling could be used to prevent child maltreatment or potentially to advance racial equity suggests that the use of algorithms shouldn’t be judged as inherently bad or good, Putnam-Hornstein added. This approach just needs to be further evaluated. Where that big data is used is ethically to address social challenges and inform policy.

“This is why we need social work practitioners at the table to help think through these tools can be built and implemented to support better practice,” she said.

THE ROOT OF DISPARITIES

As a young child growing up in rural northern North Carolina, Trenette Clark Goings saw firsthand the consequences of substance misuse within her community. She also saw how Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) with limited incomes struggled for health care, food, housing, and safe neighborhoods.

“We are interconnected,” she said. “I am hopeful that future social work researchers and practitioners have a moral and ethical responsibility to challenge society’s historical assumptions about Black men and women, and youth, she said. “We must destigmatize Black youth, and we must normalize the belief that Black youth are just— you know, Goings said. “In fact, per the NASW code of ethics, future social work researchers, practitioners, and educators have a responsibility to be antiracist in public and in private, when popular and unpopular.”

“Anti-Black racism, alone, costs the U.S. $16 trillion per year. In this way, inequities impact all of us financially. Also, racism begets racism. Racism policies ultimately negatively impact all BIPOC, which leads to a greater number of people being exposed to racism and its negative impact, which includes stigmatized care, inequities in income and net worth, criminal justice involvement, substance misuse, illnesses, and death.”

For nearly 15 years, Goings and her research team have used federal grants to address these problems. Specifically, they have developed studies with a focus on substance use among biracial adolescents and helping agencies better think through how these tools can be built and implemented to support better practice. “This is why we need social work practitioners at the table to help think through these tools can be built and implemented to support better practice,” she said.

Goings examines these issues because ultimately, such injustices affect everyone, she said.

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A playground near Lumberton, N.C., a young woman studied the well-used equipment — standard-issue swings and climbing structures. She raised a camera to her eye, framed the image, and snapped a photograph.

For anyone else, this is simply a photograph of a playground. But for this woman, the photograph is a reminder that her community doesn’t have enough resources to enrich the life of her child, who has a disability and has disabilities — a list that mirrors the needs of many rural, lower-income counties in North Carolina.

In February 2021, the MI-PHOTOS mothers shared their photos and their ideas during an open forum for community leaders in Robeson County. CAB decided to present the forum as an online presentation to prevent any additional delays, as the forum had been originally scheduled for May 2020 but was postponed due to COVID-19 restrictions on in-person events.

“We’ve got some very dedicated moms who’ve been really active in this project,” Bledsoe said. “This is their work, too.”

KEY FINDINGS
Three themes emerged during the project, Bledsoe said.

First, the mothers needed — and wanted — peer support, including a formal space where they could come together to share information about community resources and their own experiences.

“They turned the project into an informal social support group,” Bledsoe said. “They had a lot to offer. They’re very resourceful.”

Second, some women needed direct support in the form of confidential, individual, therapeutic services.

“They’ve got some very dedicated moms, the generosity of spirit they had — they really come together to support one another with knowledge, time, whatever,” Bledsoe said. “They want a safe and healthy place for their children to grow as well as themselves.”

The programs that are there now are really helpful to these moms, but there’s a real gap when they age out,” Bledsoe said. For example, services from Healthy Start, the federal government’s signature program to prevent infant mortality, and when the child is 18 months old.

Third, policies and services that support families are vital to the well-being of children and their parents. This can include accessible health and child care and family leave, Bledsoe said.

The project also revealed a common characteristic: These mothers living in rural lower-income communities have existing strengths that enable them to face daily challenges with determination.

“What stands out to me is the resilience of these moms, the generosity of spirit they had — they really come together to support one another with knowledge, time, whatever,” Bledsoe said. “They want a safe and healthy place for their children to grow as well as themselves.”

Resilience in Robeson
By Karen Kornegay

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PEER SUPPORT FOR MOTHERS

The need for peer support is echoed by Sharnice Marshall, one of the Robeson County mothers who served on the MI-PHOTOS Community Advisory Board.

“[There are things] you can’t tell your parents, but you could tell other moms who are going through what you’re going through,” Marshall said. “It helped me more than I expected.”

Many of the young mothers share the same struggles, from managing a household with young children to finding transportation for work, school, and appointments.

For example, Marshall said, “Every day, I hang [loads of laundry] up around the house.” She has a toddler and a baby, and she said it’s hard to manage the day-to-day needs of young mothers and their families.

“When my first child was born, Marshall lived in Fairmont, about 10 miles south of Lumberton, where many county agencies and health care services are located. There weren’t many options for public transportation. Robeson County offers SEATS (South East Area Transit System), a daytime transit service, for $2 per passenger with advance reservations required. The Healthy Start program provided transportation to medical appointments, but that service was halted by COVID-19 restrictions.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected Marshall’s ability to meet with other mothers during CAB meetings, too. She missed the interaction: “I would really love to see everyone face-to-face.”

“It’s a safe space where you can come together with peers and be open and honest.” — Brittany Gordon

ADVOCACY AND TOGETHERNESS

As a health educator with Healthy Start, J. Anice Oxendine helps connect parents with services they may need, such as vocational rehabilitation, housing resources, legal services, and more. She has a special interest in families with children who have disabilities, helping them identify the services they may need and develop plans for their children to continue through school.

Oxendine described the MI-PHOTOS project as an opportunity for participating mothers to become effective advocates for themselves and their families. She said she was surprised by some descriptions the mothers shared about why the photographs were important to them. However, as they explained why they took those photographs, the mothers practiced advocating their ideas.

“You’ve got to be an advocate for your family and for yourself,” Oxendine said. “It’s a good thing to not be afraid to ask questions — don’t be afraid to investigate a day care center before you take a child there.”

Brittany Gordon, a case manager with Healthy Start, has lived in Robeson County her entire life. Still, she was surprised by what she learned as the mothers shared their photographs and stories.

“The project was eye-opening,” Gordon said. “We’re in this [as social workers] every day, but [it’s different] when you see something from someone else’s perspective.”

Gordon added that she was impressed by the way the mothers interacted.

“One of the things I observed was the togetherness they had when they are together,” Gordon said. “It was a relief for them. It’s a safe space when you can come together with peers and be open and honest.

“I pray for us to be more resilient, but I don’t want the resiliency to cover up the trauma,” she added.

COMMITTING TO ROBESON

Since 2012, Bledsoe has been building relationships in Robeson County with colleagues including Jada Brooks, with whom she re-connected at a Healthy Start conference. Community leaders in Robeson County had become skeptical of researchers who came to the county, collected data, and left without having any real impact on the county challenges. Bledsoe was determined to create a different legacy for this research.

“I see this as a community I hope to partner with for the rest of my career.” — Sarah E. “Betsy” Bledsoe

LeMasters and Bledsoe began working together in 2017. With the guidance of Brooks, Pevia, and others in and from Robeson County, they began to build what they call “lasting and equitable partnerships.”

“If you’re going to come work in this county, you need to be committed,” Bledsoe said. “I started these relationships about 10 years ago — I see this as a community I hope to be partnered with for the rest of my career.”

Robeson County is one of the largest counties in North Carolina, with dedicated service providers, spiritual communities, and strong ties among residents. This rural county is also one of the most racially diverse counties in the South, with its population divided almost equally between American Indian, Black, and white residents. The Latino population is slowly growing, and the county’s demographics are beginning to shift to reflect that.

In addition to its strengths, Robeson County has challenges, with many linked to rurality, families surviving low incomes, and historical trauma. This includes one of the highest infant mortality rates in the state and highly prevalent adverse birth outcomes. For example, 11.5% of the children born in Robeson County have low birth weights, compared to 8.9% across North Carolina.

Families faced new challenges when Robeson County experienced severe flooding during Hurricane Matthew in 2016 and, before the county had fully recovered, during Hurricane Florence in 2018. Three years later, some families are still living in homes that were damaged and have not yet been repaired. Some businesses have closed, leaving vacant buildings and limited employment prospects.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Community partnerships are a key to recovery and require high levels of dedication.

“That’s the approach Robeson Health Care Corporation (RHCC) and Healthy Start CORPS have taken to reduce infant mortality and help families to become healthier. RHCC was founded in 1985 to provide a range of health care services to Robeson County residents. Healthy Start CORPS has been an initiative of the University of North Carolina Pembroke for nearly two decades, focusing on perinatal health.

In 2014, each organization received $500,000 separately in funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Maternal and Child Health Bureau. They decided to join forces as the mothers,” Oxendine added.

“Everyone is participatory, too. CAB members received certificates and gift cards in recognition of the award.

Additional funding from UNC School of Social Work, the Thorp Faculty Engaged Scholars Program, and the Carolina Women’s Center will contribute toward future partnership activities.

“[It’s about bringing resources to the community],” said Brooks.

The funds will help support interviews and additional data collection as part of the Community Voices project, as well as developing interventions (such as support groups) to address the needs identified in MI-PHOTOS.

How can we continue this work?
Associate professor David Ansong was appointed by Governor Roy Cooper to serve on North Carolina’s Permanency Innovation Initiative Oversight Committee. Created in 2013, the committee is charged with developing initiatives for foster care youth transitioning to adulthood in North Carolina.

Professor Gina Chow received the Leadership in Social Development Award during the Virtual International Consortium for Development (ICSD) 22nd Biennial Conference. The award recognizes her efforts to advance the field of global social development.

Annamae Giles was promoted to clinical assistant professor. Giles, who has been with the School’s 3-Year MSW Winston-Salem Program since 2014, has spent her career in both macro and direct practice in the areas of healthcare, end of life, substance use prevention, and aging.

Rachel W. Goode was reappointed as assistant professor. Goode’s research interests include developing, implementing, and evaluating interventions to address racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in obesity and eating disorders. Goode was also recently selected for the Thorp Faculty Engaged Scholars Program.

Teresa Kidd, an accounting tech for UNC School of Social Work since 2008, retired in September. Previously, Kidd worked with UNC School of Medicine. Research assistant professor Brianna M. Lombardi was recently named deputy director for the Carolina Health Workforce Research Center at the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research. Lombardi, Ph.D., also holds an appointment as an assistant professor with UNC Family Medicine. Adjunct faculty member Allison DeMarra was invited to serve a two-year appointment as a faculty affiliate with the UNC Program for Public Discourse.

Ph.D. student Claire McHillan was awarded a one-year $20,000 grant from the Center for Innovation in Child Maltreatment Policy, Research and Training at Washington University for the study “Assessing the utility of a risk-stratification model to increase equitable service connection.” Professor Emily Putnam-Hornstein is co-principal investigator on the project. The proposal was one of three projects to receive a pilot grant.

Cindy Fraga Rizo was named the John A. Tate Early Career Scholar for Children in Need and promoted to associate professor. The Tate professorship recognizes a faculty member’s high level of productivity in teaching, publishing, research, and service in support of children, youth, and families as well as overall contributions to the School of Social Work Community.

Robin Sansing was appointed as UNC School of Social Work’s director of wellness. In the newly created position, Sansing reports to the dean and provides vision, direction, and strategic leadership for addressing the School’s community wellness. As part of her responsibility, Sansing will work to create and sustain a culture of wellness for students, staff, and faculty by assessing wellness needs, ensuring programming is provided, and measuring wellness outcomes.

Tauchiana Williams, director of the School’s 12-Month Advanced Standing MSW Program and a field education advisor, was accepted for admission to the 2021 BRIDGES Academic Leadership for Women program. BRIDGES is an inclusive professional development program for women in higher education who seek to gain or strengthen their leadership capabilities. Williams will join 35 women from varied higher education institutions across North Carolina to comprise this year’s class.

Three Master of Social Work students at UNC School of Social Work have been chosen as the first recipients of the Vera Tayeh Innovation and Impact Award. Azleena Azhar, Naana Ewool, and Juliana Wilson will each develop a unique field placement around an innovative project with the potential of improving the lives of individuals, families, and communities. The goal? To think big, take risks, and be bold in challenging both oneself and the status quo.

The students will work with faculty, field education supervisors, clients, and community stakeholders to help design interventions that reflect innovation and scholarly discovery in social work. Each will receive a $10,000 award to support their projects.

MEET THE RECIPIENTS

Azleena Azhar has more than 15 years of experience in community service and has served Triangle refugees through World Relief Durham and as a chaplain intern for Duke Religious Life. She earned a graduate certificate in Islamic chaplaincy from Hartford Seminary and has continued her clinical pastoral education at Duke Hospital, where she serves on the pastoral services advisory committee. Azhar is the founder of Hope Sisters, a safe and nonjudgmental support group for Muslim women, and is a co-facilitator of SuperMoms, a support group for mothers of children with special needs.

Naana Ewool is a first-generation American-born Ghanaian, a queer Black woman who is committed to Black liberation globally. She is pursuing her MSW with a concentration in Community, Management, and Policy Practice. Ewool is interested in applying social work skills to radical community work, focusing on community care, healing justice, and creating alternatives to policing through transformative justice.

Juliana Wilson spent 19 years in Indonesia, studying dance and gender with a Fulbright Award and later working on innovative international development programs to build rural infrastructure and improve maternal and child health. In North Carolina, she served at a crisis center for survivors of interpersonal violence and began working in tobacco cessation through her first-year field work as a MSW student.

ABOUT THE AWARD

The Vera Tayeh Innovation and Impact Award was founded by Vera Tayeh (MSW ’87), who remembered her experiences as an intern in Lebanon, where she was born. Tayeh enjoyed both creativity and responsibility in developing afterschool programs for teenagers during her internship, and she wanted current MSW students at the School to have similar opportunities.

Tayeh established the award with a $100,000 gift to the School to develop incentives for student innovation. A member of the School’s advisory board, Tayeh has worked in child welfare with Wake County Human Services for more than 20 years.

Tanya Jisa, community education coordinator for the School’s Social Innovation & Entrepreneurship Lab, is the School’s point of contact for the Tayeh Award and provides assistance to the students in developing their projects. She can be reached at ss program. She can be reached at tayeh@unc.edu or via the Vera Tayeh Innovation and Impact Award website at ssw.unc.edu/tayeh-award.

To learn more about the Tayeh Award, visit its web page: ssw.unc.edu/tayeh-award.
Happy New Year to our UNC School of Social Work alumni — I have the great honor to serve as the newly elected president of your Alumni Council. Our council, which has a rich history of contributions to SSW, has been most recently led by Kristen Register Lakis. I am grateful for her leadership and service during what can only be described as a challenging couple of years. Her hard work and dedication have not gone unnoticed, and I know I have big shoes to fill!

A little bit about myself — I graduated from UNC School of Social Work’s Advanced Standing MSW program in 2014, after earning my bachelor’s degree from Auburn University and serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala (2011-2013). One of my favorite things about being a student at UNC (in addition to basketball) was the opportunity to put my education directly into practice by volunteering with the UNC Refugee Mental Health and Wellness Initiative and with the Student Health Action Coalition (BHAC). These experiences not only prepared me to be a better social worker but also equipped me with skills I use in my current role as a Research Health Science Specialist at the Durham VA Medical Center.

When I think about my time at SSW — the professors who encouraged me, the classmates who shared my passion for social justice, the field supervisors who mentored me — I am really grateful for all of the support that I received both in the classroom and in the field. The relationships I built were a solid foundation for my career in North Carolina and beyond.

That’s one reason that I joined the Alumni Council — to give back to the institution that kicked-started my career. There are many other reasons, including the chance to network with social work colleagues, a way to stay in touch with the School and help influence the future of social work education, and an opportunity to keep my professional skills fresh.

As I think about the future of our School and the alumni council, I can’t help but reflect on SSW’s 100-year history, which we are celebrating now. Our School has a long-standing tradition of excellence in our field, and I am so proud of that. Many people work to keep SSW at its best, including our alumni who play an integral role in maintaining SSW’s standing among the top schools in the country.

Today, it’s more important than ever to have a strong Alumni Council supporting the School in every way possible. We advise the administration on educational programs, we help mentor students, we support the School’s development activities, and so much more. We need YOU to help with our work, and I invite each of you to join me and take an active role in the Alumni Council.

Here’s to our next 100 years!

Caitlin Bearden Kappler MSW ’14

Letter from the alumni president

“Our School has a long-standing tradition of excellence in our field, and I am so proud of that.”

— Caitlin Bearden Kappler

Alumni news

1960s

Louise Moore Bryan (MSW ’62) died on July 20. She spent much of her career in Raleigh, working as a marriage counselor and volunteering as a Guardian Ad Litem, among other roles in community service.

1970s

MaryAnn Black (MSW ’70) was awarded posthumously the University Medal, Duke University’s highest honor for transformational service. Before her death in 2020, Black had served in the N.C. House of Representatives and as an associate vice president for community relations with Duke University Health System, among other leadership roles.

1980s

Gary Bailey (MSW ’84) received his Ph.D. in Leadership Studies in May 2021 from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. His dissertation title was “The Association of Emotional Intelligence to Transformational Leadership to Job Satisfaction of Social Work Leaders.”

1990s

Basil Gooden (Ph.D. ’97) was recently named director of state operations for rural development with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Gooden has previously held roles as the chief deputy director of the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development and as an extension specialist in Community Vitality at Virginia Tech, among other roles.

Scott Janssen (MSW ’93) was recently interviewed for the End of Life University podcast about near death experiences and after death communication in hospice work. Janssen has been a hospice clinical worker for almost 30 years. Janssen was also quoted in the CNN article, “They lost their loved ones to Covid. Then they heard from them again.”

2000s

Erin Barger (MSW ’03) was named CEO of the Food Bank of Northeast Georgia.

Ryan Estes (MSW ’09) was recently elected treasurer of the Board of Directors for the National Association of Social Workers. Estes is the treatment operations director of Coastal Horizons Center, Inc. in Wilmington, N.C.

Angela Oxendine Kahn (MSW ’03) received the Civilian of the Year Award for 2020 from the Fort Bragg Soldier Recovery Unit at Fort Bragg, N.C. She also recently received a Military Coin for...
Mia Ives-Rublee (MSW ’09), (lower left) director of the Disability Justice Initiative at the Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C., recently joined other leaders to meet with Vice President Kamala Harris to discuss issues and policies related to disabilities, race and the LGBTQ community.

2010s

Sarah Dababnah (MSW ’10, Ph.D. ’14) recently earned a prestigious Fulbright U.S. Scholar Award and will travel to Egypt to study disparities among people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are often treated differently from others. Dababnah is an associate professor at the University of Maryland School of Social Work.

Benjamin Rosado (MSW/MPH ’18) is a senior training manager at the Boston Public Health Commission in Boston, Mass.

Tricia Smar (MSW ’10) gave birth to her first child, Eliana, with her husband Brent Darden on July 2, 2021. She and Brent wed in a small backyard ceremony last year after COVID forced them to cancel their large ceremony.

Aaron M. Thompson (Ph.D. ’12) was promoted to professor and director at University of Missouri-Columbia School of Social Work.

Rayhaan Adams (MSW ’13) was recently named director of Population Health Clinical Services for UNC Faculty Physicians within UNC Family Medicine. Previously, he served as case manager and as senior lead for Population Health Clinical Services. His new role will include guiding development of related services in Internal Medicine and Geriatrics.

Yaliza Ramos (MSW ’14) was named director of the UNC Campus Y. Previously, Ramos served as interim director for 18 months.

Nora Spencer (MSW ’17) was named one of Triangle United Way’s “10 to Watch” leaders of diverse nonprofits.
Seaside reflections on the deanship

By Gary Bowen, Ph.D.
Kenan Distinguished Professor

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oy! Since stepping down as de

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2019–2021 Strategic Plan, which

stay in the photo I that Dana

First, although I enjoy fishing, I

referred to this focus as closing the

Second, both fishing and being dean

Third, attention to context is
critical in both fishing and serving

I sought to ... keep the

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low tides. As dean, I had
to remain situationally aware at
times, including maintaining
awareness of the opportunities and
the challenges emerging at the
national, state, and university levels,
as well as internal dynamics playing
out at the School at any particular
point. These forces frame and shape
priorities at the School level and
influence what can and cannot be
accomplished at a given time. I was
particularly proud of the School’s
ability to successfully pivot in March
2020 in response to the COVID
pandemic.

Last, both fishing and being dean
involve assuming responsibility
for those around you. I typically
fish from my boat rather than the
shore or a pier. Consequently,
I am responsible for ensuring
the safety of all lives on board,
including having life jackets,
safety equipment, and a plan of
action in case of an emergency or a
threatening situation. President
Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “A
smooth sea never made a skilled
sailor;” and whether the captain of
the boat or the dean of the School,
the job carries great responsibility
for ensuring safe passage through
fair weather and storms. As dean,
I took my leadership responsibility
very seriously to ensure the safety
and promote the well-being of
individuals, families, and
students. I believe the School
achieved much and evolved in
many ways through the leadership
of Dr. Ramona Denby-Brinson,
collapsed during my tenure, and
remains strong and relevant.

Although many duties and activities
involve assuming responsibility
at the School at any particular
time, including maintaining
situationally aware at
high and low tides. As dean, I had
reflected on the question, the more I
asked how being dean and fishing
are similar. At first, I just laughed
at the comparison, but the more I
reflected on the question, the more
parallels I discovered. As part of my
effort to integrate my experiences
as dean over the last five years,
as well as to have a little fun in
responding to the request from the
editorial staff of Contact to share
some “lessons learned” from my
deanship, I would like to mention
just a few of these similarities.

“WHAT DO ‘FISHING’ AND ‘BEING
DEAN’ HAVE IN COMMON?”

I sought to ... keep the
School’s focus on impact,
making a difference for
individuals, families, and
communities.”

— Gary Bowen

WHAT DO “FISHING” AND “BEING
DEAN” HAVE IN COMMON?

So, what’s up with the “Ahoy”? Those
who know me well also know that I
love the ocean and fishing — passions
inherited from my father. Working
from the beach has given me the
opportunity to do more fishing than
typically possible, especially in the
fall (the best time to catch fish). While
pursuing these passions, I’ve enjoyed

First, although I enjoy fishing, I like
fish better. Fishing is a process, whereas catching is
an outcome. Being dean is similar. Although
many duties and activities are associated with being dean, I
sought to work from an outcome perspective to keep the School’s
focus on impact — making a difference for individuals, families,
and communities in North Carolina and beyond through teaching,
research, and engagement.

Second, both fishing and being dean
require a strategy. With fishing, you have to know what
you are fishing for — your target determines the fishing strategy,
such as the location and the type of
rod, lures, and bait. As I look back
at my years as dean, one of the
School’s greatest accomplishments
from my perspective was the

contact. Having such an experienced
transition, and we have remained in
contact. Having such an experienced
and capable successor has eased my
transition from the deanship. I greatly
appreciated having time to
prepare for teaching in the spring and
to re-initiate my research program.

Now, I have the opportunity to
pursue these passions, I’ve enjoyed

Let me say how pleased I am with the
selection of Dr. Ramona Denby-Brinson
to assume the deanship. I greatly
enjoyed working with her in the first
half of August to facilitate a smooth
transition, and we have remained in
contact. Having such an experienced
and capable successor has eased my
transition from the deanship. The
School is in very competent hands, and
its future is bright.

I appreciate the opportunity to
take a lighter perspective in writing
these reflections. Serving as dean of UNC School of Social Work was
the greatest honor and privilege of
my life. Please know how much I value and appreciate the
many contributions of our senior
administrative team, faculty, staff,
students, alumni, and our incredible
Board of Advisors during my time as
dean. Thank you.

First, although I enjoy fishing, I like
fish better. Fishing is a process, whereas catching is
an outcome. Being dean is similar. Although
many duties and activities are associated with being dean, I
sought to work from an outcome perspective to keep the School’s
focus on impact — making a difference for individuals, families,
and communities in North Carolina and beyond through teaching,
research, and engagement. I
referred to this focus as closing the
“know-do” gap and, in this
context, I frequently mentioned
the importance of four R’s: Rigor,
Relevance, Relationships, and
Resolve.

Still, both fishing and being dean
involve assuming responsibility
for those around you. I typically
fish from my boat rather than the
shore or a pier. Consequently,
I am responsible for ensuring
the safety of all lives on board,
including having life jackets,
safety equipment, and a plan of
action in case of an emergency or a
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Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “A
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for ensuring safe passage through
fair weather and storms. As dean,
I took my leadership responsibility
very seriously to ensure the safety
and promote the well-being of
individuals, families, and
students. In this context, I was particularly proud of

SSW navigates COVID-19

By Karen Kornegay

Nearly two years ago, UNC School of Social Work’s plans to celebrate its centennial anniversary came to an abrupt halt in March 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic spread further around the world.

School leaders, faculty and staff quickly set aside all other plans, pivoted to online instruction and worked to develop innovative resources to serve social work colleagues in communities throughout the state.

Our alumni reported their own stories of adjustment. Those working in direct practice saw some social problems quickly escalate in scale — eating disorders, substance use, interpersonal violence, gaming addictions, mental health disorders, and more. In response, our researchers designed projects to explore the impact of the pandemic on individuals, families, and communities.

Our continuing education faculty also jumped in to assist the state. In particular, our Family and Children’s Resource Program, in partnership with N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, redesigned eight classroom courses for online delivery within just two weeks. These courses — child welfare workforce training required by state legislation — served 1,000 department of social services employees across North Carolina.

Throughout these challenges, we persevered as an academic community. Students and faculty navigated the new Zoom environment for classes. The School recruited a strong cohort of students for our MSW and Ph.D. programs. And, our researchers published even more articles and celebrated a record-breaking year of funded research.

Since returning to campus in August 2021, our community has faced new challenges, including some instances of quarantine and illness on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus, and increasing reports of mental health concerns.

School leaders again jumped into action with online “town hall” meetings for students, faculty, and staff to share their concerns and ideas for coping with the ongoing pandemic. Professors practiced flexibility to create the best possible learning environment for their students, and our wellness committee provided support through a weekly email, meditation moments, and other activities.

Moreover, our School led campus efforts to provide more mental health services, including the expansion of Mental Health First Aid programming, led by our Behavioral Health Springboard initiative. As the pandemic continues, so will our work.

Although this wasn’t the centennial celebration expected, the experience allowed us to demonstrate lessons learned over the past 100 years — how to adapt to change with resilience, to forge a path with creativity and leadership and to always care for those we serve.