



Meg Myers Morgan was the first full-time faculty member for OU-Tulsa's MPA program and is credited with restructuring the curriculum to reflect its student body and community.

Aaron Anderson

NONPROFIT KNOW-HOW

BY GINNIE GRAHAM

OU-Tulsa has seen enrollment jump in a new MPA program that thrives on student input in areas from nonprofits to public policy.

The class trickles in on a Tuesday evening, bringing with them stories from places like a police station, an elementary classroom, a grant-giving foundation and social service nonprofits.

Many still in work clothes, they quickly finish fast-food dinners and saying their hellos before Meg Myers Morgan, the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa Master of Public Administration program coordinator, starts an ethics lecture prompted by a recent book from former FBI director James Comey.

Pretty soon, the students take over, asking questions of each other and using their experiences to tease out answers on leadership, conflict and relationships.

“We will sit and debate for three hours,” Morgan says. “You don’t get to do that in everyday life, civilly and respectfully. They can’t have cellphones. They can’t have laptops. It sounds so old-school, but they sit in this room and talk to each other.

“It’s just magic.”

This magic has reinvigorated the Master of Public Administration program on the OU-Tulsa campus into a thriving, sought-after graduate degree.

Just five years ago, the Tulsa-based MPA program had a dwindling enrollment of about 20 students. Then, Morgan was hired as its first full-time faculty and restructured the curriculum to reflect its student body and community.

These transformational changes struck a chord with students. Through word-of-mouth, the program has reached a top enrollment of about 60 with plans for expansion to serve more than 100.

“I don’t think we’ve done any recruiting efforts except for when I meet with potential students,” Morgan says. “They are mostly coming to me from other students. You get great students from other great students.”

The Tulsa MPA program traditionally followed curriculum developed for full-time students coming directly from undergraduate programs. But that approach had a hard time resonating with the more non-traditional Tulsa students, who are in their early to mid-career, ages 25 to 50. Classes are held at night, for eight hours on Saturday and half a day on Sunday.

“There is so much peer-to-peer learning. One of the

best parts of the program is that they can take that back to their jobs on Monday and start working on it the same day,” Morgan says.

More hands-on experience and group exercises were added, and Morgan developed relationships among Tulsa nonprofits, researchers and foundations.

“In teaching adults, they need a voice and to be a part of the classroom. They need to know their experiences and knowledge are sometimes greater than mine,” Morgan says. “When I started, I asked students what they wanted—the types of classes and skills they wanted to build. That became the DNA of the program.”

The curriculum allows for evolution. At the request of students, a presidency course was added in the semester of the 2016 election, and later a Women in Politics class was offered.

“There is a core program, but there is an ability to be nimble. That is what OU has let me do,” Morgan says.

One popular class teaches students how to become program evaluators.

“It relates to everybody in the room,” Morgan says. “They can walk away with an entire new skill set. It’s the one I consistently have people saying they took it, implemented it on their jobs and then got a raise or promotion.”

A new section of nonprofit-related courses was developed. Tulsa often has an intersection of philanthropy and government in its public projects, such as in the Gathering Place and early childhood programs. This led to the creation of a graduate certificate in nonprofit management, the only one available in Oklahoma.

Heather Palacios, executive director of the Coretz Family Foundation, enrolled after seeing how a \$25,000 grant was administered by the MPA program. The Coretz family provided the gift for a grant-giving simulation project.

Students evaluated nonprofits and charitable programs for distribution of the funds. The work impressed Palacios.

“In the process of meeting with a lot of nonprofits through my work, I see how things could be different or better,” Palacios says. “They are all doing great work and are well-intentioned, but there



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TOP – Adult students “need to know their experiences and knowledge are sometimes greater than mine,” says OU-Tulsa MPA program coordinator Meg Myers Morgan, walking on campus with student Steven Cox. ABOVE – The MPA program attracts non-traditional students who attend night and weekend classes.



The MPA program offers Oklahoma's only graduate certificate in nonprofit management, benefiting students like 2018 graduate Holly Becker, executive director of the Tulsa Arts and Humanities Council.

is a business side to it. I wanted to learn more about that.”

Palacios wants to delve into the public policy side of nonprofit work.

“I want to know more about how to affect laws and systemic changes that really need to happen in our state,” Palacios says. “This is about equipping nonprofits that want to be advocates within the missions they have.”

Her classmate, Jake Lerner, founded the nonprofit Tulsa Changemakers, which is an after-school program located in 17 schools serving a majority of low-income students.

“I saw this program as a way to extend my education and continue learning,” Lerner says. “I wanted to see how Changemakers can have a deeper impact. I feel like I am getting what I came here to get. But even more than that, meeting people in the program has been extremely, extremely valuable.”

Students often refer to the importance of connections being made.

“It’s worth the time,” Lerner says. “I don’t feel like work is work when I’m there, and I don’t feel like this is school when I’m at school. I keep finding myself with good people, asking good questions and doing interesting things.”

About 70 percent of students are working in the nonprofit and philanthropic fields. The others come from a range of public agencies and businesses. At least six Tulsa MPA alumni have run for elected office and include Oklahoma state Reps. Monroe Nichols and Forrest Bennett.

“What draws people here is that they inevitably want to do good. They all want to contribute to something bigger and better,” Morgan says. “There is such diversity in the room. They are learning from each other but also building coalitions and networking.”

Claremore Deputy Police Chief Steven Cox earned his undergraduate degree in finance. After being a police officer and supervisor, he wanted to understand more about the policy process.

“When I came into class, I had a preconceived mindset. It’s opened my eyes to a lot of things and given me a bigger picture,” Cox says. “Sometimes we focus on the law enforcement side of things, so in here we are looking at other things.”

Cox realized he crossed paths almost daily with local nonprofits.

“This is a cool experience,” Cox says. “We have all different walks of life and different perspectives talking and learning from each other. It’s not a lecture-style program.”

In January, David Blatt will join the faculty to lead the public policy side of the OU-Tulsa MPA curriculum. Blatt helped found the Oklahoma Policy Institute in 2008 and led the think tank into becoming one of the state’s most respected data and research resources. He stepped down from the position to teach at OU-Tulsa full time. His hiring is expected to attract more students from the fields of government and public policy analysis.

“The Oklahoma Policy Institute is so revered in our program that I am excited to see students interact with him,” Morgan says.

The OU-Tulsa MPA program is bucking the national trend in the rising demand for online courses.

“Students tell us their favorite part of the program is the interactions,” Morgan says. “Our students have families, jobs and lives. It takes grit for somebody with that to come back into the classroom.”

“It is inherently amazing, and the classroom is where we see the magic.”

Ginnie Grabam is a reporter for the Tulsa World.