

# UNC Charlotte

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## Virtual Visions

UNC Charlotte  
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# Doctoring Organizations

Organizational science Ph.D. program on the leading edge nationally

By Fred Tannenbaum



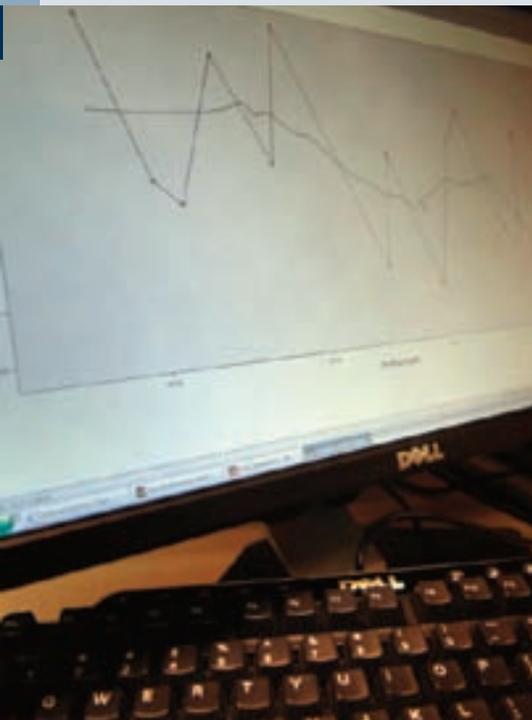
Pressures on corporations continue swelling – foreign competition, skyrocketing costs for fuel and raw materials. Surviving these and future challenges not only takes hard work but a tough look inward.

Any problems in the organization's culture, communications and employee satisfaction only will magnify those other pressures. UNC Charlotte's newest Ph.D. program aims, along with its ambitious educational and research goals, to return functionality to the dysfunctional.

Rogelberg said. It answers skeptics that looked at each of the separately operating fields of study and questioned: How can academicians in the four subjects truly improve the world of work when they don't communicate with each other?

"These are four sets of folks, who at most universities never talk with one another," he said. "For 100 years ... they've been talking about how the world of work is inherently interdisciplinary but the organizational sciences, in practice, are not."

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The innovative doctoral program in organizational science is groundbreaking and silo-demolishing. It's the first in the country weaving together four traditionally separate disciplines: organizational sociology, management, industrial/organizational psychology and organizational communication, said Professor Steven Rogelberg an IO psychologist and program director. Its 13 faculty members are drawn from each of these fields.

The Ph.D. program features a unique, integrated curriculum,

This cross-pollination of the subjects within organizational science is vital for two reasons, said Professor Orlando Taylor, vice provost for research and dean of the graduate school at Howard University.

First, the body of knowledge in the universe is so great that it's difficult for any one person to master that discipline, Taylor said. Second, "most topics of interest to most people, whether its politics or global warming, they require a convergence of theory, research, professional experiences from many disciplines to fully

Organizational Science students combine their knowledge of organizations and human behavior with advanced statistics to improve organizational and individual performance, well-being, and effectiveness.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** left, Marisa Adelman; middle, Ben Baran; right, Joseph Allen

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understand the nature of those issues.

“If an organization is going to be competitive on a global scale, economics, public relations, the law, are critical for these organizations to work,” he said.

Without an interdisciplinary approach, “We don’t understand organizations well and we don’t prepare people ... to help their organizations to be competitive,” Taylor said.

The program is giving its doctoral students a breadth of resources to achieve whatever they want to do and go where they wish.

“It’s interdisciplinary but it’s also new research that hasn’t been done,” says Brett Agypt of Barrington, Ill., near Chicago. “It hasn’t typically been looked into. It speaks volumes of what we’re going to be able to do later.”

- Measurement and testing, recruitment, selection and promotion,
- Training and development,
- Communication systems and processes,
- Diversity,
- Workplace stress and health,
- Employee attitudes, satisfaction and morale,
- Communication effectiveness,
- Employee motivation and job design,
- Organizational effectiveness, development and change, and
- Work-life programs.

“The best way to describe it to people who aren’t familiar is that ‘I want to become a doctor of organization,’” said candidate Joe Allen of Ladoga, Ind. “The same way a doctor diagnoses problems in a body, we diagnose problems in an organization but we don’t do it from one perspective. We take the tool from whatever discipline will most effectively answer the question or help solve the problem.”

While the organizational science program is breaking down silos between fields of study, it’s demolishing walls between instructors and students. They are working together in ongoing research projects, application projects, and co-authoring scholarly papers and journal articles. Faculty members are encouraging the doctoral candidates to really stretch themselves, launch research projects on their own, and engage in meaningful supervised consulting opportunities.

In other words, the faculty treats the students as peers not subordinates.

“Some of them call us ‘colleagues in training,’ said candidate Marla Boughton of Oklahoma City. “It encompasses a lot of mutual respect and makes you feel like you belong here and are contributing as an equal or someone who will become an equal soon.”

Allen believes the students serve as the bridge between faculty who’ve spent their careers focusing on their chosen fields. “We’re the ones that



most effectively answer the question or help solve the problem.”

## Curriculum

Organizational science focuses on examining and improving the health, well being and effectiveness of organizations and the individuals working in them.

The program focuses on the study of a wide range of topics, including but not limited to:

- Team dynamics and effectiveness,
- Organizational culture and climate,

don't have the disciplinary biases coming into it," he said. "We're able to approach things like a research problem and use the different disciplines to solve that problem."

## Trailblazing

Organizational science is about understanding and working to improve the world of work, Rogelberg says.

UNC Charlotte hired Rogelberg in 2003 to create the program. The university provided him and the graduate students with an entire wing of the Colvard Building, providing everyone with offices and computers. "We're doing it right," he said. The program now boasts 13 faculty members who also support their home departments in communication studies, management, sociology, and psychology.

Over time, parochialism and silos began crumbling away. Faculty across disciplines understand each other, value each other, and want to work together.

"That's pretty unprecedented," Rogelberg said. "Scholarship usually stays within the discipline." We have incredible training and scholarship that's interdisciplinary.

Meanwhile, around 2005, the program sought its first students. It received 60 applicants for five positions, their grade-point averages and Graduate Records Examination (GRE) scores would compete in the top 10 of the nation, he said. "For UNC Charlotte, it's pretty neat." Students have chosen to come here instead of places such as UNC Chapel Hill, NC State, Cornell, Columbia, Clemson, and Texas A&M to name a few.

Rogelberg recruits candidates from other universities through their graduate schools. Taylor, the Howard University graduate dean, already has made a mental note of the UNC Charlotte program.

"Students are always asking about a good place to study," Taylor said. "We like to recommend schools that are on the cutting edge and this is on the cutting edge of the discipline."

The candidates hail from as far

## MEETINGS

### research shows you don't really hate them

Pity the poor folks in Dunder Mifflin Paper Co.'s Scranton Branch on the NBC sitcom "The Office." With hapless boss Michael Scott in front of the room, meetings can be the bane of employees' existence and make viewers cringe.

Think of sitting through some particularly excruciating gatherings you've experienced: Checking out your BlackBerry, imagining you're anywhere but stuck in this room with people you'd rather not be. Wishing there was a trap door beneath your chair.

Love them or hate them, meetings can be important to the proper functioning of any corporation or group. UNC Charlotte's innovative Ph.D. program in organizational science is taking an interdisciplinary look at these business gatherings.

The two-year-old doctoral program has a research group of 10 people studying meetings from the perspectives of organizational communication, management, organizational sociology, and industrial/organizational psychology.

Each discipline has something valuable to add, said UNC Charlotte Professor Steven Rogelberg, who directs the organizational science doctoral program. An organizational sociologist might say: "Meetings are windows of insight into the greater culture of an organization" and an organizational communication scholar might add: "Meetings may be particularly meaningful because in addition to operating as vehicles of activity coordination and information sharing, they also provide opportunities for members to demonstrate and make sense of their roles in relation to the roles that others are playing".

"As an industrial organizational psychologist, I've been interested in meetings and their impact on employee health and well being," Rogelberg said.

The group meets every week or two. Faculty members Steven Rogelberg, Beth Rubin, Cliff Scott and Linda Shanock are involved, said Joe Allen, an organizational science Ph.D. candidate.

Employees may moan about how much they loath meetings but research shows they don't. "There's a norm to say, 'I hate meetings. I haven't gotten anything done all day because I've been in meetings.' But inwardly, as social creatures, we like to have some meetings each day," Allen said.

The meeting study group will launch four or five projects studying these gatherings from different angles and how meetings may be used – or misused. One project will study supervisor actions in meetings. Another will examine how power is projected during such gatherings. A third project examines together meetings, organizational structure, and temporality.

"Most prior research has looked at meetings as a tool for analysis," said candidate Ben Baran. "They've looked at it as something to study group process. They haven't looked at it as this activity that happens within organizations."

In fact, improving the quality of meetings can improve the quality of an organization. Most quality initiatives are taken care of in meetings, Allen said.

"If your meetings don't include an agenda and aren't effective, you need to talk about the various things you can do right now to improve your meetings," said Allen.

—Fred Tannenbaum

away as Colorado and Malaysia. Some ultimately want to be consultants while others want to teach. Some also are concurrently getting masters degrees in some of the sub-disciplines.

During an interview in a Colvard conference room, they were asked if they felt like trailblazers,

Laughter. Heads nod. "Yeah," is the mutual response. "The good and the bad."

"One of the appealing things to me is that we have control over the destiny of the program," said Agypt, the candidate from suburban Chicago. "We can set the bar as high as we'd like. And I think we're setting it relatively high.

"The bad (part) is that there's not really a template for how the program is working," he said. "We're kind of establishing that ourselves."

**"There's a huge disconnect between what we know in research and what is out there in practice."**

– Adrian Goh

Comparisons to being guinea pigs are unavoidable, the candidates said, but in a positive way. "It's evolving in the process," said Allen the candidate hailing from Indiana. "There's no other program like it. So building it, we're all learning things such as "How do you do interdisciplinary research? How do you make these different silos communicate with each other?" ... Our experience has been a learning process the whole time."

## Consulting and Outreach

Along with its curriculum, UNC Charlotte's program has built a consulting and outreach center, generating research on recruiting employees, motivation, leadership, organizational structure and organizational change. Student and faculty teams are engaged in a consulting practice assisting private, public, small and large organizations.

It provides a variety of services to locally based and national corporations, including Bank of America Corp., Automatic Data Processing Inc. (ADP) and Carolina Tractor, also known as Carolina CAT.

Faculty members lead the projects. Sometimes, the suggestions are simple, such as updating a client's Web site. Other recommendations may require some changes to an organization's culture.

Ben Baran, a candidate from Steubenville, Ohio, worked on a project with Carolina Tractor to identify the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors making people successful there. In other words, what separates the top performers from the bottom performers? The effort created eight core competencies that Carolina Cat now uses in its training and recruiting. "It's really an example of how we can reach out into the community," he said.

Boughton, the candidate who hails from Oklahoma City, says the experienced gained through consulting is invaluable. "Each project I learn a new skill set," she said. "I've done process improvement. I'm doing communication analysis. It's nice to practice what the research has shown and to help organizations."

Corporations and organizations need to take a serious look at the fruits of the doctoral program to remain relevant in an increasingly competitive economy where a competitor is as likely to come from across an ocean as across the street.

"There's a huge disconnect between what we know in research and what is

**"What is being done in research doesn't get translated into practice without consulting."**

out there in practice," said Adrian Goh, a candidate from Malaysia. "What is being done in research doesn't get translated into practice without consulting. What we've learned in the last 10 years won't be applied for the next 10 years. There's a huge lag there."

And in an ironic twist, companies need this kind of organizational examination when the economy sours, which is now. But as graduate student Marisa Adelman points out, "In times like this, it's the people development, the talent management, that's the first to go."

Taylor said it's crucial to understand how institutions and people functions. As a professor of communications, he has studied how language can differ across locations, races and genders, including in organizations as large as the U.S. Army.

The army recruits people from around the country but they've got to work with a single mind, Taylor said. "If you have people miscommunicating or being hostile to one another, it erodes efficiency.

Kurt Kraiger, a psychology professor at Colorado State University and president-elect of the Society of Industrial Organizational Psychology, a professional trade group, sees the UNC Charlotte program as an example other universities will follow. Two years ago, his organization studied the problems of pay and identity for people in the field and what to do about it.

"To me," Kraiger said, "The organizational science unit is probably the best solution."

## Boosting Minority Presence in Graduate Programs

UNC Charlotte's organizational science doctoral program is reaching deep to create the next generation of specialists trained to create healthy companies and groups.

In 2009, the program launches an organizational summer institute targeting high-potential African-American and Latino undergraduate students.

Plans call for 10 rising undergraduate seniors to be invited to Charlotte and spend a week being exposed to the organizational science program and graduate school in general.

"This is a really special opportunity for under-represented students and provides them with an extremely unique opportunity to experience what graduate education is all about," says Shawn Long, Ph.D., coordinator of the institute.

The goal is energizing students about the opportunities provided in graduate school and providing them with the tools to realize those opportunities, Rogelberg said.

### During the institute, the students will:

- Experience a research project using data already collected, working with a doctoral student mentor and a faculty member. They will work with those two people to study that research question. Unlike research that usually takes a year, this is research that's going to be completed in a week. "They get to enjoy the experience and excitement of discovery," Rogelberg said. At the end of the week, they will give a presentation of what they found,
- Learn how to apply to graduate school and the qualities and achievements graduate admissions officers look for,
- Build a sense of community among themselves and with the doctoral candidates and faculty, and

- Be given some Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) preparation.

UNC Charlotte's graduate school is funding much of the program but Applied Psychological Techniques Inc., a management and human-resources consulting firm in Darien, Conn.; Kenexa Corp., a Wayne, Pa.-based employee recruiting and retention consulting company; and Development Dimensions International Inc. of Pittsburgh are donating money.

To prepare, the organizational science program is hosting a think-tank for the honors-program directors from minority-serving colleges and universities to discuss and promote the institute.

Rogelberg says it's a cutting-edge approach to diversity.

Orlando Taylor, vice provost at Washington, D.C.'s Howard University and head of its graduate school, says the summer institute is a tried and tested approach to increasing a minority presence in graduate education.

Minority students have little understanding of graduate school and how to prepare for it, he said. As a result, they are underrepresented in masters and Ph.D. programs and in the upper echelons of corporate America.

"It's good that we increase the professional opportunities for all our students but at the same time," Taylor said, "it's good for the country and will allow us to remain competitive."

—Fred Tannenbaum

