



MAKING IT WORK: HR PROFESSIONALS IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

By Steve Taylor

DONNA PUCKETT IS AN HR veteran.

She's worked at Duke University for 28 years in various HR roles, both on the academic and health system sides. She has PHR certification, as well as the SHRM CP. At home, she has a grandson and three children. ("Two are grown, but one of them lives with me while in nursing school.")

To add to her plate, this very busy career woman and mom is also pursuing a master's degree. "Even if you work years and years," she explained, "there's always other knowledge to be gained."

Leslie Carter, an HR generalist at Salem Distributing Company in Winston-Salem, is on the same grueling track. "For me it's a real struggle," she said. "Balancing a full-time job, getting a master's degree and raising two young children all at the same time is honestly the hardest thing I have ever done."

And listen to Kimberly Weston Moore, Employee Relations Manager at

Fayetteville State University: "Being a military spouse with a three- and six-year-old as well as having a full-time job could be hard to manage, especially when trying to complete a graduate program. I am completing the program in two years."

Could be hard to manage, she said.

These three prodigies are enrolled in the Online Master of Science in Human Resources program at Western Carolina University [WCU] in Cullowhee.

According to Program Director John Sherlock, the program "is designed to be quite demanding, [but] all the faculty are very respectful of the 'balancing act' that most of our students are dealing with." For example, he said, students can log on to the program whenever they are available, 24/7. Live online instruction sessions are typically recorded so that students who work can view them later.

"While there are certainly the typical papers to write and exams to complete, our students also learn by doing," Sherlock added, noting that students must complete two courses where they provide pro bono HR consulting to nonprofit organizations, which lets students "apply their organizational acumen [and] HR expertise."

Sherlock said about 70 percent of the program's approximately 120 students are already working in HR.

North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro [NCAT] offers a Human Resource Management Concentration in its Master of Business Administration curriculum. Of the program's approximately 100 students, about 40 percent have previous HR experience.

MBA Director Eric Gladney said the percentage of HR professionals enrolling in the NCAT program is rising. "There's a lot of market change occurring [in HR], a lot

of students having to retool to keep up with new markets, such as business services and health services," he said.

The NCAT program involves either online or on-campus study, and evening courses are offered. "Our faculty is very sensitive about trying to balance needs of a [student] that's working and has a family," Gladney said.

Although other North Carolina colleges and universities offer HR courses in various settings, WCU and NCAT's master's degree programs in HR are the only ones in the state that have been aligned with the curriculum guidelines from the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM).

So how do our three HR professionals make it all work—on the job, in college and at home?

"You have to have incredible time management skills," admitted Carter. "There is a lot of reading and a lot of online discussions. Those take up considerable time."

So Moore plans far ahead. "If we have a group project I try to reach out to the group early in the semester, to get a sense of my obligations... If I have a paper to write, I begin to research information about the topic and formatting my paper," she said.

"I'm the type person when I get an assignment I'm on it right then," Puckett said. "I don't like to wait for a day or two to start something."

The women all agree that the program is worth the pressure.

Moore said she is challenged "to become a more strategic, effective, and results-oriented HR professional."

"You get a chance to hear from other people in the field," observed Carter. "You get ideas, different perspectives, and you get to see that you face similar issues."

In this year's Spring semester Puckett studied legal issues and took a leadership class. "I've never thought of myself as a consultant, but we're pretty much [acting as consultants] when helping employees through HR issues," she said.

Moore said the WCU program "has given me leverage within the career field, making me more comfortable with effectively leading my organization, navigating the various changes within the field, and most of all instilling business acumen."

"I am always surprised about the students and how different we all are," Carter noted.

"It seems like HR attracts people from so many different backgrounds."

Sherlock said WCU's students "are equipped not only to perform various HR function, but also to think strategically about how to design and execute HR practices so they align with organizational strategy—and contribute in tangible, measurable ways to organizational performance."

NCAT's Gladney said, "We work well with industries, and [we] align companies and

executives with our classes. [This gives our students] theory grounded by some of the experience executives expect to see."

Nearing the end of her Master's program, what has surprised Donna Puckett about her home-work-study life?

"How well I've done balancing everything and still maintaining high GPA," she laughed. "I thought, if I could get out with B's and no C's I'd be glad. But it's been two B's and the rest A's.

"I'm very proud." ■



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