



## 2U Symposium: MPA@UNC is Part of a Pioneering Movement

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2U is our partner in delivering MPA@UNC, and this week they hosted their third annual symposium. The symposium is an opportunity for 2U and their university partners to share information and create a vibrant learning community. The focus is on getting better, not simply on basking in the glow of past accomplishments. For me the event was inspirational, and I came away with several strong reactions.

We need to recognize and celebrate that we are leaders in a movement to completely change access to graduate higher education through high-quality online teaching. There was a powerful sense of pride at the symposium that collectively we are transforming online teaching in ways that provide a great educational experience for our students. I want to acknowledge the broader context for our work and to celebrate that we are part of an extraordinary movement. One of our stated goals in creating MPA@UNC was to do something truly great in online education, and to be part of an effort to change how people think about online education. We are accomplishing that goal because of the hard work and commitment of our faculty and staff, and because of our partnership with 2U. I am convinced that people will look back in twenty years and see that we were pioneers in creating a new model for graduate higher education. It is hard being a pioneer because there is no map to follow, but the MPA@UNC team at the School and at 2U are doing a magnificent job of charting this new territory.



For me the best moment of the symposium was a panel of current and former online students. One of our current students, [Tracy Miles](#), Executive Director of [Girls on the Run Triad](#), was on the panel. Tracy did a fabulous job of representing the School of Government. Not surprisingly, the convenience and flexibility offered by our online programs was seen as a plus for everyone. Each panel member also talked about how the program gave them new skills—and new confidence—that they put to use almost immediately in their current jobs. Another encouraging theme was how strongly the students were supported by their programs. It also was interesting to note what the panelists did not say. None of them expressed regret that they couldn't attend the residential version of their graduate program. Instead, they felt that they had received a better education by enrolling in the online program. Tracy talked about how MPA@UNC gives her the best of both worlds because she has two faculty members for every course. She gets access to the knowledge of the faculty member who designed the course and to the practitioner faculty member who helps her see more of the practical applications.



Student Panel (Tracy is third panelist from left)

2U is growing in ways that are impressive. Since launching the company in 2008, 2U's university partners have enrolled over 17,000 students. They now are working with 14 different universities on 28 different graduate degrees (Syracuse University signed a contract during the symposium to add their engineering program). 84% of those students either have graduated or they are still enrolled—over 6,000 students in 2U-partner program have graduated.

2U is aggressively committed to providing the highest quality outcomes for our online students. I've never worked with an organization that is as explicitly, relentlessly, and genuinely committed to improvement as 2U. They believe in collecting and sharing data about all aspects of the operation. There were sessions about the online platform and all aspects of their technology, course development, post-enrollment services, and marketing. In each case the leaders from 2U were forthcoming about weaknesses and welcomed suggestions without the slightest defensiveness. The data on the impact of adding programs in the same vertical (more than one MBA, for example) was of special interest to me. So far it shows a 20% increase in the original program's enrollment primarily because multiple programs allow 2U to spend more on overall



marketing in the vertical. I hope that experience holds when 2U adds other MPA programs.

2U recognizes that they still have lots to do in terms of measuring educational outcomes. The key for me is that they are working on a framework to better define the value of an online education from the student's perspective. It is called the Straight A's, and it includes Access, Advancement, Advancement, Affiliation, and Aspiration. 2U is early in the process of defining these elements of educational outcomes. Many residential programs take for granted that they are providing a great educational outcome for their students. The continuing bias against online education is one factor causing us to focus more intentionally on measuring educational outcomes than many brick-and-mortar programs. That's a good thing, and I believe it means that over time we will be able to demonstrate that online education in partnership with 2U is at least as good as, and in many cases better, than residential programs in producing high-quality educational outcomes for our students.



Closing Thoughts. Over the last year I have focused too much on the fact that MPA@UNC has not



enrolled as many students as we had expected, at least not yet. I'm cautiously optimistic that our enrollment numbers will increase as 2U builds partnerships with other MPA programs. It is wrong to focus too much on enrollment and revenue because it misses the much bigger picture. We have added three terrific faculty members—Whitney Afonso, Kim Nelson, and Margaret Henderson—because of MPA@UNC. We have increased our impact by reaching many more students, and they are terrific. By focusing too much on enrollment, I have unintentionally blurred the bigger picture—which is all about being part of a committed community of scholars and professionals who are transforming the online model of graduate education. We talked at the symposium about finding a way to bring faculty members together to learn from one another and to connect with this wonderful learning community. 2U is committed to making that happen. Kudos to all of our faculty and staff for doing great work, which often has required very heavy lifting, and to our partners at 2U for their dedication to doing things the right way.



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