

SPAA BA Graduate Profile: Kareem Willis (BA'16, MPA'17)

November 09, 2020



Full name: Kareem Willis

SPAA BA Graduation Year: 2016

SPAA MPA Graduation Year: 2017

Current Position(s): Chief Administrative Director, Yendor, LLC; PhD student at Rutgers SPAA; Public Engagement Coordinator, Office of Public Engagement at Rutgers SPAA

Why did you choose the BA program at SPAA and what did you enjoy most about it?

Choosing the BA program at SPAA meant finding the structured environment I needed to explore my passion for community development and advocacy.

What were some of your most meaningful experiences at SPAA?

I fondly remember participating in the on-campus interviews and internship experiences. As a Newark transplant, navigating the landscape would have been even more difficult without the personal and professional opportunities from these types of experiences. I made considerable progress and established many strategic relationships that have not only kept me employed but exposed me to a variety of avenues to explore and exercise my passion.

What choices did you make at SPAA that contributed to your career success / journey?

I took advantage of the opportunities that were presented to me by the staff and administration at SPAA. The logic was simple for me – if these individuals had my best interest at heart, why wouldn't I trust the opportunities and experiences that they've curated? I also gave myself the room and permission needed to explore the different types of public and nonprofit agencies. This was instrumental in helping me define my passion and be more strategic about my professional endeavors.

What was your first job after graduation and what other jobs did you have before your current position?

I worked as a program manager at Yendor Arts/Yendor Production upon graduating from the BA program. I am fortunate to still be with the company and worked my way up as I studied more and as opportunities became available. I now am the chief administrative director with the organization, co-leading its strategic plan and development.

What do you like about your current job and what do you find challenging? How does it relate to your degree?

I like my job because it is the most unexpected yet most fulfilling position I've had to date. I work for an arts organization and immediately made assumptions about the nature of the work. I was not prepared for the transformational power that the arts hold and just how it infiltrates our society and shapes our lived experience. I enjoy using art to create and foster a sense of community. The challenging part is finding creative and effective ways to get others (who threaten the funding of this work) to see that same power and buy into it.

From your experience, what has been the value of having an undergraduate degree in public and nonprofit administration? How has the degree benefitted you?

The undergraduate degree in public and nonprofit administration gave me the foundation needed to understand the field. It made what was once elusive real to me. I came of age in Jamaica and heard about charities and government agencies but I was not able to give them a name until I lived here and was introduced to it through SPAA. Another value is the practical nature of what I was learning in classes. I was literally able to take what I was learning in my fundraising class and apply it to my internship at the Newark LGBTQ Community Center to craft parts of their fundraising plan.

Are there any other achievements or activities you would like to highlight?

My degree has provided me with opportunities that I'm not sure I could so readily access without it. It has put me in the room with leaders of huge corporations, state officials, prominent scholars, and so on. I've received multiple awards for simply doing what I love. I'm able to do what I love in large part because of the foundation I established at SPAA.

What advice would you give to students and alumni interested in breaking into your industry?

Public and nonprofit administration permeates everything everywhere. There are areas that allow you to blend your multiple passions. It might not come in the package that you're expecting it to, but the work is just as engaging and fulfilling. You just have to be open to the possibilities.

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