

Kareem Willis (BA'16, MA'17) Becomes First Student to Pursue Three SPAA Degrees

by Jade McClain | May 04, 2017



Kareem Willis (BA'16, MA'17) (photo by Tobias Truvillion)

When Kareem Willis (BA'16, MA'17) begins his PhD program in the fall of 2017, he will be the first student to study in all three **School of Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA)** degree programs – he earned his bachelor's degree last year as part of the joint BA/MPA program, and will receive his master of public administration this May.

"I came here wanting to leave some kind of legacy, not knowing that this would be part of it as the first person to go through all three," said Willis, of Irvington, New Jersey. "So it's a proud moment."

Through his classes at SPAA, Willis developed skills that prepared him to take on leadership roles on campus with student organizations and programs, including RU Pride and OUTfront, a peer mentorship program for LGBTQ students.

"Working for those organizations was the highlight of my undergraduate career because I was able to use what I learned at SPAA to design programming, co-create programming, evaluate programming, and measure its success," Willis said. "So it was like running my own nonprofit, so to speak, within the university, and making a greater impact for the students, in particular, the LGBTQ students and their allies."

Willis brought those same skills to his myriad internships, including at Kids Corp, Freedom School, the Barat Foundation, and the Newark LGBTQ Center. At these internships, Willis says he worked toward organizational improvement, which included helping the Newark LGBTQ Center establish a fundraising plan.

His experiences and education not only honed his skillset, they helped him translate his personal experiences and interests into career aspirations of starting his own nonprofit for the LGBTQ population.

"Growing up I've always had a support system within my family that made it easier for me to navigate the queer experience," Willis said. "What influences my work and my passion is trying to build a community of support for youth who probably weren't as fortunate as I was to have that coming out experience and to live a peaceful lifestyle like I've been able to live as an openly gay man."

Willis says that in Newark, at least 10 percent of the youth identify as LGBTQ, but many of them lack stability and support, increasing their susceptibility to drug use or other self-harming practices.

Willis's goal after earning his PhD is to start his own LGBTQ Center that will offer resources, a community of support, and a better quality of life for vulnerable LGBTQ youth. He also wants to teach at the college-level and work as a researcher helping nonprofits in urban areas that might lack the staffing and skills needed to offer more expansive services to clients and thrive as organizations.

"I'm very passionate about urban areas because that's where I see more people like myself, that's where I feel like I'll make a greater impact," Willis said. "Nonprofits are really the vehicles of change and the easiest way for people to live more fruitful lives."

With such a clear vision for his future, Willis initially hadn't considered pursuing his PhD immediately after earning his bachelor's and master's degrees, but after some self-reflection and conversations with a trusted life-coach, Willis determined that a doctorate would set the tone for the rest of his career.

As a doctoral student, Willis intends to study nonprofit development and management, particularly in urban areas. For the professors who knew and taught him at SPAA, there's no question that he'll be a strong addition to the program.

"I can state without hesitation that Kareem is one of the sharpest, brightest, and most dedicated students that I have ever had the honor of teaching," said Dr. Rachel Emas, assistant teaching professor at SPAA. "His scholarly work is exemplary, well-focused, and highly analytical. Beyond the classroom, Kareem's professional experience highlights his commitment to and motivation toward the public good."

In addition to the support of the SPAA community, Willis says that his family has also rallied behind his educational endeavors, noting that he is the first in his family to pursue a PhD.

Willis says that while he had previously considered earning a PhD at a different institution, SPAA offers unique advantages that will help him toward his goals.

“I know the PhD journey can be tedious and difficult, and you need support,” Willis said. “I feel like it was smart for me to stay here because I’ve had the support here, I’m familiar with the faculty and familiar with the administration, and to me they have my best interests in mind.”

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