

MPA

2024-25 MPA ANNUAL REPORT ▪ BYU MARRIOTT SCHOOL OF BUSINESS





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◀ On a trip to Washington, DC, students explored career paths and met with public servants across multiple federal agencies—including the US Department of State. From left, Kenji Sugahara, Best Bagalwa, John Lidang, Alondra Felix Silvestre, and Solesia Lasa.

Front cover: In spring 2025, MPA and EMPA students broadened their global view on a study abroad trip through Hungary, Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland—visiting historic sites and former labor camps.

MPA 2024-25 Year at a Glance



September

Connections Across Generations

Students meet government professionals from across the globe at the week-long ICMA conference in Pittsburgh.

November

Up Close in DC

A group of MPA students share their research at a national conference in Washington, DC. A memorable visit with US Senator Mitt Romney caps the trip.



January

Back in Session

After the holidays, EMPA students settle back into coursework at the BYU Salt Lake Center—balancing careers, families, and their graduate studies.



March

Professional Pathways

EMPA students sharpen their career skills in a professional development session featuring Liz Dixon and Aaron Miller. Alumni join a panel to share advice from their own career journeys.

AUGUST

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

JANUARY

FEBRUARY

MARCH

APRIL



August

High Ropes, High Hopes

The new EMPA class experiences an elevated orientation with rope climbs and zip lines at CLAS Ropes Course in Provo.

October

Costumes and Camaraderie

The MPA program embraces Halloween as Aaron Miller's Enron-themed costume steals the show.



December

A Season for Service

Alum Daniel Dudley, CEO of Make-A-Wish Utah, brings both holiday cheer and inspiration as he speaks to students about public service.



February

Policy in Practice

Students visit the Utah State Capitol to witness public service in action for a full day. The group observes a legislative session and meets with BYU alumni serving as representatives, staffers, and auditors.

April

Capping It Off

The semester ends with both celebration and impact. Grantwell honors its partners and its students at an annual awards event, while graduating MPA students eagerly prepare to launch their next chapter.



BRIDGING BORDERS, BUILDING LEADERS

By Sara Smith Atwood

When Mayor Khishgeejin Nyambaatar of Ulaanbaatar—the largest and most populous city in Mongolia—sought to strengthen the public officials who manage the city, he knew just where to turn.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has invested in humanitarian work in Mongolia for many years. Despite being the largest group among the country's slim Christian minority, the Church is relatively new in Mongolia and is often met with suspicion. To express goodwill and a love for their Mongolian neighbors, church workers coordinate with the government to provide help in the developing nation. One such need: professional development for city officials.

"Mongolia still has a big Soviet influence," explains recent MPA grad **Kenji Sugahara**, a native of Japan and a former church employee in the region. "The mayor of Ulaanbaatar wanted to strengthen the city's public administrators by providing education in Western theory and ethics."

That's when Mayor Nyambaatar turned to local church workers. They in turn reached out to their former colleague Sugahara, wondering if BYU could help. As part of his MPA capstone project, Sugahara joined with fellow 2025 graduate **Olivia Kirk** and coordinated with MPA director **Rob Christensen** to develop a training for the Mongolian officials. The training, held in Utah, would give the public officials more tools for managing a large city. "The mission of BYU's MPA program is to transform the world through Christlike leadership," Sugahara says. "Having public administrators visit from another country to learn is completely aligned with that."



PHOTO BY BYU PHOTO

MPA Crash Course

In May 2025 a delegation of 26 civil servants from Ulaanbaatar arrived in Provo. For most group members, it was their first visit to the United States. Amid their jet lag and culture shock, the officials eagerly dug into a public administration crash course taught by BYU professors.

“This was basically BYU’s MPA program in two weeks,” says Mongolia native **Batbold Bukhchuluun**, a 2022 BYU MPA graduate who is now pursuing a PhD in education at BYU. Working alongside church employees, he interpreted BYU professors’ morning lectures into Mongolian, covering topics such as ethics, negotiation, and traffic control. “Each professor condensed their classes and life’s research into four-hour presentations,” Bukhchuluun says.

In the afternoons, participants analyzed case studies about a simulated city modeled after Ulaanbaatar.

The training content was tailored to the specific needs Mongolian officials had expressed during pre-program outreach. Sugahara and Kirk had traveled with Christensen to Mongolia a few months before the training and surveyed the group to understand which topics they were most interested in. With this feedback in hand, Sugahara, Kirk, and Christensen returned to Provo and developed a relevant curriculum, working with AI and student teaching assistants to design case studies.

Grateful Mongolian officials shared their impressions of the experience: “The program was well organized and meaningful,” says Otgonbayar Nasan,

the head of finance for Ulaanbaatar, through an interpreter. “I learned not only theory but also how to influence stakeholders, negotiate effectively, and lead with morals. The professors are skillful and well educated.”

The attendees also appreciated when professors introduced their families and took the time to learn about Mongolia. Second-year MPA student **Allison Haack**, who served as a teaching assistant, shares, “Many of the professors had their slides translated into Mongolian and had learned some phrases so that they could connect with the people.” Haack continues, “One professor studied the layout of the city of Ulaanbaatar so that his example could be relevant to specific neighborhoods.”

The MPA program’s effort will pay off far beyond the two-week training—especially for the Mongolian officials. “All the knowledge that’s in the presentations, we’re going to adapt it to our work,” says Ariuntuya Lkhaasuren, an elected city council official. “We’ll train our local citizens and departments so everybody benefits.”

Lkhaasuren appreciated how BYU professors moved beyond rote lectures and used real-world applications to bring abstract theory to life. “That made the concepts easier to understand,” she says. Nasan agreed, noting that discussing case studies after the lectures helped him learn from his colleagues. “Working as a team helped me develop a respect for others’ unique abilities and talents,” he says. “It also helped me to realize those areas that I need to improve.”

PHOTO FROM ADOBE STOCK

“I LEARNED NOT ONLY THEORY BUT ALSO HOW TO INFLUENCE STAKEHOLDERS, NEGOTIATE EFFECTIVELY, AND LEAD WITH MORALS.”

PHOTOS BY BYU PHOTO

Field Trips

Twice per week, the group ventured outside the classroom to visit Utah institutions facing similar urban challenges. The Mongolian officials discussed public transportation with Utah Transit Authority, toured city hall with Provo Mayor Michelle Kaufusi, sat down with the CEO of Wasatch Behavioral Health, and joined Elder Neil L. Andersen (who had visited Mongolia previously) for a tour of Welfare Square and Temple Square.

As the group asked questions on site visits, it was clear to Bukhchuluun that the Mongolian guests cared about finding the best solutions for the people they serve back home.

“They’re really smart people and very humble,” says Bukhchuluun. “They are professionals who are working hard to tackle real-life problems.”

The Mongolian participants really clicked with their guides: “It was interesting to see the group from Mongolia and the people who work at the sites talk through interpreters and start to realize they have similar problems and are all working toward the same goals,” says MPA student and teaching assistant **Morgan Farley**. “The people from Mongolia were eager to learn and make connections.”

Haack saw their enthusiasm deepen during certain visits. “They lit up when we went to site visits that match their work,” Haack says. “When we went to the Department of Transportation, some people were really excited and had very specific questions. Other people were asking question after question at



▲ Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Wasatch Behavioral because it was very applicable to their area in Mongolia.”

Batkhuu Bat-Ochir, a police colonel and head of the narcotics department in Ulaanbaatar, came to Provo to study ethical leadership, explore correctional systems, and assess services for mental health and addiction rehabilitation. “We are planning to build more addiction recovery facilities like what you have in this state,” Bat-Ochir says. “This knowledge and practical experience will help me better contribute to the upcoming projects that are initiated by the government of Mongolia to combat addictions to harmful drugs.”

Amid the worksite visits, moments of cultural connection made a lasting impression on both the visitors and hosts. When the Mongolian group gathered with Elder Andersen for a private concert at the Salt Lake Tabernacle, the organist began playing the Mongolian national anthem. “They all rose at the same time and put their hands over their hearts,” recalls Christensen. “It was a powerful spiritual moment.”

These shared experiences were underscored by a recurring theme: The participants from Mongolia showed deep gratitude to everyone they met. Farley says, “They really take pride in giving gifts,” such as scarves, chocolates, candies, and keychains. “Everywhere that we go, they bring some gifts for the people that they meet,” adds Haack. “They want to shake everyone’s hand and say thank you.”

Cultural Connections

For the Mongolian visitors, hearing their national anthem, watching professors and teaching assistants stumble through Mongolian phrases, and meeting students like Bukhchuluun deepened their connection with BYU and the Church.

The Church began sending missionaries to Mongolia in 1995, and plans for a temple were announced in 2023. Still, “in Mongolia, the Church is something new, even mysterious,” says Sugahara. “But this program helped break down barriers.”

Bukhchuluun also observed a shift by the end of the program. Some of the participants had initially expressed skepticism, but “their eyes were opened, and they changed their minds—about BYU and about the Church,” he says. “This experience really strengthened the relationship.”

As part of the effort to build understanding, the MPA team hosted an evening event and invited the Mongolian officials, Mongolian BYU students, and

“SOME OF THEM WERE SAYING THEY WANT TO SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO BYU. THEY WERE SO IMPRESSED.”

returned missionaries who had served in Mongolia—one of whom played Mongolian folk music. The group also spent time in the homes of Mongolians living in Utah, many of them church members.

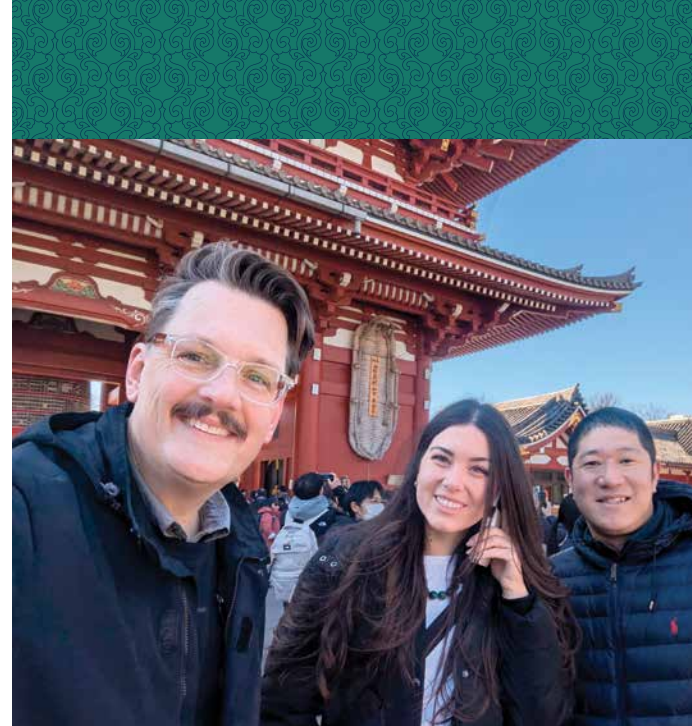
Through experiences like these, the participants from Mongolia came to see that BYU’s interest in Mongolia wasn’t motivated by politics or profit. “They saw that we love Mongolia, but not for strategic reasons,” says Christensen. “We love Mongolia for Mongolia. BYU MPA has had several Mongolian students in its program, and each student has brought a beautiful depth to the program; we love teaching them and learning from them.”

The simple authenticity felt at BYU also made an impression on the group. “Some of them were saying they want to send their children to BYU,” says Bukhchuluun. “They were so impressed.”

The cohort commented on the beauty of the campus, the resources available to students, and the safe environment. “Every morning, I walked around campus exploring beautiful buildings,” says Lkhaasuren. “I just hope more Mongolian students can study here and take what they learn back home to help our society.”

The appreciation went both ways. Second-year BYU MPA student **Alexa Franco** observed:

I never imagined I’d have the opportunity to work with such an incredible team as the public servants from Mongolia. Every moment was truly rewarding. This experience gave me a unique glimpse into how public service operates in another part of the world. I learned so much from them—far more than I could ever “teach.” Along the way, I also discovered more



about Mongolia, built meaningful friendships, and felt genuinely loved. Despite the language barrier, their kindness and warmth made me feel completely at ease. I truly cherished every second of our time together.

Right Place, Right Time

When Sugahara first approached Christensen about helping the Church’s humanitarian efforts in Mongolia, Christensen wasn’t sure if the department had the resources and organizational capacity to pull it off. Nevertheless, he realized “it was the right thing to do, for reasons I can’t explain beyond just inspiration; we just needed to move forward.”

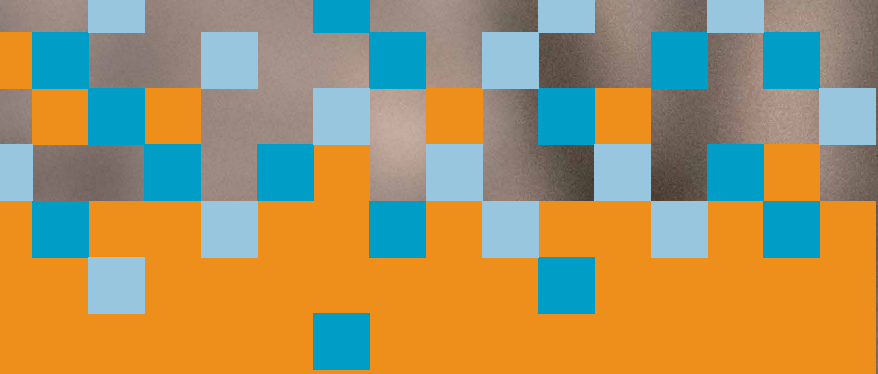
Part of that inspiration involved finding the right people, who all seemed to be placed in the right place at the right time: Sugahara with his background in church employment in the Asia Area; Bukhchuluun, a recent alum from Mongolia; faculty willing to volunteer their time; and student assistants with interest and experience in international relations. One evening, for example, just before the initial trip to Mongolia, Christensen met Molly Meredith, a BYU undergraduate student who became an important coordinator. “Without Molly,” Christensen notes, “we wouldn’t have had the capacity to deliver the intensive two-week experience. Sometimes we have these great ideas, but without the right people and right timing, they don’t take off,” Christensen says. “This was definitely a time when the stars aligned. And I think it did a lot of good.”

That good was on full display on the last day of the program. Teams of Mongolian officials presented their case study work in a mini case competition and received certificates of completion at a luncheon hosted by BYU’s International Vice President’s office.

Collaborating with others to organize the training gave Farley valuable experience for a future career that could involve hosting international guests. “Helping people make the connections they need to solve their problems is super interesting,” she says.

The program, notes Christensen, also served as a pilot effort for future partnerships. There are conversations about ongoing connections with Mongolia and opportunities to provide MPA-level professional development in other nations.

“We’re grateful that the exchange with our Mongolian friends happened and happy that it was successful,” adds Christensen. “It’s in our department’s DNA to ‘Enter to learn; go forth to serve.’”



Student Life

For **Claudia Barillas**, community work isn't just service—it's a path to healing. Her MPA experience helped transform a grassroots idea into a thriving nonprofit organization that empowers young Latinas to reclaim their voice and confidence. Barillas now serves as Utah County's human services manager, helping families build hope for generations to come. Learn more on page 17.



Student Report

Class of 2024-25

CATEGORY	MPA	EMPA
Students enrolled	76	82
Average age	28	44
Female	63%	63%
Married	51%	76%
BIPOC	17%	11%
Bilingual	57%	30%
International	14%	—

Countries Represented

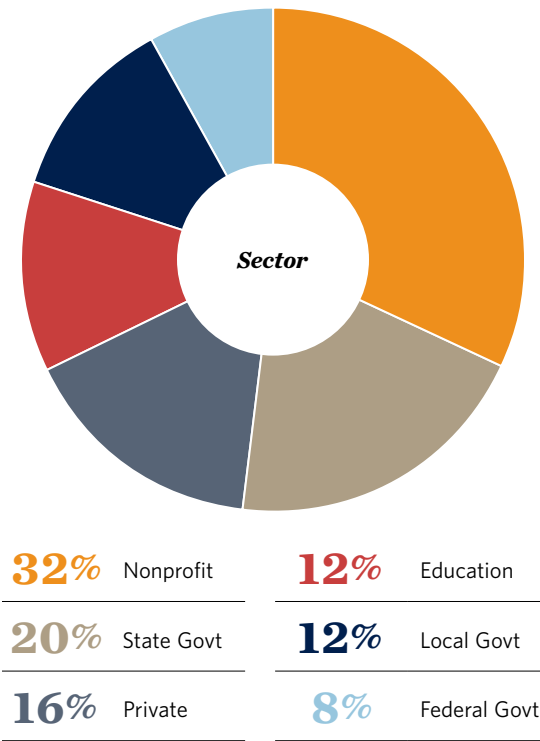
Canada	Korea, Republic of
Colombia	Mexico
Dominican Republic	New Zealand
Ecuador	Nigeria
El Salvador	Philippines
Fiji	Samoa
Finland	Tonga
Germany	United States
Japan	

Degree Emphases

Federal government	33%
Local government	22%
Nonprofit	45%

Job Placement— Graduation Year 2024

CLASS OF 2024	MPA
Average salary	\$66,506
Placed by 3 months after graduation	88%
Internship converted to job	19%
Received a job offer before graduating	64%



To Pittsburgh with Purpose



In September 2024, a group of BYU Marriott MPA students traveled to Pittsburgh to dive deeper into local government at the annual conference for the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). They came home with inspiration and meaningful connections with BYU Marriott alums.

David Rellaford, an operations supervisor at Deseret Industries and a native of Springville, Utah, was only three weeks into the EMPA program when he attended the event. “I was really impressed with both the alumni and the conference participants who sacrifice a lot and dedicate themselves to helping other people—I mean, there’s a reason they’re called

public servants,” says Rellafor. He also noted that the conference included meaningful networking opportunities and was a great way to start his MPA experience.

EMPA student **Aileen Conder** also pointed to networking as a standout part of ICMA. “Your networking is going to get you on the track you want to be on,” she says. Conder is from Provo and works in the Utah County Commission office. “My day-to-day job is never going to be something that I do on my own,” she says. “I’m always going to be working with groups of people on budgets or projects or problems.”

Aaron Eggleston, an EMPA student from Lehi, Utah, who works as an international support

manager for the Church, was inspired by the positive mindset that people bring to their work as they face challenges of public service. He was particularly impressed by what one of the conference presenters said: “Despite the craziness we often have to deal with in our work, we know just how wonderful and amazing our city management jobs are.”

The students extended their networking beyond the conference through a group dinner and a testimony meeting with BYU Marriott MPA alumni. Eggleston says, “Perhaps the most meaningful part of the trip was sitting with the alumni and hearing their personal stories: why they earned an MPA at BYU Marriott, how they got into their careers, and what keeps them going.”

Those alumni stories struck a chord with Rellafor as well. He was especially moved by how the alums lean on their faith while being surrounded by people with differing values and opinions. “Hearing their experiences helped me want to be more committed,” he says.

Eggleston walked away with a similar takeaway of the power of being spiritually grounded in public service: “The Spirit was there as they bore their testimonies about the importance of being guided in their city management work. When you can get the local government running really well, then communities of people can thrive.”

Speaking the Language of Compassion

Rahel Meyer grew up in Hanover, Germany, seeing the struggles of refugees who arrived by the millions.¹ “If I were in their shoes, I would love to have somebody who cares enough to change policies,” she says. Now, as a BYU Marriott MPA student, she is equipping herself to be that person.

Meyer’s passion for helping refugees began with her mother, who taught in an integrated refugee program and encouraged Meyer to get involved. Meyer began working with two Afghan siblings as they adjusted to their new community and learned German. Her growing connection with the family made her more aware of the barriers they faced, from navigating the legal system to finding jobs they were qualified for.

While serving a mission in France and Switzerland, Meyer taught language classes, participated in service projects, and shared the gospel—all of which deepened her connection with refugees. “The more I worked with them,” she says, “the more I saw them facing the same challenges.”

Later, Meyer’s BYU–Hawaii professors encouraged her to consider earning an MPA at BYU Marriott. “I went to the info session and felt like the people who do the MPA program really make an impact,” Meyer recalls. She decided to enroll, hoping to transform her real-world experiences



with refugees into a broader, more applicable skill set.

As an MPA student, Meyer joined Grantwell, an experiential learning program that gives students opportunities to consult nonprofit and philanthropic organizations. She assisted with board administration, marketing, and paralegal services for Black 14, which lifts underserved communities and promotes racial equity in sports. “Their whole vision resonated with me,” she says.

Meyer has enjoyed gaining hands-on experience with nonprofits while also deepening her understanding of program evaluation, consultancy, and organizational operations. At times, she worried that her English wasn’t

perfect. “I’m an international student, and I felt that inhibited me. But going through the MPA program, I can see how that actually makes me more versatile,” she says. “I can empathize with other people because of my experiences.”

Meyer hopes to return to Geneva, Switzerland, one day and work with the United Nations Refugee Agency. Her goal is to make a global impact by helping displaced people rebuild their lives. “That’s why I’m here in the MPA program,” she says. “It gives me the tools, skills, experiences, and connections I need to make a difference.”

Notes

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Germany. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/donors/germany>.

Backpacks and Bright Futures

For **Nay Robinson**, the BYU Marriott MPA program wasn’t just the next step in her education—it was a way to give back.

Robinson’s passion for service is rooted in her own childhood. Raised below the poverty line in Florida, she never expected to attend college. Her mother and grandmother hadn’t finished high school, and higher education felt like a long shot. When Robinson sent her ACT scores to BYU, a door opened—and she walked through it.

Scholarships through BYU’s Multicultural Student Services gave Robinson the boost she needed to enroll at BYU in 2020. Before graduating with her bachelor’s degree in psychology, Robinson participated in BYU’s Civil Rights Seminar, which included visits to the Rosa Parks Museum and the home of Martin Luther King Jr.

“As we talked about how thankful we were for our ancestors, the question came up: ‘How can I be a better ancestor for the generations who come after me?’” Robinson reflects. “I’m getting a degree at BYU, which is something that no one in my family has done. As I look to my future career, I want to bridge gaps for people and connect them with resources and help them elevate their lives, just as people have done for me.”

Robinson chose the BYU Marriott MPA program because it would give her the tools to turn empathy into action. She interned with Humble Beginnings Foundation, a nonprofit in Florida that supports underprivileged children and families. She played a key role in the organization’s Back to School Bash, which distributes hundreds of backpacks filled with school supplies to children in need.

It was more than just an event for Robinson—it was personal. “I remember standing outside the Amway Center [now the Kia Center] in the boiling Florida weather every year to get our backpacks. I remember being sent home from school once a month with backpacks of food for food-insecure students,” she recalls. “To be on the other side of that and to orchestrate these events is special. I want to show these kids that they have a chance and that there are people who believe in them. It’s life changing.”

Looking back on her time at BYU, Robinson sees the Lord’s guidance in every step—from moving across the country to navigating a new culture as a first-generation college student. “I’m so much more secure now of who I am,” she says. “I learned there was no way to be anybody but myself. I had to get comfortable with where I came from, and my story just makes me stronger.”

Robinson got married in the summer of 2025 and graduated in August with her MPA. The next month, she and her husband moved to Santa Ana, California, for Robinson to begin a position as event manager at Illumination Health + Home—a nonprofit that provides housing and healthcare services for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Robinson is ready to keep bridging gaps, building hope, and blazing trails for the next generation.

Adapted from original reporting by Tyler Stahle.



Lessons From Five Continents



Living on five continents taught **Kenji Sugahara** that common ground leads to common good. As a student in BYU Marriott's MPA program, Sugahara gained tools to increase his impact and elevate his work in international development.

Sugahara grew up in Osaka, Japan, and first lived abroad while serving a mission in Portugal, where he met many people from Angola and Mozambique. After his church mission, Sugahara attended Japan's Kyoto University of Foreign Studies to study Portuguese and international relations. He went on a study abroad to Brazil as part of his coursework.

Sugahara's mission experiences helped him thrive in his post-graduation roles. He spent three and a half years based primarily in Angola, where he worked at the Japanese embassy, then joined a nonprofit focused on landmine removal, and later advised the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) on education, clean water, and peace-building initiatives. A promotion to assistant director at JICA brought him back to Tokyo, where he oversaw the Knowledge Co-Creation Program and projects in Central America and the Caribbean for four years.

These experiences prepared Sugahara to serve as an area humanitarian and education manager for

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Welfare and Self-Reliance Services. Managing programs in Mongolia, Korea, Japan, Guam, Palau, and Micronesia taught Sugahara that self-reliance means much more than just "being out of your parents' house and being able to support yourself." He explains, "Jesus teaches that when we are self-reliant, we can better serve and support others."

This principle became tangible when Sugahara was working with an association supporting single-parent families in Japan who wanted to give back to the community rather than just receive aid. Sugahara helped organize a beach cleanup in Okinawa for the families, which inspired a local aquarium to donate tickets to participants. "When we were trying to do something good with two parties, a third party came and made the movement a little bigger," he says.

To further his own education—and opportunities to serve—Sugahara decided to pursue an MPA from BYU Marriott. Through the program, Sugahara says he can see how "Christ is trying to construct bridges between people and countries." Sugahara also sees bridges within the program itself, where he and his peers focus on "crossing the finish line together instead of trying to become the best of the cohort."

Outside of the classroom, this mindset has helped Sugahara's family as they adapted to life in the United States. Sugahara and his wife, Miyuki, have four sons between the ages of 3 and 11. When his older sons struggled to make friends and to understand some of their schoolwork in English, Sugahara could relate. "I was a student as well, so I was very open to sharing my grades with them, which were sometimes lower than their grades," he says. In return, Sugahara was inspired by his children as they made new friends. His oldest son even joined student council.

From Tokyo to Angola to Provo, Sugahara has found that empathy and collaboration can break down barriers. "We are all children of God, and we have so many things in common," he says. With that belief in mind, he is determined to use his MPA to build bridges across borders. "I want to be able to make a greater impact on others," he says.

Rooted in Community, Rising in Purpose



Claudia Barillas was 12 years old when her family moved from Mexico to Los Angeles. As she struggled to learn English and adapt, Barillas found support in her newly discovered faith community: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Church members changed her trajectory, encouraging her to pursue higher education and embrace her heritage. Now, she is determined to do the same for others.

Barillas had big dreams when she graduated from California State University, Los Angeles, with a degree in social work. Hoping a master's degree would open doors, Barillas moved her young family to Provo and applied to BYU's social work program in 2020. She was waitlisted but not accepted to the program—a curveball she's now grateful for.

At the time, Barillas was working for the Provo City School District as a student-family advocate coordinator for Latino students and their families. The role

opened her eyes to the frequent behavioral issues, dropout rates, drug abuse, and teen pregnancies affecting the Latino student population. "These families' needs were like a gushing wound," she describes, "and all I was doing was putting a bandage on it."

Barillas asked herself: *How do I help fix this?*

The unexpected answer came from Nadia Cates, a concerned parent with an idea for a program that would help young Latinas reconnect with their cultural roots. Barillas helped launch a one-month pilot program called Ella Rises, which included art nights and cultural activities. She was surprised by how deeply she connected with the participants. "The girls trusted us enough to open up about really hard issues that they were dealing with," she says.

The program grew, as did Barillas's desire to further her own education and impact through graduate school. A friend in BYU Marriott's EMPA program recommended it to Barillas, who applied and was accepted. "I think it was divine design," Barillas says.

The MPA courses were immediately applicable to Barillas's work with Ella Rises. Her assignments helped her develop the organization's structure, create its bylaws, strengthen its existing programs, and establish its 501(c)(3) status. "Ella Rises helped make tangible

all the things that I was learning in the program," she says.

The MPA community also helped Barillas tackle one of her biggest challenges: finding funding for Ella Rises. Associate Professor **Chris Silvia** helped Barillas gather qualitative data to identify the foundation's most effective program. Students in Alex Jensen's class in the BYU School of Family Life analyzed the data. Then **Liz Dixon**, an associate professor of management communication, helped Barillas turn the findings into a flyer to showcase the nonprofit's story and impact.

"It took a year to gather the data, but it was a very rewarding learning experience," Barillas says.

As Barillas neared the end of the program, she felt prompted to update her résumé and look for new opportunities. She discovered a posting for a human services manager for Utah County. "As I was reading the description, I felt this powerful feeling, like I've been prepared my whole life for this job—and it was made just for me," she says.

Barillas landed the role and began developing a program to support families navigating intergenerational poverty. "I'm helping to heal the gushing wound," she says. "I'm helping to provide a solution that will affect not just this person we're working with but also generations to come."

BYU Marriott MPA Scholars

BYU Marriott MPA students and faculty stand out as dedicated leaders and public servants. Their impact extends well beyond the classroom. These awards, supported by the generosity of donors, recognize and honor the achievements of exceptional MPA scholars.



Doyle W. Buckwalter Internship Award

Jordan Gygi



Garth N. Jones Writing Award

Rahel Meyer



Stewart L. Grow Citizenship Award

Olivia Kirk



From left, Claudia Barillas, Gloria Wheeler, and Anne Apuakehau.

Gloria E. Wheeler Good Works Award

Anne Apuakehau
Claudia Barillas



From left, Cheri Wallace, Sierra Pierson, Carri Ward, Mary Ann Curtis, Liz Brimley.
Not Pictured: Neil Squire.

Lennis M. Knighton Academic Award

Liz Brimley
Mary Ann Curtis

Sierra Pierson
Neil Squire

Cheri Wallace
Carri Ward



Back row from left, Janelle Fairbanks, Scott Miller, Peter Maughan, Guillermo Lemus-Martinez, Olivia Kirk, Mary Ann Curtis, Liz Brimley. Front row from left, Youngsoon Walker, Alexa Elliott Johnson, Cheri Wallace, Alondra Felix Silvestre, Rachel Sumsion. Not Pictured: Kristian Dorman, Claudia Barillas.

Vision, Mission, Values Awards

Faith in Christ: Janelle Fairbanks and Guillermo Lemus-Martinez
Integrity in Action: Liz Brimley and Rachel Sumsion
Love, Agency, and Accountability: Alexa Elliott Johnson and Scott Miller
Respect for All: Kristian Dorman and Cheri Wallace
Service to Community: Claudia Barillas and Alondra Felix Silvestre
Excellence and Generosity: Olivia Kirk and Youngsoon Walker
Overall Values: Mary Ann Curtis and Peter Maughan



MPA Professor of the Year Award

Breck Wightman



From left, Alondra Felix Silvestre and Savaira Veikoso.

Catherine L. Cooper Good Works Award

Alondra Felix Silvestre
Savaira Veikoso



From left, Jordan Gygi, Andrew Knecht, Nay Robinson, Rachel Sumsion, Emmu Salo.
Not Pictured: Peter Maughan.

Karl N. Snow Academic Award

Jordan Gygi
Andrew Knecht

Peter Maughan
Nay Robinson

Emmu Salo
Rachel Sumsion



Faculty & Staff Spotlights

A Fulbright Scholar appointment in Spain gave **Kurt Sandholtz** a fresh perspective on building partnerships. The experience sparked collaboration with faculty at Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, opened doors for student internships abroad, and created lasting ties between BYU and a forward-thinking entrepreneurship center. Read more on page 25 about how Sandholtz's time as a Fulbright Scholar paved the way for unique collaborations.



Faculty Involvement

Publications & Citizenship Activities

Brad Agle

- Coauthor: *The Totality of Allegiance: Inside the Hearts and Minds of Trump Supporters* (2024) with Travis Ruddle
- President: Fellows of the International Association for Business and Society

Rob Christensen

- Coauthor: “Familiarity Matters: Corporate Philanthropy and Employee Workplace Giving and Volunteering,” *Voluntary Sector Review* (2024: vol. 15, no. 2) with Dan Heist
- President: Public Management Research Association (PMRA)

Liz Dixon

- Facilitator: WriteGrader, BYU’s first AI-powered essay feedback tool
- Guest speaker: BYU Marriott MCom 320 Podcast with Microsoft’s director of search and AI

Maryliss Fantoni

- Coauthor: “Assessing Gender Equity in Public Administration Research: Findings and a Theory-Driven Agenda,” *The American Review of Public Administration* (2025: vol. 55, no. 6) with Rob Christensen
- Presenter: “The Role of Fear in Psychological Costs: An Experiment of Domestic Violence Reporting,” Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management

Dan Heist

- Recipient: Editor’s Prize for “Tubs, Tanks, and Towers: Donor Strategies for Donor-Advised Funds Giving,” *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* (Nov. 2022)
- Publisher: *The National Survey of Donor Advised Fund Donors* by DAF Research Collaborative

David Matkin

- Executive board member: Association for Budgeting and Financial Management
- Presenter: “The Accuracy of Unaudited Fiscal Data,” Comparative International Governmental Accounting Research Network

Aaron Miller

- Instructor: Expanded curriculum to include peace-building in MPA 644: Negotiations in Public Service.
- Producer and host: Three seasons of *How to Help* podcast and newsletter

Brad Owens

- Recipient: Values in Action Award for teaching
- Coauthor: “The Virtue Counterbalancing Model: An Illustration with Patience and Courage,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (2024: vol. 19, no. 3)

Travis Ruddle

- Coauthor: *The Totality of Allegiance: Inside the Hearts and Minds of Trump Supporters* (2024) with Brad Agle
- Coauthor: “In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: An Ethical Exploration of Citizen Assessments of American University Presidents’ Political Endorsements,” *Public Integrity* (2024)

Chris Silvia

- Coauthor: “The Value of Being Nonprofit: A New Look at Hansmann’s Contract Failure Theory,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (2024: vol. 53, no. 5) with Eva Witesman
- Presenter: “A Conjoint Study of the Activation of Collaborative Partners in Mandated Networks,” Public Management Research Conference

Breck Wightman

- Presenter: “Ethical Advice Seeking: Do Leadership Style Preferences Vary by Sector?” Public Management Research Conference
- Recipient: Grant from Stephanie S. Sorensen Endowed Student Support Fund, “Leadership in Limbo: Understanding Public Perceptions of Interim Succession Strategies After Nonprofit Executive Scandals”

Eva Witesman

- Coauthor: “Creating a Public Service Topology: Mapping Public Service Motivation, Public Service Ethos, and Public Service Values,” *Public Administration*
- Recipient: Corporate Impact Award, International Religious Freedom Secretariat
- Coeditor: *Reimagining Nonprofits: Sector Theory in the Twenty-First Century* (2024)

Reflections from the Long Run

Endurance runner **David Hart** teaches ethics classes that prepare students to endure the long haul of their careers without compromising their ethics or intentions.

“As of a few years ago, the most common reason for firing CEOs was ethics violations like misconduct,” says Hart, an associate professor in the Romney Institute. “What’s going to prevent anyone from acting similarly in difficult situations?”

That question drives much of Hart’s teaching and research. During his 25-year academic career, he has explored why well-meaning people make unethical choices and how individuals can build integrity into their daily lives.

Hart believes the answer starts with intention. “The majority of cases that I read about in the media are people who started out well intended, but they ended up not well intended,” he says.

Hart’s roots in ethics run deep. “I’m a second-generation professor,” he says. His father, **Kirk Hart**, also taught in the Romney Institute. Discussions on ethics around the family dinner table reinforced Hart’s interest in the career path. He earned his MPA from BYU Marriott in 1991 and his PhD in public administration with an emphasis in organization theory from the University at Albany. He returned to BYU to teach in 2000—the same year his father retired.



Hart, whose research focuses on ethical theory, values exploring dilemmas from multiple angles. “One of my favorite things to do is collaborate with people who don’t typically study ethics,” he shares. For example, Hart partnered with a human resources professor to study the ethics surrounding lateral hiring, also known as “poaching.” He has also joined with other BYU Marriott faculty to research how ethical employees survive in corrupt environments.

Blending theory and real-world application is at the heart of his teaching approach. He helps students develop intention by encouraging them to be both outwardly aware and inwardly honest. “You can’t be who you can’t see,” Hart tells them—urging students to understand themselves clearly

so they can make the right choices when the pressure is on.

Teaching students to live intentionally begins with modeling it himself. For Hart, long runs are where reflection and renewal find their stride. “When I run for several hours, I get a lot of time to think,” he says. “I get my best ideas for papers when I’m out running. I have my most important insights, and I self-reflect.”

Self-reflection has also helped Hart clarify his priorities—family and faith—and he hopes to help students recognize their own. “Many of my students are right there at the beginning, setting the trajectories for the rest of their lives,” Hart says. “At the end of your life, you’re not thinking about accomplishments—you’re thinking about how you lived.”

Helping Students Find Their Superpowers



As MPA career director, **Staci Valentine Carroll** helps students build clarity, confidence, and connections that launch them into public service. “The more that I understand a student’s needs, the better outcomes we get,” she says. Whether she’s reviewing résumés, planning networking trips, or hosting career strategy sessions, her focus is always on the people.

Carroll’s commitment to service runs deep—her father worked in government, and Carroll herself serves as a city councilwoman. That experience gives her “a solid understanding of where people might go based on their skill sets” and credibility as she guides students toward government and nonprofit roles. Carroll encourages students to see career growth as a personal and spiritual process. “Don’t forget about prayer,” she notes, “and don’t forget that God will help you.”

For Carroll, the greatest reward comes from watching students transform. “Students come in who are unsure and lack confidence. And by the end of the program, they’ve developed their superpowers,” she says. “That is so awesome to see.”

Where Faith Meets Work

As business operations manager of the George W. Romney Institute, **Anne Apuakehau** keeps the department running smoothly. Apuakehau’s work in human resources, finances, and employee relations is fueled by her conviction that every person has inherent, divine worth. “We are all children of God. Titles don’t matter to Him, so they shouldn’t matter to me,” she says.

After joining the Church as a young adult, Apuakehau learned about BYU and was drawn to its community and value system. She has worked at the university for 15 years and came to BYU Marriott in 2024. “Because of the inspiration I have received, I know that Heavenly Father loves me and that BYU is the place for me,” she says.

Apuakehau’s favorite scripture is Doctrine and Covenants 50:24: “That which is of God is light; and [one who] receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light.” For Apuakehau, that light is reflected daily at BYU Marriott, where faith and learning come together to create an environment of growth, connection, and purpose.

Whether she’s hiring a new employee or tracking expenditures, Apuakehau values the unique opportunity to bring her whole self to work. “To pray at work or talk about gospel principles—those are privileges I don’t take for granted,” she says.



Of Faux Pas and Fostering Friendships

Networking is all about relationships—finding common interests and building upon them, says **Kurt Sandholtz**. “And relationships,” he adds, “can start in the strangest ways—even in faux pas.”

After Sandholtz was named a Fulbright Scholar in 2022, he and his wife made a preliminary trip to Spain to meet with his future colleagues at Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. One afternoon he was talking with Professor Carmen Avilés when another professor approached with a book in hand. “I thought the book was for me, so I took it. When I realized the mistake, Carmen was super gracious and told me to keep it,” Sandholtz recalls. “When I got home, I sent her a copy of my book. It started a friendship, and we stayed in touch.”

Despite his early blunder, the relationships Sandholtz built during his time as a Fulbright Scholar in 2023 have flourished, leading to ongoing collaborations, a campus visit, and even an internship for an MPA student.

A key part of Sandholtz’s Fulbright experience was learning about TreeNNOVA, an entrepreneurship research center led by Avilés and Assistant Professor Camilo Muñoz Arenas. “The center teaches community members how to start sustainable businesses that relate to forestry, renewable energy, or agriculture,” Sandholtz says.

During Sandholtz’s Fulbright program, a group of BYU Marriott MPA students came through Spain during a three-week study abroad that also included stops in Portugal and Morocco. Sandholtz arranged for Avilés and Muñoz to present to the students about TreeNNOVA. A year after Sandholtz returned, MPA student **Mariyah Housari** contacted him, looking for an internship in Spain. Sandholtz reached out to Avilés, who created a position for Housari at TreeNNOVA. “It was a positive thing for BYU because Mariyah was so impressive,” Sandholtz says.

Housari’s internship set the stage for broader collaboration between Universidad Politécnica de



Madrid and BYU, and Avilés and Muñoz were interested in learning more about BYU. “It dawned on me that the first step would be having them come to campus,” Sandholtz says.

With the help of a Whitmore Global Business Center grant, Avilés and Muñoz visited BYU in January 2025. They spent a week learning about Sandbox and other on-campus entrepreneurship programs, presenting in Sandholtz’s organizational behavior classes, connecting with the BYU Sustainability Lab, and meeting with administrators from the Ballard Center for Social Impact.

“Carmen and Camilo were impressed with the energy BYU has for entrepreneurship,” Sandholtz shares.

The partnerships born from Sandholtz’s time in Spain are a testament to the power of networking. Sandholtz, Avilés, and Muñoz have collaborated on research, and Sandholtz has returned to Spain to teach a few workshops. “We’re exploring a variety of ways to keep the relationship active,” he notes.

Sandholtz feels fortunate to be a Fulbright Scholar, which made this collaboration possible. The Fulbright program is “designed to foster understanding across borders,” he says. “It’s all about international collaboration.”

Faux pas aside, Sandholtz says his experiences—both teaching in Spain and hosting Avilés and Muñoz at BYU—were wonderful opportunities to represent the US and BYU. “BYU has created some truly excellent programs,” he says. “It’s fun to introduce people from around the world to those programs.”

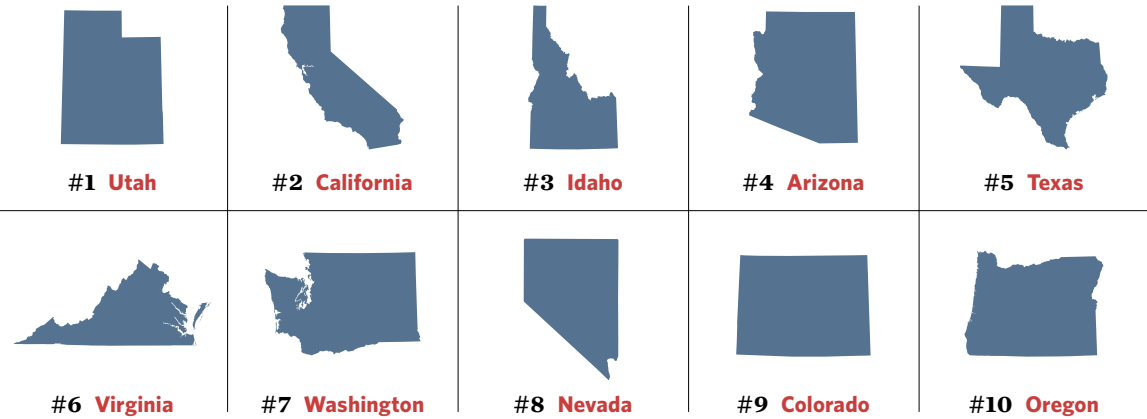
Alumni Updates

Whether working with Olympic organizers or city leaders, **Brent Stoddard** knows progress is powered by teamwork. Stoddard credits BYU MPA alumni for guiding him to his city management role in Glendale, Arizona, which hosts everything from the Super Bowl to spring training. Discover how Stoddard's strategic playbook has helped a desert community bloom into a vibrant hub on page 32.



Alumni Report

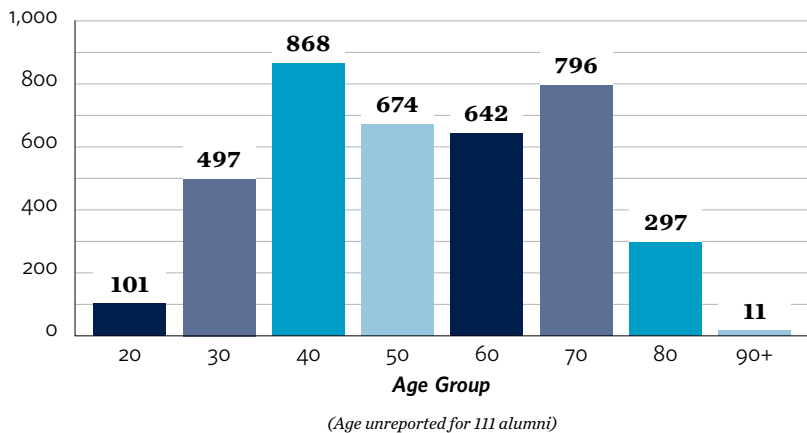
Top States Where Alumni Live



Top International Countries Where Alumni Live



Number of Living Alumni by Age



Alumni Stats

Total living alumni

3,997

Number of women

1,225

Number of men

2,772

Number of alumni living internationally

92

Liftoff to Leadership: MPA Alumnus of the Year



budget for NASA. Outside of his professional leadership roles, Carver has served as a school board member, coached youth soccer teams, and held numerous church callings.

Speaking at a luncheon held in his honor, Carver emphasized how professors and mentors opened doors to new opportunities and helped shape his success. “As I have continued to reflect on this award, I have realized this isn’t an individual achievement,” Carver said. “It’s about the relationships I have been blessed with and how individuals have helped me along the way.”

Carver, who earned a bachelor’s degree in international relations from BYU in 1990 and an MPA in 1992, recognized several former BYU Marriott faculty members who inspired and prepared him for a meaningful career in public administration. He voiced appreciation for **Dale Wright**, a former MPA program director whose kindness and encouragement left a strong impression. Carver also expressed gratitude for the writing, communication, and analytical skills he learned from **Michael Thompson** and **Larry Walters**, both BYU Marriott professors during Carver’s time in the program.

Carver’s student experience affirmed the value of faculty mentorship. He reminded current MPA faculty in the audience of their lasting influence. “Your excellence and generosity can make all the difference in [your students’] abilities to live the MPA vision, mission, and values throughout their careers,” Carver said.

Mentorship, Carver observed, plays a vital role not just during your school years but throughout your professional career. His 32 years in federal service have provided him with leadership opportunities and the chance to form meaningful relationships, including with his boss, Lisa Ziehmman, whom he recognized as an advocate and mentor.

Looking beyond his own career, Carver reflected on the vital role of faith and leadership in public service. “As we can see by simply turning on the news, we live in a world in dire need of leaders who will lift the world through Christlike leadership in public service,” Carver remarked. “It is my firm faith that as we look to Jesus Christ, our faith will give us the capacity to envision a better future, the confidence to make that future happen, and the courage to act in the face of challenges.”

Distilling Revelation

What started as a four-month internship turned into a 30-year career for **Jenifer Greenwood**—and she’s still loving it. Through it all, Greenwood has trusted in God to guide her toward opportunities for growth, including BYU Marriott’s EMPA program.

Shortly after earning a bachelor’s degree in English from BYU, Greenwood started an internship with the Curriculum Department at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That internship led to a part-time position with the department, which led to a full-time position as a copyeditor, which eventually landed her an assistant managing editor position with church magazines.

When the opportunity arose to transfer to the Priesthood and Family Department, Greenwood initially hesitated. But a prompting helped her recognize that her work with church magazines was just one season of her life. “To be open to that career pivot was terrifying, but I couldn’t do what I do now if I hadn’t taken that step into the unknown,” she says.

Greenwood’s role as Priesthood and Family Department manager expanded her comfort zone. “I went from a position where I was central to so much of the work to having to create a job description for

myself,” she says. She found that her new role amplified her impact and also gave her more opportunities to write and create. As a magazine editor, Greenwood had worked on publishing general conference addresses; but as a manager, she had the opportunity to accelerate the whole publishing process. Her improved process is still being used—12 years after she implemented the initial changes.

While working for the Church, Greenwood felt a growing desire to continue her education. She had pursued a master’s degree in English when she started her internship but had never finished. “That was such a regret,” Greenwood shares. “I felt really strongly that it was time to take what I always thought of as this little hole in my soul and just fix it.” Some of her friends and colleagues who had completed BYU Marriott’s EMPA program suggested that she apply.

The in-person evening classes at the BYU Salt Lake Center helped Greenwood earn her EMPA without taking a career break. “It ended up being the most mind-expanding experience,” Greenwood says. While her MPA is an important career tool, Greenwood also values her connections with former classmates, many of whom also work for the Church. “We speak the MPA language: We can talk about carrying the pole or about storming, norming, and forming or having the right people in the right seats,” she says.

Greenwood is currently director of policy and general officer support in the Church’s Priesthood and Family Department—the first woman to hold that position. She works on writing and editing the *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* and enjoys being part of the process that implements the revelation church leaders receive. “It’s an opportunity to see revelation distill,” she says.

This job is not a position Greenwood expected to hold when she started as a temporary editing intern 29 years ago, but following her heart’s desires and the Spirit’s guidance led her on a unique and fulfilling career path. “I don’t really separate work and church because they are one and the same,” she says. “And that is my passion.”



Called to Serve, Hired to Lead

Michael Dyal didn’t just manage cities—he built his career on listening to the Spirit and acting on its promptings. That guidance influenced his career in four municipalities as he worked to improve city governments while remaining deeply committed to the people they served.

Meeting a city manager in high school first opened Dyal’s eyes to the world of local government. Later, while earning his MPA at BYU Marriott, he was inspired by a professor who had been a city manager. After graduation in 1970, Dyal worked as an unpaid intern in Los Altos Hills, California, before he accepted a position for Silver City, New Mexico.

Then came the prompting about North Las Vegas. “The Spirit told me, ‘That’s your next job,’” Dyal recalls—even before he knew the city was hiring. When Dyal discovered an open city manager position in North Las Vegas, he applied and was hired.

Though the prompting was unmistakable, the reality on the ground was grim. “The city was slowly but surely headed toward bankruptcy,” he says. His first day brought a heavy assignment: laying off 40 employees. As he worked through the painful process, another impression came to him—1,080 acres. When Dyal asked other city leaders about the number, he learned that the Department of the Interior had previously granted the city 1,080 acres of desert land.

That land became a lifeline.

Dyal worked with a developer who was awarded a contract to create a park, an elementary school, and a fire station at no cost to the city. The new development led to new homes. “We went from 45,000 to 77,000 people in five years—and our income mushroomed,” Dyal says.

Alongside city growth, he looked inward at operations. A conversation with the utilities department revealed that outdated water meters were underreporting usage in commercial buildings. Dyal empowered the team to replace the meters, which brought in additional revenue. “When we turned the department loose, they had ownership of that process,” he says.

In his final year managing North Las Vegas, Dyal received approval to hire 100 additional employees—a welcome contrast to the layoffs that had marked his first day on the job.

The lessons Dyal learned in employee engagement were applicable when he moved on to manage city governments in Orem, Utah, and Medford, Oregon. Over the years, he observed that people floundered when they weren’t challenged. “They didn’t find meaning to what they were doing, and I knew that was a leadership issue.”

Dyal increased engagement by encouraging departments to underspend, allowing teams to reallocate leftover funds toward their own priorities. He also introduced monthly “neighborhood walks”—an outreach initiative in



which teams of city employees went door-to-door to ask residents what changes they’d like to see. Dyal required that any concern raised receive a follow-up within one week. “It was the most immediate, personal-yet-professional way to learn what was going on in neighborhoods,” he says.

Dyal’s career also took him to Romania, Brazil, and Japan, where he taught principles of local government and embraced opportunities to share the gospel. “I’m so glad I got my master’s degree at BYU Marriott so people can connect me with the Church,” Dyal says.

Today, Dyal continues to give back to the program that launched his career. He serves as a member of the Romney Institute Alumni Board and as a representative of the MPA class of 1970. Led by the Spirit and committed to service, Dyal spent his career fulfilling one quiet ambition: to leave things better than he found them.

Game Changer: The Power of an Alumni Team



Standing midfield, **Brent Stoddard** handed 2024 Fiesta Bowl commemorative footballs to the athletic directors of BYU and Oklahoma State University. LaVell Edwards Stadium buzzed with midgame energy as Stoddard, deputy city manager of Glendale, Arizona, and Fiesta Bowl board of directors member, marked the 50th anniversary of BYU's first-ever bowl appearance—a 1974 matchup against Oklahoma State. It was a moment of reflection for the two teams and for Stoddard himself, whose two-decade career has been defined by teamwork and strategy.

Stoddard kicked off his public service career by working with the Salt Lake Organizing Committee for the 2002 Winter Olympics—an early assist that illustrated local government in action. Fresh off a BA in political science from BYU, Stoddard saw the opportunity as a natural bridge to his graduate studies. It became much more.

“I saw how a major international sporting event can bring together people from all kinds of backgrounds to accomplish something impactful,” he says. “I didn’t realize it then, but that experience laid the foundation for my career.”

Stoddard had once envisioned a career in Washington, DC, but the MPA program piqued his interest in local government. “We had amazing professors and both active and retired city managers who shared their experiences,” he recalls.

Seasoned alumni like **John Arnold**, then a deputy director in an Arizona agency, helped Stoddard land a local government internship in the state that would become Stoddard’s home turf. “To have an alumni like John take me under his wing—it was absolutely invaluable for my career trajectory,” says Stoddard.

After Stoddard finished his MPA in 2004, the alumni network came through again when **Byron Smith** and **Tom Belshe** pointed Stoddard to a role with the League of Arizona Cities and Towns. The job exposed Stoddard to key municipal leaders, and two cities stood out: Glendale and Mesa. Stoddard would go on to work for both.

As a legislative coordinator in Glendale, Stoddard represented the city’s interests at the state and federal levels during a time when the city’s new NFL stadium and

NHL arena were transforming the city into a sports and entertainment hub. Soon, BYU MPA alum and city manager **Chris Brady** asked Stoddard to join the team in Mesa. Stoddard served as chief of staff to Mesa’s new mayor and played a role in the city’s partnership with the Chicago Cubs for its spring training facilities. In 2010, Stoddard was invited to return to Glendale, and he’s been shaping the city’s growth ever since.

Stoddard applied an “entrepreneurial approach” to his roles in Glendale, first as city director of public affairs and then as deputy city manager. “I was part of the team that developed the strategy to manage and handle our growth,” he says. “We blew the rooftop off all the goals and metrics that were set.”

Like any great team, Glendale’s 2,300 employees work together to execute the city’s game plan, and Stoddard is right there with them. Glendale has hosted everything from WrestleMania to Super Bowls and NCAA Final Fours, and Stoddard helped expand roads to support the city’s booming entertainment district. He has also connected citizens with the policy-making process and secured Luke Air Force Base as a training site for the US Air Force’s F-35 fighter jets.

No matter the arena, Stoddard believes that progress is built on collaboration. “I like to see the power of teamwork,” he says.

Three Degrees for Good

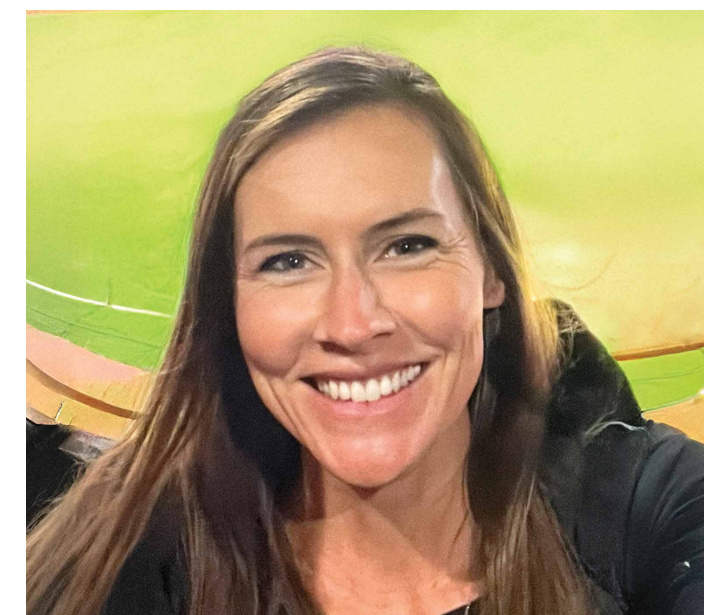
For **Rachel Bennion**, advocating for immigrants isn’t just a professional goal—it’s a personal passion. Inspired by her great-grandfather’s experience as a young man immigrating alone from Denmark to the US, she now helps modern immigrants overcome challenges her grandfather couldn’t have imagined. Bennion, a senior attorney at a leading nongovernment organization, advocates for the rights of children who were separated from their parents at the US border. Each reunited family is a testament to the power of fervent advocacy and the resilience of those Bennion serves.

Bennion’s Spanish-speaking mission in Richmond, Virginia, opened her eyes to the challenges faced by immigrants. That spark followed her back to Provo, where Bennion volunteered at nonprofit Centro Hispano during her undergrad years at BYU. Her first job after completing her bachelor’s degree in English was as a community organizer for AmeriCorps with United Way of Utah County. This experience reinforced her passion for immigrant advocacy and pointed her toward BYU Marriott’s MPA program. “I wanted to work with amazing, brave, resilient immigrant families and help them succeed in the United States,” says Bennion.

She began the MPA program in 2010 with plans to use her degree to fundraise for Latino rights. But the mentorship of MPA professors such as **Carl Hernandez** and **Aaron Miller** helped her see how earning a law degree would amplify her impact. In addition to their influence, Bennion recalls, “I felt the Lord guiding me through my morning scripture study. Law school felt like the right thing to do.”

By the time she finished her schooling at BYU in 2015, she had earned “three degrees of glory,” she jokes—a BA, an MPA, and a JD.

With those degrees in hand, Bennion accepted a fellowship with Catholic Charities in San Francisco, where she worked mainly with children who had fled violence in Central America, helping them find



stability and legal status in the US. Bennion soon moved to Catholic Charities in Washington, DC, to work with victims of domestic violence, help oversee the organization’s pro bono program, and mentor volunteer attorneys in humanitarian immigration cases.

Bennion’s colleagues felt like family in DC, and she wasn’t looking to leave her position. But she had a unique opportunity to help children displaced by the immigration policies of 2017 and 2018. “I remember watching with horror as family separations unfolded,” recalls Bennion. “Children were taken from their parents and placed in government custody or foster care, and parents were deported. Some of the parents I work with did not see their children for over four years due to this policy.”

Since 2021, Bennion has been part of a special team of attorneys that helps reunite immigrant families. Currently based near her Bay Area hometown of Los Altos, California, Bennion feels that her BYU Marriott education continues to be an asset. “My MPA focused on nonprofit management, measuring impact, and teamwork. That training has helped me in the work I do,” she notes.

That foundation has not only guided her career but has also deepened Bennion’s ability to serve. “I want immigrant students and alumni to know they’re not alone,” she says. “People are in their corner.”



Romney Institute Highlights

A packed room of MPA students and alumni gathered to hear former US senator and ambassador Jeff Flake and his wife, Cheryl, share insights from a lifetime of public service. Their message: Diplomacy takes faith, empathy, and hard work—but it's worth the effort. Read more about their visit on page 40.



Making the Case for Collaboration

The scenario was fictional—but the pressure was real.

As part of the Local Government Case Competition, a regional event hosted by BYU's MPA program, student teams from BYU, Southern Utah University, and the University of Utah were handed a crisis: a mid-sized city facing serious debt. The students had a week to prepare solutions that balanced fiscal responsibility with employee retention before coming together to defend their ideas in front of a panel of current city managers.

"The practice responding to a real-life local government crisis was excellent preparation," says BYU MPA student **Ben Maxfield**. "It helped me feel better prepared for a career in local government."

The competition—returning after a long pause that started during the pandemic—was spearheaded by **Wayne Parker**, the Romney Institute's city manager in residence and Mountain Plains regional director for

the International City/County Management Association. Parker sees case competitions not only as an academic exercise but also as a chance to develop professional connections that students can lean on throughout their careers.

During the event, collaboration emerged as a key theme. "We are trying to foster support and camaraderie through competitions such as this one," notes **Travis Ruddle**, assistant professor in BYU's MPA program. To encourage interaction across a range of academic backgrounds, teams were composed of students at different stages of their education.

University of Utah student Mina Ghobadi appreciated the diversity of perspectives. "Our team was able to pull from models, approaches, and methods we had learned from different courses we've taken and bring them all together to problem-solve," she says.

David Michelsen, an SUU student and Provo City employee,

agrees. "Even within our small team, we had a range of backgrounds. It gave us the chance to come up with ideas from different perspectives."

Each team received feedback after presenting to the panel of city-management professionals. For BYU MPA student **Jackson Berthold**, that critique was invaluable. "Their perspective helped me recognize areas I tend to overlook and where I'm already meeting expectations," he says.

For the judges, watching students blend analysis with creativity was rewarding. "Case competitions provide an excellent opportunity to learn how to compile information, present it effectively, and discuss it with others," says Dustin Grabau, a manager in Utah's Wasatch County who served as a competition judge.

SUU ultimately took home first place. **Joel Vallett**, SUU professor and BYU MPA alum, praised his students' ability to blend theory and practice. "Many are working professionals, able to draw on real-world experience and apply it directly," he says. "It's rewarding to see that recognized through this win."

While only one team took home the trophy, the conference offered something more enduring to all participants: the chance to think under pressure, test their skills, and receive expert feedback.



Guided by Faith, Committed to Leadership



face poverty. "I knew what it meant to suffer," he said. Dávalos set a goal to attend college, but as he got older, he also felt called by God in another direction: missionary service. He spent 11 years serving missions for the Catholic church across the United States, Mexico, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

"When I was in the Philippines, I was part of the majority in a Christian country," Dávalos described. "But when I went to Indonesia, belonging to the minority religious group made me believe that building bridges is not enough." Dávalos realized he didn't want to simply contribute to a community and then leave; rather, he wanted to act as the bridge between communities by becoming a good listener. "By listening, you acknowledge the other person, and they become a part of you," Dávalos said.

Dávalos also pursued his goal of higher education, earning bachelor's degrees in international relations and philosophy from ITESO, Universidad Jesuita de Guadalajara and an MPA and a master's degree in public policy from Tecnológico de Monterrey. Dávalos has been with the International City/County Management Association for Mexico and Latin America since 2019, and he currently serves as the executive director.

Throughout his story, Dávalos highlighted four aspects of good leaders: self-awareness, creativity, love, and heroism. "Love and compassion will always be ingredients for good leadership," Dávalos said, adding that he gauges his leadership and service by reflecting on his impact in people's lives.

Dávalos recognizes that sometimes service is motivated by a hope to get something in return, but he finds personal fulfillment by working to enhance the lives of others, especially those in greatest need. He reflected, "Service is going out of yourself to make someone else a priority."

Armed with his faith in God and a dream for a better world, Salvador Torres Dávalos has made it his life's mission to relieve suffering. In recognition of his contributions to that cause and for his many years in the public sector, the Romney Institute gave Dávalos the 2025 MPA Administrator of the Year Award. At the ceremony, Dávalos acknowledged how trials shaped him into the person he is today.

Dávalos grew up in Mexico. When he was nine years old, his father abandoned the family, leaving them to

Crossing the Finish Line Together



Unable to bend his fingers in the cold, first-year MPA student **Jacob Lowe** used his whole hand to shift gears as he cycled up Southern Utah's Mount Carmel in the middle of the night. Cheering him on were other members of his cycling team, comprised of BYU Marriott students, faculty, alumni, and friends.

Lowe was one of 16 iMPActers—racers representing the BYU MPA program—who tackled the 429.2-mile Salt to Saint relay from Salt Lake City to St. George, Utah. The cyclists took turns riding solo through the race's 24 segments while teammates followed in cars, leapfrogging ahead and cheering each other on.

Each rider's effort contributed to the team's success. When Lowe reached the top of Mount Carmel, he passed the baton and let his teammate take the descent. "It was satisfying to know that the next rider would benefit from the hard work I'd done and that I could find joy in his success as well," Lowe says. "I told him to hit 40 miles per hour on the way down for me."

For first-year MPA student **Alli Haack**, the race reinforced a key lesson from the program: Success comes from collaboration among peers with diverse strengths. "Being part of that team has actually

been a bright spot in the MPA program," says Haack. "Working together and supporting each other can create a community, even when there are such obvious differences between people."

The race deepened that sense of community, pushing riders to rely on one another as they battled heat, cold, and inclines—all with minimal sleep. "There's a connection that's born when you're going through something hard," says **Chris Silvia**, an MPA associate professor who helped organize the team. "You don't get those types of connections in class or at a department picnic."

After 31 hours, 4 minutes, and 1 second, the iMPActers crossed the finish line together¹ as those who had been cheering joined to ride the last two miles as a team. For Haack, this collective finish was meaningful because "I was part of something bigger instead of just working toward the goal on my own."

This is not the first time the program has made an impact through cycling. **Karee Brown**, former Romney Institute program manager, worked with Silvia to put together the inaugural team, which rode in the Saints to Sinners relay from Salt Lake City to Las Vegas in 2023.

During the 2023 race, when Brown approached an incline with an elevation gain of more than 1,100 feet over nine and a half miles, she found her second wind through her team's support. "They saw more in me than I could see in myself, and when I got up to the top, they were there cheering for me," she recalls.

Brown completed the climb in just over 48 minutes, the fastest women's time that year, and earned the Queen of the Mountain title. "This experience is a good metaphor for the MPA program," says Brown. "It's going to be a steep climb, but there's going to be a lot of support along the way and waiting for you at the top."

Notes

1. Salt to Saint Relay, 2024 Salt to Saint Relay Results. <https://salttosaint.com/home/results/2024-salt-to-saint-relay-results/>.

Getting to the Heart of Public Service

Nothing says love like meeting for a carpool at 6:30 a.m. on a cold winter morning—on Valentine's Day. But for BYU Marriott MPA and EMPA students, this trip to the Utah State Capitol was well worth it. Students met with alumni, observed the legislative process firsthand, and gained valuable career insights from public servants eager to help the next generation find their place in government.

Now in its third year, the excursion has evolved from a public policy class field trip into a dynamic networking tradition. Each year more students take part and more alumni welcome them. "Being there in person allows students to connect with our amazing alumni and witness firsthand the impact that the BYU MPA program is having on Utah policy," says Professor **Breck Wightman**, who led the tour.

That impact was on full display as students stepped inside the Capitol and saw policymakers in action. During a committee hearing the group observed from the House floor, Representative **Stephen L. Whyte**, a BYU MPA alum and Utah House District 63 representative, took a point of privilege to recognize the visiting students. Later, **Jason Thompson**, another MPA alum and a Utah House District 3 representative, met with students to answer questions. "I enjoyed

seeing their enthusiasm for the legislative process," Thompson reflects. "Their curiosity and passion are inspiring, and I'm confident they will go on to make a real impact in the future."

In addition to elected officials, **August Lehman**, an MPA alumnus at the Office of the Utah Legislative Auditor General, offered students the advice he wishes he'd heard when starting his career. "New recruits to government simply don't have the basic information they need to make informed decisions about where to work, how things operate, and what to expect," Lehman says. "I wish I could have talked with more knowledgeable people before I started looking for a career in government."

The meetings with alumni at the state Capitol gave students not only practical career insights but also a sense of connection and inspiration. First-year MPA student **Savanna Lee** appreciated seeing how graduates of the program had translated their degrees into meaningful careers. "It was fun to reconnect with old friends and meet new people in state government," Lee says. "The MPA alumni were so friendly and open to answering all my questions about life after the program."

For EMPA student **Youngsoon Walker**, the visit was more than just a networking opportunity—it



was a moment of personal realization. "When I first visited the Capitol, I felt out of place and unsure if I truly belonged there, especially as an immigrant," Walker shares. "But as I observed the spaces where important decisions are made and standards are set for the people, I began to realize how much these processes impact the lives of Utah residents." She described the event as "truly inspiring" because it strengthened her resolve to support fellow immigrants.

By the end of the day, MPA students had gained not only a clearer vision for their future but also a reminder that public service is, at its heart, about caring for people—a fitting Valentine's Day takeaway. "Despite the early start time and the cold temperatures, the van ride home is always humming with excitement as students share their experiences and discuss the energy that they felt," says Wightman. "We are grateful to our many alumni who welcomed our students with open arms and gave them an up-close view of the legislative process."

Diplomacy Is Worth the Work



“There’s no substitute for diplomacy—and it’s worth the work,” Jeff Flake told a packed room of current and future public servants. Jeff and his wife, Cheryl, shared how faith, relationships, and empathy shaped their public service journey, first as an Arizona legislator and later as a US ambassador.

Their journey began at BYU, where Cheryl studied travel and tourism and Jeff earned a bachelor’s degree in international relations and a master’s degree in political science. With Cheryl’s support, Jeff went on to represent Arizona in the United States House of Representatives from 2001 to 2013 and in the Senate from 2013 to 2019. He later served as the US Ambassador to the Republic of Türkiye from 2021 to 2024.

Though their time in public service spanned high-level government roles, the Flakes emphasized that what matters most isn’t power or position—it is people.

The Flakes put this philosophy to the test when Jeff became ambassador and faced what he described as a “very frosty” relationship between the US and Türkiye. Before the Flakes arrived in Türkiye, Jeff gave a speech focused on similarities between his own beliefs as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the principles of Islam, the country’s

predominant religion. “A video of this speech made the rounds in Türkiye,” Jeff said. “It helped quite a bit in terms of acceptance by the population.”

That people-first philosophy became even more vital in 2023 when a magnitude 7.8 earthquake devastated Türkiye, killing more than 53,000 people. As ambassador, Jeff helped facilitate support from US search and rescue teams. The Flakes also witnessed the Church step in with resources and relief. “The Church has produced hospitals, schools, and homes and has provided food, aid—whatever you can think of,” Cheryl said. Volunteers even built a soccer field for the local youth. “We played soccer with the kids,” she recalled, “and it was fun to see the smiles on their faces.”

Diplomacy, the Flakes taught, isn’t just about managing bilateral relationships—it’s about bridging differences across cultures, countries, and ideologies. While helping negotiate an agreement between Türkiye and Sweden, Jeff navigated a web of concerns among international leaders and US lawmakers alike. “Jeff didn’t think of somebody as a horrible person if they disagreed on an issue,” Cheryl said. She credited Jeff’s long-standing relationships in Congress with helping move the agreement forward. “It was great to see diplomacy in full action,” she said.

The Flakes’ presentation resonated deeply with many students, including **Youngsoon Walker**, an MPA student from Busan, South Korea. “My favorite part was hearing how Jeff was able to serve his country while being a faithful member of the Church and supporting local members abroad,” Walker said.

For Montreal native **Guillermo Lemus-Martinez**, the Flakes’ presentation reinforced the role of empathy in effective diplomacy. “What I took away more than anything was that influence without empathy is hollow,” Lemus said. “Ambassador Flake’s career reminded me that diplomacy is not built on cleverness or credentials but on character—on whether people trust you enough to listen.”

A consistent theme in Jeff’s remarks was the call to serve. “When all is said and done,” he said, “we desperately still need people to enter public service; it is a noble profession.”

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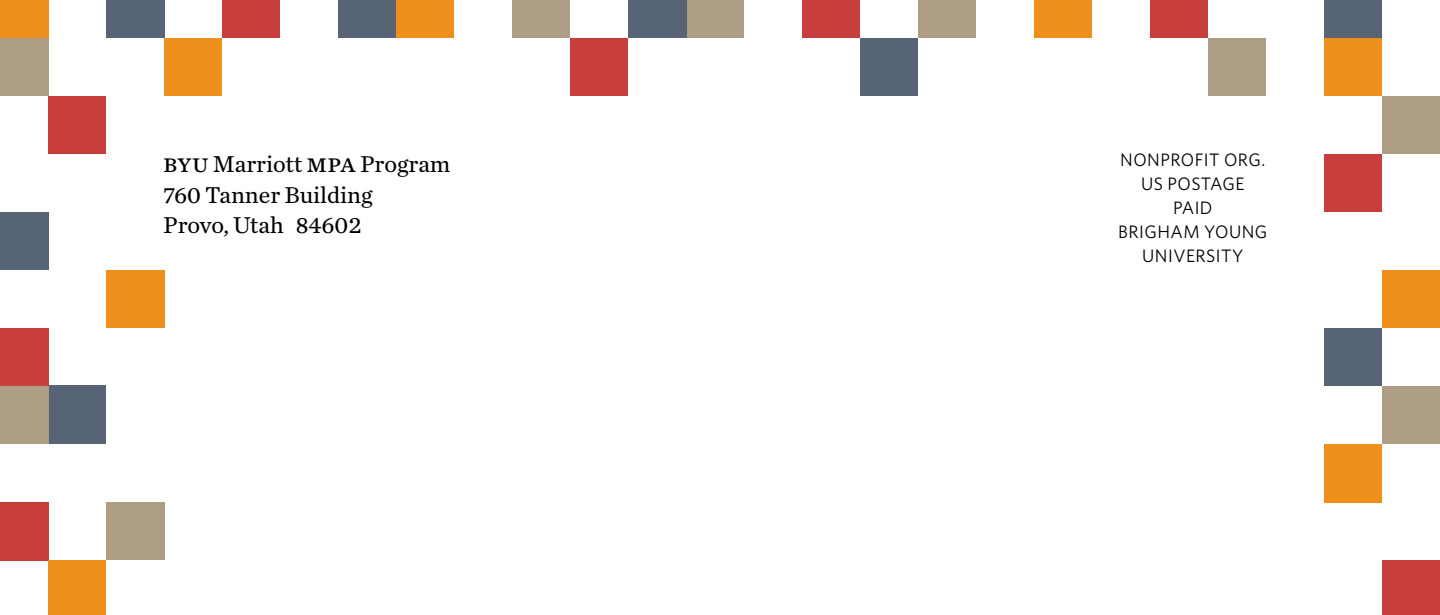
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