Meet the Nicholas School of the Environment’s Student Services Team

We are Here for You!
Sherri Nevius
Associate Dean, Student Services

Responsibilities: Provides leadership of the Student Services team – Durham and Duke Marine Lab. The Student Services team provides the administrative foundation for the quality educational services provided at the Nicholas School. We foster an engaged, inclusive school community, promote career and professional readiness, inspire environmental leadership, and encourage lifelong learning for all students, as defined by the Duke University Mission. Student Services consists of professional masters recruiting and admissions, student administration, career and professional development, and PhD and undergraduate programs.

Bio: Sherri first came to the Nicholas School in 1998 to pursue a Master of Environmental Management (MEM) degree. Prior to coming back to Duke in 2008 in her current position, she worked for URS Corporation as a project manager (environmental consultant) focusing on environmental management systems, program development, and environmental compliance and conformance. Sherri is a Midwesterner: grew up in Wisconsin and attended Cornell College in Iowa for her undergraduate degree. Though she has made North Carolina her home, she still wears a cheese head! Sherri is married, has two boys, 4 dogs, a turtle, and fish – and finds sanity in biking (all kinds!), running, gardening, and working on home improvement projects.
Allison Besch
Director, Career and Professional Development and Executive Education

Responsibilities: Allison provides strategic direction for a comprehensive and integrated professional development center including Career Services for NSOE professional students and Executive Education (non-degree short courses) for environmental professionals. Primary duties include supporting client/employer relations and new program development for both programs, and coaching professional students in career exploration.

Bio: Allison has over 20 years of experience in science communication and educational program design, including work at National Geographic magazine, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, and the North Carolina Maritime Museums. Allison holds a BA in geology and environmental studies from Colgate University, and a Master of Environmental Management degree from Duke University. In her free time, she enjoys hiking, yoga, traveling, and cooking, but not necessarily in that order.
Melissa Hunter
Assistant Director, Career and Professional Development

Responsibilities: Provide career coaching to MEM/MF students. Research and engage with employers. Serve as Program Coordinator for the Stanback Fellowship program. Compile and analyze data for student internships/employment.

Bio: Melissa Hunter joined the Career and Professional Development Center in April 2018. Melissa holds a BA in Social Work from Salisbury University and a MA in Student Affairs in Higher Education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She comes from D.C. where she worked at a non-profit aimed at helping students transition from college to career through teaching a career-readiness curriculum based on the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) competencies. She is passionate about utilizing her background to help students identify, develop, and accomplish their professional goals. In her spare time, Melissa enjoys being active outdoors, eating gluten-free foods, spending time with husband Kyle and baby girl Delaney, and cheering on the Pittsburgh Steelers!
Deanna Knighton
Assistant Director, Career and Professional Development

Responsibilities: Provide career coaching to MEM/MF students. Manage career readiness curriculum. Lead process for internship, enrichment, and student groups’ career treks funding.

Bio: Deanna Knighton joined the Career and Professional Development Center in December 2019. Deanna has a Master’s degree in Agricultural and Natural Resource Economics from the University of Florida (Go Gators!) and a Master of Education in Higher Education Administration from North Carolina State University. She is a certified Global Career Development Facilitator. She grew up on a farm and has experience in government, a non-profit, and abroad. Deanna enjoys coming alongside and working with students as they seek to determine and achieve their professional goals. When not at work, she likes being outside (hiking, camping, exploring, gardening, etc.), reading, traveling, spending time with people, attending performing arts events, and all things Durham.
Moriah Carleton  
Program Specialist, Career and Professional Development

Responsibilities: Moriah assists with administrative tasks for staff, faculty, and students. Assists in managing and supporting Nicholas School Executive Education courses and trainings. Supports CPDC staff by assisting with projects and events.

Bio: Moriah Carleton is a recent graduate from North Carolina State University with a B.A. in International Studies with a concentration in Global Relations, as well as a minor in Linguistics. Moriah has interned with DCID for the past two summers as a staff assistant, working with foreign diplomats. She has been with the Nicholas School since August 2018. In her spare time, she enjoys traveling to different places, and spending time with her family. She has spent time in China, Jordan, and Israel. She hopes to continue her involvement in the field of education and international development.
Tom Brooks  
Staff Assistant, Career and Professional Development  

Responsibilities: Supports projects across the Nicholas School including budget and financial projects; Nicholas School Executive Education courses; the DEL Certificate in Environmental Communications; Career Services; technical support; and helps with special events.

Bio: Worked for Duke in various roles including software development and program administration. Recently returned after teaching public school. MS in Environmental Studies from Johns Hopkins University. BA from College of William and Mary.
Laura Lipps  
Assistant Director, Executive Education

Responsibilities: Laura coordinates and supports Nicholas School Executive Education courses, trainings, and events. Coordinates event planning, on-campus and e-learning initiatives; implements the DEL Certificate in Environmental Communications.

Bio: Prior to joining the Nicholas School, Laura's prior professional positions included policy analyst at the Ecological Society of America and research assistantships at the Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center and the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center. She also served in the U.S. Peace Corps as an Environmental Education Extensionist in El Salvador. Originally from the Washington D.C. area, she holds a B.A. in Biology from Earlham College and a M.S. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies. In her free time, she enjoys wildlife watching, Zen meditation, and shooting the breeze.
Shalini Uppu
Director of Enrollment Services

Responsibilities: Shalini manages the planning and implementation of the recruitment and admission process for the MEM, MF and DEL-MEM professional masters programs. She represents the Nicholas school to attract talented, driven individuals who want to capitalize on their proven abilities and become environmental leaders of consequence. Shalini also collaborates with faculty, staff, and students on a variety of issues and projects pertaining to admissions standards and procedures (including the review of applications), as well as effective recruiting strategies.

Bio: Shalini recently joined the Nicholas School after serving as the Director of Admissions at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Prior to Reed, she spent 5 years at Whitman College as Associate and Senior Associate Director of Admissions and also at the University of Chicago and Connecticut College. When not working, Shalini enjoys tennis, astronomy, and is proud parent to Chester, a prized and resilient succulent.
Melissa A. Kotačka
Assistant Director of Admissions

Responsibilities: Melissa recruits prospective students for the professional master’s programs at the Nicholas School, and serves as a member of our Admissions team to evaluate and recommend candidates for admission. She employs various channels to meet bright, talented, and ambitious individuals whom we hope will find their next intellectual home here at NSOE.

Bio: Melissa joined the Student Services team in July 2019, and brings a range of admissions experience to the NSOE. She maintains a fiercely student-centered approach to her work, and has presented at state, regional, and national conferences on best practices of admissions and college counseling. She is a Nationally Certified Counselor and Certified Thanatologist who holds a M.A. in Career Counseling and Placement with an additional concentration in grief and bereavement from North Carolina Central University. When not working, she’s most likely catering to the whims of her rescue dog or curled up with her nose in a book.
Cynthia (Cindy) Peters  
Assistant Dean, Student Administration

Responsibilities: Strategic lead for Student Administration including student academic and personal advising, financial aid, registration, academic standards and policies; staff manager for undergraduate programs.

Bio: Cindy has worked at Duke for 40 years in several different schools and offices including the Law School, the Sanford School and the Graduate School. She has been with the Nicholas School since December of 2000. Cindy is a native Floridian: born in Miami, she lived in Florida until the age of 12 when her family moved overseas. She returned to the US to attend college in Atlanta, Georgia and is a proud graduate of Agnes Scott College and an equally proud Duke fan. Outside of work, Cindy likes to read, do crossword puzzles, play cards and spend time with friends and family.
Erika Lovelace  
Registrar and Associate Director of Student Administration and Advising  

Responsibilities: Manage and coordinate course scheduling and registration processes, manage and coordinate activities involved in the establishment and maintenance of student records, audit degrees for graduation, student advising, manage the prerequisite status of all students, and leads the new student on-boarding process.

Bio: Erika has worked at Duke since 2002 and at the Nicholas School of the Environment since 2005. Erika’s academic background includes a BA in theatre arts and a MS degree in management with a focus in project management. In her down time, Erika enjoys a competitive game of Scrabble and Words with Friends, reading, card games and she’s a huge fan of professional football. Go Eagles! Erika hails from a big family – she has 4 sisters, 4 brother-in-laws, 5 nieces and nephews, 2 loving parents and her very sweet cat, Olive, whom she loves and adores.
Mary Beth Magallanes
Staff Assistant
Student Administration/Student Services

Responsibilities: When a student has a concern and is not sure who can help with it, Mary Beth is their first stop. She knows a little bit about what everyone else in Student Services does, and directs traffic accordingly. She has good relationships with staff assistants throughout NSOE, so she is able to help with the assistance of her network. Also, she schedules all prospective student visits with staff and faculty. In addition to assisting Enrollment Services, she supports the work of those on the Student Administration team, and is fortunate to have contact with everyone from undergrads to PhD candidates.

Bio: Mary Beth has been with the Nicholas School since September 2018. Prior to working at the Nicholas School, she worked at Duke Health Technology Solutions (DHTS) - the OIT for Duke Health- from 2013 to 2018. One of her reasons for wanting to move out of DHTS was not ever having contact with the patients and knowing how her department’s work affected them. Mary Beth’s favorite part of her work at the Nicholas School is student contact, and her greatest joy at work is seeing students support and guide each other in tough times. She moved to Carrboro, NC from Islip Terrace, NY in 2010, and it’s the best decision she ever made. She now owns a home in Graham, NC. She has a BA in Journalism from Marymount College (Tarrytown, NY), and she loves writing, book discussion groups, cooking, exploring new neighborhoods, and is very happy living with her human, David, and canines, Atticus and Daisy.
Katie Wood
Assistant Director, Undergraduate & Marine Lab Programs, Student Administration

Responsibilities: Overall coordination of the undergraduate program at the Marine Lab and academic programs, Marine Science and Conservation Leadership Certificate and the Marine Science and Conservation Concentration within the Environmental Science majors. Marine Lab website, social media, general communications for the Marine Lab. Advising, recruiting, coordination with undergraduate students and student groups. Meets and recruits prospective students for Nicholas’ professional masters programs; also assists in coordinating the Coastal Environmental Management concentration of the MEM degree.

Bio: Katie started with Duke University at the Marine Lab in 2007. Katie is originally from Batavia, IL and has a MA degree in Higher Education Administration from SUNY Stony Brook, and a BS in Media Studies from the University of Illinois. When not at work you can find Katie out on the boat with her family or in the company of her three dogs (Scout, Luna, Rosco) or at the gym.
Kelley Robbins-Thompson
Program Coordinator, DEL-MEM Program, Student Administration

Responsibilities: Coordinates and oversees daily operations of the DEL-MEM program; plans, manages, and implements the logistics and administration of DEL place-based sessions; provides administrative support for DEL students and faculty; supports DEL recruitment efforts; collaborates with faculty director to identify best practices and offer programmatic recommendations.

Bio: Kelley graduated from the Nicholas School’s Master of Environmental Management program in 2019 and joined the Student Services team in 2020. Prior to her Nicholas School adventures, she served as the Community Agriculture Director at a conservation and community land trust in Athens, GA. Kelley has a Master of Social work from Washington University in St. Louis and a BA in political science and urban studies from Rhodes College. She is also a proud Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (Thailand, ’03-’05). When not at work, you can find Kelley hiking with her family, playing in the dirt with her son, triathlon-ing, and spending as much time outdoors as possible!
Danielle Wiggins
Assistant Director, PhD Programs, Student Administration

Responsibilities: Danielle directly administers and manages academic, operational, and financial activities for four of the six NSOE PhD programs (ENV, EOS, UPEP, UPE). She serves as the liaison for NSOE’s business office and the other two PhD programs (MSC and UPEH) as well as Duke Graduate School. Danielle is an essential advocate for NSOE PhD programs and students.

Bio: Prior to joining the Nicholas School in 2015, Danielle served as Logistics Manager at Duke’s National Evolutionary Synthesis Center (NESCent) for seven years where she managed logistics for over 60 meetings and events with 1500 visitors annually to the center. She received her BS in Business Administration from Gardner-Webb University in 2008 and became a Certified Meeting Planner in 2014. Danielle is currently working on a master’s in higher education concentrating on educational leadership. In her spare time, Danielle enjoys traveling, community service, and spending time with her family and friends.
Responsibilities: Provide administrative support to key professional and undergraduate student and program functions as part of the Duke University Marine Lab and Student Services team. Support, plan, coordinate and administer activities and select programming. Serve as registrar for Duke University Marine Laboratory undergraduate and CEM students; schedule ML courses; manage application and admissions process for non-Duke students; administer course evaluations for ML; process visa paperwork for international scholars, students, and visitors. Meets and recruits prospective students for Nicholas’ professional masters programs; also assists in coordinating the Coastal Environmental Management concentration of the MEM degree.

Bio: Gwendy is originally from Henderson, NC but has lived in Carteret County for more than a decade. She acquired a BS in Horticulture Science from NC State University in 2003. For 12 years Gwendy was the Conservation Horticulturist at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores where she worked designing and maintaining interior and exterior habitats, providing outreach to community groups and individuals and working alongside other agencies to promote native plants in coastal communities. She also spent time in a high school classroom teaching Agriscience and Horticulture. Gwendy has no free time as she is the mom of 2 boys who keep her running around outside, jumping on trampolines and swimming in the sound. She enjoys reading, gardening and eating ice cream.
Laura Collins  
Program Coordinator, Professional Programs

Responsibilities: manage master’s project (MP) processes, manage and coordinate external partner engagement and project development, collaborate with faculty to design and implement MP guidelines, resources, and events, and support planning and delivery of projects related to MEM and MF program operations.

Bio: Laura graduated from the Nicholas School’s Master of Environmental Management program in 2017 and joined the Student Services team in August 2019. Prior to returning to Duke, Laura was a program associate for Greenprint Partners, where she designed and led client engagement and impact evaluation for community-driven green infrastructure projects. She earned her BA in biology from Colgate University. When not in the office, you will likely find Laura exploring Duke Forest with her beloved Australian shepherd, traveling to visit family and friends, or working on her latest painting/drawing/knitting project.
Bailee Starnes
Undergraduate Program Coordinator

Responsibilities: Bailee provides support to the undergraduate programs and registrar functions by working closely with the DUSs, plan and implement special events such as graduation with distinction, manage web updates, assist with course registration and scheduling matters, new student on-boarding and provide support for orientation.

Bio: Bailee is a recent graduate from East Carolina University with a B.A. in Psychology and a minor in Biology. Bailee's favorite college memory is being Philanthropy Chairman for her sorority, Phi Mu, where she got to support the nonprofit, Children's Miracle Network Hospitals. Bailee has been at the Nicholas School since September 2019, where she supported the Stanback Fellowship Program, The Career and Professional Development Center, the DEL-MEM DC Leadership Module, and now the Undergraduate Program and Registrar. In her free time, Bailee enjoys traveling, playing with her dog, Phoebe, and spending time with friends and family!
The Student Services team looks forward to meeting you in the fall and interacting with you throughout the next two years and after you graduate.

WELCOME to the Nicholas School of the Environment, Duke University and Durham, NC!

Contact us at https://nicholas.duke.edu/people/staff