The UNC Charlotte Urban Institute

Gambrell Student Research Fellowship Program

What is a fellowship?

A fellowship is a financial award provided to students to support research and/or scholarship. It is usually provided in the form of a stipend (salary) so students can focus on their research and learning without the challenges of maintaining an additional full-time job. Fellowships do not have to be repaid like a loan, and they are not dependent on students' grades like a scholarship.

What does The Gambrell Student Research Fellowship entail?

The Gambrell Student Research Fellowship is an 18-month program that supports graduate student research and professional development for master's students enrolled full-time at UNC Charlotte. As part of the fellowship, students will be paid bi-monthly to work 15-20 hours a week (including attending biweekly meetings) at the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute and on a research project that Fellows co-design with a community partner.

What's unique about *this* Fellowship?

The Gambrell Student Research Fellowship empowers UNC Charlotte graduate students to apply their academic training and local expertise to evaluate issues related to quality of life. It advances The Gambrell Foundation's mission to learn directly from communities about what defines a great life and what is needed to cultivate it. Recognizing that not everyone in Charlotte and the surrounding region has access to resources and opportunities essential for quality of life, the fellowship mobilizes students' lived experiences and locally informed insights to understand and appropriately address quality-of-life challenges while illuminating the assets that make the region great. Students are supported in pursuing a topic of their interest with the guidance of Urban Institute staff and alongside a community partner. Fellows will additionally benefit from an educational seminar, cohort-style peer support, professional and community networking, and skills building.

In alignment with the university's strategic plan to expand community-engagement efforts, the fellowship will provide new pathways for community-driven student research, increasing the Urban Institute's public and institutional impacts within and across the region.

Who is Eligible?

- The fellowship is open to UNC Charlotte master's students who are originally from the Carolinas (North and South). Students from the 14-county Charlotte region are encouraged to apply.
- Prior research experience is not required.

- Students must be admitted full-time to a Master's degree program at UNC Charlotte from Fall 2026 through Spring 2028.

What will Fellows learn?

- Through hands-on experience and the support and direction of Urban Institute research staff, students will connect their academic learning and personal journeys to a community issue, plan and implement an independent, feasible research project using community-based methods to address a meaningful question, and apply their research findings to create appropriate recommendations and/or interventions.

- Fellows will learn how to translate research findings into accessible formats for public audiences and use diverse methods and outlets for knowledge dissemination.

- Fellows will become knowledgeable about community-engaged research ethics and best practices, including collaboration and working with people, particularly vulnerable populations; reflexivity and understanding how, as a human instrument, the researcher impacts research; and responsible data collection, storage, and sharing.

- Fellows will develop a deeper understanding of their own experiences, as well as the cultural, structural, and systemic factors underpinning contemporary social issues. With this broad understanding, students will come to appreciate how history, culture, policy, economics, and social systems (e.g., community, family, and beyond) contribute to different outcomes and experiences, including and especially their own.

What will Fellows do?

Fellows will work directly with a Research Mentor (Urban Institute staff or other engaged faculty member) on their innovative and community-driven project. The fellowship will be structured around five key phases–question, design, learn, translate, and share– in which fellows will progress through each phase as a cohort[1].

- **Question**: Fellows will solidify a research question related to one or more dimensions of quality of life and relative to their community or the region. The dimensions of quality of life encompass the social, cultural, economic, ecological, and biological factors that contribute to an individual's well-being. Fellows will leverage the interest and expertise of community members and partners when deciding on a topic and question to ensure its relevancy and value to the community. Questions could include such diverse topics as:
    - How could more young adults participate in local decision-making on transportation?

[1] Timeline for each phase is expected to occur as follows: during the first semester of the program, students will solidify their question and conduct their literature/preliminary research and design their research plan. During summer and fall, students will conduct their research, analysis, and begin interpreting their findings. In the final spring semester, students will compose and disseminate deliverables summarizing their research, findings, and action-based recommendations.

    - What defines belonging in my hometown of Shelby County and how can we create more spaces of belonging for youth?
    - How and why does access to green space or nature vary among Charlotte communities and what are the connections between exposure to natural environments and perceived stress and self-reported happiness?
    - How does the strength of social networks and community engagement influence perceived well-being and safety in low-income neighborhoods?
    - How does social isolation manifest in rural versus urban spaces and what solutions are appropriate?
    - How do traditional food practices among immigrants in Hickory, NC contribute to both nutritional health and social belonging?
    - How does early-life access to arts and leisure associate with awe and activities in adulthood?
    - How do respiratory illnesses map onto poultry farm operations and/or manufacturing companies in rural counties surrounding Mecklenburg?
- **Design**: Fellows will review literature and conduct preliminary research among community stakeholders to inform their research project and design. In working with their mentor and a community partner, they will design a research plan and data collection tools as needed. Research methods can vary depending on students' academic background, interests, and field of study. We value diverse approaches and welcome students from a wide array of disciplines, including, but not limited to, computing and informatics, data science, geography, STEM disciplines, economics, public policy, anthropology, sociology, social work, philosophy, religion, and public health. Projects could include a range of topics and approaches:
    - A photovoice project on ….
    - A handbook of evidence-based and promising practices in …
    - A spatial analysis and mapping of ….
    - Focus groups and interviews on….
    - A data visualization of…
- **Learn**: Aside from the knowledge that fellows will gain through their research, fellows will participate in a bi-weekly seminar (dates and times will be determined based on students' schedules) where they will learn critical research and translation skills, professional development, and peer-review while building cohort community and support. Students will also have opportunities to engage directly with community social impact leaders, faculty experts, and visiting scholars through guest lectures, meetings,

and workshops. Fellows will also have the opportunity for hands-on learning on other Institute research and data initiatives.

- **Translate**: Fellows will translate their research findings into a public-facing product by the end of the program. They will work with their staff mentor (and faculty mentor if applicable) and community partner to determine the deliverables, expectations, and critical audiences. Some examples of community/public deliverables include a technical report to be provided to the community and partner(s), a podcast or radio interview, a news article/op-ed/letter to the editor/, a community presentation, public brochure, booklet, or guidebook, informational videos, blog posts, compelling infographics, and digital media. Creative writing and thought pieces are also encouraged.

- **Share**: Beyond the public deliverable, fellows will present an overview of their research and findings in the final semester of the Fellowship program (second spring). Fellows may have the opportunity to additionally co-author a scholarly piece based on their work at the Institute. This may encompass co-authoring a manuscript to submit to a peer-reviewed journal, a research brief for the Institute's website, or a conference presentation or poster. If fellows show interest and capacity, mentors will guide fellows in this process and provide continual feedback. Lastly, fellows may explore submitting their ideas for interventions and potential solutions to funders with the support of the Urban Institute.

Additional Details:

- Fellows will be assigned a primary research mentor who will advise them throughout the program, including providing support and guidance in developing and implementing the student's research, working with community partners, interpreting and translating research findings, and reviewing and editing deliverables. Students will also interact with other staff members and develop a network of mentors.

- In addition, students may connect with a Gambrell Faculty Fellow to continue building their network and learn about broad types of research and scholarship. The Faculty Fellow mentor may or may not work directly with the student on their project.

- The program is 18 months, encompassing three academic semesters and one summer term. The 2027-2028 cohort will begin in January 2027 and end in May 2028. Proposed projects should be feasible for the fellowship period.

- Fellows are expected to work 15- 20 hours per week (this includes work in the community/data collection) at the Urban Institute on Campus. Biweekly seminars and professionalization or community engagement activities are counted as part of Fellows' weekly work hours.

- The Fellowship provides a stipend of $8,500 per fall and spring semester and $4,800 for summer work.

- The Fellowship provides a tuition scholarship of $1500 per fall and spring semester of the program.

Additional Benefits for Students

- Fellows are encouraged to use their Fellowship research and/or final products as their Master's thesis/capstone/practicum, provided they receive prior approval from their academic committee. The Fellowship final products will also enhance students' resumes, CVs, and portfolios for future job applications.
- The Fellowship gives students hands-on experience in applied research and public scholarship, helping them decide whether to pursue this work as a career.
- While each Fellow will have one primary UI staff mentor, they will also work with multiple staff and potentially connect with a Gambrell Faculty Fellow, building a broader network of mentors and connections.
- A biweekly seminar will teach students valuable skills in professionalization and public scholarship, as well as serve as a space for cohort community building and peer support.
- Fellows will also have the opportunity to attend additional (optional) Urban Institute events (e.g., happy hours) outside of the seminars and project work.

Application Requirements

- A letter written by the applicant that describes their motivation, quality-of-life interest, and how their proposed project connects to Charlotte and/or the surrounding region and the Mission of the Urban Institute. The letter should be no more than two pages, single-spaced, and address the following:
    - Local Issue & Personal Motivation: Identify a pressing local issue related to quality of life in Charlotte or the surrounding region. Explain why you are passionate about addressing this issue and how it connects to your academic, personal, community, or professional interests.
    - Proposed Research Project: Describe your proposed research project and explain how it is meaningful, relevant, and timely for Charlotte or the region. Highlight how your research can contribute to understanding and addressing the identified issue (e.g., inform policy, provide practice solutions).
    - Community Engagement & Application: Identify potential community partners (e.g., local organizations, nonprofits, government agencies) who could benefit from or collaborate on this research.
    - Alignment with the Urban Institute: Discuss how your research interests align with the Urban Institute's proactive research agenda and mission, including how your work will contribute to advancing knowledge and a good quality of life for everyone in the Charlotte region.

    - Broader Impacts: Share a plan to engage those impacted by the issue directly - not just as part of your research, but also in sharing your findings
    - Personal Fit: Include one paragraph about why you are apt (the right person) to do this work. For example, you may reflect on your lived experiences that provide a unique perspective, your commitment to your community and service, research or work experience that aligns with the necessary skills and/or topic of interest, etc.
- A simple resume or cv (2 page limit)

Overview of the Urban Institute & Gambrell Foundation

The UNC Charlotte Urban Institute is our region's applied research and community outreach center. We seek solutions to the complex social, economic, and environmental challenges facing our communities. We engage expertise across a diverse set of disciplines and life experiences to curate data and conduct actionable research and policy analysis that helps equip changemakers with the power of data and research to solve our communities' greatest challenges.

The Gambrell Foundation is a Charlotte, North Carolina-based foundation dedicated to the investment in research and ideas that foster quality of life. From their website, they "cross-pollinate promising, well-researched ideas and take them from the pages of books to our communities" and "champion ideas that offer a strong sense of purpose, a daily dose of awe, and a belief that you are better off because of your community, not despite it".