



NEWS RELEASE

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Master of Public Health Scholarship Recipients Announced

Johnson-Baker scholarships honor MPH program founders

Asheville, NC, August 18, 2023: The UNC Asheville – UNC Gillings Master of Public Health program announces the first recipients of a scholarship provided by MAHEC and created to honor two founders of the program. The Johnson-Baker Scholarships are presented to up to 10 students per MPH class who have lived or worked in Western North Carolina and expressed a commitment to regional communities that have been underserved and disproportionately affected by structural biases.

The competitive \$10,000, tuition-offset awards are named in memory of Travis Johnson, MD, MPH, and Melissa Baker, MPH, two of the program’s founders who contributed to the health of Western North Carolinians in a myriad of ways and died at the height of their careers.

Dr. Johnson was the first director for the Asheville MPH program, who lived with cancer for eight years when he died a month before the COVID pandemic broke out, just as the first cohort approached graduation. He was a passionate advocate for maternal, child, and other public health services in underserved communities and always sought to “do what is right, love mercy, and walk humbly.” In this MPH program, he wanted to “partner with local agencies to give students the opportunity to solve cases based on real-life issues in real-time.”

Melissa Baker was a community health catalyst who enhanced collaboration in caring for children with disabilities and led region-wide quality improvement initiatives in pediatrics and women’s health. She was instrumental in making sure physicians, mental health counselors, schools, and law enforcement throughout Buncombe County and WNC understood both the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and how to help people with trauma build resilience skills.

Congratulations to the following 2023-25 Johnson-Baker Scholars: Adriana Alvarez, Natalie Beach, Ryan Bostic, Albert Chow, Dakotah Fozzard, Vanessa Howe, Chasity Leake, Niki Maness, Imani Saya, and Taylor Young.

Students in the UNCA - UNC Gillings MPH program, located on MAHEC’s Biltmore campus, attend classes with their cohort once a week during the academic year. In 21 months, they earn a Master of Public Health, with a concentration in Place-Based Health. Johnson-Baker Scholars will continue to serve Western North Carolina communities as they cultivate public health skills in the program.

More information about the MPH program may be found at www.mahec.net/mph.

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Photo caption

Recipients of the 2023-25 Johnson-Baker Scholarship, provided by MAHEC. (First row, from left: Dakota Fozzard, Adriana Alvarez, Chasity Leake, Taylor Young. Second row: Natalie Beach, Niki Maness, Vanessa Howe, Imani Saya, Albert Chow, Ryan Bostic)

Mountain Area Health Education Center

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About MAHEC

Established nearly five decades ago, MAHEC – Mountain Area Health Education Center – is a leader in healthcare, education, and innovation. Headquartered in Asheville with satellite offices in [various locations](#) across its 16-county Western North Carolina service area, MAHEC is the largest of nine [Area Health Education Centers](#) in North Carolina. With nearly 1,100 employees, MAHEC’s mission is to recruit, train and retain the workforce needed to create a healthy North Carolina, with a focus on primary care in rural communities and those with less access to resources.

MAHEC’s 14-acre Biltmore campus is also home to [UNC Health Sciences at MAHEC](#), an academic health center in partnership with UNC-Chapel Hill that includes programs from the UNC School of Medicine, UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy, and UNC Adams School of Dentistry. A private, [501\(c\)3 nonprofit organization](#), MAHEC will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2024. For more information, visit [mahec.net](#) and follow MAHEC on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter](#).

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