

Increasing mobility and opportunity close to new board member's heart



When Stelfanie Williams first considered a career path, she thought she might be a journalist or documentarian because she loved to write and began to study public policy in preparation. But after graduation from Duke University, she began teaching in the NC Community College System and knew she had found her mission. Helping people move toward a better quality of life has been a common thread connecting her life's work.

"What I have valued throughout my career are the opportunities for transformative learning," says Williams, GoTriangle's newest board member and Duke University's vice president for Durham and Community Affairs. "And whether it's working with students – or in the case of my current position, working with community organizations as partners – I enjoy collaborating to create positive change, greater social mobility and community development."

At Duke University, Williams' job revolves around helping to build and sustain community programs in areas that include economic development, affordable housing, education, civic engagement, neighborhood relations and health. She sees her role on the GoTriangle board as a continuation of her passion to help move people toward their goals.

"That's what interests me most, even in the work of the GoTriangle board ... those elements of transit that could be instrumental in creating greater access, opportunity, and connection for residents of the Triangle area," she says.

Born in New York to native North Carolinians, Williams was a child when her parents returned with her to North Carolina, and she has spent most of her life studying and working in various parts of the state. She earned undergraduate degrees in public policy and Spanish from Duke, a graduate degree in management from Western Carolina University, and a doctoral degree in education from North Carolina State University.

In studying public policy, she says she came to understand its importance in shaping communities. She then gravitated toward education policy partly because she had seen the difference that education made for her grandparents and her father.

"Immediately after graduating, I was offered an opportunity to teach, and came to appreciate adult education and higher learning, ultimately deciding to make that my life's work," she says. "I still enjoy writing when I find time, which is less and less these days, but I consider myself a life-long learner and a life-long educator."

Before becoming Duke's vice president for Durham and Community Affairs in 2018, Williams was president of Vance-Granville Community College. During Williams' time there, the college experienced its largest graduating classes, record fundraising and programmatic and capital expansion. These advances she credits to others.

"It is a tribute to the fantastic team at that institution and so many teachers, educators, counselors – you name it – who are a part of helping to support student experiences," she says. "I was fortunate to lead a great team there."

When pressed further about these successes, she reveals a three-pronged strategy. "There, as well as in my current role at Duke, I look for the intersection of the mission of the institution with community-defined needs and interests, and how connecting the two can positively impact quality of life," she says.

As she assumes her new role on the GoTriangle board, she says she is starting by listening and learning. She sees the biggest challenge GoTriangle faces as coming up with regional transit plans so that people can easily access workforce opportunities and enjoy social mobility.

In advancing people's lives, GoTriangle's ability to tackle transit issues regionally is a key reason she wanted to join the board, she says.

"The board has representation from across the region coming together to consider issues from a regional perspective, and that for me is crucial as we think about the future of transit," she says. "A regional approach is key – today's families and workers don't necessarily live within four corners. People need to be able to move about in order to live out their best lives."

As a board member, she says she looks forward to meeting GoTriangle employees in the coming years.

"I hope that over my tenure I will come to know many of the employees and that their interests and knowledge will help inform the leadership team as they bring ideas and plans to the board," she says. "I appreciate the roles that various employees fill in serving this community. Not only are they employees of GoTriangle, but they also provide an important service for this region, and for that I am grateful."

People – young and old – continue to inform and inspire her in her work, she says, citing her grandparents, who overcame many obstacles, and her children who are nearing adulthood and offer her new ways of thinking.

"I am inspired by people every day," says Williams, who also mentions community members and colleagues who help shape her thinking or her work. "I value and appreciate that it takes a team to keep everything moving and working together, and I believe small things can make a big difference."