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## **SOUND ADVICE, WORD OF MOUTH HELP FIRM**



Derrick Drakeford talks with a client over the phone. Drakeford has run his own consulting firm, Drakeford & Associates, since 2003.

**By STANLEY B. CHAMBERS JR, Staff Writer**

The woman who motivated Derrick Drakeford to start his consulting firm ended up becoming his first client.

Since then, he has raised \$3 million in grant money for his clients. Started in June 2003, Drakeford & Associates has worked with the Durham Child Development Center, Duke University, the Triangle Urban League and other organizations.

Drakeford, 27, got the idea for his firm while obtaining a graduate degree in public administration at UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Government.

He wanted to create a think tank for businesses and provide services, such as grant writing, for organizations that can't afford a development director.

His first job was a feasibility study for the Historically Minority Colleges and Universities Consortium of North Carolina, studying whether the not-for-profit organization, which works to close the achievement gap of minority students, should apply for non-profit status. The study was used to structure the consortium, said director Nan Coleman, who inspired Drakeford to start

his firm.

"He did a very good job on that report," Coleman said. "The consortium members were very pleased with his work and the manner in which he handled himself in conducting the study."

His second job was analyzing Shaw University's freshman studies program. The school then hired him to implement his suggested changes. Drakeford eventually became director of Shaw's freshman studies program.

But things were hard in the beginning. He had to rent out rooms in his house to survive. Drakeford would teach at Shaw and then work on his business at home. Having a part-time job was key for starting a business with no capital, along with six month's savings for living expenses, because it took that long to develop business relationships, he said.

Teaching four classes a week and having a laptop provided the flexibility Drakeford needed to cultivate his business. Quality and service have been the focuses of his firm, and commitments to those ideals have allowed the company to grow, he said. About 80 percent of his clients are referred by word of mouth. Drakeford left Shaw in 2005 to focus on his business full time. The firm is moving into a bigger office in June, and Drakeford is considering expanding into other cities.

"Grant writing is something that you know you need or don't need," he said. "You can't sell that service."

It just so happened the Long Leaf Opera in Chapel Hill wanted to raise funds for an outreach program to train ballet dancers. James E. Shaeffer, the opera's executive director, met Drakeford about six months ago while sharing a rehearsal space at Legacy Dance Studio. Now Drakeford is working on a feasibility study for the opera, examining space for an administrative office, a set-building shop and storage, rehearsal and performing areas.

"He's a professional gentleman, does what he says he's going to do and submits his reports on time," Shaeffer said. "I'm looking forward for a long-term relationship."

(For more information, contact Drakeford & Associates at 360-1053 or [www.drakefordassociates.org](http://www.drakefordassociates.org).)

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