Barbara Polk

She is Carolina’s own, a 1979 graduate, and she is among the University’s finest — honored as an undergraduate with membership in the Order of the Golden Fleece. In 1980, Carolina brought Barbara Polk back into the fold, hiring her to help find and secure the next generation of our best and brightest — students who, like her, excel in critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making; whose talent for communication and collaboration will connect them to people and ideas that create new knowledge; and whose work ethic, determination and drive set them apart from all others.

Now Deputy Director and Senior Associate Director in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions, Barbara has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the University and its ideals, working tirelessly to help tens of thousands of students find their paths to and through Carolina. “She has traveled to nearly every community in the state through her work in Admissions,” wrote a nominator. “A native of North Carolina, she knows better than most the beacon of hope UNC represents to people from all walks of life. She is as comfortable, respectful and effective counseling a first-generation college student as she is talking with the child of a fourth-generation alumnus, and she wants no less for one than the other.”

Barbara’s leadership in Admissions is informed by the same sense of humanity. Nearly 15 years ago, she was the driving force behind the University’s policy to end early-decision. “At the time, the prevailing thought was that ‘elite’ schools had to have an early-decision program,” wrote a nominator. “But Barbara argued that this practice coerced students into making commitments before they were truly ready to do so, denying them the chance to explore other opportunities, change and grow during their senior years of high school. Her argument took real
courage, but carried the day. As a result, UNC became the first major university to eliminate this practice, and others have followed."

The ability to evaluate academic potential is especially critical when considering student-athletes for admission. Barbara is committed to finding those who can succeed academically while balancing high-profile sports and high demands on their time. “I have watched Barbara interact with the Department of Athletics, coaches and administrators to identify student-athletes who will be successful,” wrote a nominator. “She has worked steadfastly, balancing many competing demands, to ensure that everyone understands how Admissions and the Committee on Special Talent evaluate prospective students.”

According to one colleague, Barbara has a particular gift for helping students and families in distress. Her many acts of kindness include outreach to an admitted student injured in a very serious auto accident, welcoming a new work-study student with lunch at Sutton’s or offering a warm office to students on a cold day. “Barbara’s good deeds have typically taken place behind the scenes and out of the limelight,” wrote a colleague. “She has done them out love for the University and the goodness of her heart.”

For advocating and upholding the ideals of higher education; for the great integrity, respect, warmth and compassion she brings to the admissions process; and because — in the words of a colleague — “When I reflect on her contributions to our University, words like fair, honest, tireless, selfless and gracious come to mind,” Barbara Polk receives the 2018 C. Knox Massey Distinguished Service Award.