As a little girl growing up on the lower west side of Buffalo, Maria Runfola would never have dared believe that she would one day be a professor, much less an administrator, at the “Big University at North Main.” A teacher opened the door to these unimaginable possibilities, thereby inspiring Runfola on the path of these dreams. Her aspirations began early as she gave her first solo piano recital at age 5 and performed with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra at age 9. Just as a teacher did for her, Runfola has spent a career making an impact on her profession and the education of her students.

Her career began in 1962 teaching vocal music in a middle school in the Tonawanda City School District. Her ability as an educator and innate interest in how children learn and develop musically allowed Runfola to make a difference in the lives of her students, uncovering and nurturing their musical abilities. Many of her students went on to become music educators and leaders in the community bringing quality arts experiences to Western New York.

Although Runfola loved working with middle school students, she likes to think she moved “up” as she began studying younger and younger children. When Runfola came to the Graduate School of Education in 1998, her research agenda crystallized as she found support to explore her ideas regarding the development of music audiation in young children. Her work with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in MusicPlay classes is an ongoing endeavor that will result in a catalogue of young children’s natural musical responses. Insight gained from working with young children in MusicPlay led to important questions regarding parallels between language and music literacies. She is currently analyzing data from a 3-year project, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which investigated the effect of appropriate music instruction on preschooler’s oral language development. In addition to several articles in preparation supporting the benefits of rich musical experiences in early childhood, Runfola has translated the empirically-based findings from the NEA study into a $1,000,000 professional development grant proposal for work with early childhood teachers in Western New York.

Runfola’s career exemplifies service to the profession. She is a frequent presenter at conferences, a staff development trainer for school districts throughout the country, and a guest conductor of regional elementary and junior high school choruses. Her various administrative positions at UB included chair of the Department of Music and associate dean of the university’s Graduate School, and she is currently chair of the Department of Learning and Instruction. Recently, Runfola served New York’s State Education Department as chair of a taskforce whose mission was to develop arts assessments for high school students throughout the state. As a result of her efforts, student artists in New York State will soon have opportunities to showcase their knowledge and abilities in the arts.

Runfola’s publications include The Development and Practical Application of Music Learning Theory and a chapter on the developmental characteristics of music learners in The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning. She was commissioned by the Music Educators National Conference to compile a booklet, TIPS The Child Voice, and has been a music consultant for numerous musical toys for Fisher-Price.