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### **GWU Doctoral Student Pushes Past Language Barrier to Complete Curriculum and Instruction Degree**

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# GWU Doctoral Student Pushes Past Language Barrier to Complete Curriculum and Instruction Degree

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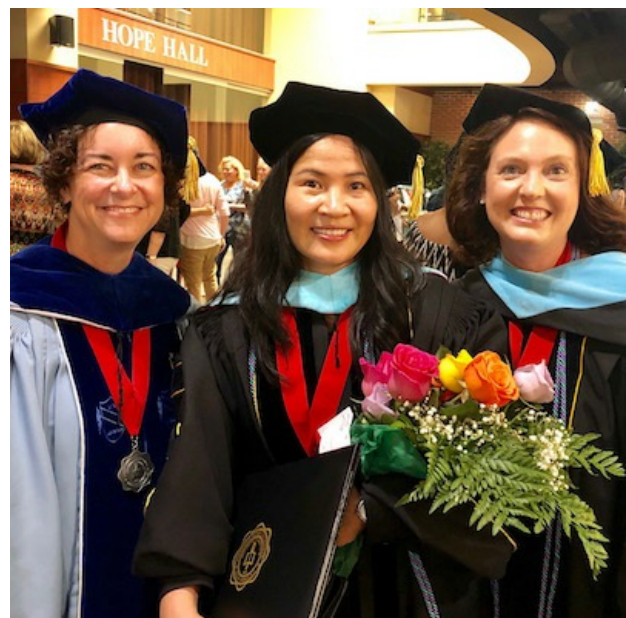
## Thanh-Thuy T. Nguyen, '19, Wanted to Quit, but GWU Professors Encouraged her to Pursue Her Dream

Give Thanh-Thuy T. Nguyen a complicated mathematical problem, and she calculates the answer in a few minutes. But ask her to read a book on curriculum theory and practice, and the native of South Vietnam will pour over the material for hours, looking up definitions. Even after 24 years in America, Nguyen, a college math instructor, is not confident in her English skills.

She cried on her first day as a doctoral student at Gardner-Webb University. She was overwhelmed just thinking about the effort it would take for her to understand her textbooks and then write a dissertation. “I have a mathematical mind,” Nguyen explained. “Language is the weakest point for me. A lot of the words I have never seen. The understanding part is the most difficult.”

Several times while pursuing her Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction, Nguyen shared her concerns with Dr. Jennifer Putnam, associate dean, School of Education Graduate Program and coordinator for the Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction Program. “I wanted to give up, and Dr. Putnam said, ‘I know you can do it,’” Nguyen offered.

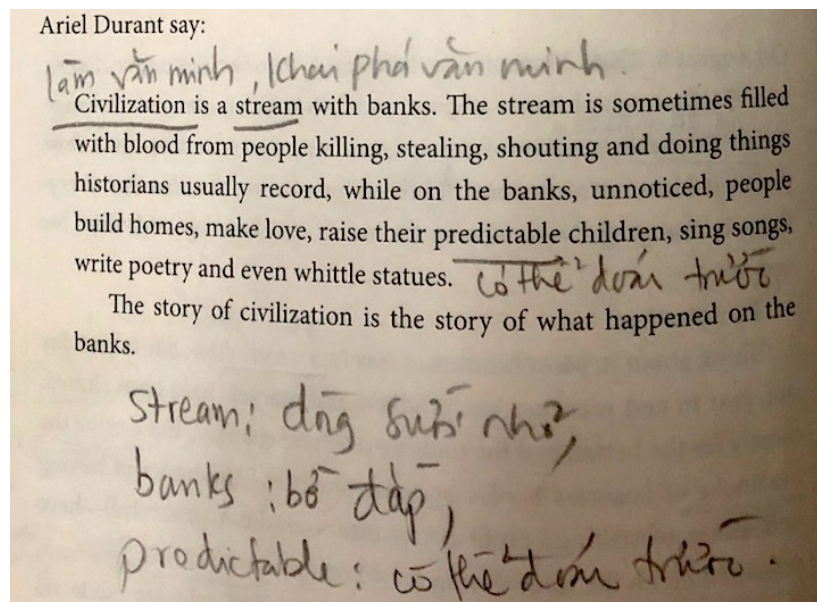
With encouragement from Putnam and Dr. Sydney Brown, dean of Gayle Bolt Price School of Graduate Studies, Nguyen stayed in the program. In August 2019, she obtained her doctorate—finally accomplishing a goal that had eluded her for several years.



Thanh-Thuy T. Nguyen, center, celebrates after receiving her Doctor of Education degree in curriculum and instruction with Dr. Sydney Brown, left, and Dr. Jennifer Putham, right.

Nguyen's journey began in 1995 when her family came to America through a program sponsored by the U.S. government. Her father was a South Vietnamese Army Captain, who had been jailed in North Vietnam for more than eight years. When they arrived in Charlotte, N.C., Nguyen was 21 years old. In college, she had taken Russian and electrical engineering, but she didn't know one word of English.

She bought a dictionary and began to learn 25 words at a time. After she'd been in Charlotte for a year, a woman from an agency that assisted immigrants took her to apply for a job at IBM, an information technology company. "She told them I had knowledge of electrical engineering, but I didn't know English," Nguyen stated. "They gave me an (engineering) test and I made 100."



A page from one of Thanh-Thuy T. Nguyen's textbooks shows how she looked up the words to better understand their meaning.

She was hired to troubleshoot and employees were told to communicate with her by email, so that she could look up the words in a dictionary and type a response. "If someone knocked on my door, I pointed to the sign on the wall that said to email me," Nguyen said. "They brought me (electronic) boards to work on that other people couldn't fix. When they realized I could do the job, they hired an English teacher for me, two hours a day."

She also went to school and earned an associate's degree from Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte. However, in 2004, the company moved overseas, laying off her and several employees. They were eligible for a federal program to earn a two-year degree, but she wanted to get her bachelor's degree. "I fought with them for three years," Nguyen related. "The third time, they told me I could go, if I could finish in two years."

She had two children and was pregnant with her third, but managed to complete her bachelor's in mathematics. Her plan was to teach high school, but after observing the

behavior of high school students, she decided the atmosphere wasn't for her. She took a year off to stay with her baby. When she was ready to go back to work, she went to see her adviser at UNC-Charlotte. "I told her, 'I think you advised me to take the wrong major,'" Nguyen recalled. "She said, 'Teach college.' I said, 'How many more years do I have to study?' She said, 'Two more years.'"

Because of her exceptional math score on the GRE and past grades, Nguyen was offered a scholarship for the doctoral program. While in school, she became pregnant with her fourth child. After the baby was born, Nguyen felt strongly about spending more time with her and all of her children. She didn't complete her dissertation. Instead of a doctorate, she received her second master's degree and began teaching part time at five colleges.

In 2011, she was hired full time by Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte. After she'd been there five years, the dean started pushing her to complete her doctorate, so she could be considered for professorship. She kept putting it off, because of her fears about comprehending new words and concepts. Some of the faculty at Johnson C. Smith recommended Gardner-Webb, and Nguyen decided to give it a try.

Since earning her doctorate from GWU, Nguyen has been promoted to assistant professor of mathematics at Johnson C. Smith. She is also the director of the STEM Resource Center. "Having the opportunity to partake in the Gardner-Webb Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction program was a great blessing for me," Nguyen asserted. "Through this program, I was able to have a path towards reaching my goals for higher education and future career paths. As a mathematics professor, the projects required for my degree helped me to improve my listening, presenting, and discussion skills. I have also grown in my facilitation skills to create trust and promote effective interactions among colleagues. I am very thankful for the nonstop help and encouragement of the GWU professors who guided me along the way."

[Learn more about doctoral programs in the GWU School of Education.](#)



Thanh-Thuy T. Nguyen, left, poses with her church choir in traditional Vietnamese dress.