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Office of University
Communications

March 13, 2018

Event Designed to Help Participants Understand Issues Related to Social Work, Human Services

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – An event held at Gardner-Webb University was designed to shed light on the issues of poverty and social work, and organizers say they are already making plans to repeat the exercise later this year.



Photo: Jenna Shackelford/GWU

March is National Social Work Month. Many issues being highlighted this month are directly connected to themes that emerged among students, faculty, and staff during the inaugural “Poverty Simulation” exercise, held last semester on the Gardner-Webb main campus. The GWU Impact Center joined forces with the University’s Counseling Center to offer students, faculty, and staff members a chance to better understand the challenges faced by low-income individuals and families through the simulation. Organizers of the event hoped to inspire students towards empathy, justice, and empowerment and to provide them with a deeper understanding of how poverty works.

Each person involved in the simulation was given a role to play—either as a member of a family unit struggling to make ends meet or as a community member offering a needed product or service. Participants also had a goal to meet, such as getting a job, keeping their electricity on, or avoiding eviction.



Photo: Jenna Shackelford/GWU

“With the simulation, you actually live out the challenges, and the experience doesn’t just pass,” shared senior Shaquavia Chiles of Greenville, S.C., an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) major. “For me, the simulation kept me awake at night and really encouraged me to reevaluate my perspective. Especially in working with kids whose parents are facing a language barrier and are often below the poverty line, I’ll need to understand the familial situation in order to effectively teach these children.”

Michael Taub serves as a University Counselor at the GWU Counseling Center. Taub had participated in a similar poverty simulation exercise and knew the value such an event would provide to university constituents. “Even though we have a lot of outreach opportunities here at GWU, we are still in a little bubble here,” he offered. “Some people have not experienced life like that portrayed in the simulation. It was a way to allow them to have that experience in a controlled environment and hopefully help them build empathy and awareness to be a difference maker in some positive way.”



Photo: Jenna Shackelford/GWU

Taub believes the impact of social services goes hand-in-hand with the challenges of poverty issues. “I believe the biggest issue for participants was figuring out how to utilize the available resources efficiently,” he explained. “Some paid their bills to the wrong place. Some ran out of transportation passes and couldn’t travel anywhere. It was the process of figuring out what to do with the limited resources they had.”

Chiles agreed that decisions people made during the simulation felt more understandable with the proper context. “The poverty simulation hit home when some groups had to take their children out of school in order to watch younger siblings because they couldn’t afford daycare,” she recalled. “I could literally see the beginnings of a poverty cycle that entangles so many that I’ve only read about before. There were people with degrees and honest educations who had good jobs, but due to a hardship or unfortunate event, it sent them spiraling into the depths, and they were unable to get out of it.”

Taub hopes to provide another poverty simulation later this year. “One of our goals was to bring awareness of issues related to poverty to our students,” he said. “We hear about it on the news and may think it only happens in the bigger cities, but it occurs in any setting. The reality is many of us are just one bad decision or circumstance away from finding ourselves in a similar situation.”

Located in the North Carolina foothills, Gardner-Webb University is a private, Christian, liberal arts university that prepares students to become critical thinkers, effective leaders and compassionate servants in the global community. Emphasizing a strong student-centered experience and rigorous academics, Gardner-Webb ignites learning and service opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.