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Office of University
Communications

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Graham Atkinson '98 Appointed to Serve on Parole Commission

On his 21st birthday in 1985, Graham Atkinson went to work for the Surry County Sheriff's Department in Dobson, N.C. A four-year degree wasn't a requirement, and Atkinson was eager to begin working. About a decade later, he enrolled in Gardner-Webb University through what is now called the Degree Completion Program (DCP). He took this step for two important reasons. He was about to become a father and realized if he expected his children to go to college, he should set the example. He also became aware that having a bachelor's degree would affect his career advancement.

Gardner-Webb was convenient, because classes were offered at night at Surry County Community College, where he had earned his associate's degree. "One of the things I liked about the GWU program was the smaller class size and being able to interact with your instructors, even though they weren't on campus every day," Atkinson observed. "They would take the time while they were there and were accessible if you needed to talk to them during the week. They wanted to give us the things we needed to be able to succeed."



Graham Atkinson, retired Sheriff of Surry County, N.C., throws out candy during a Christmas parade in Dobson, N.C., in 2016. Atkinson was appointed to the North Carolina Post-Release Supervision and Parole Commission in 2017. (Photo courtesy of Mount Airy News)




Graham Atkinson speaks during a law enforcement memorial event. (Photo courtesy of Mount Airy News)

Atkinson spent his entire career in the Surry County Sheriff's Department, serving as a patrol deputy, detective, narcotics investigator, chief of detectives and the county's first DARE officer in 1990. He was elected sheriff in 2006 and served in the position 11 years.

During his tenure as sheriff, he often recommended Gardner-Webb to the young people who applied for jobs without bachelor's degrees. He pointed out the monetary benefits to earning a degree, but also told them how education would improve their skills. "You are

going to be a more well-rounded person, a better report writer, better investigator and better at testifying in court,” he would advise the recruits. “You are going to form friendships that will be rewarding to you for the rest of your life. You will meet people from other places so if you need something on the other side of the state, you can pick up the phone and talk to someone you know.”



Graham Atkinson, center, talks with city Police Chief Dale Watson, left, and a media person at the scene of a joint city-county Internet gambling raid just outside Mount Airy, N.C. (Photo courtesy of Mount Airy News)

In his own experience, Atkinson appreciated how the classes broadened his worldview. “They teach you to look at things through the prism of other cultures, other sets of ideas and other backgrounds,” he assessed. “I grew up in Surry County and worked there all my life. You are exposed to people who have been other places and done other things. You look at things from their perspective and exchange ideas. You may not agree with them, but that is how you learn—by listening to other people’s thoughts and forming your own opinion based on that information.”

In 2017, Atkinson retired as sheriff to accept an appointment from Gov. Roy Cooper to the North Carolina Post-Release Supervision and Parole Commission. The governor appoints four members to the Commission, which is an independent agency responsible for releasing offenders who meet eligibility requirements established in North Carolina General Statutes.

He misses local law enforcement, but appreciates the opportunity to serve on the commission. “I enjoy the work and the people I work with,” Atkinson reflected. “The things we do have an impact statewide. It’s a challenge, very busy and difficult, but rewarding in a lot of ways.”