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Communications

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Kaitlyn McNeilly ('15) Utilizes Writing Skills in Marketing Field

Kaitlyn McNeilly of Forest City, N.C., had pretty much made up her mind: She wasn't going to college after high school. With no clear major in mind, she planned to take at least a year off to figure out her career path.

But she met a determined admissions counselor from Gardner-Webb University before the start of her last semester in high school. He encouraged her to "give the school a chance and come for a visit." After touring the campus, McNeilly filled out her application and was accepted, but she was still unsure about going to college at all.

"Sometime later, I was selected to interview for the Presidential Scholarship (full tuition, room and board for four years)," she revealed. "I went through the process but was selected runner-up. In a sweet twist of fate, the person ahead of me decided against coming to Gardner-Webb, and I was awarded the scholarship. It was like I had to go at that point. Everything fell into place."

Delving into her studies, McNeilly began the process of discovering what subjects interested her and what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. "I loved chemistry in high school; it was by far one of my favorite subjects," she elaborated. "One semester at Gardner-Webb was enough, though. I liked it, but I didn't love it. I didn't wake up every Monday, Wednesday and Friday excited about the 9 a.m. class. I had a great professor, but it wasn't the same feeling I used to have."

She floated between majors for a couple months, thinking exclusively about what would get her a job when she graduated. "English was always on my mind, but I didn't know how to answer that oft-asked question, 'What are you going to do with an English degree?'" she explained. "I didn't want to waste time and money and end up back at the retail job I had in high school. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how important my own personal happiness was and still is. Turns out, it is pretty important, so I went for it. I wanted—needed—to do something that I love."

She's employed as a marketing assistant at Doncaster, a high-end women's clothing company in Rutherford County, N.C. Not only does she use writing to promote the company through social media, newsletters and the website, she relies on several interpersonal skills learned in her classes.

“I feel like Gardner-Webb and the English department really set me up for success with the variety of projects and activities we had to do,” she offered. “Something as simple as group work in class—translating a piece from Chaucer, for example— isn’t much different from sitting down in a meeting where we have to comb through the issues at hand and create a cohesive final product. The work that I had to put into my thesis showed me what it takes to put together and present an important project. While I’m no longer reading literary theory, understanding how to look at something not just on a surface level, but to really dig into it, is an indispensable ability.”

Her classes also prepared her to handle criticism and critiques with grace, poise and the realization that it is important to be open to ideas and suggestions from others. She also learned how to articulate an idea in the best way to engage customers in the brand and the products without inundating them with too much information. “There is a lot of balance required when it comes to deciding what to put on Instagram, how to caption it and what filter to use,” she related. “Knowing you could boost sales or turn customers away based on how you present the brand online is sometimes a challenge, but Gardner-Webb and its professors prepared me for the task.”

Some of her most memorable classes were taught by assistant professor Dr. Jennifer Buckner and professors Dr. Chris Davis and Dr. June Hobbs. “I’m still using notes I took and things I learned from Dr. Buckner’s Visual Rhetoric course,” she assessed. “She approaches elements of design and style in a way I had never thought about before, and now I can’t stop thinking of them in that way. Dr. Davis’ writing classes introduced me to some amazing writers, and helped me feel more confident in my own work. He also taught me to mean what I say and to stand up for what I write. Dr. Hobbs’ Classic American Novels class was the first English class I took outside of the core requirements. I had heard rumors that she’s tough (and they’re all true), but it is such a nurturing kind of tough. I treasure the B that I made on that final essay. Without her I don’t think I would have pushed myself nearly as hard or as much, but it truly paid off.”

Outside of the classroom, Dr. David Parker, professor and chair of the Department of English Language and Literature, gave her encouragement to try new things. “His recommendation that I join the staff of The English Channel (department newsletter), not as a writer, but as one of the editors my junior year, helped me to realize that little sweet Kaitlyn McNeilly from Forest City can be pretty good at something,” she asserted.

For those students who are struggling like she was to find their purpose or who are considering Gardner-Webb, McNeilly offers the same advice she received: Give it a shot.

“The Gardner-Webb environment is something I miss a ton,” she affirmed. “Everyone, faculty, staff, and students, all seem to be happy to see you, and are helpful and friendly. Gardner-Webb’s location and ideologies foster a community in a way that you will never experience at a larger school. Professors know my name, even ones that I only had one

class with, and some that I had zero classes with. Smaller classes mean you have the perfect environment in which to work with peers and professors one-on-one. It's easy to feel comfortable asking questions and joining in the conversations in and out of the classroom. Gardner-Webb creates a family.”