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Communications

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Chelsea Hearne ('12) Chooses Career in Mental Health Field

While completing her degree in biblical studies at Gardner-Webb University, Chelsea Hearne ('12) became clear about her future.

“I want to be a psychiatric nurse. By way of many conversations with my professors, I can say with confidence that my skill set is in mental health issues,” Hearne assessed. “The membrane that divides theology and mental health considerations is very thin, and it is where my skill set can be best amplified to offer care to the world. I can also tell you with certainty that this is my conclusion because of my studies at Gardner-Webb.”

Hearne’s degree also prepared her for the academic rigors of graduate school. While working on her Master of Theological Studies at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., she has found that she is ahead of the curve in regard to picking out methodology and creating sound arguments. She owes her grasp of the material and ability to think critically to the faculty in the GWU Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy—especially Dr. Perry Hildreth, Dr. Paula Qualls and Dr. Ron Williams, professor emeritus of religious studies. They helped prepare her to succeed on the graduate level as well as discover her place in society.

“I learned how to think responsibly, monitoring my opinions without losing my convictions,” she related. “Because the Gardner-Webb program was designed with a classical style of education, I am able to have intelligent conversations regarding several areas of discipline. Dr. Williams’ classes have given me an edge over my current classmates, because they forced me to wrestle with deeper arguments. Dr. Hildreth’s attention to classical education taught me more about how the world works than any other class I’ve taken. He also taught me more about what it means to be a good citizen.”

She is not alone in her graduate school experience. In comparing notes with other Gardner-Webb students who are studying at esteemed universities, Hearne has found they have a similar respect for the GWU Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy.

“I was curious and somewhat intimidated about how I would match up against my new classmates academically, simply because Vanderbilt is a prestigious school,” she divulged. “Another student and I discovered that GWU’s religion program prepared us both better

than many of our classmates. We think more critically. We are able to consider the logic and structure of an argument to weigh its value as opposed to just arguing about preference/opinion. Gardner-Webb's department is a gem in a desert. We have been trained to think well, and to not be satisfied with the 'because I said so' of the academy."

Hearne played soccer and volleyball at Gardner-Webb and both opportunities enriched her academic experience.

"I experienced several injuries in college and learned to listen to my body's needs as opposed to plowing through them," Hearne explained. "This sensitivity has greatly impacted how I understand my studies. Being an athlete informed my sense of study and vice versa. My theology had an immediate playing field, and my sense of identity as formed by athletics helped me integrate the concepts I was studying in class. I also mentored many of my teammates and ended up leading a Bible study for three years. After my soccer career ended because of an injury, I played volleyball while attending divinity school at GWU and also led a team Bible study."

Two of her favorite classes outside her major area of study at Gardner-Webb have also helped in her graduate work. In Western Civilization class with Dr. David Yelton, professor of history, she learned how to write stronger research papers and developed a respect for history. The concepts she learned in rhetoric class with Dr. June Hobbs, professor of English, emphasized topics in her logic class with Hildreth.

"Until college, I hated history because I have trouble remembering things in order," she explained. "Dr. Yelton teaches his classes according to major overarching themes. Dr. Hobbs's class gave me valuable skills for presenting information. She gave us standards for arguments, but we were able to do speeches about whatever we wanted."

Hearne believes the GWU learning environment is supported by a close-knit community. "I found a family in the people at Gardner-Webb," she described. "I had my wisdom teeth pulled over a break and one of my professors picked me up from the dorm so I could eat with her family. Another professor experienced a death of a close friend, and students were able to watch the faculty absorb some of his grief. When a professor had to leave for health reasons, the students contacted his family to set up classroom time at his house every few weeks."

She continued, "I could go on and on about the power of community amongst professors and students. People at this University take care of each other in ways that I have never experienced before and in ways that I will likely not experience again."