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### **Gardner-Webb Exercise Science Grad Confident About her Future**

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# Gardner-Webb Exercise Science Grad Confident About her Future

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Office of University  
Communications

January 19, 2016

## *AJ Francioni ('15) Gains Knowledge about her Profession and Life Skills*

The first time Alexandra Joy “AJ” Francioni ('15) visited Gardner-Webb University, she found something she didn't expect. Interested in the University's new exercise science major, Francioni discovered that a city girl from Chicago, Ill., could feel right at home in Boiling Springs, N.C.

“I met so many great people and everyone was extremely friendly,” she recalled. “I was sold simply because there was a great atmosphere on campus, a sense of community, and a trip to the Cookout drive-through restaurant was involved. An exercise science program at Gardner-Webb was just another sign that it was the school for me.”

Once on campus, she took advantage of every opportunity to become involved in her major and in other areas. She volunteered as a Student Recruitment Ambassador for Undergraduate Admissions and was also selected to be a member of the Exercise Science Advisory Committee created by Dr. Jeff Hartman, associate professor of exercise science. The group suggests ways to improve the program for future students.

“Gardner-Webb offers more than just an exceptional education; it offers many life skills as well,” she observed. “The Career Services Office offers resume and interview workshops throughout the year and is always available for a private appointment. I have also been a part of a Leadership Advisory Committee in Student Activities that has taught me how to create an effective team and focus on each member's strengths. Our Exercise Science program has a core value of service, and I have been able to make connections and grow as a person through involvement with the National Senior Games athletic competition and Chemistry Honors Society's Bulldog Backpacks program to provide food for children in need.”

Francioni also served as a Peer Leader for Freshmen University 111 classes through Gardner-Webb's First-Year Experience Program. The purpose is to help develop a freshman's personal and academic success skills, stimulate intellectual curiosity and interdisciplinary thinking, encourage assimilation into university culture, foster a sense of community, nurture faith, and facilitate service-based leadership.



“Each year I have received a fun group of kids that all became such great friends as we developed inside jokes and learned about all that Gardner-Webb has to offer,” she shared. “I have really appreciated seeing my freshmen grow into the people they have become as they have chosen majors, excelled in sports and academically, and created their own stories and memories at Gardner-Webb.”

Since receiving her degree in exercise science, Francioni works at Duke Sports Medicine in Durham and has accepted a position in UNC-Chapel Hill’s Doctorate of Physical Therapy program. She is confident in her professional ability and also feels prepared for graduate studies.

“Exercise Science is a major built upon the need to cater to students’ future careers, especially the Pre-Professional track, which has a diverse arrangement of core classes that match the pre-requisites for physical therapy school,” she assessed. “It has offered me the opportunity to do research projects and write a thesis. The Exercise Science department has a wing in the School of Health Sciences, which has various equipment to study physiology and the effects of exercise on the body.”

She took advantage of Gardner-Webb’s emphasis on liberal arts by taking classes that would help her in her profession and in life. Some of her favorite classes were in the College of Arts and Sciences.

“A liberal arts education means more than taking an extra art class or English class – it means you are getting a well-rounded education that will make you a better professional and human being upon graduating,” she affirmed. “I filled my schedule with extra psychology classes that helped me understand the human condition, an ethics class that helped me develop a moral code to apply to various situations, and a communications class to improve my written and oral communication skills. Of course, my future profession requires a hefty load of math and science classes, but the liberal arts curriculum at Gardner-Webb provides even more self-discovery and life-long learning on top of an education that prepares you for a career.”

All of her professors taught with enthusiasm and genuinely cared about her success, whether she had class with them for one semester or several. And faculty in the School of Preventive and Rehabilitative Health Sciences worked diligently to start the exercise science major and set up the new space for future students. Hartman provided useful advice to students about their future professions or graduate school. He also helped Francioni by writing a letter of recommendation for her application to physical therapy school.

“I have had the privilege of celebrating a Thanksgiving meal, an ice cream social, and even a bonfire at various professors’ houses,” she shared. “The dedication that professors have shown is really how I was so successful at Gardner-Webb. Making connections with the



faculty and staff at Gardner-Webb does more than make your four years here worthwhile, but it also helps make you successful in the future.”

While Gardner-Webb provided her an exceptional education, Francioni also grew in her faith.

“When I started my college career, I was not strong in my faith, but being a part of a school that has professors who pray with their class before a big exam, or people asking to pray for me after my elbow surgery, really opened my eyes to the benefits of having a school proud of their spirituality,” she confided. “The Christian atmosphere at Gardner-Webb is one that is comforting and inviting. I was able to grow spiritually through opportunities such as the Sister’s Ministry, a student-led Bible study, and simply discussing religious beliefs with my peers. Gardner-Webb’s Christian community is one that strives to incorporate Christ-like living without ever excluding others or being overbearing. If you are looking for an environment where you feel comfortable to explore your faith or share it with others, Gardner-Webb is filled with loving, humble servants that will help you nourish that passion.”