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Communications

January 18, 2016

Classes in Biblical Studies Prepared Mary Hellstrom ('14) for Graduate Work

Mary Hellstrom came to Gardner-Webb University as a nursing major, but left with a bachelor's degree in biblical studies.

She switched majors her freshman year, and during the next four years at the University, she experienced both academic and personal growth.

“It is one of the best choices I have ever made, hands down, following the decision to attend GWU in the first place,” she stated.

The classes and people at GWU prepared her for the next step in her career as a graduate student in Marriage & Family Therapy (MFT) at Wheaton College, a top-ranked, academically rigorous Christian liberal arts college located west of Chicago, Illinois.

“It is so interesting to see how well my experience at GWU has flowed into my life and work in Wheaton,” she observed. “I was challenged deeply, yet also encouraged, in every class I attended within the GWU Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy. Most of the beliefs and assumptions with which I entered college were held up to the light within these classes. I experienced a lot of doubt and questions, and in the end I was more in love with scripture, with Jesus, with life, and with people than I could have ever hoped. Without the faith-forming process I experienced at Gardner-Webb, I know that my time at Wheaton would have been very different.”

Professors at GWU taught her more than how to read Hebrew, write exegesis papers, and hold conversation with theologians.

“They taught me how to live life in a way that is honest, genuine, faithful and loving,” she said, “from ‘Old Testament Prophets’ with Dr. Paula Qualls to ‘Life & Letters of Paul’ with Dr. Scott Shauf to ‘Global Christianity’ with Dr. Eddie Stepp to my senior seminar class with Dr. Kent Blevins.”

She believes these professors and others in the department highly prioritize, value, and respect their students, and it's evident in their teaching methods.

“This is why students leave the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy and go on to live beautiful and engaged lives,” she offered. “They have been taught, challenged, and encouraged by some of the brightest and loveliest minds on campus.”

These lessons about life and relationships have been central to her success in the MFT program at Wheaton. She is an intern at Centennial Counseling Center, a private practice located in St. Charles, Ill., which is about 20 minutes from Wheaton. Working under a supervisor, she sees about 10-15 clients each week, including individuals, families, and couples.

“The program is training me to become a licensed therapist, working through the lens of families, systems, and relationships in order to bring about wholeness and healing in people’s lives,” she said. “The MFT program uses the cohort model, meaning I am in all of my classes with the same 19 people over a two-year period. This group of wonderful, diverse people has become my home and community here.”