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Kitty Hoyle ('15) finds coursework is immediately relevant to running her company

In 1989, when Katherine “Kitty” Hamrick Hoyle ('15) took over her father’s concrete business in Boiling Springs, N.C., she had to prove herself in an industry dominated by men. Through the years, she has gained the respect of national industry leaders and received awards from the Chamber of Commerce in Cleveland County, N.C.

She made wise decisions and led her father’s company through tough economic times. Because of her professional demeanor, customers and service providers had no idea she was intimidated by one simple question.

“When you run your own company, people equate you with the business,” Hoyle shared. “If you know it well, people have confidence in you. That is why, even after being in business for years, in conversation with others, my most dreaded question was, ‘Where did you go to school?’ and ‘What was your major?’ That question always created an awkward situation, because I was an art major and I had not even finished that major. When people heard that, they usually had a funny look or said that was odd, or asked, ‘How did you get from art to concrete?’”

Her answer: She came home from college in the ‘70s to work in the family business for just a little while, but never left. She worked her way up through the ranks of her father’s company, starting as a laborer with some clerical duties, until becoming president when her father retired.

“I had always regretted not finishing a degree,” Hoyle confided. “Over the years having a lot of experience I felt pretty confident about my abilities, but this question about education would still come up from time to time.”

She was talking with the dean of instruction at the local community college when the dreaded question came up again. The dean told her she probably still had some college credits and should go back and get her associate’s degree. She took the dean’s advice and enrolled at the community college.

“I got my degree and wasn’t going to walk through the graduation ceremony, and this same person, this dean of instruction, said, ‘You should do that. You should celebrate that accomplishment.’ So I went to graduation,” Hoyle recalled. “I was in line beside a young woman who told me that she had already started her undergraduate classes. She said, ‘I’m going to Gardner Webb in the GOAL program (now called Degree Completion Program). They make that process really easy, and I just love it.’”

Hoyle kept thinking about what the woman said and decided to investigate Gardner-Webb. At the time the economy was in terrible shape and the concrete business was temporarily shut down in some areas.

“I just looked around and thought, ‘If I’m going to do this, this might be the best time, and maybe my last opportunity,’” Hoyle assessed. “So I applied to Gardner Webb and they were very responsive. Since I really had the luxury of taking my time, I thought I would just take a couple of classes each semester. That way I could really concentrate on the class and get something good out of it. It was really helpful to have an advisor who knew me and my objective. That was great because everything I learned was so useful at work. As I sat through those classes, whatever the topic was, I always applied it in my mind to my work.”

Hoyle received her Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and was honored to be a speaker during graduation. The motivation for earning her degree was to be able to say that she finished something she started a long time ago. She realizes now that she received so much more. As she reflected on her experience, Hoyle noted her education from Gardner-Webb gave her a range of benefits.

“I had the opportunity to be around some very interesting and smart instructors who had real-world experience in a variety of areas: manufacturing, marketing, industrial engineering, and finance. This is an opportunity that otherwise wouldn’t have come to me as a small business owner, because there is not a higher-up structure from which to learn,” she shared.

“I also learned something from the students: how they think and how they operate. They are fast, smart and creative. Soon these young people will have key roles in determining the future. If I am going to remain relevant, I am going to have many working relationships with them,” she continued.

“I feel like I have been updated. I have a better picture of how big companies operate in today’s environment,” she concluded. “That is something I can’t learn at work. I can’t learn how a large corporation operates while running a small business. But more and more, I am dealing with large corporations. Understanding how those companies work will help me communicate and interact with them.”