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Office of University Communications

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American Christianity Students Utilize Social Media, Online Connections for Unique Learning Experience

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Social media outlets are known to be valuable tools to connect friends separated by time and distance.

Now, Gardner-Webb University students are also taking advantage of the opportunity to utilize social media platforms to establish meaningful dialogue with virtual strangers.

Case in point: A student's recent Twitter message to the author of one of the textbooks being discussed in her *American Christianity* class led to an impromptu Skype session with author Ed Blum of San Diego, Calif. Blum is a distinguished historian and the co-author of the book "The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America." He has won numerous awards, including the Peter Seaborg Award for best book in Civil War studies. He also serves as an associate professor of history at San Diego State University.

Stephanie McKellop is a junior psychology major who read the book for Dr. Joseph Moore's American Christianity class. She felt compelled to reach out to Blum to tell him how well written and intriguing his research was and she mentioned the book was being covered in Moore's course. "I sent a message to him on Twitter and asked a few questions about certain portions," McKellop shared. "Ed was really encouraging, accommodating, and gracious in his response. He said he wanted to take the class too! I copied Dr. Moore in on our dialogue and they worked out a way for the Skype session to happen so Ed could join us."

Since the class meets at 8 a.m., Moore knew the time difference might be somewhat challenging. Coffee in hand, Blum signed in promptly even though it was just 5 a.m. in California. He dove in to the subject by telling students, "I'm obsessed with how we think about the sacred and what it says about us." He then welcomed questions, comments and insights from the class.

When pitched a question, Blum often asked students to first give him their thoughts and feedback before offering his own perspective. Nathan Lile, a sophomore with a double major in computer science and philosophy, found Blum's approach extremely effective.

"*The Color of Christ* covers a huge timeline—from Colonialism to the modern day," he said. "In our required reading alone, we encountered a large amount of information and examples. Getting to ask questions and hear direct answers from the author is amazingly

enlightening. Not only does it confirm conjectures we might have made in class, but we are able to glean information that isn't necessarily overt in the text."

Moore served as facilitator and moderator and allowed students to actively engage with Blum in order to ensure their questions were addressed. He and Blum have been professional acquaintances for years and Moore was thrilled to be able to help coordinate such a unique opportunity for his students.

"Professor Blum shared some remarkable insights with our students, but our students did an equally remarkable job asking thoughtful questions that showed how seriously they took this opportunity," Moore reflected. "Watching our students engage one of the leading scholars in American religion puts on display what we all know here at Gardner-Webb—that our best students are as good as any students anywhere."

Students believe Moore established a tremendous foundation for their class discussions, and give him credit for the subsequent learning opportunity with Blum. "Dr. Moore always does such a wonderful job of making our class and the material relevant and influential to each of his students on a personal level," McKellop offered. "That makes the learning process meaningful and exciting for everyone."

Nile agreed. "There are very few professors who treat their classes with as much attention, care, and enthusiasm as Dr. Moore," he said. "It's only fitting that he was able to facilitate such an opportunity such as this in his class. Any change to the normal structure can be a breath of fresh air, as long as it is academically worthwhile. I cannot stress how generous Dr. Blum was with his time and how appreciative our entire class was for his presence."

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University blends a liberal arts core curriculum with more than 55 major and minor professional programs of study, a comprehensive academic experience that flows from our Christian commitment to intellectual freedom, service and leadership.