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Office of University Communications

May 14, 2012

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.— Monday was a day of milestones for Gardner-Webb University and its graduates. For the first time, a record three separate commencement ceremonies were broadcast online via live stream. In total, nearly 700 degrees were awarded, including the University's 25,000th degree since becoming a senior college in 1971.

Gardner-Webb also awarded its 7,000th bachelor's degree in business, its 1,500th associate's degree in nursing, its 1,000th bachelor's degree in nursing, and its first ever Doctor of Nursing Practice degrees.

Morning Traditional Undergraduate Ceremony

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Several morning graduates were honored for outstanding leadership, citizenship, and academic excellence. The Most Outstanding Male Graduate medal was presented to music graduate Matthew Thomas Lineberger, of Morganton, N.C.

Chelsea Renee Usher, an English graduate from Hendersonville, N.C., was awarded both the Most Outstanding Female Graduate and one of three Senior Scholastic Awards for a perfect 4.0 cumulative grade point average (GPA) during her tenure. Also earning that honor were Amanda Marie Jefferies, an elementary education graduate from Matthews, N.C., and Jane Elizabeth Savage, an English graduate from Marietta, Ga.

Three graduates were commissioned as Second Lieutenants in the United States Army. Monique Francis, a psychology graduate from Roanoke, Va., was presented the emblem denoting her rank, a bar of gold, from her grandmother and father, Sheila Hickman and Lloyd Francis. Andrew Morris, a Columbus, N.C., native who received his master's in business administration, was presented his gold bar by his wife, Nicole Morris. Brandon Smith, a political science graduate from Winston Salem, N.C., was presented his bar by his parents, Guy and Rezuba Smith.

Two graduates offered commencement speeches during the morning ceremony. Usher especially thanked her professors, a "real and genuine" group of "brilliant and engaged teachers." Savanna R. Yount, a psychology graduate from Lattimore, N.C., shared a dozen

reasons why she loves Gardner-Webb, insisting that the University “embodies the values and virtues that are most important to me—acceptance, compassion, and empathy.”

Afternoon GOAL Undergraduate Ceremony

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The afternoon ceremony featured graduates of Gardner-Webb’s Greater Opportunities for Adult Learners (GOAL) Program. Adam Reep, a human services graduate from Troutman, N.C., offered the commencement address.

A veteran of the U.S. 82nd Army Airborne Division, Reep experienced horrific violence during several terms in Afghanistan, leading him to abandon his faith in a loving and benevolent God. But, he said, thanks to the Christian character of Gardner-Webb’s mission and its people, Reep received more than just a quality education. “I discovered what I was missing. My new Gardner-Webb family has given me a new perspective. I have found God again, or in reality, maybe for the first time.”

Five students were also honored with the GOAL Senior Scholastic Award for maintaining the highest cumulative GPA in their class: Carly Patricia Nicks Sotillo, an accounting graduate from Hickory, N.C., and four accounting graduates from Rutherfordton, N.C.: David Blake Caulder, Chad William Cooper, Daniel Reed Hudson, and Samuel Nathon Staton.

Evening Graduate Programs Ceremony

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The evening graduate programs ceremony, in which the University awarded its first ever Doctor of Nursing Practice degrees, featured commencement addresses from three students: Juan L. Cherry of Shelby, N.C., who received his Master of Arts in School Counseling; Billy D. Houze of Kings Mountain, N.C., who received his Master of Divinity in Pastoral Care and Counseling; and Alayna Powell Robst of Mooresboro, N.C., who received her Master of Business Administration.

After thanking his family and several professors who influenced him profoundly, Cherry addressed his classmates directly. “We are equipped to bring about change,” he said. “I anticipate personal success and expect nothing less from each of you. Let’s go make a difference.”

In reflecting on the significance of his achievement, Houze said, “Yes, I am getting older. But my Spirit is becoming more mature. My vision is clearer, and my heart determined to be the best I can be.”

Finally, echoing several other speakers' sentiment, Robst expressed a "reluctance to leave Gardner-Webb," a place that has become "a home" to her. "I can only wish that my future will be as welcoming as the atmosphere here at Gardner-Webb," she said. "May we all remember our time here fondly, and look toward our futures with excitement and hope."