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**ADVANCEMENT**

# GWU Officials Announce Naming of Searight PACE Program, Leadership Certificate and Award

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON NOVEMBER 12, 2021



## Rev. Johnny L. and Mrs. Shirley P. Searight Desire to Assist Students with Financial Needs

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—Raised on a farm in Alabama, an imaginative child made a basketball from scraps, taught himself how to play and earned a scholarship to college. Now, that child, the Rev. Johnny L. Searight, and his wife, Shirley P. Searight, alumni of Gardner-Webb University, want to create educational opportunities for students in similar situations. With the help of the GWU Advancement team, they have established the Searight Leadership Certificate (SLC) and the Searight Multicultural Leadership Award (SMLA).

Moreover, in honor of their generosity, the University is pleased to announce that the PACE (Professional and Continuing Education) program will now be known as the Searight PACE Program.

“This significant contribution will strengthen the future of the Searight PACE program, which offers courses to enhance the skill levels of professionals ranging from entry level to mid-management, executive, and beyond,” said Vice President for Advancement Nate Evans. “Additionally, the certificate program and award created for undergraduate students will prepare them for leadership and service in their professional careers and in their personal lives.”

Johnny, who has served various churches in the area for more than four decades, came to Gardner-Webb in 1973. He helped the Runnin’ Bulldogs achieve 48 wins over two seasons. He earned multiple honors, including first-team NAIA All-District 26, and was inducted into the GWU Athletics Hall of Fame in 2019. He received a Bachelor of Science Degree in physical education in 1975 and a Master of Divinity

in pastoral care and counseling in 2009. He has served as pastor of Jones Tabernacle CME Church in Lawndale, N.C., for four years, and before that, he served 20 years at Piney Ridge CME Church in Union Mills, N.C., and 18 years at Allen Temple CME Church in Gaffney, S.C. He has served on the Christian Service Organization board at Gardner-Webb and currently serves on the PACE advisory board.

“The Searights are wonderful friends of Gardner-Webb University, and I am grateful for their continued support of our institutional mission,” praised GWU President Dr. William Downs. “With this gift, the Searight family is investing in the success of students for generations to come. Our county, our state, and our region all need leaders ready to thrive in a dynamic economy and in a diverse society. Reverend and Mrs. Searight are enabling opportunity and access for high-ability students who previously may not have enjoyed an abundance of either. With these new leadership programs as catalysts, impressive things are about to happen.”



▲ Rev. Johnny L. and Mrs. Shirley P. Searight

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Johnny was one of six children, and he met Shirley in high school. “My family were very poor and couldn’t afford to buy me a basketball,” he shared. “I also had to borrow basketball shoes to play.”

He was so determined to learn and practice the game that he took old socks and packed them with cotton. Using thread from feed sacks, he sewed the socks into a circle. He cut the bottom out of a 2-1/2 gallon can and nailed it to the barn for his basketball goal. “If there is someone in a similar situation, I want them to know that it’s not where they are, it is what’s in their heart,” Johnny affirmed. “They can make a difference. There is hope. If they have the determination, the sky’s the limit.”

The Searights were married while they were at Gardner-Webb. Off the basketball court, he was a guest speaker in area churches. He began pastoring his first church in 1978. Shirley graduated from Gardner-Webb in 1977 with a degree in business administration and a concentration in education and from Winthrop in 1989 with a Master of Arts Degree in teaching. She was in education for 32 years—in the classroom for 24 years and in VOCATS testing for eight years—all at Crest High School in Shelby, N.C.

Johnny had been thinking about setting up a scholarship at Gardner-Webb, and as soon as he mentioned it to Shirley, she was on board. “We had some things in mind that we wanted to do to help students who had been poverty-stricken,” he said. By helping underprivileged students, the Searights are paying forward the help he received to attend college. He also believes they are following the commands of Jesus in Matthew 25 to provide for the “least of these.”

Shirley added, “We’ve always tried to help young people in any way we could to reach their educational goals. We both graduated from Gardner-Webb and have a love for Gardner-Webb. I just thought that was the perfect match.”

Additionally, Johnny is acting on the words of Horace Mann in one of his favorite quotes: “Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.” Mann issued this challenge in 1859 to the graduating class at Antioch College (Yellow Springs, Ohio) where he served as the institution’s first president.

The new SLC—housed administratively within the Searight PACE program—will be offered to all first-year students at Gardner-Webb, beginning in the fall of 2022. Curriculum and instruction will draw upon Gardner-Webb’s numerous strengths, including: faculty from business, arts & sciences, education, divinity, and health sciences; resources available through the Center for Ethics and Entrepreneurship; mentoring from the Center for Personal and Professional Development; support from the Office of Diversity and Inclusion; and the unique array of corporate connections made possible by our alumni networks. Upon completion of the certificate program, graduates will have secured an officially acknowledged Certificate (denoted on their GWU transcript) that will open doors, secure opportunities, and grow in value over time.

Students who are enrolled in the SLC program will be eligible to apply for the SMLA, which will provide need- and merit-based financial support to first-generation college students who exhibit an aptitude and an appetite for leadership. This award will provide access to the knowledge and skills that will enable graduates to become catalysts for good throughout society and within America’s corporate structure. Consistent with Gardner-Webb’s desire to invest first in the communities surrounding our campus, this award will prioritize recipients from Cleveland County, then other counties comprising the Foothills Commitment (Gaston, Rutherford, Lincoln). The next geographic priority will be the Mecklenburg County area, given the location of GWU’s Charlotte Center and its use as a venue for the SLC. Preference for selection will be given to (1) students with a demonstrated commitment to diversity, (2) students with demonstrated financial need, and (3) students with demonstrated leadership potential.

For more information about the certificate and award program, contact Dr. Anthony Negbenebor, PACE director and professor of economics, at [anegbenebor@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:anegbenebor@gardner-webb.edu) (<mailto:anegbenebor@gardner-webb.edu>) or (704) 406-3820.

*Gardner-Webb University is North Carolina's recognized leader in private, Christian higher education. A Carnegie-Classified Doctoral/Professional University, GWU is home to six professional schools, 14 academic departments, more than 80 undergraduate and graduate majors, and a world-class faculty. Located on a beautiful 225-acre campus in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb prepares graduates to impact their chosen professions, equips them with the skills to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and inspires them to make a positive and lasting difference in the lives of others. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.*