

GGC School of Liberal Arts News: Graduate Success

Student from GGC's 'Early Days' Enjoys Long Term Success: Psychology Grad Receives Ph.D., Academic Appointment



Now and then: Binion, left, at Furman University, where she received academic appointment effective Fall 2022. Binion, center, in photo at right, graduating with GGC colleagues in 2014.

It is natural for universities and colleges to brag about the accomplishments of their graduates, especially those earning doctorates. People unfamiliar with GGC might experience confusion when they hear Georgia Gwinnett College's professors say, "we're just getting there." Two factors explain the confusion. First, GGC only began awarding baccalaureate degrees in 2008. Second, the time that it takes to earn a doctorate means that the institution is only now enjoying the opportunity to boast!

Grace Binion is one of GGC's early grads who have proceeded to distinguish themselves. Binion enrolled in 2009 and graduated in 2014. A few months later she started in a Ph.D. program in Clinical Psychology at the University of Oregon. Her research and training focused on children's development in contexts of risk, parental mental health, and research methods and statistics. In recognizing her achievements, we asked her about her time at GGC, her graduate studies, and her upcoming appointment as a faculty member in psychology at Furman University, in Greenville, South Carolina.

What are some of your fond memories of GGC?

During my very first semester, my Introduction to Psychology professor and I ate lunch and chatted about my aspirations to be a clinical psychologist. At one of these lunches, she introduced me

to Dr. Lois Richardson, then the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts. We discussed psychology as a field of study and graduate school as an option. It felt to me as if my future was important to every professor and administrator with whom I interacted and as though everyone wanted to provide me the scaffolding necessary to attain my goals.

How do you think GGC contributed to your success in Graduate School?

I had absolutely no idea how competitive Ph.D. programs in Clinical Psychology were, and I only realized after I was admitted how extraordinarily fortunate I was just to get into a program, let alone one of my dream schools. My time in research labs at GGC, getting to work closely with professors in conducting and presenting research, is the biggest reason I was admitted to a PhD program. Students at bigger schools who attend classes of 150+ students just don't get those opportunities. My *(continued next page)*



Binion and colleagues in Eugene, Oregon

Number 14: Early GGC Student Success

experiences at GGC equipped me with essential skills - professionalism, data analysis skills, knowledge of how to interact with diverse research participants, experience with the publishing process - which meant that I began graduate school with many "tools" in my academic and professional "tool belt." Beyond this, I carried with me the profound impact these experiences can have on students. I remain immensely grateful for the opportunities I was afforded at GGC. As a result of my undergraduate education, I knew quite early in my graduate training that I wanted to contribute to students' development in similar ways at an institution that prioritizes research with faculty, small class sizes, and student development through mentorship.

Can you describe your dissertation research?

It was driven by the question: how do kids who have tough, unpredictable early lives learn to regulate their emotions and interact with others? To answer that inquiry, I assessed preschool children whose mothers had a severe form of mental illness (Borderline Personality Disorder or BPD) as well as children whose parents had no mental health symptoms. What I found is that, when compared to children whose mothers did not have mental health difficulties, those whose mothers had BPD showed poorer social and emotional behavior, even at age 3 and 4 years old. Further, these difficulties were associated with significant challenges regulating their attention and behavior as well as challenges understanding other people's mental states. Basically, these children struggled to understand what other people were thinking and feeling and to formulate appropriate responses to these mental states. It turns out differences in how we see the world, see our emotions, and see others may even be observed as early as preschool when our parents have mental health challenges.

Earning a Ph.D., studying in very different regions of the country, and now embarking on a career in higher education, what do you think are the most important things in an undergraduate education?

Throughout our lives, we are required to navigate a barrage of information in news, from our peers, on social media, and from other sources. Doing so with a critical

eye and empathy for others can feel impossible at times. At its best, undergraduate education serves as an opportunity to hone the skills necessary to wade through and make sense of this barrage.

More than memorizing facts and accruing knowledge, college can help students develop their abilities to employ

this knowledge, evaluate evidence, critically self-reflect, and form cogent and logically-sound rationales for their beliefs and actions. Also, college is a fantastic opportunity to develop the informal and often under-appreciated skills that can bolster success and support relationships both at work and in the community.

In retrospect, is there one thing that you wished you had learned at GGC that you did not?

There aren't many things, honestly, but one that is salient to me is the limited utility of grades as an indicator of mastery or success. Prior to grad school I absolutely thrived on demonstrating my knowledge in classes by getting good grades. I placed huge emphasis on (and consequently invested a large amount of my worth in) "performing" in this way. In grad school, it's not that grades don't matter, but that success is so much more than and so much outside of grades and performance. My mentality had to shift from "How good can I prove I am at this?" to "How will these experiences or this knowledge support my personal goals?"

Can you say a bit more about future plans?

I will be wrapping up my postdoctoral fellowship at the Emory University School of Medicine in July. In August I start teaching at Furman University. I'm very much looking forward to teaching classes such as child psychopathology and research methods and statistics as well as to establishing an independent research lab investing children's development in contexts of risk. I almost can't believe I get to (hopefully) do for students what GGC faculty did for me those years ago!



Binion at masters defense