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An interview with President Denise Battles

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An interview with President Denise Battles

Nicole Callahan

How has GREAT Day changed since your first one as president in 2015?

I started my position in July of 2015, but by early 2015 I knew I was coming to Geneseo as I had already been named President-elect; I just hadn't started yet. So, I visited Geneseo specifically to attend GREAT Day in April 2015. I received an advance perspective because I had heard so much about the event, and I was not disappointed. I was delighted that I had that opportunity. In terms of specific changes we've certainly had an increase in the number of presenters; we've crested the 1,000 mark, which I don't believe we were at in 2015. I would say the variety of presentations has expanded as well, and that's a good thing. It shows the wide range of interests our students have. I suppose one other change is that—unlike when I came here in 2015 and my knowledge of the students was obviously very limited and likewise the faculty and staff—now when I attend GREAT Day I know the people who are mentoring and working so closely with the students, and I can see the trajectory of the scholarly and creative works as these mentors continue their efforts with a new group of student scholars. So, it's delightful to see that progress because I know the people.

What do you look forward to at GREAT Day?

There are relatively few institutions that have such a priority on undergraduate research that they will carve a precious full day out of their academic term to dedicate to highlighting it. Fortunately, Geneseo is one of those institutions. I enjoy the excitement that accompanies the event; it's just a different vibe. It's toward the end of the academic year, so it's sort of a culminating scholarly piece. I really appreciate the excitement; I get to observe the passion that the student participants have in highlighting their work. So that's really what I look forward to, is to get to be a participant in all that.

What impact does undergraduate research have on Geneseo's culture and on higher education in general?

One of Geneseo's points of pride is that our learning is not limited to the confines of a classroom. We support our students in their efforts to integrate learning across a variety of disciplines, across academic and co-curricular areas, but also to apply it. Undergraduate research is an excellent way to apply what students learn in the classroom,

and it enables students to take something that reflects a piece of scholarly interest, whether it's creative work or lab research or field research, whatever it might be, to pursue something that really fuels their creativity. At a campus like Geneseo, we are fortunate because we are primarily an undergraduate institution, our students have opportunities they might not have at schools that are larger or have a large graduate population. Our students in physics get to work on a Pelletron accelerator, it's such a rarity that students get such a quality scholarly opportunity; in a graduate or research institution, it would be the graduate students who have those opportunities. So, it really positions our students for whatever comes next, whether it's graduate school—and I think in part our level of undergraduate research is the reason why we have such a high placement rate of students who go on to graduate school—or whether they're looking to go right into employment post-Geneseo. They have wonderful applied learning experiences that enable them to really get the most out of what they're learning. The other piece I would say is that having that sort of faculty- and staff-mentored experience helps our students build really strong bonds with our personnel, and that's not just something that occurs during their undergraduate years; it is sustained. I see it every year when alumni come back for homecoming, alumni that are five years out from graduation, ten years out, twenty years out, fifty years out. I even met an alumna who was eighty years out this past year, and what I hear focuses on the strong relationship our students had with the faculty.

When you took the position of president, what did you guess the student body and staff would be like during GREAT Day, and were you correct in that assumption?

I assumed that since the institution had gone to the lengths of setting aside a whole day to celebrate students' scholarly and creative activity, what I would see were very dedicated, enthusiastic, talented people exploring their passions, and I did find that, but I underestimated all of those. I underestimated the scale, the sheer numbers, the level of excitement on campus. So, when I came I was blown away by the high caliber of what I was seeing. It wasn't something that was a modest endeavor; this was truly something of a high caliber that was more reminiscent of graduate students than undergraduates.

What has been the most rewarding thing to experience at GREAT Day?

I don't know that it's been just one thing, but I think it's been about being able to be a witness, and see students explore their passions, and presumably take a step forward in pursuing their passions. It's the first step in what one assumes will be a successful professional life. So being there and being able to experience students being so poised and articulate in explaining their research, or being so adept in their creative performances. It's watching a transformative moment when people are saying, "This is what I want to do, and I am giving it my all," and it's watching them launch.