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An Interview with Joseph Cope, Associate Provost for Student Success

Jaime DeVita

How would you define GREAT Day; what is it to you?

Cope: GREAT Day, I think, is a really important opportunity for the campus to push pause on the day-to-day activities of campus and celebrate and showcase all the really exciting and interesting work that students do in terms of research, creative performance, and community engagement. So it really is a showcase for the best that Geneseo has to offer. I think it's also a good way for us to demonstrate to the wider community all of the exciting things going on at Geneseo that may not always be visible, so at the department level, departments may know that they have a great cohort of students who are doing mentored research, but what GREAT Day gives us is the opportunity to showcase that to the rest of the campus, as well as to the wider community. I also think that it's important as a form of mentorship. In many cases the work being showcased during GREAT Day are culminating experiences for students. It's work that they may have been building up to in the course of three or four years, and so if we're thinking about those first-year students or second-year students who are really trying to find their place at Geneseo, or imagine what they're going to do in the future. It gives us an opportunity to show what our students are doing in really concrete ways, and start to open up conversations about pathways for other students to get involved going forward.

What does GREAT Day mean in terms of student success?

GREAT Day shows all of our students what is possible on our campus, and provides a kind of peer modeling of the really exciting things that are going on on our campus. The other thing is in the world of higher education, there's a lot of research that shows that high impact practices. Those are things like mentored research, community learning, and study abroad, that have a really big impact on students' success: their completion of a degree, their ability to find a major that's a good fit for their interests. GREAT Day gives us a chance to highlight what kinds of high impact experiences are available on campus, and build momentum for ensuring that there is equitable access to those kinds of programs, so that every student who comes here, can envision "this is the kind of experience that is maybe going to help me figure out what I want to do after Geneseo," or what my values and commitments are.

How does GREAT Day represent what is seen within the classrooms of the various fields of study on this campus?

I think one of the strengths of GREAT Day, and this has to do with the enormous student participation in it, is to really see the curriculum manifested in ways all over the events that go on during GREAT Day. So you can go from one room where Chemistry students are talking about the research that they may have done with a faculty member to a panel that's showcasing really fun INTD 105 papers, to a creative performance in the Union, and to think about academic work as something that doesn't just happen in the classroom, but that is really integrated and connected in all sorts of ways...I think GREAT Day gives us an opportunity to model that, and live it.

At last year's GREAT Day, you sponsored several students from your INTD 188 class "First Year Seminar." What do you look for in a work that deems it appropriate for GREAT Day?

I have pretty consistently tried to sponsor students since we got started with GREAT Day. In a lot of cases, in my department—which was the history department—we had a departmental requirement that any student that was doing an honors thesis, would present at GREAT Day. The idea behind that is in the history department, students who do an honors thesis spend two semesters doing a really deep dive, similar to what they would do in graduate school, and we wanted to think about that research as something that doesn't just live in a 60-page honors thesis, but as something that is shared more broadly with the community. I think part of the answer to the question is, it's a reflection of how we think about students participating; it's a reflection of this sort of "Geneseo ethic" that our research is meaningful, impactful, significant to the "real world." What we want is to work with students on thinking about ways to take what is maybe a very narrow research topic, and make it accessible to a wider audience. In terms of thinking about how you know panels are constructed it is about taking something that's really exciting and maybe innovative and giving students the opportunity to show off a little bit—the ways that they've creatively taken their learning and the skills that they've gotten from their classes, and applied it to an unstructured problem or an issue that they see as important. One of the things that we've tried to do with the student ambassadors is to give those students space to show off a project or a problem that have identified and how they applied their academic skills to that. Last year, some of the student ambassadors were working with Geneseo Central School on developing a sustainability curriculum that could be brought into high school classes. These students, who were science majors at Geneseo, had the opportunity to work closely with faculty mentors. They were then able to go out and do that in the community, and provide a real benefit, to students at Geneseo High School. What we can do at GREAT Day is show that off, and show how our students aren't confined by the curriculum, but are actually doing what we expect people to do with a Liberal Arts degree—to take those skills and those competencies and that learning, and apply it in new contexts.

You have been a faculty member at Geneseo for almost 20 years, how has GREAT Day changed throughout your years on this campus?

I was actually here before there was a GREAT Day. When I arrived here at Geneseo there were a variety of different, largely disciplined-based opportunities to showcase work. In the humanities we had the “Humanities Undergraduate Paper Symposium” that would run annually, and the idea was the humanities disciplines could nominate students or panels to give a set of presentations. Similar things were happening in the sciences, in the social sciences. Around my fifth or sixth year at the college, we pooled all those together into GREAT Day, and the idea was rather than sort of focusing what’s going on in the humanities specifically or what’s going on in STEM fields specifically, let’s have a day at the college where everybody can come together, and put a pause on the academic calendar, and really celebrate learning as it’s manifested across campus. It’s changed over the years; first in the scale of it. The fact that we had more than a thousand students last year who participated in GREAT Day—those numbers are off the charts. That means that almost a fifth of Geneseo students are doing something on GREAT Day, and the range of projects that are presented at GREAT Day I think has evolved in really interesting ways. So a lot more creative work, a lot more opportunities for performances, the ways that the Insomnia Film Festival has now appeared as the end-of-the-day activity on GREAT Day—we have an opportunity to look at what Geneseo students are doing creatively in digital media. The other thing that I think has been really powerful over the last five to seven years is the way that the GREAT Day keynote speaker has, I think, been selected with care, to model that liberal arts ethic of learning applied to the “real world.” So we’ve had opportunities to hear from people who are involved in direct scientific research—journalists on the ground during Hurricane Katrina and the experiences that had associated with that. I think that the GREAT Day keynotes are really reflecting that ethic of the liberal arts environment in really powerful ways.

How has your perception of GREAT Day changed since becoming an administrator?

I don’t think it really has. I think as a faculty member, you would come out and make sure that to announce to classes that GREAT Day is not a “day off,” it’s a day where we expect students to be engaged with the work of their peers. If anything I think the lens shifts a little bit in my current role because of my focus on student success, so I might think about GREAT Day a little bit differently than as a history faculty member, showcasing the work—the really inspiring work—that my students are doing. Now I think of it, in that bigger picture, how does this also support the principles that we’re trying to advance at Geneseo in terms of building students who are equipped to function in a world full of complicated problems and where they’re really going to be pressed to apply their academic skills and knowledge to those kinds of problems. So, I don’t think my overall attitude to GREAT Day or my impressions of GREAT Day have changed much, but my sense of the scale and significance has shifted.

