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Interview with Lytton Smith, Director of the Center for Integrative Learning

Nicole Callahan

How would you define GREAT Day?

That's a great question. That's a big one. I mean for me the Boyd showcase comes to mind—particularly a showcase of student research and creativity. On the one hand, it gives students professional expertise, delivering their research to an audience, which I think is rare at undergraduate institutions. But even more than that, the other thing that comes to mind, I think it's a check-in as well. It's a celebration because it gives a chance for students to see the really cool stuff that one another is working on. And it could be a great week.

What does GREAT Day mean in terms of student success?

It means a tremendous amount. I think one of the key things is that it allows students to recognize what's going on and build on it. So there's an inspiration aspect to it. I think it's a confidence builder towards participating in off-campus presentations. Something might be designed for GREAT Day and that leads to something else, or somebody might do something at GREAT Day and then think, "Hey, that wasn't so bad, I can do this." Then they take it to an undergraduate or a disciplinary venue. I think it's also important in terms of equity and access. It's a day where every student can talk and participate because class is canceled. So a lot of the obstacles to attending conferences, like if you're a carer, or if you're off-campus, or if you have financial barriers—GREAT Day doesn't have those obstacles.

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

I think it creates a space for people to move through. So you might go to a poster session, or go see a friend's poster, or you connect with another class, or you find something you weren't expecting. If you're interested in a particular topic and you see that there's a panel you head there and listen to something. But part of it's also the importance of the GREAT Day Program in that, you look at the program and think, "I wish I could go to that," or "I'm glad that I know that that exists." Hopefully that isn't just my experience as a member, I hope that's an experience the students have too.

What do you think the role of undergrad research is at Geneseo, and what do you think it should be?

One of the things I love most about Geneseo is that undergraduate research is really central. I think it's at the forefront. I think faculty and staff here take students seriously as researchers. I think that, as an undergraduate, it can be hard to take yourself seriously as a researcher, and I'm impressed at how students come to do that, because it's not easy. It's something they should do because amazing research is produced by undergraduates here.

You know, I think sometimes students don't realize that there are TRAC [Travel, Research and Creativity] Grants for attending conferences. I think the fact that people don't realize they exist is a sign that there's this great resource there that, when students find out about it, they say, "Wow, there's a means to achieve this." There are things like the ambassadorship program, so there are those opportunities to engage in research. I've always been a great believer in the ideas of pedagogy theorist Paulo Freire. He talks about student-teachers and teacher-students, the idea that students have expertise, and the classroom is never hierarchical. There's not just one person with the knowledge there. And so, I think the role of student research is to serve as a reminder that students contribute expertise, contribute knowledge, that they can create, and discover, and articulate. GREAT Day is a great way of achieving that, but also symbolizing that for the rest of the year.

As the director of the Center for Integrative Learning, you interact with a lot of areas of undergraduate research and self motivated study on campus. So what do you think Geneseo's culture surrounding undergraduate research is?

Yeah, I mean I think the culture is one of empowering students. It's a place where I see faculty and staff working really hard to make sure that there are opportunities for students. They work on making research possible and making it clear why it's a valuable thing to be doing. So that's the point being a college. Particularly a liberal arts college like this one, where the sciences are strong, while it's still firmly being a liberal arts college. The point is not to sit and listen for four years. The point is to gain knowledge, to gain skills, and to come to understand yourself. Research is an important means for doing that. What's also striking I think—and I'm not just saying this because of my role—but culture is integrative, which is to say that students have always been finding ways to bring different subjects together or different experiences together.

You know, so it could be that they're involved in a club, so they're relating that to a class that they're taking. They're thinking, "How does my studying a particular history class relate to my work within an activism club?" That desire to join the dots is something that I think speaks to the culture of curiosity here. And you know, I'm always inspired by seeing colleagues fostering that culture of creative curiosity. But

that also comes from the students, it comes from the sort of a student who chooses SUNY Geneseo.

Are there any other points about integrative learning or undergraduate research opportunities at Geneseo that maybe you haven't gotten to touch on yet that you think are important?

I want to find more ways for students to get from a GREAT Day presentation to an ambassadorship application, or to get from a GREAT Day presentation to national fellowships and scholarships. I recognize that there are steppingstones along the way. It might be that a GREAT Day presentation leads to something in a class or a conference or a directed study. But that's largely on me to help make those links, but I'm also always looking to collaborate with students to find ways to make GREAT Day itself as integrative as students want it to be. I'm lucky because of one of my involvements, I'm always in a GREAT Day room where there's a group of creative writers and a group of scientists. I'm listening to subjects that I wouldn't otherwise come into contact with. I think it's very easy, because we've got so many friends and colleagues in our own disciplines, to have a GREAT Day where its all philosophy or all mathematics, and I think one of the things that excites me most is when I hear students talking about how they were just in a biology presentation and now they're off to an anthropology presentation on ceramics. I try to foster that.

