Positioning Students to Succeed

GUSSIN SPIRITAN DIVISION BOLSTERS CONFIDENCE AND ACADEMICS FOR A BETTER COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

By Holly McCalmon

Five days after Joshua Rodes graduated high school, he got on a plane to Pittsburgh.

Why the swift departure? Rodes had a commitment to be part of the Gussin Spiritan Division of Academic Programs (GSD), founded more than two decades ago to help with the transition of a select group of students during their first year of college.

Over the last 20 years, the GSD has become more than a transition program for first-year students. It positions students to succeed personally and professionally by improving confidence and building skills that will help them in college and after they graduate.

“Human beings must work to keep the human spirit lifted,” says Dr. Judith Griggs, GSD director. “The division’s work with its students seeks to provide experiences that enlighten, inspire, and bring about self-knowledge and growing self-worth and belief.”

Many students come from widely different backgrounds from across the country and abroad. Acceptance into Duquesne as a GSD student is based on many factors, including grades, standardized test scores, commitment to excellence and potential for success in a college environment.

In many ways, the GSD is a “satellite campus” within the main Duquesne campus. With its own dedicated team of faculty, tutoring programs, support services and credited core curriculum, the sought-after program helps students develop at their own pace. The program has continued to grow over the last several years, peaking at 105 students in the 2017-2018 academic year. This year, 73 students are enrolled in the GSD—the program’s third largest cohort. The required GSD Summer Passage Program begins shortly after students receive their high school diplomas. A readiness phase, the five-week, residential campus summer program helps students develop “the attitudes, behaviors, skills and work ethic that will bring them academic success and self-fulfillment.”

“Research shows that students are more likely to leave college if they do not have a sense of belonging; community gives students a feeling of security and of fitting in that anchors them,” notes Griggs.

The GSD binds students together as a community to help them stay and thrive while at Duquesne. For Rodes, as well as Gabrielle Lapointe and Brandon Stewart, their summer trek to Pittsburgh would take them further than they realized, as they soon would learn.

GSD STUDENTS THRIVE

JOSHUA RODES

Joshua Rodes has always been a hard worker. A recent Pittsburgh transplant from Madison, Conn., he got his first job at the age of 12 and continued working throughout high school. His work schedule often pushed homework and studying late into the night.

Although his grades fell below Duquesne’s standard admissions requirements, he was accepted into the GSD.

“It was definitely an adjustment at first going from high school to college. The summer semester prepped me and got me ready,” says Rodes, a 2019 Gussin Spiritan Division Student of the Year and a junior majoring in accounting. The program was so beneficial for Rodes that Zachary, his twin brother and Duquesne marketing major, noticed the differences between their first-year experiences.

The GSD provides the right balance of encouragement and structure that gives each student the confidence to succeed, and a purpose and direction that they may not have otherwise found—or found later.

“The GSD transformed my life both academically and personally. The GSD has done so much for me, I want to give back to this program. I believe the GSD cultivated my desire to succeed and for that I am forever thankful,” says Rodes, who works as a GSD resident assistant for this year’s cohort.

Rodes’ future plans are also ambitious, as he aims to attend graduate school to obtain an MBA and pursue a career in financial planning.

GABRIELLE LAPOINTE

While in high school in eastern Pennsylvania’s Lehigh Valley, Gabrielle Lapointe’s primary focus was playing volleyball, which helped her develop discipline and a respect for teamwork. But it also impacted her grades.
Many students find their attention split between academics and activities, especially those who participate in sports. Lapointe, a junior with a double major in accounting and information systems management, now puts her competitive spirit to work as a participant in the GSD.

“Coming into college, I wasn’t the strongest student. I focused on volleyball year-round and my grades fell to the wayside. And now I’m maintaining a high GPA because of the program,” explains Lapointe.

Lapointe says the GSD is “one of the best experiences I have ever done. It’s given me so many more friends and so much more opportunity. I’ve noticed so much growth within myself. And it gave me more motivation to go after my career and my ambitions.”

Along with her determination and focus on her studies and speaking at GSD orientation about her experiences, Lapointe participates in the Student Accounting Association, Best Buddies chapter and Alpha Gamma Delta. She is also vice president of the Student Accounting Association and the president of Phi Eta Sigma, a national honor society that encourages and rewards academic excellence among freshmen in institutions of higher learning.

Lapointe is looking toward future opportunities with a focus on finding internships and networking during her last two years at Duquesne.

“I’m excited to grow as a person,” says Lapointe. “I’m also excited to continue to build relationships and focus on my studies—I want to finish out strong with an end goal of becoming a CPA.”

BRANDON STEWART

Brandon Stewart's long involvement and leadership roles with the Boys & Girls Clubs in his hometown of Sarasota, Fla., brought him to Duquesne as a recipient of the Robert and Patricia Gussin Endowed Scholarship.

The Gussins, the same couple whose hands-on approach to philanthropy has strengthened the GSD program for decades, are also the generous benefactors of the scholarship Stewart received that is unique to the Boys & Girls Clubs of Sarasota County (see sidebar). Under the umbrella and support of the GSD, this full four-year scholarship to Duquesne is awarded annually to at least one Club member who has done well academically in high school to eliminate the financial burden of obtaining a top-rated college education.

Stewart, a sophomore pursuing a double major in economics and marketing, graduated magna cum laude from Sarasota Military Academy, which helped to shape his confidence and focus with its rigorous academic program and values. Through the scholarship, Stewart was enrolled in the GSD and credits the summer program with providing him a head start to college.

“I could explore my personal and academic interests while being supported by a staff that were truly invested in my success and my future,” says Stewart. “It really kick-started my academic and social life at Duquesne. And because of that, I felt more equipped and confident going into the fall semester.”

Stewart also values the GSD resources and faculty, saying, “the Michael P. Weber Learning Skills Center is where they house all of the amazing staff from the Spiritan Division. It is really that one-stop shop for anything and everything that we all need.”

While at Duquesne, like many of his GSD counterparts, Stewart is taking full advantage of everything the University has to offer and participates in many activities, including the International Relations Club, where he is the social media and events coordinator. Starting this fall, he also holds positions as the career development ad-hoc committee chair for the Student Government Association, as well as the president of Lambda Sigma, an honor society with a mission that is “dedicated to the purpose of fostering leadership, scholarship, fellowship, and the spirit of service among college students.”

He also is looking toward the future.

“I’m excited to apply my knowledge and skills I developed at Duquesne in the real world,” says Stewart, who worked over the summer as a first-year program management intern within the human capital division at UnitedHealth Group, a global health and well-being company headquartered in Minneapolis, Minn.◆

The Couple Behind the GSD

Dr. Robert Gussin, P’59, GP’61, an emeriti member of the University’s Board of Directors and retired vice president of Johnson & Johnson, struggled like many students to transition from high school to higher education, but found his path and excelled. Gussin's personal academic challenges moved him and his wife, Dr. Patricia Gussin, a physician and New York Times best-selling author of mystery novels, to endow the Gussin Spiritan Division of Academic Programs and to establish the Robert and Patricia Gussin Endowed Scholarship to benefit participants of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Sarasota County.

Every year, the Gussins travel to Duquesne to join the endowed scholarship recipients at an on-campus event to celebrate their academic successes. Since the scholarship's inception in 2004, eight students have benefited from it. Three students have received the scholarship for the 2019 school year.