

UW-Stout: Human development and family studies graduate seeking career in school counseling

Posted on Friday, Dec 18, 2020

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Menomonie, Wis. – Erica Gaetz likes helping people. But when she was looking at colleges her senior year in high school, she had no idea what she wanted to study or what a career in helping people would look like. Then she attended University of Wisconsin-Stout's campus preview day.

Gaetz began her day touring with the undecided group, but after hearing a speaker introduce the human development and family studies major, she immediately switched to the HDFS tour. Gaetz toured Heritage Hall, where many HDFS classes are held, met with the program director and learned what the program was about.

“That switch is still one of the best decisions I have ever made,” she said. “It felt like a true light bulb moment. I left campus with my mom that day unable to stop talking about how exciting it felt for the pieces to finally start clicking together for me. I was exactly where I needed to be.”

Gaetz thinks many people do not understand the importance of helping professionals and their work, but she believes “HDFS is vital for many people and communities and the countless lives that have been touched.

“People can be confused about what HDFS is because it covers so many careers and opportunities. It can be difficult to simplify the definition of what it truly is,” she said. “To me, that is the beauty of HDFS. Students have a passion for helping people and this can take them down so many different avenues.”

In her 3½ years at UW-Stout, Gaetz had the opportunity to walk down several

avenues to discover which helping profession path she wanted to pursue.

Gaetz, of Spencer, will graduate on Saturday, Dec. 19, one of 637 UW-Stout fall graduates. She is applying to UW-Stout's school counseling graduate program. She plans to be a middle school or high school counselor.

Finding her path in the helping professions

In her first year, Gaetz wanted to become a social worker. But in her sophomore year, she realized her passion for school counseling. She had several work-study and internships with area schools and organizations, working hand-in-hand with children.

Last spring, Gaetz tutored students at Downsview Elementary School through a work-study position with the America Reads program. However, the program was cut short when schools closed because of COVID-19. She is still grateful for the experience and thinks it is one that would never have happened if she had not chosen UW-Stout.

In June, Gaetz started working at Coulee Connections, an alternative education program in Menomonie, helping with the summer outlook program.

"The experience I gained while working with the students is so incredibly valuable to me. You can have all of the education and training that you want about working with kids with different traumas, behaviors and disabilities, but nothing can help you more than experiencing it for yourself," she said.

Gaetz also interned at Elk Mound High School this semester, working with the school's counselor Hugh Goodrich. Between school, work and her internship, Gaetz's final semester was the busiest of her college career, and she is grateful for every moment of it, she said.

"That is not to say it has not been challenging working with high school students, but I can honestly say this experience confirmed for me that school counseling is exactly what I want to do. I am so glad that I was still able to do my internship even with the global pandemic going on, and I feel like this has helped me get a look at some of the things that will never quite be the same in education even when things eventually go back to normal," Gaetz said.

She is proud of how both Coulee Connections and Elk Mound are doing their best for their students during this difficult time.

“The consistent, positive attitude and high level of enthusiasm Erica brings to work each day have made her a highly valued and much appreciated part of our team this semester,” Goodrich said. “You can’t fake genuine. Erica has been genuinely committed to improving the lives of our students while improving her own understanding of the role our counseling team plays within the lives of our students, staff and community.”

Making positive connections and lasting relationships

Aside from her off-campus experiences, Gaetz was also involved in many student organizations. The connections and friendships she made on campus are what stand out most to her. Gaetz, who has a Spanish minor, was inducted into Phi Upsilon Omicron, a scholastic honor society.

She served as the society’s historian for two years. She served on the board for the Academic Honor Society as head of public relations and secretary. She was also secretary for the Stout Council on Family Relations and was president of SCFR in her final semester.

“SCFR has added so much to my life during my time at Stout. Being president has been an amazing leadership opportunity for me, and I feel like my collaborating and delegating skills have definitely grown during this time,” she said.

“Erica is truly a superhero HDFS student,” said SCFR adviser Candice Maier, an assistant professor. “She balances schoolwork with fieldwork, which is a central component of the major. Her dedication and commitment, as well as serving youth, are exceptional. Erica’s work ethic will take her far in the field.”

Gaetz will continue working with Coulee Connections while transitioning to graduate school.

“I feel like my major has definitely helped prepare me for my future career,” she said. “Stout showed me that the world is much bigger than the small town I come from. There are other ways of thinking that are different than what I had learned. My experience at Stout also helped me figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

Human development and family studies graduates care for people's needs with sensitivity to age, culture, gender, sexuality and life-stages. The program is a path to many master's studies, including marriage and family therapy, mental health counseling, school counseling and social work.

Graduates may also earn certificates in school counseling or social work.