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Positive outlook and positive impact

BY JAN GILLIS ('07)

Tara McGrath ('14)

social work major | Westminster, Md.

Is it possible, despite the recurring news of a bleak job market, for undergraduates to happily anticipate their graduation from college?

JMU social work major Tara McGrath ('14) answers the question with an unequivocal "yes." What's the source of her positivity? "I know that I will be well prepared because of the knowledge and skills that I have gained from the JMU Department of Social Work."

She came to Madison with a desire to pursue social work and a dream to "have a positive impact on other people's lives," she says. "I chose JMU because of its strong academic atmosphere."

And, she hasn't been disappointed.

McGrath, of Westminster, Md., says JMU social work professors are committed to developing graduates who will succeed in their field. "Professors focus on teaching students to apply what they learn in class through group work, projects, practice case studies and role-play," she says. "Our small class sizes allow students and teachers to become actively involved in the learning process."

What is not part of the process? "Professors do not tell you how to solve problems step by step," says McGrath. Instead, the emphasis is placed on seeing problems in their context. "As social

workers we do not just give answers to clients. We facilitate them through their problem and where to go from there." A key element of the training for JMU students is learning to solve problems the right way. "The person-in-environment, or PIE, perspective is emphasized," says McGrath. "This perspective focuses not only on the problem, but also on all the internal/external factors that contribute to the problem."

Students are required to take what they've learned out into the real world and complete more than 400 hours of volunteer service in a community setting. She became confident in her ability to work through problems with clients during hands-on experience working with teens at the Boys and Girls Club. "I worked very closely with one individual who was going through many different things. I could not simply stop, go review my notes, and see how I could help. I had to think on the spot and wisely."

Working in such settings is crucial in developing skill and confidence needed for a successful career. "As a social worker, you can never be sure of what is going to occur, or who is going to walk into your office," says McGrath.

She appreciates the support that professors provide for their students. "Each one of my experiences with the

professors in the department has been positive," she says. "Dr. Nancy Poe is just one example. She has always made herself available to answer questions that I have about the department and has helped me through some personal decisions and events that affected school and my future career. Dr. Poe has provided me with lots of support and encouragement."

McGrath, who also serves as president of the JMU chapter of the National Society of Leadership and Success, is ready for her future. "I am so excited to start my career," she says.

"If I were to be thrown into the real world right now, I could succeed." **ME**

