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When it comes to complex problems, fitting together the pieces of the puzzle is what Dr. Crystal Harris does. Her impressive educational background at a tier-two research institution saw her hired to [Governors State University](#) as a [Psychology](#) professor while still finishing her dissertation. During her twelve years on campus, Harris has shifted from the [College of Education](#) to the [College of Arts and Sciences](#). As program coordinator for [Interdisciplinary Studies](#) (IDSS), one of the largest programs on campus with over 300 students, she has the opportunity to influence policy, curriculum, course designs, and help students navigate through the various complexities of completing a degree. This role suits her well.

“I love that research in interdisciplinary studies pulls from different disciplines and allows you to integrate it all together into something that is theoretically a solution to a problem that I care about. It’s has been a good fit for me, personality wise,” she said.

The final piece of the puzzle for Harris was moving into [Prairie Place](#) as Faculty-in-Residence, a role she occupied until July 2020, where she supported an environment of life-long learning in order to create globally conscience students.

Her dedication to continuous learning is mirrored in her students, who range from eighteen year old freshmen to 60 year old students returning to school.

“You know, you're never too old to learn. That's what they remind me. You're absolutely never too old to learn,” she said.

GSU Newsroom: What brought you to GSU?

Harris: I'm a social scientist. As a result of that, I care about issues like access to affordable, quality education in neighborhoods or populations that are underserved, which is what GSU is. That's how I ended up working here.

I believe you always put yourself in the presence of where you want to be. I knew I wanted an academic job, so even when I was supposed to be at home working on my dissertation, I went to a conference. I met these phenomenal people and they suggested I apply to GSU. And I was thinking to myself, “Okay, why not?” As it happened, they had adjunct opportunities and asked me to teach over the summer. Soon after they had an immediate open for a full time faculty member four weeks before school started. I was actually terrified but I was excited. I was supposed to be working on my dissertation! But it worked out well.

GSU Newsroom: What inspires your work as the IDSS programs coordinator?

Harris: The IDSS program is based on the idea of preparing people to solve complex problems in the world by processing their life and their experiences. What's important is that the [students](#) are able to think about their lives as a sort of story over the long haul. That's the theory that resonated with me and I still think influences the nuances of the program. We're helping students to tell a story that is going to be meaningful and profitable to them.

One of the things that I'm most proud of that we've done is that we have a Career Planning course which is full with a waiting list since a month before fall semester. It involves systems thinking, analysis skills, writing skills, and being able to tell that story from a hodgepodge of background experience. The course is good because we listened to what the students needed and tried to design something that sort of fit that hole and students are responding well to it.

The other thing that I'm super proud of in IDSS is our honor society, Alpha Iota Sigma. We have one of the largest chapters of the honor society at GSU, and we're inducting more members every year.

GSU Newsroom: How does your work revolve around mentorship?

Harris: My own research around first-generation college students has to do with mentoring and how, in order to prepare them for graduate school in particular, they have to see people and work alongside people who are headed into graduate school or headed into academic careers. So I'm making sure that students have good mentoring experiences and even junior faculty have good mentoring experiences.

I want to teach students that they need a career that they're passionate about, that's also going to be profitable enough for them to be able to maintain themselves and their futures. I think that's the part of the story that's really missing for our more underserved

communities. They're not trained to think like that. Students need to run into people who are going to steer them directly or indirectly into career paths that are more lucrative.

Let's say you want to be an artist, and maybe what you need are good marketing skills, good business skills, good branding skills to be able to sell your art. You do not need to be in the mindset of the starving artist. There's a myth that you have to be a starving artist, but there's also artists who are millionaires. Why not? Why can't we strive to be that?

GSU Newsroom: Why are Faculty-in-Residence important to the students living in Prairie Place?

Harris: I started living in Prairie Place in August of 2017 and stayed for three academic years. It was great. I really loved interacting with students inside and outside the classroom and connecting them with resources on campus. I think it helps them see that education is not just something we do on Tuesdays at 1:30. Being an engaged citizen in America means using what you're learning all the time. Education is a lifestyle.

I enjoyed the role immensely because it allows students to build relationships with faculty beyond the classroom and gain a more diverse perspective. It expands their concept of higher education and what it contributes to one's overall life. Lastly, they observe an integrated intellectual life as it blends beyond professional careers into the social, familial and civic responsibilities we all have.

These college experiences are preparing them for their future boss, the next door neighbor, their husband's mother, and all the other people in their future that they're going to have to navigate around and still be high functioning, pleasant professionals who are accomplishing something. It's really about just being a good citizen so that students have good experiences.

GSU Newsroom: What's next?

Harris: Within IDSS, I really am interested in doing something around a service learning course and a leadership development course. I also want to do a study abroad trip that would be cross listed between IDSS and some of the health sciences or social sciences like sociology. Somewhere warm and fun. There've been ravaging natural disasters in the Caribbean area that I think we could help with. So in the next two to three years, those are things that I'm working on putting in place.

My dream is to, one day, do something as a support role of education that would still meet my affinities for working, coaching, and mentoring students.