

OUTSTANDING GRADUATE STUDENT AWARD

Whitney Higginbotham '22

The Outstanding Graduate Student Award honors a student who has demonstrated superior achievements in scholarship and academics, character, leadership and initiative during graduate studies.

IT WAS A YEARNING to take control of her career that drew Whitney Higginbotham '22 back to Western for a master's degree in Organizational Leadership.

After graduating from WOU in 2012 with an undergraduate degree in Community Health Education, she took a job with Salem Health. Her first position was as an outreach operations specialist for the hospital's cancer awareness program and for six years she worked in clinical research, managing regulatory processes.

"I was ready to grow in my role, but I didn't know where I could go within the clinical research world," she recalls. "As much as I loved clinical research, I found that I had worked myself into a corner. I had become a little bit too specialized with my experience."

As she interviewed for new roles, she was also starting to hear a refrain—she needed a master's degree or more relevant experience. Both suggestions caused Higginbotham a great deal of internal conflict. She'd never considered getting a master's degree and she wondered whether she should leave research altogether.

"I never thought I would get my master's degree ever because academically I struggle quite a bit," she says. But with some encouragement and a gentle nudge from Amber Deets, Director of Graduate Student Success & Recruitment, Higginbotham felt emboldened to take the next step in her career.

Not only has she learned new skills, Higginbotham says she's gained confidence and learned more about herself in the process. "The knowledge and skills that I learned about and practiced, means I can work in many different

industries if I chose to, which is incredible, because I find that I really like to change what I like to do," she says. "I just see myself doing so many things."

In addition to her studies, Higginbotham worked as graduate assistant for Dr. Kathleen Cassidy, the Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences, lending support to various committees on campus with her skills as a data analyst. Higginbotham reached out to an adjunct professor to see if there were opportunities to work with the City of Salem on her final project, and subsequently partnered with the Public Works Department to benchmark burnout, and provide tools and strategies to prevent it.

Higginbotham envisions eventually landing in consultant work, with a focus on change management, organizational development and process improvement.

"That's where I see myself because it involves working with different people and projects consistently, which is what I like," she says. "I loved that my classmates were from

all different backgrounds, some very different from my own, including military, healthcare, academia, business – all over."

And while the year and a half of her studies were mostly online, even that experience had a silver lining, giving her an opportunity to hone skills that she may not have considered in the past.

"I learned how to relate to people in a remote setting and connect with others from my home office. That was a great experience to have and a push forward with the way things are going in different careers and industries," she says. Most importantly, the Organizational Leadership program has opened a whole world of new possibilities.



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