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Thompson draws on personal experience in advising students

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Thompson draws on personal experience in advising students

“There’s no reason for you to go to college and waste your parents’ money.”

Those words from Laura Thompson’s high school guidance counselor — and the counselor’s refusal to sign off on Thompson’s college applications — left her crushed and convinced college was not to be.

Mildly dyslexic and tormented by a reading learning disability, Thompson says she struggled in all of her high school courses except math and science. When she graduated, she says, she was reading on a middle-school level.

An empathetic biology teacher bent the rules a bit and signed the documents the counselor had scorned, and Thompson was eventually accepted into Madison College, now James Madison University.

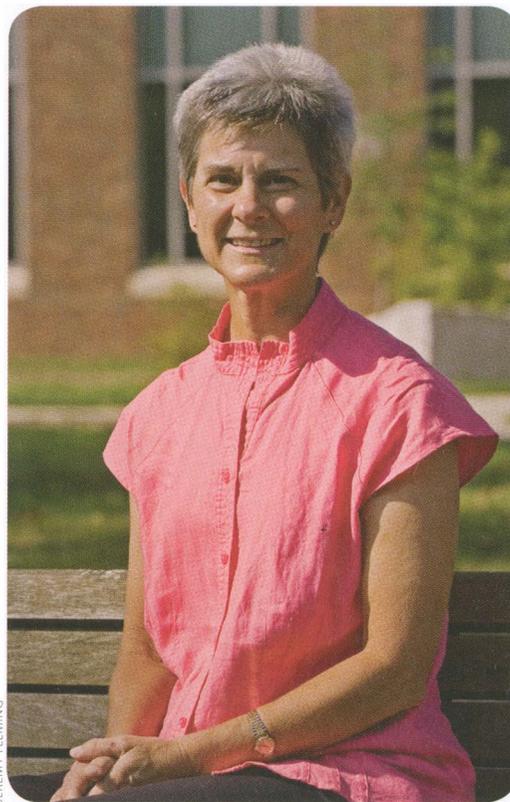
Still, with the counselor’s words seared into her mind, she failed her first college botany exam, her nerves and debilitating lack of confidence getting the best of her.

Thompson knew she was at a crossroads. She could let the naysayers (including herself) get the best of her, or she could stay the course. After a soul-searching weekend, Thompson decided to remain in school.

The result: She graduated *summa cum laude* and went on to earn a Ph.D. in plant physiology from Virginia Tech. She has been a member of the Furman biology faculty since 1987, and in 2007-08 she received the **Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Advising**.

Thompson, who served as Furman’s health careers advisor from 2000 until last spring, draws from her experiences when working with students.

“When they come into my office, I don’t care what it says on their transcripts, I don’t care what their SATs or ACTs are, I don’t care if a student



JEREMY FLEMING

walks into my office with a GPA below 2.0 as a senior,” she says. “At some point in their lives, the light will come on and they’ll realize what they should be doing and where they need to be going.

“We as advisors need to support and help that student until the light goes on, because when it does, that person will be successful. And if I can get through college with my learning disability, any student who walks through the gate at Furman can graduate and be successful. So I never pre-judge a student by what’s on paper.”

As health fields advisor, Thompson dedicated herself to learning all she could about professional schools, entrance requirements, test prep programs and more. At other schools, Thompson says, students tend to be on their own when applying to health careers programs.

“It’s a real maze getting through all the health careers stuff. You really can’t go to one place and find all the answers,” she says. But the best place to start might well be the Web page Thompson developed for Furman students: www.furman.edu/depts/premed.

Thompson invested countless hours in the lives of upwards of 200 health careers students, preparing cover letters, application packets and letters of recommendation for scores of professional schools. Sandra Larson, a former departmental colleague, says of Thompson, “When these duties were added to her ‘regular’ advising duties, plus teaching responsibilities, Laura had usually completed 40 hours of work by sometime on Wednesday, depending on the number of after-hours meetings.”

The payoff for Thompson has been seeing students’ goals come to fruition. “When you work really hard with these students for four years and they come into your office and say, ‘I got in! I got in!’ — it’s a personal success for them, but it’s also a personal success for me because I know that the student is realizing a dream.”

— TINA TARKINGTON UNDERWOOD

The author is a free-lance writer in Greenville.