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Up Close: Challenge accepted

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UP CLOSE

Challenge accepted

From sociology to business development, Caroline Poole hasn't shied away from her curiosity.

Caroline Poole '14 is a long way from her native Monroe, Georgia. She's at Salt Lake City International Airport, fielding phone calls – like this interview – as she waits by her gate. A boarding announcement blares above the murmur of hushed voices, shuffling feet and rolling luggage in the background. This Furman alumna now calls SLC her home, but she's on her way to Los Angeles for work.

Poole is also a long way from her roots as a sociology student at Furman. She's part of business development with Qualtrics, a company that provides an enterprise platform for collecting and analyzing research. But along her journey to this airport gate – both geographically and professionally – there's been one constant: curiosity.

Growing up in the rural Deep South, Poole freely admits her circle was small, but if anything, that only magnified her desire to know more about the world she lived in. "I saw a lot of racial issues and a lot of stratification of communities, and I knew that the way my friends, friends' parents, and teachers were describing our community missed the mark," Poole says. "At the time, I didn't have the tools to explain what I was seeing, but I knew the

explanations I was given were insufficient."

The moment that began to change was during Accepted Students Day at Furman, when Poole sat in on a mock sociology class conducted by Kyle Longest. "He used a lot of tools and terminology to describe what I saw in my community – redlining, segregation, integration – the long-term effects, and how they were measured," says Poole. "It was wonderful. I knew that day I wanted to be a sociology student. I was hooked."

Sociology offered more than mere intellectual satisfaction. It also bridged the gap between the theoretical and the practical, which allowed Poole to apply her natural affinity for mathematics. "Statistics always came naturally, so running math problems on research data was always easy to me. The hard part was learning the theory behind it and applying the specific definition to real-life examples. That was always where I struggled, but I loved the struggle."

Poole's experience developing and analyzing research served her well when a Furman friend forwarded a Qualtrics opportunity her way. "He described what Qualtrics was, and I thought, 'Well, this is what I did in my sociology classes.' Though I didn't have experience spe-



Caroline Poole shares a seat with Barnaby, the Qualtrics mascot.

"MY DEGREE DIDN'T TEACH ME ONLY ABOUT SOCIOLOGY. IT REALLY TAUGHT ME HOW TO LEARN."

cifically using Qualtrics, I could talk about my experience in my research methodology classes."

Poole started out on Qualtrics's support team, helping customers figure out what information they needed, the logic for asking the correct questions, and how to analyze the data once it was collected. But Poole quickly sought new avenues for growth. "I get bored pretty quickly, so over the past three or four years, my job's changed a lot. I've always wanted to move my career in a direction that would lead me to a new challenge," she says.

That challenge happened to be business development. Despite not having a tradi-

tional education in business, Poole drew upon her curiosity as a strength: "Instead of seeing all I lacked, I saw different creative ways I could apply my existing skills." That included what she credits as the most important takeaway of her Furman experience: "My degree didn't teach me only about sociology. It really taught me how to learn. And in my professional career, being able to learn quickly has been much more important than knowing every single thing about a given topic."

With less than half a decade of professional experience, there's still much for Poole to learn. At the same time, given her career trajectory and innate curiosity, there's no question that's exactly what she wants. ●

– Andrew Huang '11