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Alum's Strategies Apply to Politics, Products and People

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Illinois Wesleyan University alumna Gretchen Grabowski's career has taken her from a political campaign in the small Georgia town of Cleveland, (population 3,400) through the inner workings of The Nielsen Company's television ratings service.

Each job, however, required similar skill sets. "Thinking critically, analyzing data, and communicating the results of that analysis — all of which I learned at Wesleyan -- have been important in every job I've had," said Grabowski '03, who earned a bachelor of arts in political science. "Political science majors don't just go to law school or teach or run for office. You can do all of those things, but you can also apply the skills you learn at Wesleyan to just about anything."



Gretchen Grabowski

On a recent campus visit, Grabowski advised political science majors to:

- take advantage of any and all internship opportunities. Grabowski completed three as an IWU student;
- work on the student newspaper, where Grabowski learned how to "ask the right questions and tell a story;"
- learn how to use SPSS, among the most widely used computer programs for statistical analysis in social sciences;
- realize the network the students would have when they leave Wesleyan is just as important as the education they receive. As an example, Grabowski said IWU graduates made up the entire the paid staff on the Tari Renner for Congress campaign in 2004, including her.

Grabowski developed an interest in politics and its impact on daily life as a reporter for her high school's newspaper in Morton Grove, Ill. A speech Grabowski covered by then-First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton turned out to be a pivotal moment. "I knew then that I was really interested in politics and wanted to incorporate it into my future studies in some way," Grabowski said. "Professor Tari Renner's American Elections class, my second political science class at IWU, led me to decide to become a major."

In addition to completing internships, serving as editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, and mastering SPSS, Grabowski served as editor of *Res Publica*, the political science department's journal of original undergraduate research. She also had two papers published in the journal, a highly unusual accomplishment, according to Jim Simeone, chair of the political science department.

After completing her studies at IWU, Grabowski served as finance director for the 2004 Renner Congressional campaign while also earning a Master of Arts in political science at the University of Illinois. She then moved to Cleveland, Georgia, where she served as general staff and finance director for a candidate running for her first statewide office. "This was a shocking experience for me, not the least of which was because our campaign office was a trailer staked in the parking lot of the candidate's trucking company," Grabowski said. "We had to turn on the oven and open its door in order to have heat in the winter."

After yet another Congressional campaign, this one in Florida, Grabowski was offered a position as an analyst with Hamilton Campaigns, a consulting firm. Based in Hamilton's Fernandina Beach, Fla., office, Grabowski did data analysis, polling analysis and election mapping for up to five campaigns at a time.

Grabowski then took her experience in survey writing, data analysis and written communication to a job as a research analyst with The Nielsen Company.

"I saw the Nielsen job as a new challenge in that it offered me an opportunity to use many of the same skills I learned in politics and political research in a different environment," said Grabowski. "I liked the idea of being able to spend some time working in media research, and the experience has also made me more marketable in the long run because I've seen both sides of the spectrum."

She now works for Mintel Group, Ltd., a market research firm and Nielsen competitor with offices in Chicago and London. Grabowski again uses her data analysis skills, but now she produces syndicated research related to trends and consumer attitudes on topics in the travel, leisure and lifestyle industries. Her responsibilities include: survey design and data analysis, trend evaluations, research and report writing --- in short, skills she has honed over the years in her previous positions.

"Whether politics and campaigning or marketing and marketing research, it's all related to some kind of sales," Grabowski said. "How you position your candidate as the best is the same as positioning your product as the best."

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