

Dr. Leigh Johnson M.A. English, 2005

By Max Chambers

Associate Professor of English, Marymount University

“No one is perfect the first time. Writing for a critical, friendly reader is such a gift, and WKU has multiple professors willing to give students that gift of critique, encouragement, and confidence.”



Dr. Leigh Johnson graduated from WKU in 2005 with a master’s degree in English. In 2011, she completed her PhD in English at the University of New Mexico. Johnson is currently an Associate Professor of English, Chair of the Liberal Studies Program, and Coordinator of the Gender Studies minor at Marymount University, a private Catholic university in Arlington, Virginia.

Johnson began her undergraduate degree at Lewis & Clark College as an International Affairs major. She realized near the end of her degree program that she wanted to pursue an English degree. “I decided to graduate a semester early, rather than take an extra year to switch majors,” said Johnson. She volunteered as a 6-12th grade reading tutor with AmeriCorps for a year to save money for graduate school before pursuing her master’s degree at WKU. “I chose WKU because it was close and convenient [to home], but I came to realize how special the faculty, department, and cohort were immediately,” said Johnson. “I felt very lucky to have fallen into the program.”

Johnson still uses inspiration gained from her WKU English professors as she teaches her own English students. The late Dr. Libby Oakes and her *Women’s Poetry* course left a lasting impression on Johnson. “[Dr. Oakes] inspired me to play with language, words, and pedagogy,” said Johnson. “Much of how I approach teaching is due to the way she encouraged us to work in groups, to think hard and broadly, and to have fun with what we were learning. I thought if I could be half as good as she was, I’d be doing all right!” Dr. Kelly Reames’ course on *The Novel* and Dr. Jane Olmstead’s *Feminist Theories* course also influence Johnson’s research today.

After completing her master's degree in 2005, Johnson taught English and Gender & Women's Studies courses part-time at WKU while she considered PhD programs. Johnson chose the University of New Mexico, where she worked as a teaching assistant while completing her dissertation. She rigorously applied for teaching positions during her final year, and when she graduated in 2011, she immediately accepted a tenure-track teaching position with Marymount University.

In addition to heading the Liberal Studies program and coordinating the Gender Studies minor, Johnson teaches 5 classes each school year. "I teach two classes in the Fall, usually composition and an advanced literature class," said Johnson. "I teach three classes in the spring, usually gender studies, a literature survey, and a senior seminar in Liberal Studies." Her job often centers around department coordination, but Johnson loves the opportunities to mentor students. "I love seeing them take original research to conferences, make a service project into a job, and ask questions beyond the classroom," said Johnson.

In her free time, Johnson loves to read contemporary literature and occasionally non-fiction. "I read, cook, garden, do Ashtanga yoga, hang out with my kids, and travel," said Johnson. "Any and all of these bring me frustration and pleasure, and I wouldn't trade them!"

Johnson knows how challenging the higher education job market is, but she encourages current English students to practice and pursue their passion, no matter where that passion takes them. "Read, write, repeat," said Johnson. "Yes, the job market is terrible, but there are lots of ways to use your English degree. I'm a lucky cliché. You can do more than I did."

