

Sydnie Cunningham '13, Young Alumna of the Year 2020

Our 2020 young alumna of the year is described by her friends, professors and co-workers with a fascinating range of words and phrases from “insightful,” “analytic,” “technically-skilled” and “a force” to “generous,” “bubbly,” “a rock” and someone who “brings diverse personalities into relationship with one another.” What is perhaps most remarkable is the way Dr. Sydnie Cunningham, Class of 2013, has integrated her personal talents and values, her brilliant mind for research and scholarship, and her fierce grit and determination into a career that, just seven years after graduating from Houghton, is improving the lives of those around her.

Sydnie came to Houghton in 2009, participated in our London Honors program and graduated four years later with a double major in Psychology and Sociology, along with minors in Business Administration and Australian Studies. As her Houghton career progressed, Dr. Paul Young, Professor of Psychology and our current Dean of the Faculty, saw Sydnie begin to combine her passion for inclusivity and diversity with her academic pursuits.

“Sydnie developed strong research skills through her majors in psychology and sociology. Always looking for an extra challenge, she pursued the honors research track in psychology. That led to a senior thesis investigating factors that affect women’s career choices in STEM fields, which connects with her current work. She took abstract research findings and applied them to real-world situations at Houghton, and onward in her career. She is one of Houghton’s finest!”

Sydnie continued on to earn her Masters and PhD from the University of Tulsa in Industrial and Organizational Psychology. While in graduate school, in addition to teaching undergraduate courses and co-authoring a number of scholarly journal articles, Dr. Cunningham participated in a variety of projects including helping a company create a strategy to increase workplace diversity and conducting a mixed-methods experiment at the University of Tulsa assessing engineering student cultural awareness. Her PhD journey culminated in a dissertation focused on the effect of inclusive work environments on employees’ fits within their organizations, and how an inclusive environment can lead to better job satisfaction and lower rates of turnover. In addition to these accomplishments, she was also honored with the Bellwether Fellowship, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology Travel Grant, and the Chapman Travel Grant.

Dr. Cunningham continued her research after earning her PhD, serving as a Research Psychologist with the US Army, where she served as Project Leader of a ten-year longitudinal study, involving 50,000 soldiers every year, assessing Army talent management practices. Kimberly Owens, Dr. Cunningham’s team leader, soon noticed the same attributes mentioned by those who knew Sydnie at Houghton, evidenced by the selection of all three of Dr. Cunningham’s papers for presentation at a prestigious conference in her field. Additionally, Owens says about Dr. Cunningham “One of Sydnie’s most impressive traits is her ability and commitment to mentor and support colleagues and students. She gives her time and attention generously. I am sure those students were the first of many young, talented students and professionals that Sydnie will take under her wing.”

Currently, Dr. Cunningham serves as an Applied Social Scientist with the US Department of Defense. It is fitting that her role involves using her exceptional mind for research to study workplace outcomes that women experience when they enlist in combat positions. Through her work, Dr. Cunningham hopes that

she can help to improve inclusiveness and provide a better experience for future women serving in those challenging roles.

In recognition of her accomplishment in the field of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, the excellence she has shown as an author and researcher, and the positive impact that she continues to have on communities around her both personal and professional, we are pleased to present Dr. Sydney Cunningham with Houghton College's 2020 Young Alumna Award.