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[EAGLE Academy students seize distance learning as a new opportunity to prepare for the digital world](#)

April 14, 2020

When Georgia Southern University College of Education members founded [EAGLE Academy](#), they never planned for students to learn virtually.

“The premise was to bring students to live on campus, some for the first time, and have them cultivate lifelong skills that would help them be independent as well as active and engaged citizens in the workforce,” said Stephanie Devine, Ph.D., EAGLE Academy executive director.

An inclusive post-secondary education (IPSE) program, the academy offers Equal Access to Gainful Learning and Employment (EAGLE) for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Georgia Southern IPSE program is unique in many aspects including that it offers the third and fourth years for students who have already completed an initial two-year program at another institution. EAGLE Academy also offers its students a custom-built academic program based on their interests.

When the University System of Georgia colleges and universities closed their campuses in response to the coronavirus pandemic, EAGLE Academy had to determine a new way to help students reach their goals from a distance.

“EAGLE Academy’s Program Director Julie Pickens has reimagined our network of graduate assistants, student assistants and peer mentors to help the students in the academy be successful in a virtual environment,” said Devine. “This is definitely a whole new world for the students in EAGLE Academy as our program was certainly not designed to be virtual. However, we are doing everything we can to make sure each EAGLE Academy student is receiving the support he or she needs to be successful.”

Director Julie Pickens, Ph.D., said the transition has not only been a success but perhaps even beneficial for the students to experience.

“The online learning helps our students to adapt to changes and problem-solve with our support,” said Pickens. “It also may help students to really learn to advocate more for the support that they need to be successful. While it is not ideal to go fully online in the middle of the semester, the reality is that the world is becoming more digital and remote, and students will have to use online platforms more and more to live and work in the world.”

The support team for the academy has found Slack to be a useful communication and management tool for the group.

“We were using Slack to communicate with peer mentors about the students that they were supporting before we went online,” said Pickens. “However, it has been a great medium, especially now that everyone is so spread out and there are multiple people working to support the same students. I think that it does help everyone to know that we are all in this together and want the best for the EAGLE Academy students.”

While the move to online was not expected and has been difficult for all students, the EAGLE Academy team has found communication to be key. In addition to Slack, the team uses Google Hangouts and FaceTime, as well as emails, phone calls and texts.

EAGLE Academy student Cole said thanks to his mentors, moving to a virtual platform is going well.

“I’m very comfortable with the learning and technology online because I have great people on my side to help me,” said Cole. “The main thing I’m going to take away from this experience is doing stuff on my own. It’s given me a big opportunity to be more independent.”

Academy classmate Brandon agrees that the online platform is a new opportunity.

“I like that I can make my own schedule and I can work at my own pace,” he said.

Pickens said she is not surprised that the academy students are doing so well, as they have strong characteristics of adaptation to their advantage.

“I think that in some ways EAGLE Academy students may be better able to adapt to this experience than other students,” said Pickens. “These students have spent much of their academic career going into classrooms that were not always taught the way they learn. I hear many other students voicing that they signed up for in-person classes because that is how they learn best, and they don’t know how to adjust to online learning. Many of the academy students have good self-accommodation skills to help them adjust to an academic setting that does not best meet their needs. I think that this experience will further help students to learn those self-advocacy, self-determination and self-accommodation skills.”

All in all, students are doing well, but ready to get back to being on-campus.

“This has made me try a new way of learning,” said Brandon. “But it has made me miss all of my friends at EAGLE Academy. I like living in my college dorm room. I miss going to the football, baseball, basketball and volleyball games. I can’t wait for the virus to be gone so we can go back to Georgia Southern.”



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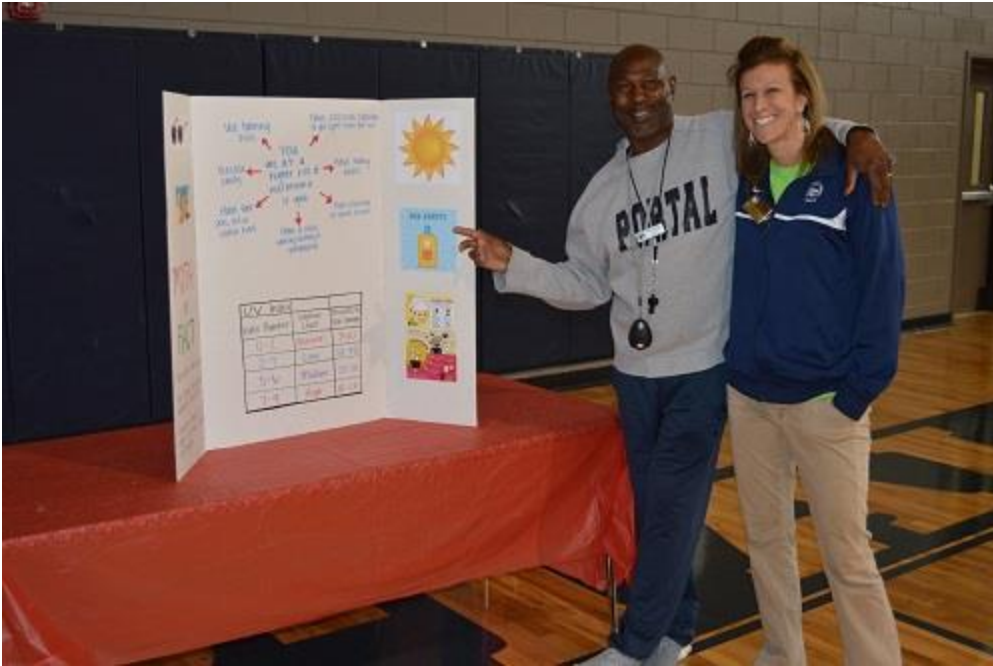
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Georgia Southern alumnus encourages his students to stay active from home

April 14, 2020



Portal Middle-High's Tendai Haggins (l) with Georgia Southern University's Kellie Penix, Ed.D., lecturer of health and physical education

At 16 years old, Tendai Haggins ('93) lost his 36-year-old mother, who had long put her health issues to the side as she took care of her family.

From then on, health and physical fitness became a pivotal part of Haggins' life in Portal, Georgia, a small town located in northwest Bulloch County. In high school, he played any sport he could, including baseball, basketball, football and track.

"It not only kept me in good shape, it kept me busy and out of trouble," said Haggins. "I had so much energy and always

wanted to be busy."

Because Haggins was driven and willing to do manual labor, he didn't consider going to college. However, his teachers and coaches challenged him to think otherwise.

He watched them in their jobs, noting that they had fun and got paid to do it. Haggins thought, "I can do that."

After applying for and earning numerous college scholarships, Haggins chose Georgia Southern University to pursue a degree in health and physical education.

"I was at home at Georgia Southern," he said.

Haggins walked onto the University's baseball team where he played one season before stepping down to focus on grades and finances for college. When he successfully completed his teaching degree, Haggins returned to Portal to do what he always wanted to do -- teach and inspire kids to be healthy and reach their fitness goals.

"I love seeing these kids doing something they never thought they could do," said Haggins. "I want them to believe in themselves."

For students who don't want to tackle sports and fitness, Haggins encourages them to be active.

"I still participate in the class," he said. "I workout with them, play with them. They keep me young."

Haggins also works with students on their personal goals.

“If it’s about losing weight or gaining muscle or just living a more healthy lifestyle, we work on that together,” said Haggins.

Since schools across the state and nation have closed their doors and moved to virtual platforms for the remainder of the K-12 school year, Haggins said it is more important than ever to keep students engaged, active and thinking about nutrition.

“I post challenges for them, and I am still getting calls and texts from students about their fitness goals,” he said. “I have explained to them that 30 minutes a day will make a big difference, and I am encouraging them to now challenge their family members to do the exercises with them. When we return to school, we will be accountable for this time. We have to keep our goals in mind and keep working toward them.”

Haggins also encourages students to keep a food journal. Looking at the research and science of food, they log how they are feeling, correlating their energy levels and emotions with the food they eat.

“It’s easier if you can make a family commitment,” said Haggins. “Cook healthier meals and take walks together, especially during this time. I had a mom approach me in the grocery store who jokingly told me that she now has to get in shape because of me. Her daughter wants her to complete the challenges with her. That’s what it is all about.”

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