

# Newsroom

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Georgia Southern University

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# New inclusive post-secondary education program at Georgia Southern takes flight

DECEMBER 22, 2017



INCLUSIVE POST-SECONDARY  
EDUCATION

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GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Georgia Southern's newest academic program, EAGLE Academy, welcomed its first two students in fall 2017 as fully enrolled undergraduates. EAGLE Academy is an inclusive post-secondary education (IPSE) program offering the chance at a college education for those with mild intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

EAGLE, which stands for Equal Access to Gainful Learning and Employment, offers students a custom-built academic program based on their interests. Currently, the program includes two students, Kasey and Sharaun, who both took courses this fall at Georgia Southern related to areas in which they hope to have future careers.

Sharaun wants to work in graphic design, and took an introductory digital art and design course. Kasey, who is considering a career in recreational activities with disabled children or nursing home residents, took an introductory therapeutic recreation course this fall.

"EAGLE Academy is thinking outside of the box," explained Karen Phipps, program director for the Academy. "We create a program based on the student. This gives our students the same opportunity every other student has in this country. They can be productive members of society, but they need to be trained just like anyone else."

As a part of the EAGLE Academy program, students also train for employment through internships or paid jobs. Kasey is working in childcare at the Statesboro First United Methodist Preschool, while Sharaun is employed with Walmart Distribution Center.

Students attending Georgia Southern through the EAGLE Academy program also have the opportunity to become fully-ingrained in campus life. Both Kasey and Sharaun live in on-campus housing where they can easily access academic buildings and campus events.

"How do you sell this program?," Phipps asked rhetorically. "You don't. These students sell this program when they go home and say 'I want to go to college, and now I can. Here's how.'"

The Academy is also incorporated into the undergraduate education curriculum for special education and dual certification (early childhood and special education) degree programs. Students taking assessment courses in these majors are introduced to the EAGLE Academy teaching philosophy and process. They are also given the opportunity to volunteer to work with the Academy's enrolled students to serve as peer coaches, academic mentors and social mentors.

"Often these students will just stop by the Academy and check in to see how the students are doing and how the program is going," said Shelley Woodward, the College of Education's (COE) special education instructor and founding executive director for the Academy. "They are invested and want to see both the EAGLE Academy and our students succeed because they know how important a program like this is for students who have disabilities."

EAGLE Academy is now the eighth IPSE program in the state of Georgia. The Georgia Southern program is unique in many aspects including that it offers the third and fourth year curriculum for students who have already completed an initial two-year program at another institution such as East Georgia State College.

Phipps and Woodward explained there are 700 graduating high school students in the state that qualify for IPSE programs.

"That's why it is so important that we keep talking about this program and the vision we have," said Woodward. She said the Academy began as an 'Ah-Ha' moment in spring 2013, has grown from a dream to a passion and now, reality.

"During a candidate visit to campus, the faculty member [from Clemson University] discussed ClemsonLIFE, and that's when we realized that programs like this existed," Woodward said.

At the time, Georgia only had one fully operational IPSE program located at Kennesaw State University. Woodward attended the Inclusive Higher Education Conference in fall 2013 and realized she was not going to be able to let this dream go.

"I couldn't stop talking about it," Woodward said. "My brain wouldn't stop."

The next four years were spent writing grants, visiting other IPSE programs, holding meetings and working long hours to make this program a reality alongside Phipps.

"Nothing about this has been easy," said Woodward.

"But it's worth it," added Phipps. "It's worth all of it."

To operate, EAGLE Academy utilizes a five-year Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) grant it received from the U.S. Department of Education starting Oct. 1, 2015. For tuition assistance, the Academy has also partnered with the Statesboro branch of Synovus (formerly Sea Island Bank).