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Georgia Southern University officially opens landmark learning center in Ireland

November 25, 2019



Georgia Southern University opens its first international facility in Ireland.

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WEXFORD, IRELAND — When a team of Georgia Southern University leaders traveled to Ireland last week to officially open its learning center in Wexford, the ceremonial event proved to be so significant it attracted the Deputy Prime Minister of Ireland and led to a meeting with Ireland’s president – the first official meeting between a Georgia Southern president and a foreign head of state.

The attention underscored the fact that Georgia Southern University is the first public university in the United States to open an outreach learning facility in Ireland.

“Visiting with Irish President Michael D. Higgins, opening our new center and meeting with a number of important Irish partners made for a moving, once-in-a-lifetime visit,” said Georgia Southern University President Kyle Marrero. “The excitement from Irish leaders in Wexford was overwhelming – we heard repeatedly that having our delegation visit in person sent an important message about our commitment to this learning center and our intent to expand the scope of our new partnership.”

The new Irish learning center is a logical outgrowth of a long-time partnership between Wexford and Savannah, and Georgia Southern’s Center for Irish Research and Teaching.

A large percentage of Savannah’s population claims Irish ancestry, specifically tracing their roots to Wexford. The Allen company of Wexford town and the Graves and Howlett companies of New Ross (ports in County Wexford) operated direct services to Savannah in the mid-19th century. That connection brought many

emigrants across the Atlantic on vessels like the *Dunbrody*. To this day, family names associated with Wexford abound in Savannah. Georgia Southern students and researchers have been studying those immigrants, their descendants and the larger historical connections between the two countries.

That history — and years of collaboration between Savannah and Wexford leaders and academicians — led to Georgia Southern University-Wexford, a global hub for learning housed in a historic building constructed in 1812. The space now features state-of-the-art classrooms and student apartments.



*Michael Sheehan, Chairman of Wexford County Council, and Dr. Kyle Marrero, president of Georgia Southern University, with Don L. Waters, chair of the University System of Georgia Board of Regents, and Tom Enright, CEO of Wexford County Council, at the official opening of the Georgia Southern University outreach learning facility in Ireland, located in Wexford. Georgia Southern University is the first public university in the United States to open an outreach learning facility in Ireland.
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“This is going to work for everybody, and in my view, it may become a template for other universities in the US to build a footprint and create an international hub in Ireland based on partnership, on trust, on friendship, and on research and education,” said Simon Coveney, TD, deputy prime minister of Ireland and minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Others attending the ribbon-cutting included: Paul Kehoe, TD, Minister of State with Responsibility for Defence of the Government of Ireland; Brendan Howlin, TD, leader of the Labour Party of Ireland; Michael Sheehan, Chair of Wexford County Council; George Lawlor, Mayor of the town of Wexford; Dr. Declan Doyle and Dr. Karen Hennessey, Institute of Technology Carlow; Tom Enright, Chief Executive Officer of Wexford County Council; Tony Larkin, Deputy CEO of Wexford County Council; Wexford County executive personnel Anthony Bailey, Liz Hore, Martina Furlong, Edwina Colfer, and Billy Byrne; Seán Connick, CEO, and Walter O’Leary, Chair, of the John F. Kennedy Trust; Don Waters, Savannah resident and chair of the University System of Georgia Board of Regents; Howard Keeley, Director of Georgia Southern’s Center for Irish Research and Teaching; Georgia Southern leadership from academic affairs and external relations; and Georgia Southern faculty members participating in the Wexford Professional Development program.



Georgia Southern University Opens its first International Facility in Ireland. Pictured signing the Visitor's Book are Simon Coveney, TD, deputy prime minister of Ireland and minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Cllr. Michael Sheehan, Chairman of Wexford County Council. Copyright: Brownes Photography

The event coincided with International Education Week, which ran November 18-22.

“We have a strategic plan for our system, and it’s based on two core principles: student success and economic development,” Waters said. “I can think of no better example of an opportunity to create student success and economic development than the Wexford learning center of Georgia Southern University.”

Waters noted the University System of Georgia’s Consortium for Analysis of Student Success through International Education released findings last week that student participation in international education has a positive effect on learning outcomes.

Sheehan, from Wexford, said Georgia Southern’s new international learning center certainly supports a larger mission. “Wexford County Council is very pleased to facilitate the establishment of this international learning hub,” he said. “It’s an exciting and it’s an important development for both Wexford and for Georgia.”

Georgia Southern’s Keeley agreed, noting that this week’s opening was a significant milestone.

“This constitutes the university’s most important study-abroad initiative since its founding over 100 years ago,” Keeley said. “Our ambition is to develop this center in Wexford Town as Georgia Southern University’s primary educational venue for Europe. While the principal user will be Georgia Southern’s 26,000 students, we anticipate and welcome use by our sibling institutions in the University System of Georgia, which serves some 330,000 students.”

Georgia Southern encourages its students to gain a global perspective by studying and interning abroad, and the University intends to offer courses throughout the year at its Irish hub in Wexford. He said plans for next year include launching a series of pilot courses developed by the university’s colleges to advance students’

international competencies. The faculty members on the trip represented a range of disciplines, from business to engineering to health professions — and more.

“In addition to classroom instruction and field experiences, the intention is to provide networking opportunities for Wexford Town-based Georgia Southern students and faculty,” Keeley said.

Among the offerings during the initial phase of Georgia Southern University-Wexford will be humanities and international-studies courses, presented under the auspices of Georgia Southern University’s Honors Program. Occurring over four weeks in May and June 2020, the courses will center on the unique emigration story that links the county of Wexford and the city of Savannah.

“During the early summer of 2020, these courses will provide undergraduate students with opportunities to conduct primary-source research at the Wexford County Archive and elsewhere in the region; to present their findings to public audiences; and to gain knowledge about diaspora identity, a matter that’s more important today than ever,” Keeley said.

Welcoming the university to Wexford, Cllr. Michael Sheehan, Chairman, Wexford County Council said, “We are delighted to see a complete realization of the strategic vision of Wexford County Council and Georgia Southern University here in Wexford today. We are extremely proud to form a part of the significant investment transforming this heritage building into a 21st-century university facility for international students. There is already an academic vitality. We know that its modern, well-equipped facilities will provide students from across the US and beyond life- and career-enhancing opportunities here in Wexford. We look forward to offering all of the students a warm Wexford welcome this Spring.”



Georgia Southern President Kyle Marrero speaks at official opening of the university’s learning center in Wexford.

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Marrero said he expects the Wexford learning center to be not just an instructional facility but also a vibrant community space, where folks from across and beyond County Wexford can enjoy activities such as performances by faculty members and students from the music and theatre programs, as well as lively public lectures, workshops, and symposia.

He said connections made during the trip will certainly lead to further collaborations. Georgia Southern has a new fan in Irish President Higgins, who received from Regent Waters a plaque on behalf of the Hibernian Society of Savannah commemorating the establishment of the organization in 1812 to provide aid and assistance to needy Irish immigrants to Savannah.



Don L. Waters, chair of the University System of Georgia Board of Regents presents Irish President Michael D. Higgins with plaque.

Georgia Southern University, a public Carnegie Doctoral/R2 institution founded in 1906, offers 141 degree programs serving more than 26,000 students through nine colleges on three campuses in Statesboro, Savannah, Hinesville and online instruction. A leader in higher education in southeast Georgia, the University provides a diverse student population with expert faculty, world-class scholarship and hands-on learning opportunities. Georgia Southern creates lifelong learners who serve as responsible scholars, leaders and stewards in their communities. Visit GeorgiaSouthern.edu.