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## Georgia Southern Professor tapped for national project to foster retention and advancement of diverse STEM faculty

April 15, 2020

Georgia Southern Associate Professor Sarah Zingales, Ph.D., has been named a National Science Foundation (NSF) ASCEND Faculty Fellow as part of a \$1 million grant to support mid-career women faculty members in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

“It is a great honor to be chosen as a participant for this project,” Zingales said. “One of the major focuses of this grant is to help close the achievement gap for women in STEM by helping mid-career women in STEM faculty persist and become promoted to full professor or obtain leadership positions in academic administration.”

The NSF project — Advancing STEM Careers by Empowering Network Development (ASCEND) — is a collaborative initiative that involves nine project leaders, 60 faculty participants and 15 administrator participants from colleges and universities across the Southeast, Northwest and Midwest. The leadership team comes from various universities including Willamette University, Gonzaga University, Claflin University, Furman University and The Citadel.



*Sarah Zingales*

“The women in this alliance will receive mentorship and support to achieve our goals for furthering our careers,” said Zingales. “We will also give feedback about barriers to our success and help administrators in the leadership team come up with institutional solutions for how to close this achievement gap.”

Zingales has been a faculty member on the Armstrong Campus since 2013. She teaches organic chemistry and medicinal chemistry and she is active in organizations that mentor women in STEM. She is a founding member of the Alliance for Women in STEM on the Armstrong Campus, which has expanded to the Statesboro Campus.

“Having a diverse faculty is very important for recruiting and retaining STEM students,” she said. “Representation allows for students to see themselves in that discipline or career.”

The NSF grant supporting the fellowship project will run for the next four years. Zingales will participate in monthly virtual meetings of the Southeastern regional alliance and attend an annual in-person conference.

“I will also be taking surveys as part of the evaluation process to measure the efficacy of the program and giving feedback,” Zingales said. “I hope that the solutions that are devised through this diverse collaboration will be broadly applicable and things that I can bring back to the department and the University to help other women in STEM across our campuses.”

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](https://www.GeorgiaSouthern.edu).

Tags: [College of Science and Mathematics](#), [Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry](#), [STEM](#)

## [Georgia Southern student named Goldwater Scholar](#)

April 15, 2020



Andrea Appleton

Flowers, for many, may simply be a nice gift for a loved one or something to stop and smell along the way, but to Honors Program biology student Andrea Appleton, they are a window into the intricacies of daily life.

“Plants are incredibly diverse and everywhere, and I feel that we have a lot to learn from them and their life history,” Appleton said. “Flowers are a remarkable evolutionary advancement for plants; and understanding their uniqueness is important to understanding the complexities of life.”

Appleton’s research in botany and floral evolution were recognized this year when she was named a Goldwater Scholar, the highest national award for undergraduate students in the STEM majors.

“A career in science, especially research, was not always the obvious path for me to take, so to pursue it and have that pursuit validated is very meaningful,” said Appleton. “This recognition, to me, means that I am trusted and expected to conduct innovative research throughout my career. I feel very fortunate for the support and for the reassurance in my career choice.”

This is the second year in a row that a Georgia Southern student has been honored with this prestigious scholarship, which is awarded to undergraduates who show exceptional promise of becoming the nation’s next generation of research leaders in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

“Having a recipient of this high honor from Georgia Southern University speaks volumes about our commitment to student research, the quality of our undergraduates, and the talent of our faculty,” said Georgia Southern President Kyle Marrero. “I would like to congratulate Andrea Appleton, and the professors who worked with her, for this outstanding achievement.”

In addition to her award-winning research, Appleton directs the Georgia Southern Herbarium, a collection of 40,000 plant specimens from around the world. While sorting through a backlog of specimens, she realized just how unique flowers can be.

“I opened a newsprint and was stunned by the most striking flowers I had ever seen,” Appleton said. “Those flowers were pressed in intricate clumps and retained the most surreal blue color, even though the newsprint was dated to the 1960s.”

The Georgia Southern junior later learned they were flowers of *Delphinium*, commonly known as larkspurs. Intrigued by the immense biodiversity and charm of plants, Appleton began to conduct floral evolution research with her advisor, former Georgia Southern Professor John Schenk. She studies the evolution and development of staminodes, which are stamens (the pollen-producing parts of flowers) that have lost the ability to produce pollen. His departure from Georgia Southern left the Herbarium curator position open, and Appleton was selected to take on that role, an opportunity that is extremely rare for an undergraduate student. William Irby, Ph.D., a professor of biology, taught Appleton in his Honors Principles of Biology class. He said Appleton was an obvious choice for the position of acting curator.



“She readily took to the responsibilities of her job,” Irby said. “She began work on her honors research early, and by the end of her sophomore year had achieved as much as most honors students do, by the time they finish their projects as seniors.”

The College of Science and Mathematics and the biology department have supported Appleton’s studies with travel grants that have enabled her to present her research at regional and national conferences.

“As faculty have worked to enhance the undergraduate research experience, we see this huge benefit for our students – they are competitive at a national level and they are poised to become the future of scientific research,” said Delana Gajdosik-Nivens, dean of the College of Science and Mathematics.

The Honors scholar plans to attend graduate school after she leaves Georgia Southern and pursue a career in evolutionary botany.

“I am eager to expand our understanding of the patterns and processes of floral evolution,” Appleton said. “I want to explore the power of plants to uncover the secrets of evolution and push the boundaries of our understanding of the natural world and its complexity.”

The rising senior expressed gratitude for the faculty mentors who guided her through the process to winning the Goldwater Scholarship. She said guidance from her advisor and mentors have been invaluable.

“I am a first-generation student and would not be in college at all without the support of the Honors Program and the Department of Biology,” she said. “The opportunities I have been granted and the people I have met have all been incredibly influential in my professional and personal life.”

Appleton was one of only 396 college students across the United States to earn the scholarship of up to \$7,500 a year. The scholarship honors the lifetime work of the late Sen. Barry Goldwater, who served his country for 56 years as a soldier and statesman, including 30 years in the U.S. Senate.

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Tags: [College of Science and Mathematics](#), [Department of Biology](#), [Goldwater Scholar](#), [Honors Program](#)

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

April 15, 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 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.”

Program 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 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 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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