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College of Education faculty travel to Georgia Southern University’s Ireland campus for exchange of ideas in advance of summer study abroad program

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$100K student scholarship pool available for 2022 summer courses in Ireland

Betsy Barrow, Ed.D., left, Catherine Howarter, Ph.D., Amanda Wall, Ph.D., Alex Reyes, Ph.D., Dan Calhoun, Ph.D., Kip Sorgen, Ph.D., and Howard Keeley, Ph.D., at the Glendalough monastic site in Ireland.
Six professors from Georgia Southern University’s College of Education (COE) recently broadened their horizons during a trip to Ireland as they learned from and shared insight with instructors and educational leaders in the Wexford County community.

Led by Howard Keeley, Ph.D., director of the University’s Center for Irish Research and Teaching, COE faculty traveled to Georgia Southern’s learning center in Wexford, Ireland, to observe Irish educational settings and exchange ideas with local leaders just ahead of a summer study abroad program opportunity for Georgia Southern students in which $100,000 of scholarship funding is available.

“The main thing we did was get in front of leaders in the education space in Ireland,” stated Keeley. “We spoke to a number of folks who are either principals or vice principals or, in some way, senior administrators in a variety of schools including all-boys, all-girls, religious, secular and mixed schools.”

The group included Catherine Howerter, Ph.D., associate professor of elementary and special education; Kip Sorgen, Ph.D., assistant professor of leadership, technology and human development; Alex Reyes, Ph.D., assistant professor of middle grades and secondary education; Amanda Wall, Ph.D., associate professor of middle grades and secondary education; Betsy Barrow, Ed.D., assistant professor of middle grades and secondary education; and Dan Calhoun, Ph.D., professor of leadership, technology and human development.

Reyes, who trains pre-service and in-service teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students, was excited to travel to Wexford after a study abroad program in Czech Republic she spearheaded with Wall was canceled in March 2020 due to the pandemic. Intrigued by Ireland, a plurilingual country, she was curious to see how Wexford’s environment might benefit students culturally.

“I thought it was really exciting,” said Reyes. “All of the street signs are in Irish, even though English is the main language spoken. That prioritizing of that cultural heritage is fascinating. It was great to learn that the students in their primary and secondary schools take Irish language and culture as a subject every year.”
She was especially motivated by a field trip to an Irish-language school, *Meanscoil Gharman*, which serves middle and high school students. With the exception of one daily class in English, teachers and students conducted all lessons in Irish.

“It was really interesting to see that perspective,” she said. “There has been a revitalization of that culture. I thought that was fascinating to see how that can be handled in school.”

In addition, Reyes was duly impressed with the country’s prioritization of social and emotional literacy for children, and the mandated well-being hours that are incorporated into daily school routines as a result of the pandemic. A program that promotes hygiene and an anti-bullying campaign also fit into the wellness curriculum.

“It really impressed me that as a nation they prioritize the wellness of students, and how language and cultures can really be supported in a meaningful way,” Reyes said. “It’s affirming to see a proactive approach that has positive outcomes. Now, thinking ahead, we can look at how we can create opportunities for our students to experience this kind of approach.”

Sorgen, who teaches in the educational leadership program at Georgia Southern, was interested in Ireland’s professional preparation.

“None of them had advanced degrees, like what we offer at Georgia Southern,” noted Sorgen. “Learning about how to be a principal in Ireland is on-the-job training. In Georgia, there are specific educational requirements for our school administrators guided by professional standards. In Ireland, they generally ascend through the ranks, which makes professional mentoring essential to their success. We are exploring ways our educational leadership students could learn from Irish administrators about their experience, specifically with mentoring.”

He also foresees the international partnership as a two-way exchange.

“Given educational leadership programs are not common in Ireland, our faculty are considering ways in which we could use our expertise to foster leadership development of principals and teachers in Wexford,” said Sorgen. “We would utilize the Georgia Southern Wexford campus to host some of these sessions, furthering Georgia Southern’s relationship within the Wexford community.”

Keeley also arranged meetings with education policy makers, including an extended meeting with an Irish congressman who is a representative for the County of Wexford in the Irish national parliament and chairs the joint committee for the Irish equivalent of the House and Senate Committee on education and higher education.

“That was a tremendous opportunity for our faculty to talk to somebody at the highest level of government in Ireland, creating Irish state policy on education,” said Keeley. “And I know from the feedback we got from our College of Education colleagues that particularly for those in higher education, that to them was a really useful, next-step experience.”

The trip exceeded expectations.
“It was a fantastic learning experience for everyone,” said Keeley. “We had lots of high-level and also very practical experiences, and I could see our College of Education team thinking, ‘How can I bring what I’m learning, what I’m experiencing in this moment, into my classroom, into my curriculum, into my prospective study abroad courses in a way to build student success for our Georgia Southern folks.’ I think it was a great visit.”

Complementing the faculty’s trip, a COE Irish study abroad program on diverse education in Ireland was recently approved for Summer 2022 and will give education students the opportunity to take one or two courses with the study abroad component. This will be a part of a broader study abroad program in Wexford, presented by the Honors College and the Center for Irish Research and Teaching, with assistance from the Office of the Provost and the Office of Global Engagement.

The costs for undergraduate students at Georgia Southern’s Wexford campus will be offset by a $100,000 scholarship fund with awards of $1,000 for each student accepted into the program.

“For students traveling to Wexford, Ireland, this summer, we will be able to defray the cost of the program through a generous travel scholarship through the Georgia Southern University Foundation,” said Dustin Anderson, Ph.D., associate provost for Student Success. “The donation makes these the most affordable multi-week programs that we ever have been able to offer.”

Keeley is thrilled the gifts from generous donors will enable a number of students to earn valuable global experiences.

“For students to have an opportunity to have international lives is powerful, and it’s powerful in ways that sometimes we can’t even predict,” he said. “Just the very fact of being abroad is going to change any of us, right? It can have a really transformative effect to feel a sense that, you know, as a student, ‘I can do this,’ and then a sense after the fact, ‘I did this,’ and just that in itself is educational. Giving students a safe space in Wexford, Ireland, to grow and feel that they are in a sense global citizens and bring the best of America, bring the best of Georgia, bring the best of the states from Savannah to Ireland, and learn to be an ambassador. That’s wonderful.”

In addition to the education courses, students will also be able to choose from a Wexford-Savannah honors inquiry and an interdisciplinary program open to all students on human migration with courses in geography, religious studies, public health and a CORE study abroad course.

Students interested can learn more about the program by clicking here and can email Kristin Karam in the Office of Global Engagement for more information about the scholarships.

Georgia Southern University-Wexford is 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. Georgia Southern is the first public university in the United States to open an outreach learning facility in Ireland.

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