Giving Students a Chance to ‘Excel’

New Program Creates College Opportunities for Students with Disabilities

KRISTEN BAILEY
INSTITUTE COMMUNICATIONS

For many high school students, graduation usually leads to the possibility of college or other continued education at more than 7,000 colleges across the country. Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, though, have a little more than 200 choices in comparison to their peers.

This year, Georgia Tech began offering a postsecondary academy for high school graduates with mild intellectual and developmental disabilities. The program, Excel, provides these students with a learning experience in which they can build on their education, life skills, and independence. Students who participate in the four-year program earn two certificates: one in social growth and academic enrichment, and a second that also incorporates career exploration.

“We’re creating college opportunities for students who have historically been shut out of the college experience, and it’s a game changer because we are doing it at Georgia Tech, one of the top ten ranked public universities,” said Ken Surdin, director of Excel.

Around 2,000 students in Georgia high schools are eligible for this kind of program, but until Excel, there was only one program in the state offering 13 spots a year. Excel has eight students this year and expects to enroll around 12 additional students per year, with a peak enrollment of around 48 students.

Excel students take some classes as a cohort, and others with degree-seeking Georgia Tech students in inclusive classes, such as GT 1000. The Excel curriculum includes traditional subjects such as reading comprehension, math, and science.

Tech Wins Atlanta Bike Challenge

KRISTEN BAILEY
INSTITUTE COMMUNICATIONS

Georgia Tech employees took to two wheels in droves during the month of October, beating out several other employers to win this year’s Atlanta Bike Challenge.

Tech won first place in its category of organizations with more than 2,000 employees.

“We won, we had to get existing cyclists to ride and to encourage new riders,” said Johann Weber, a graduate student in public policy who also served as an ambassador for the Challenge.

“In the end, Georgia Tech earned 60,000 points with 18 new riders, 145 total participants, and 12,000 miles ridden.”

The Challenge awarded points based on the number of existing riders, new riders, miles, and days ridden for each participant. Staff members in Parking and Transportation Services used the challenge as an opportunity to take group bike rides as a team.

“I ended up using a bicycle at least once every day of the Challenge for trips to work, meetings, and lunch,” said David Crites, transportation operations manager. “We had weekly lunch rides on Wednesdays to local destinations like the BeltLine, Ponce City Market, Centennial Olympic Park, and Piedmont Park.”

Harrington Takes Helm of Georgia Tech Human Resources

MYRA OVIATT
HUMAN RESOURCES

After 10 months in an interim role, a trusted campus administrator moves into the lead role at Georgia Tech Human Resources.

Effective November 1, Kim D. Harrington, interim associate vice president for Human Resources, officially assumed the role as associate vice president of Georgia Tech Human Resources.

Harrington came to Human Resources from the Student Center, where had she served as director of Tech Human Resources.

“During her 14 years on campus, Kim has proven to be a trusted administrator and colleague,” Vice President of Campus Services Paul Strouts said. “She has the requisite leadership skills, strategic vision, and campus relationships that will allow Human Resources to grow and prosper in the coming years.”

Harrington recently took home top honors at the University System of Georgia Chancellor’s Annual Service Excellence Awards, where she was announced as the gold winner of the Service Excellence Award for Outstanding Leader. She holds a master's degree in counseling and educational psychology from the State University of New York at Buffalo, and a doctorate in educational psychology from Georgia State University.

Georgia Tech Human Resources serves the Institute and its more than 14,000 employees, ranging from students to tenured faculty, through strategic human resources counsel, leadership in employee engagement and learning, and facilitation of campuswide organizational effectiveness.

Nominations Open for Annual Awards

A number of awards are given out at Tech’s Faculty and Staff Honors Lunch each year, and nominations for those awards are now open. A full list of awards and criteria is available at www.c.gatech.edu/FSHL

Open Enrollment Closes Nov. 13

All employees are encouraged to review their benefits options for 2016 and make selections online in advance of this Friday. Review information about this year’s offerings at www.ohr.gatech.edu/openenrollment, and make your selections at www.techworks.gatech.edu
Facilities Management Honored for Grounds, Tree Care

RACHAEL POCKLINGTON
INSTITUTE COMMUNICATIONS

Georgia Tech has recently been recognized by two organizations for its excellence in grounds maintenance and tree management.

The Professional Grounds Management Society recognized Georgia Tech with an Honor Award in the Society’s 2015 Green Star Awards competition. The program brings national recognition to grounds maintained with a high degree of excellence, complementing other national landscape award programs that recognize outstanding landscape design and construction.

Tech also received the 2015 Georgia Urban Forest Council’s prestigious President’s Award for its comprehensiv urban campus tree inventory and management practices. Georgia Tech was recognized for its specific accomplishments in assessing campus trees, documenting the environmental benefits of campus trees, and implementing sound urban forestry management.

“This is a true testament to hard work and commitment to Tech’s unique urban landscape,” says Hyacinth Ide, associate director for Landscape Services. “There are many teams involved in achieving this status. From the continuous assessment and planning conducted by Capital Planning and Space Management teams to the landscaping professionals caring for and maintaining the grounds on a day-to-day basis, this award is shared by many at Georgia Tech.”

Learn more about Facilities Management and Landscape Services at www.facilities.gatech.edu/landscaping.

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as well as life skills such as financial literacy, interpersonal communication, and community engagement.

“The ultimate goal is for students to continue their education, live independently, have a job they like, and develop a social network with their peers, who benefit from reverse inclusion by engaging with a more diverse student body,” Surdin said.

Mutual Growth

This year, the eight students — four men and four women — are living in two suites in the Square on Fifth apartments in Tech Square. In just two months, Excel staff members have seen noticeable changes in the way the students navigate challenges. One student took a bus by herself for the first time on her third day on campus.

“She had this huge grin because she had never done that before,” said Marnie Williams, peer support program coordinator for Excel. Williams manages the peer support and mentor components of Excel, which provide opportunities for Tech students to get involved in the program. “I’ve been blown away to see how much the students have grown and how much the peer supporters have really stepped up to the plate with their involvement and commitment.”

Williams, a Tech alumna, holds a bachelor’s degree in biomedical engineering. As an undergraduate, she founded a Georgia Tech chapter of Best Buddies International, an organization that creates opportunities for young adults with disabilities. She first worked with students with disabilities in high school and missed the interaction when she came to college.

“They offered a perspective I didn’t have,” she said. “You get a completely new outlook on your environment and the world.”

Williams has found her Tech educational experience to be highly applicable to working with students with disabilities.

“The engineering mindset is extremely transferrable to the social sector,” she said. “To look at the global problem of what opportunities individuals with disabilities have when they graduate high school, how do we provide a college education for them, and what does it look like here at Tech — I use that kind of problem solving every day.”

Excel’s peer mentors focus on fitness, academic, and social aspects of development for Excel students. Supports serve as volunteers who help Excel students adapt to Tech, learn about campus life, and get to know others on campus. Excel provides training for all mentors and supports.

Mentors help Excel students get plugged into campus life in ways they otherwise might not. Carrie Crayton, an Excel student, learned through her high school that she wanted to be a part of the Tech community.

“Tech is a great place to be, and I’ve met a lot of people there, so that’s been really fun,” Crayton said.

Aside from meeting new people and learning her way around campus and Atlanta, one of Crayton’s favorite parts of being at Tech has been having GT 1000.

“I’ve loved every minute of that class,” she said. “It’s different because I’m the only Excel student, but I love learning what other students are learning.” Crayton is also working on improving her computer skills and narrowing in on a career path — hopefully one that includes working with children.

As part of the career exploration aspect of the program, Surdin hopes to be able to incorporate what is best about Georgia Tech into the Excel curriculum. As Excel students express interest in particular topics, Surdin and his staff are working with faculty members to find opportunities for the students to take inclusion classes and learn more about different types of careers.

“It may be a way for them to discover something they’re passionate about, and that’s really what college is all about,” he said.

An Inclusive Community

Tech students helped shape the Excel program before it even got off the ground.

The initial idea came from Terry Blum, Tedd Munchak Chair and professor in the Scheller College of Business and director of the Institute for Leadership and Entrepreneurship, and Cyrus Airdun, professor in the George W. Woodruff School of Mechanical Engineering.

The two presented the idea to Tech students and formed a student advisory group to get support and feedback along the way.

Since taking the role of director in August 2014, Surdin has been excited by the level of support from students, faculty, staff, and alumni in the Tech community.

“The idea of disability has really changed,” Surdin said. “Students with disabilities are much more present in high school classrooms in this generation. Having this program at Georgia Tech gives us a fuller dimension to the idea of diversity.”

Excel is run out of the Institute for Leadership and Entrepreneurship, in partnership with Professional Education for enrollment. Funding comes from tuition and grants.

As the program continues to grow, Surdin hopes to integrate Excel students into campus life as much as possible. Those interested in partnering with Excel in some way can contact Surdin at karen.surdin@able.gatech.edu.

“Tech prides itself on being innovative and coming up with the next great thing,” Williams said. “People with disabilities have been left out of a lot of these conversations, but they have a lot to contribute.”

Learn more about Excel at www.excel.gatech.edu, or by following the program on Facebook (www.facebook.com/georgiachanges) or Twitter (www.twitter.com/GT_excel).

Noonan Courtyard.

A student passes through green space in the Noonan Courtyard.
Scholarships Available for Children of Tech Employees

VCOR VICTOR ROGERS
INSTITUT COMMUNICATIONS

The Georgia Tech Faculty Women's Club (GTFWC) will award five scholarships of up to $1,500 each for the 2016-17 academic year. Applicants must be Georgia Tech undergraduates and have a parent or guardian as a permanent Tech employee.

Applicants also must have completed at least one full semester at Tech; have an overall GPA of at least 2.75; and write an essay describing his or her academic plans, involvement in extracurricular activities, and reasons for needing financial assistance.

Over the past 24 years, the GTFWC has awarded 148 scholarships totaling $118,550 to support undergraduates. “I am so happy, as the scholarship chair, to be part of continuing this great opportunity,” said Christina Choi, assistant professor, School of Industrial Design. “It is satisfying to see the real effects it can have, not just to meet the students’ immediate needs, but also to increase the level of confidence in their work.”

The deadline to apply is Jan. 21, 2016, and the scholarship committee will make its selections in February. For application details, or for information on how to contribute to the scholarship fund endowment, visit www.gtfwc.gatech.edu.

Grant Funds Course Development for Public Service Pathway

KRISTEN BAIIE
INSTITUTE COMMUNICATIONS

A new grant from the Commerce Club Foundation will help Georgia Tech students connect their work in the classroom with the Atlanta community, as well as enable Tech faculty, staff, and students to develop coursework and projects that bring Tech’s talent to local organizations.

The Public Service Pathway, part of Tech’s Serve-Learn-Sustain initiative, will train faculty on how to develop courses that connect academic knowledge to real-world community challenges and work collaboratively with communities to support their visions for social and environmental change. In these courses, students will have the opportunity to form partnerships with local civic organizations and support ongoing community efforts as part of their academic work. The Commerce Club Foundation will provide $200,000 over the next two years to support course development, faculty training, and related student activities.

“This is really an outgrowth of a lot of thinking that has been happening at Tech about how to get students involved in the issues of Atlanta,” said Carl DiSalvo, an associate professor in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication who will serve as director of the Public Service Pathway.

A workshop each semester will help instructors and students develop their coursework and connect with community partners. The Public Service Pathway will also include the development of a Civic Innovation Prize to be awarded to students for projects that have made a measurable contribution to the community.

Many faculty members at Georgia Tech already incorporate this kind of work into their courses, but the grant will help grow the pool of courses and, in turn, the number of opportunities for students to get involved. As part of the Serve-Learn-Sustain initiative, it will also help faculty and students link community engagement to sustainability.

“The Public Service Pathway is the first curricular initiative for Serve-Learn-Sustain, along with two foundational courses next semester on systems and community principles of sustainable communities,” said Jennifer Hirsch, director of the Center for Serve-Learn-Sustain. “Faculty, staff, students, and community partners who participate will be partners in helping us develop the direction of the whole program. This makes it an exciting time to get involved.”

For DiSalvo, who has been at Tech since 2007, incorporating public service and community engagement into research not only benefits the community, but also hones the skills of researchers.

“It presents a unique opportunity to take whatever question you are asking out of the lab and into a messy, uncontrolled, possibly emotional environment,” he said. “It has really sharpened my research.”

A call for proposals for the Public Service Pathway will take place each semester for classes or projects to be taught or carried out the subsequent term. A design workshop will follow for those who are selected. Courses will be offered in many majors, with opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate students. Faculty, staff, or students interested in submitting a proposal for future semesters should contact DiSalvo at carl.disalvo@gatech.edu.

Tech’s Serve-Learn-Sustain initiative launched this year to provide students with a multitude of learning and co-curricular opportunities designed to help them combine their academic and career interests with their desire to improve the human condition. It was inspired by Georgia Tech students who graduated prepared to use their expertise to create sustainable communities. The initiative grew out of Tech’s recent reaffirmation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.
IN THE CLASSROOM
with Linda Green

Green Brings Team Mentality to Classroom Environment

VICTOR ROGERS
INSTITUTE COMMUNICATIONS

When teaching Introduction to Organismal Biology (BIOL 1520), Linda Green likes to tap into students’ curiosity by taking a fresh look at familiar occurrences.

“There are a lot of things in biology that people never think about,” said Green, senior academic professional in the School of Biology. “We see it every day, but most people never consider that the way a plant on a windowsill bends toward the light is a function of a hormone in the shoot and the cells elongating. In class, we pick apart why the plant is growing sideways and discuss what is involved in the process. That’s something that the students may not come in wanting to know, but it’s a way that I can connect with their curiosity.”

This is Green’s eighth year at Georgia Tech. Before coming to Tech she was already familiar with the campus because she grew up in Norcross, Georgia, and both of her parents are Tech alumni. Her dad earned a B.S. in chemical engineering and a master’s in nuclear engineering, and was a practicing nuclear engineer, and her mom majored in and taught mathematics.

Although her mom was an educator, the teaching bug didn’t bite Green until she became a teaching assistant.

“I was very inspired by a teacher I had in graduate school [at the University of Virginia],” she said. “I really enjoyed learning his style. He had a wonderful rapport with students, and was willing to work with them in class, and he wanted to see them succeed.”

After earning a Ph.D. in ecology from the University of Virginia, Green took an adjunct position at Virginia Commonwealth University, where she taught 720 students in three sections of Introduction to Biology.

“It was a very hard experience, and yet I came out of it still wanting to teach,” she said. “That was a good indicator that this is something I should do.”

She was right.

In 2014, Green received the Eichholz Faculty Teaching Award, and, in 2012, she received the CETL Undergraduate Educator Award. She also was a 2012-2013 National Academies of Science Education Fellow in the Life Sciences.

Classroom Strategies

Green has “flipped” her classroom, meaning the students engage with course content before class via readings or videos, and then participate in class. Green uses in-class technology to gauge how well students are understanding the material.

“We get to a particular class section, I have articulated usually two to four learning objectives that describe exactly what I want the students to be able to do after the class session,” Green said.

Before she started using this model, Green said she would take a chapter’s worth of material and go through it page by page.

“That approach leads to a very dry and content-rich session that may not engage the critical thinking that builds students’ toolboxes of how to think like a scientist,” she said. “I’m glad that I have moved away from that model because it has given me more flexibility to challenge the students to do something with the material [during class].”

Green credits the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (CETL) for helping to develop her teaching strategies. She regularly participates in CETL workshops, and she was selected twice to participate in CETL’s Teaching Scholars program.

“Just yesterday, I reached out to my Teaching Scholars group from two years ago,” she said. “Six of us got together with a CETL professional to chat about how each of us has implemented the flipped model in our classrooms, what’s going well, and what we needed some help with. It was fantastic. I wanted to refresh my activities because I felt like my class had gotten a little stale and needed some new ideas.”

Really Reaching the Students

Introduction to Organismal Biology is required for biology majors, but there are many non-biology majors in the course, too.

“We have a broad range of prior knowledge to build on,” said Green. “So, I have to be careful about my vocabulary. If I use too much jargon, I really lose student engagement because they can’t keep up with the connections I want them to make if they don’t know the vocabulary.”

For students who have not taken a biology course in a few years, Green points them to resources where they can get some background on the terminology being used in class.

During class, Green asks questions and uses a software program called Learning Catalytics that allows students to answer electronically.

“If I see that the answers are random and everyone is choosing something different, I often will stop the class and facilitate more discussion, taking a moment for them to talk to their peers and then to talk with me, too. Peer learning can help to redirect the class when half the class gets it and half the class is stuck,” Green said.

Following exams, Green emails students who don’t seem to understand the material and suggests that they meet with her. She asks them about their study strategies, and if they hear things that are not effective, she tries to redirect them to more efficient strategies.

For students having anxiety following a poor performance on the first exam, Green tries to assign the situation by first appealing to their quantitative side, explaining how much the particular exam is worth. Then she addresses what they can do differently, emphasizing small changes that can make a big impact.

Advice for New Faculty

To new faculty members, Green suggests creating a team atmosphere of “we’re in this together” to inspire a level of trust where the students are willing to work hard despite grade setbacks.

“Think about the environment you’re creating in the classroom,” Green said. “I believe that faculty should position themselves to be a team with their students, with the goal of having the students learn the material by the end of the semester. This keeps you from feeling there’s an antagonistic relationship where you — as the instructor — dictate the expectations, tell the students what they need to know, and then test them on it. I think a lot of success in the classroom is dependent on managing student motivation and frustration.

If your students don’t trust that by working hard they will feel successful at the end of the semester, you can’t get them engaged in the classroom.”

For more information on Linda Green, visit https://www.hub.gatech.edu/people/717

IN THE CLASSROOM is a series showcasing some of Georgia Tech’s award-winning teachers, delving into what they teach, how they do it, and what motivates them.