



EXCELLENCE *in Action*

September 2026



Monthly Updates from Academic Affairs at Georgia Southern University.



Message from the Provost

My first year at Georgia Southern has been a year of accelerated growth and opportunity. Not just for our students but for our faculty and staff as well.

Our enrollment has grown to nearly 34,000 students, while graduate enrollment has grown by nearly 5 percent. We welcomed 6,860 freshmen, and our first-year retention rate surpassed the 80 percent goal we set for ourselves. And we have achieved the metrics required for Carnegie R1 status that we are expecting next year.

As we begin a new academic year, one of my primary goals is to continue building a culture of communication across Academic Affairs — one grounded not just in exchanging information, but listening, learning and creating meaningful opportunities for dialogue.

That work has already begun.

Over the past several weeks, I have had the opportunity to join the opening meetings of each of our colleges, meet with our deans and Academic Leadership Council and student leadership, participate in Faculty Senate and staff council meetings, and spend time with colleagues during our DDDC retreat. Each of these conversations gives me a better understanding of the opportunities before us, the challenges our faculty and staff are navigating, and the work already underway across Georgia Southern.

This year, I am also looking forward to visiting every academic department across the University. I want to hear directly from each department their strategic priorities, the work they are most proud of, and the opportunities and challenges ahead. They are an opportunity for me to listen and learn, while also sharing our priorities and direction for the year ahead.

Communication must move in both directions to be effective.

Just as important is ensuring that we recognize the people behind the work. Across our campuses, faculty and staff are teaching, mentoring, conducting research, developing new programs, serving our communities and finding new ways to help our students succeed. Excellence in Action gives us one opportunity to share those stories and celebrate the contributions that strengthen our University every day.

Building a culture does not happen through one meeting, message or initiative. It happens through consistent engagement and a willingness to listen to one another. I look forward to continuing those conversations with you throughout the year, and more importantly, to turning what we hear into action.



GS study finds link between breastfeeding rates and COVID-19 outcomes across Georgia

A new Georgia Southern University study suggests that long-standing differences in maternal and child health, specifically breastfeeding rates, may help explain why some communities were affected more severely by COVID-19 than others.

Led by faculty in the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health, the study found that Georgia

counties with lower breastfeeding initiation rates experienced higher COVID-19 cases and related mortalities across the overall county population.

Published in the scientific journal *Breastfeeding Medicine*, the study examined COVID-19 cases and death rates across all 159 counties in Georgia, from March 2020 through February 2022.

"Our findings show a strong association at the community level," said lead author and Professor of Health Policy and Community Health Joanne Chopak-Foss, Ph.D. "It raises important questions about how early-life health investments, like breastfeeding support, contribute to long-term resilience and health outcomes."

Counties were grouped by breastfeeding rates and compared after accounting for demographics and public health interventions. The research team, which included JPHCOPH master's and doctoral students, analyzed more than 2 million reported COVID-19 cases. They found the biggest differences in rural communities, a gap the researchers also link to social factors such as income and healthcare infrastructure.

"COVID-19 exposed structural inequalities that existed long before the pandemic," said co-author and Professor of Epidemiology Jian Zhang, M.D. "Our work suggests that breastfeeding support may be an underrecognized component of community preparedness, one that warrants further research and sustained public health investment."

Although the study does not prove that breastfeeding directly prevents COVID-19 infection, it adds to growing evidence that breastfeeding may provide health benefits that extend beyond infancy.

"Breastfeeding is one of the earliest and most sustainable investments communities can make in health," said Nandi A. Marshall, DrPH, MPH, JPHCOPH associate dean and president of the American Public Health Association.

"These findings remind us that support for breastfeeding may generate benefits that may contribute to stronger, healthier, and more resilient communities over the long term."

Building on this research, the team looks to expand its work beyond Georgia to examine whether similar patterns exist nationwide and how these results can guide future public health planning.

"Looking at data across the country helps us see the bigger picture," Chopak-Foss said. "We hope our findings will provide new insights and contribute to the national conversation."



GS receives historic funding to curb isolation among older adults and people with disabilities

While illustrating the importance of Georgia Southern University's Senior Companion Program, Deb Blackburn, the program's director, recalled one situation with potentially deadly consequences.

"There was a woman on our waiting list who lived alone and was very sick," she said. "We went to check on her, and could smell the natural gas. She had a leak that no one knew about. We got her out of the house immediately, and called the fire department. The woman quickly recovered."

Efforts to prevent those kinds of incidents received a major boost in the form of a \$378,000 grant increase from AmeriCorps Senior. Effective July 1, the funding is one of three equal installments arriving over the next three years. It's part of the largest-ever award for the program housed in the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences' Center for Social Gerontology.

Sometimes called "companions," volunteers, 55 and older, are paired with seniors needing support to live independently in their homes. They provide socialization while assisting with meal preparation, household chores and occasional transportation.

Clients live in 15 counties across southeastern Georgia including Bulloch, Emanuel and Effingham. These counties, plus six more, have waiting lists. The new contract no longer divides the funds by location, meaning volunteers can go to areas of greatest need. Currently, there are seven vacancies for volunteers.

Other benefits include an hourly stipend, better travel reimbursement rates for

volunteers and the doubling of their daily meal stipend from \$1.50 to \$3. These changes are significant, because companion eligibility requires an annual individual income no higher than \$31,920.

Theretha Alston has been one of those companions for four years. Until recently, she visited Beatrice Huff, a 94-year-old Bulloch County resident. Huff's own work with the program inspired Alston to get involved.

"I heard about the program by word of mouth, at the time, Beatrice was still working as a companion," she said. "Seeing her so excited about the program at the age of 90 inspired me on a daily basis. I thought to myself 'What if I could be like that at her age?' She just retired last year."

Alston spent four days a week with Huff for five hours each day helping with her lunch, her exercises and walks to the mailbox.

Unfortunately, Alston needed to be paired with another senior for logistical reasons. Still, she cherishes the conversations she shared with Huff.

"My favorite part was hearing about her history," she said. "She would start talking about her childhood, her school days, meeting her husband, raising a family and her grandkids. Then she would start smiling for sure."

Blackburn emphasized that social connections like this can improve quality of life for isolated individuals.

"To me, that's one of the best examples of how our participation in the community helps people who are alone and don't have the capacity to take care of all their household needs," she said.

GS continues to address critical health care needs with new Physician Assistant Program



Georgia Southern's Waters College of Health Professions (WCHP) received approval from the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia (USG) to move forward with a new Master of Medical Science (MMSc) in Physician Assistant Studies degree program. The new program, approved by the USG's governing and managing authority on Aug. 13, will add to the college's 38 diverse health professions degrees and certificates offered at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

"The addition of a program in physician assistant studies further solidifies Georgia Southern's leadership in preparing dedicated health care professionals who will serve our communities," said Waters College of Health Professions Dean Scott Gordon, Ph.D., FACS. "As Georgia faces a critical deficit in primary care providers, we are committed to improving health outcomes and fostering long-term economic stability in our region and state."

In Georgia, an estimated 14 counties currently lack family medicine physicians, and eight counties have no physicians at all. Georgia Southern's physician assistant (PA) program will strengthen the workforce pipeline by creating a pathway for students to receive high-level clinical training in the region, recruiting from the very communities with the greatest need. The program's focus on evidence-based practice and quality improvement will also prepare graduates to contribute to the health care system's efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Physician assistant employment in Georgia is projected to grow by 32% over a 10-year span through 2032, with approximately 430 annual job openings. Current annual production of PA graduates in Georgia meets only about 80% of estimated employment demand. The program will help bridge the projected deficit over the next decade by producing 35 to 40 highly skilled physician assistants annually.

The program's economic impact will be multifaceted. Graduates will transition into high-demand clinical roles with significant earning potential, serving as vital catalysts for local economic growth. By increasing access to primary and preventive care, the program will help reduce costly emergency department utilization and address chronic disease management—factors that improve population health while reducing overall health care expenditures.

"Georgia Southern's long-standing leadership in health professions education is rooted in a fundamental belief that a theory-to-practice model based on an optimal mix of classroom-based didactic education and hands-on clinical phase, blending scientific theory with

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Physician Assistant Program Cont.

direct patient care focused on the population we serve, creates long term impact," said Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs Avinandan Mukherjee, Ph.D. "The new PA program represents a strategic alignment of our educational expertise with our deepest responsibility to prepare graduates who not only demonstrate clinical excellence, but possess the steadfast dedication to serve communities across our region and state."

Based at the Armstrong Campus in Savannah, the MMSc program is a 27-month, 112-credit-hour curriculum that balances 14 months of didactic learning with 13 months of supervised clinical practice. Pending final approval by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges and the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant, the program expects to begin recruiting its inaugural cohort within the next two years.

The program's curriculum integrates rigorous, evidence-based education with a focus on hands-on service in underserved areas, extending benefits directly to the most vulnerable populations in the region. Students will be provided multiple optional community service-learning experiences in medically underserved areas and have the opportunity to participate in clinical rotations at Federally Qualified Health Centers and community health clinics across counties in South Georgia that provide direct exposure to underserved populations. The region's strong military presence also allows students to engage with veterans, active-duty service members and their families.

Additionally, the program's emphasis on patient-centered care across all supervised

clinical practice experiences will ensure that graduates are equipped to serve numerous distinct populations with sensitivity and responsiveness to individual patient needs and community health priorities. This approach will ensure that students receive hands-on experience in the specific settings where they are most needed, increasing the likelihood that graduates will choose to practice in underserved communities upon certification.

The Waters College of Health Professions' demonstrated excellence in cross-disciplinary collaboration, interprofessional education and activities, faculty-led research partnerships and experiential learning creates an ideal foundation for this initiative. The PA program complements the institution's existing nurse practitioner program, currently the largest occupation in the region, creating a comprehensive advanced practice provider pipeline. Together, these programs position WCHP as the regional leader in addressing critical health care workforce shortages across coastal and South Georgia.

WCHP is Georgia Southern's largest college with more than 6,000 undergraduate and graduate students working toward degrees in the clinical sciences, health sciences and kinesiology, and nursing. The college confers approximately 950 undergraduate and graduate degrees each year.

"This is a strategic investment in the economic and physical health of South Georgia," Gordon added. "By leveraging our existing simulation facilities and strengths in the health sciences and deep partnerships across the region, we are maximizing the impact of University resources."



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