

EXCELLENCE *in Action*

GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY
ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

October 2026

Monthly Updates from Academic Affairs at Georgia Southern University.



Message from the Provost

Excellence happens every day across Georgia Southern University.

It happens when a faculty member publishes research that advances a field. When a staff member earns recognition from their peers. When someone presents their work to colleagues across the country or around the world. When one of our own is selected to serve in a leadership role because others recognize the expertise and perspective they bring to their profession.

These moments matter.

They represent individual accomplishments, certainly, but together they tell a much larger story about the people who make Georgia Southern what it is.

One of my priorities as Provost is strengthening a culture in which we communicate with one another, celebrate one another and recognize the contributions being made throughout Academic Affairs. Recognition does not always have to come with a ceremony or an award. Sometimes it begins simply by making sure good work is seen.

That is why I am pleased to introduce a reimagined feature to Excellence in Action: the Congratulations Corner.

The Congratulations Corner gives us a dedicated place to recognize the publications, presentations, accolades and appointments of our faculty and staff. As you read through this month's submissions, I hope you will take a moment to appreciate not only the number of accomplishments represented, but also their extraordinary breadth.

Our colleagues are contributing new knowledge to their disciplines. They are sharing their expertise with audiences beyond our campuses. They are earning recognition from professional organizations and being called upon to lead and serve. Each accomplishment adds to the collective expertise and reputation of Georgia Southern.

And I know these pages represent only a fraction of what is happening across Academic Affairs.

Every breakthrough, publication, and leadership milestone strengthens the foundation of our institution and elevates the experience we offer our students. As Georgia Southern continues to grow in reach and reputation, celebrating these moments reminds us of what is possible when dedicated scholars and professionals come together.

Because Excellence in Action is not only about striving for what comes next. It is also about taking the time to recognize the people who are already moving us forward.



Avinandan (Avi) Mukherjee
PROVOST & EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Congratulations Corner

Help Us Celebrate Excellence Across Georgia Southern!



Excellence in Action is built on the daily dedication, scholarship, and leadership of our faculty and staff. The Congratulations Corner is our dedicated space to recognize the publications, presentations, accolades, and appointments happening across Academic Affairs—and we need your help to make sure no achievement goes unnoticed.

Have good news to share? Whether you have a milestone of your own to celebrate or want to shine a light on a colleague's hard work, please share it with the Provost Office using the QR code!

GS announces Optometric Education Task Force to advance creation of Georgia's first College of Optometry



Georgia Southern University has established an Optometric Education Task Force composed of nationally recognized leaders in optometry, educators and advocates to advise on the development of the University's College of Optometry.

The task force represents a significant milestone in the creation of the college and the University's ongoing efforts to expand access to vision care, strengthen Georgia's health care workforce and establish a premier destination for optometric education in the Southeast.

"The creation of this task force brings together some of the most respected voices in optometry," said Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs Avinandan Mukherjee, Ph.D. "Their collective expertise will help ensure Georgia Southern develops a forward-looking college that prepares exceptional clinicians, advances research and serves communities across our state."

Leading the task force is **Horace Deal, O.D.**, a nationally recognized optometrist, owner of Southeastern Eye Care Clinics in Statesboro, longtime team optometrist for Georgia Southern Athletics and past president of both the Southern Council of Optometrists (SECO) International and the Georgia Optometric Association. Deal has spent decades advancing clinical education, professional advocacy and sports vision while mentoring future optometrists.

"Georgia has needed an optometry school for decades," said Deal. "This task force represents an incredible opportunity to help shape an institution that will educate future optometrists, improve access to care and strengthen the profession for generations to come."

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Optometric Education Task Force Cont.

The task force includes professionals with extensive experience in clinical practice, education, advocacy, government relations and health policy:

- **Jarrod Griffis, O.D.** ('13), a Georgia Southern alumnus and private practice optometrist specializing in specialty contact lenses and ocular disease management.
- **Jeremy Collins**, principal of Jeremy Collins Public Affairs, bringing decades of experience in government relations, public policy and strategic planning.
- **Mahsa Masoudi, O.D.**, a nationally recognized advocate for optometric education and recipient of the 2026 American Optometric Association Young Optometrist of the Year Award.
- **Robin Chandler-Morgan, O.D.**, a private practice owner dedicated to expanding high-quality eye care in rural Georgia and serving on the Georgia Optometric Association Board of Trustees.
- **Ted McElroy, O.D.** ('89), a Georgia Southern alumnus and founder of Vision Source Tifton, former president of both the Georgia Optometric Association and SECO International, and an accomplished educator and leadership mentor.
- **Walter L. Jackson II, O.D., MAPS** ('15, '17), a Georgia Southern alumnus, residency-trained optometrist and clinical educator with expertise in ocular disease management and professional leadership. He is a member of the Georgia Optometric Association.
- **Paul Ajamian, O.D.**, a graduate of the New England College of Optometry, who has authored two textbooks and edits Review of Optometry's "Clinical Quandaries" column. He is also a past president of the Georgia Optometric Association and long-time Education Chairman for SECO International. A 2015 National Optometry Hall of Fame inductee, he currently serves as President of the Georgia State Board of Optometry.

Together, the task force will provide strategic guidance as Georgia Southern advances planning for the College of Optometry, including program proposal, curriculum development, accreditation planning, partnerships, clinical education opportunities and workforce alignment.

The new college reflects Georgia Southern's commitment to meeting the state's growing demand for eye care professionals while expanding access to comprehensive vision care, particularly in rural and underserved communities.

GS researcher secures more than half a million in funding for new biomedical research

Salim Sazzed, Ph.D., a faculty member in Georgia Southern University's Allen E. Paulson College of Engineering and Computing, is conducting research that could help scientists better understand the relationship between changes in human cells and serious illness.

As the sole principal investigator of a four-year, $568,000 grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Sazzed is developing artificial intelligence–based methods and software tools to identify and trace actin filaments more accurately in three-dimensional cellular images. These filaments help cells maintain their shape, move and divide. Their alteration is closely associated with cancer, neurological disorders and heart disease.

Currently, these images are produced using "Cryo-electron tomography (Cryo-ET)", an imaging technique that allows scientists to see the microscopic actin filaments within the cells. Cryo-ET can provide insight, but the images it produces can also be difficult to analyze, according to Sazzed.

"Through my previous work, I know that these images can be very noisy," he said. "Manually tracing the filaments can sometimes take hundreds of hours, while existing automated approaches often lack sufficient accuracy."

Sazzed expects his AI models and software tools to provide a more accurate automated approach for analyzing these images and to be ready for public use by 2030. While the software won't provide an immediate treatment or diagnostic test for disease, Sazzed is hopeful about its long-term impact.



Salim Sazzed, Ph.D., a faculty member in Georgia Southern University's Allen E. Paulson College of Engineering and Computing.

"Having a more comprehensive knowledge of how cells function and how actin filaments change in the presence of disease could eventually support the development of new treatments," Sazzed explained.

Another important aspect of the project is student involvement. Two Ph.D. students and six undergraduates will help develop the software, train the AI models and analyze results. They will also attend team meetings with Sazzed and other collaborators, experts in biology, biochemistry and actin research from the University of Oregon, Ohio State University and Reed College.

"Working with students is one of the most rewarding parts of this project," Sazzed said. "They will contribute directly to this NIH-funded effort while developing as independent researchers."

Sazzed also plans to host an annual workshop during the project period to promote computational modeling and artificial intelligence in biomedical research.

Georgia Department of Public Health partners with GS researchers for study on adolescent social media use

The Georgia Department of Health is working with researchers from Georgia Southern University's Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health after Georgia lawmakers requested more information to address the rise of adolescent social media use.

The U.S. Surgeon General said social media use among adolescents is increasing at an alarming pace, and its effects on youth ages 13 to 18 are concerning.

"There are increasing concerns among researchers, parents and caregivers, young people, health care experts and others about the impact of social media on youth mental health," the surgeon general's advisory, published in 2023, states. "More research is needed to understand the impact of social media fully."

"We frequently partner with the Department of Public Health," said Tilicia Mayo-Gamble, Ph.D., associate dean for practice and research and principal investigator for the report. "This was going to require intense data collection, and they knew we could handle it."

Mayo-Gamble is an associate professor in the Department of Health Policy and Community Health at Georgia Southern. Her background in communications proved helpful as she partnered with Chun Hai Fung, Ph.D., professor of biostatistics, epidemiology and environmental health sciences, whose work was cited in the surgeon general's initial report.

"Dr. Fung is an excellent epidemiologist, and he also works with large data sets," Mayo-Gamble said. "That's exactly what this project needed."

The group reviewed post-COVID research and existing federal laws before recommending a comprehensive media literacy program. It would target students in grades 4 through 12 and be developed by the Georgia Department of Education. Mayo-Gamble said the curriculum would teach healthy social media habits, privacy protection skills and problematic use patterns.

"A program like this would be extremely important," she said. "That's what public health is; it's more than research, it's about having the chance to impact people's lives."

They also recommended continued funding for research and monitoring social media's impact on youth. The collected data would be used to inform future policy development as technologies continue to grow. But these benefits extend beyond informing policymakers.

"Research like this is meant to support communication between parents and their children," Mayo-Gamble said. "I do think that a lot of parents worry if they're doing the right thing for their kids. So if there's an opportunity to educate parents about something that impacts their ability to be a good parent, I think that's the type of research we should be doing."

GS College of Education dean appointed to Georgia Literacy Task Force



Amy Lingo, Ph.D, dean of Georgia Southern University's College of Education, was appointed to the Georgia Literacy Task Force.

Georgia Southern University College of Education Dean Amy Lingo, Ed.D., was appointed to the Georgia Literacy Task Force by Georgia Speaker of the House Jon Burns (R-Newington).

Lingo is one of three people appointed by Speaker Burns to serve a three-year term that will expire on Sept. 1, 2029. Each appointee was determined by the Governor's Office of Education and Workforce Strategy to meet the qualifications established under the Georgia Early Literacy Act of 2026 (HB1193).

"I am deeply passionate about advancing evidence-based literacy instruction in classrooms, and it is a privilege to serve on this task force," said Lingo. "I look forward to collaborating with fellow leaders to drive meaningful, lasting impact and elevate literacy outcomes for all students in Georgia."

The task force will evaluate and recommend key components of Georgia's literacy reform, including professional learning programs, reading screeners and high-quality instructional materials aligned with the state's science-based literacy standards.

"Literacy changes lives. At Georgia Southern University, our goal is to empower educators with the knowledge and confidence to teach literacy skills in their classrooms," Lingo said. "The work of our recently established Literacy Center will support and complement the work of the Georgia Literacy Task Force by helping equip educators with the knowledge and skills they need to help every student become a successful reader."

Chaired by the state literacy director, the Georgia Literacy Task Force will work to implement ongoing literacy reforms, strengthen resources for educators and build a strong learning foundation for Georgia students starting in their earliest school years.

GS faculty member honored with statewide CASA Leadership Award



Georgia Southern University Sociology Professor April Schueths, Ph.D.

Georgia Southern University Sociology Professor April Schueths, Ph.D., has been named the recipient of the 2026 CASA Board Member Leadership Award by the Georgia Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). Honored at the annual Georgia CASA Conference in Atlanta, the distinction recognizes her long-standing service and exceptional contributions to child advocacy.

Schueths has served on the board of directors for Child Advocacy Services SEGA, Inc. (CASSEGA), for the last decade, including the last five years as board chair. Schueths' tenure as board chair has been instrumental in spearheading strategic fundraising, modernizing organizational policies and ensuring equitable support for youth across the Ogeechee Judicial Circuit.

The CASA network relies on trained community volunteers to represent the best interests of children in the foster care system. CASSEGA supports foster children in the Ogeechee Judicial Circuit, which includes Bulloch, Effingham, Jenkins and Screven counties.

"I'm honored to receive the Board Leadership Award from Georgia CASA," Schueths said. "I'm so proud of the work our CASSEGA team does every day to make sure children have a voice."

Schueths leverages her clinical background as a practicing social worker and her academic research to strengthen local human services. At Georgia Southern, she prepares undergraduate sociology students for careers in public service through courses in social welfare policy, counseling skills and introductory social services.

According to CASSEGA leadership, her dual role as an educator and advocate has significantly expanded the organization's reach and operational stability.

"Dr. Schueths brings a combination of scholarly insight and hands-on community care to the organization," said Julie Pickens, Ph.D., executive director of CASSEGA. "Her rare ability to move seamlessly between policy leadership, academic scholarship and direct community engagement makes her an invaluable asset."

GS professor lands grant funding for an innovative and accessible fungal curriculum and genomics project

Georgia Southern Department of Biology Professor Sara Gremillion, Ph.D., has taken on a cross-institutional, five-year National Institute of Health grant-funded project that aims to create a curriculum and shared knowledge pool for an underutilized, yet widely available organism: Fungi.

Gremillion, who is also the Interim Associate Dean of Faculty Affairs and Student Success in the College of Science and Mathematics, explained, "I'm a mycologist, a biologist who studies molds, mildews, mushrooms and things like that. I am really interested in fungi that cause plant disease. I'm also interested in fungi that have medically important characteristics like the ability to produce antibiotics."

The project, Myco-Ed: A National Platform Bringing Fungal Genomics to the Future Biomedical Workforce, led by Gremillion, is a culmination of mycological expertise from across the globe designed to increase biomedical knowledge through an accessible, collective database of fungal research. But the project isn't just an encyclopedia of fungal research; it also centers around teaching strategies for educators who may not have intensive training in mycology.

Gremillion said, "There aren't many people who study fungi, despite their importance in ecosystems, health and industry. So, our goal is to approach the microbiologist who may be studying bacteria, or the ecologists who may be studying plants in a specific ecosystem and pull them into the project. We'll train them in a fungal-forward curriculum-based undergraduate research experience (CURE) to include in their courses."

By training fellow scientists to implement a mycology-based curriculum, student and career researchers can work toward contributing fungal genetic information to a free, online database that can easily be accessed and used to further conversations surrounding biomedical potential for a wide variety of fungi, collected from nature by students.

As a longtime professor of biology on the Armstrong Campus of Georgia Southern, Gremillion has long been a supporter of undergraduate research opportunities. For the principal investigator and adjoining investigators, the inclusion of non-graduate-level scholars also plays a major role in the project through the Course-based Undergraduate Research Experience (CURE) curriculum.

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The Science Center on the Armstrong Campus of Georgia Southern University

Fungal curriculum and genomics project cont.

"When you're majoring in STEM, your undergraduate laboratory experience is where the intense learning happens. It's the hands-on activities that help you solidify those concepts. They help you learn how science is actually done. And so, to me, when I take on a research student, it's just one-on-one teaching. Teaching a CURE is the next best thing; a classroom of students gets that research-intensive experience," Gremillion stated.

Ultimately, the almost $1.6 million grant will allow educators and scholars to investigate fungi as an innovative resource for beneficial usage as well as potential health risks. Although fungi are widely overlooked despite their natural abundance, the Myco-Ed project will provide training and knowledge to better understand these widespread organisms. With a mycologically literate biomedical workforce, fungi can be studied and leveraged for a variety of uses in the prevention of disease and production of improved, fungal-derived medicines.

For Gremillion and her collaborators, this project is the outcome of a long-held dedication to the far too understudied world of mycology, where fungi are no longer hiding beneath hidden surfaces or in the dark corners of a basement, but taking center stage in the world of biomedical discovery.

"Fungi are so cool," she said. "Don't sleep on the fungi."



Georgia Southern University Department of Biology professor Sara Gremillion, Ph.D. (center) working with students in a lab


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