



GCSU addresses disparities in rural healthcare with new Mobile Health Unit

As rural clinics and hospitals nationwide are closing their doors, Georgia College & State University proudly unveiled its new Mobile Health Unit — a free screening center on wheels — that will address rural healthcare needs in Central Georgia and train students in preventive care.

The customized vehicle was open for public viewing and tours during a ribbon-cutting ceremony Oct. 22. It now hits the road for a health fair in Putnam County, partnering with the Putnam General Hospital, as well as free screenings in several local communities.

Spanning more than 40 feet with three retractable awnings, the unit boasts two intake areas, two medical exam rooms, refrigeration for vaccines and a bathroom.

“Our new, state-of-the-art Mobile Health Unit will address a critical need for residents in rural communities, many of which are losing access to healthcare, while simultaneously providing nursing and public health students with the vital training they need to become future healthcare leaders and frontline workers,” said GCSU President Cathy Cox. “It is truly a win-win for all involved.”

About 30% of all rural hospitals nationwide were at risk for closure by 2023. That year, U.S. News & World Report ranked Georgia No. 7 for states with the most rural hospital closings. To date, nine rural hospitals in Georgia have closed. One stopped providing in-patient care, and 18 others are at financial risk, a study by Chartis found.

These closures compound the grim reality that people living in rural communities are not as healthy.

“Rural hospital closings are becoming more common across the country,” said Dr. Will Evans, dean of the university’s College of Health Sciences. “Often, these smaller hospitals cannot generate enough revenue to cover expenses, since that would require surgical services and specialty services that are not something you typically see available in smaller communities.”

“Preventive screenings are a big part of what we hope to do,” he said. “We’ll bring free services to areas that otherwise might not have

them.” Greater poverty rates, less access to health care and lack of insurance can lead to more obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and cancer, according to a report by the Center for Disease Control.

Georgia College’s Mobile Health Unit will help tackle this problem — bringing preventive care to counties like Baldwin, Bibb, Hancock, Houston, Jones, Putnam and Wilkinson that often lack resources.

The vision for a mobile health unit emerged three years ago to address burgeoning health disparities made worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most public-health efforts focused on testing and vaccination, while the need for basic health screenings for chronic conditions were not being met.

Georgia College began addressing underlying, health risk factors in Central Georgia — like hypertension, obesity, high cholesterol and diabetes — through its Center for Health & Social Issues, directed by associate professor of public health Dr. Damian Francis.

“The Mobile Health Unit will increase our capacity to do more and reach a wider geographic area. The work we’ve done, and its planned expansion through the mobile health unit, is life-saving,” Francis said.

The self-powered, ADA-accessible vehicle is fully equipped with screening tools to assess cholesterol, blood pressure, blood sugar and hemoglobin. Nursing, public health and exercise science students will conduct stress and cardiovascular risk assessments — supervised by nursing faculty. They will also give nutritional and exercise demonstrations and mental-health screenings.

“We are, in some cases, the only healthcare provider some folks will see in a year,” Francis said. “By offering preventive health services, the Mobile Health Unit will contribute to improving the overall health and well-being of Georgia’s most vulnerable populations.”

“By offering preventive health services,” he added, “the Mobile Health Unit will contribute to improving the overall health and well-being of Georgia’s most vulnerable populations, ultimately reducing emergency room visits and lowering healthcare costs in the region.”



Nursing major Alyssa Zuegel practices screening tests in GCSU’s mobile health unit.



GCSU students study coral reefs in Okinawa, Japan

Not threatened by a typhoon promising to skirt the country, Georgia College & State University Associate Professor of Biology Dr. Kristine White led a team of students to Okinawa, Japan, last summer.

The group studied reefs in pristine, blue-green waters full of fish and multi-colored corals.

“I love the water, I love the ocean,” said senior biology major Kali Holierhoek, who is earning a concentration in marine biology. “Swimming around and finding things like Nemo and Marlin in a little anemone —there’s nothing like it. The reefs there are so healthy, it’s cool to see.”

Students attended lectures by night, snorkeled in the mornings and explored the greater city of Okinawa in between.

Four teams of two students were assigned a type of organism—fish, algae, corals or echinoderms (like sea urchins) — to identify and draw.

Each morning, they put lecture into practice by snorkeling through Okinawa’s reefs.

“The idea was to see new things each day to

highlight that a coral reef isn’t just coral,” White said. “Learning the information, you can do, but to really remember it, I think you have to go do it.”

Angelina Cofrancesco, ‘24, graduated in May with a degree in biology and pre-focus for medical school.

“It never felt like work, because it was so enjoyable to be in the water. It was so warm, and we got to see so much,” Cofrancesco said.

“I really love traveling to other countries, because it really shows you how we’re all caught up in one way of life. By going to Japan,” she said, “it opened my point of view. You just need to know that there’s way more out there than just what you’re doing in that moment.”

The group visited a large, open-air market with fishmongers, the historic Nakamura House that preserves 15th century Japanese architecture. They had a party on the beach and enjoyed relaxing in izakayas, informal restaurants that allow people to sit in their private rooms.



“It was like a little restaurant, and we had our own private room,” said rising sophomore and biology major Odeya Atar. “We had a bunch of food on many plates that we passed around. It was a fun environment.”

“At the market, all the fish were so vibrant, and all the shopkeepers were so friendly,” she said. “... the ocean was just beautiful — it was the bluest water I’ve ever seen.”

Did you know?

Friday, Nov. 1, Georgia College & State University’s annual Jazz Band concert will be at 7:30 p.m. in Russell Auditorium.

This year’s theme, “Global Groove,” mixes a variety of cultures—from the United States, home of jazz, to the far reaches of Spain, Italy, Brazil and Japan.

Although jazz is an American art form—originating in the African-American communities of New Orleans—the rhythmic ragtime and blues have been globally embraced.

Join us for a lively, upbeat program with Dave Wolpe’s “Angel Eyes,” Jon Harpin’s “Black Coffee,” Benjamin Dean Taylor’s “Can I See Your Socks?” and Cole Markland’s “Feeling Good.”

Seventeen students will perform saxophone, trombone, trumpet and rhythm with vocalist Riley Greer.

This concert will also be livestreamed at www.facebook.com/GCMusicDepartment. A \$5 donation is encouraged. For more information, call 478-445-8289.

GCSU afterschool program broadened high schoolers’ horizons with podcasts

High schoolers got a taste of what it’s like to create a podcast last spring as part of Georgia College & State University’s High Achievers Program.

Students from Baldwin High School and Georgia College Early College participated in a three-month endeavor to learn the basics of podcasting.

They created their own podcast pseudo-episodes dealing with common problems for teenagers, like relationships and life issues surrounding mental health.

“We’re encouraging their public speaking skills, increasing their confidence levels and fostering leadership development and teamwork,” said Kenneth W. Daniels, HAP coordinator. “The idea of the program is to strengthen leadership development while being involved in several activities.

It’s about making a well-rounded individual that positively contributes to society. Most of these opportunities participants wouldn’t find anywhere else.”

The afterschool youth development program is funded by Georgia’s Department of Human Services, which partners with Georgia College, Baldwin County’s Board of Education, Milledgeville and Baldwin County.

In the program students have explored hands-on activities from outdoor obstacle courses and using lab microscopes to engaging with professional guest speakers

Most recently, the program introduced students to podcasting techniques and equipment.

“It’s a great opportunity for the students to learn how to share their thoughts and ideas. It’s

got to be interesting, engaging and informative,” said Dr. Chad Whittle, assistant communication professor at Georgia College.

The university’s department of communication donated equipment to the project, giving HAP students the necessary tools to produce podcasts.

“I’d like to be doing gaming podcasting,” said ninth-grade Baldwin student Arreon Amir Stephens. “I enjoy interviewing people and sharing viewpoints. I like podcasts, so I’m interested.”

Learning this new skill, high school students gained insight on a possible career.

“This is a small family of kids,” Daniels said, “who undoubtedly realized that they do have potential. They do have greatness within them.”



Arreon Amir Stephens in the podcasting booth.

What’s going on in Bobcat Territory?

Visit frontpage.gcsu.edu/events

Tuesday

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7-9 p.m. GCSU Jazz Jam at Amici Café, Milledgeville.

7-10 p.m. GCSU’s Bobcat mascot invites you to “Thunder’s Haunted Trail,” W. Campus. \$15 entry cost. Not suitable for participants under 13.

Wednesday

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Noon - 12:50 p.m. GCSU “Times Talk” with Dr. Scott Butler on “A Tale of Two Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and COVID-19” at Ina Dillard Russell Library.

Thursday

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Friday

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Noon - 1 p.m. GCSU Rural Studies Institute hosts a viral discussion, “Feast for Thought: A Public Liberal Arts Exploration of Food, Society and the Environment.” Visit this link <https://forms.gle/JoJkhWuNRbR5j8dm6> to register.

Saturday

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1-3 p.m. GCSU Women’s Soccer vs. Georgia Southwestern State University at Bobcat Soccer Field, W. Campus.

3-5 p.m. GCSU Volleyball vs. Lander University, Centennial Center.