

>> GEORGIA COLLEGE

GC Thrive program celebrates first graduate

Spencer Kirkley is the first graduate of the GC THRIVE program at Georgia College & State University. Middle Georgia's first and only inclusive post-secondary education program, GC THRIVE enables young adults ages 18 to 28 with intellectual disabilities to attend college with their peers.

While GC THRIVE students are non-degree seeking, graduates earn a Certificate of Completion in Liberal Arts Education by enrolling in two Georgia College courses each semester. The course curriculum is modified as needed by an academic coordinator and peer mentors. GC THRIVE students also complete internships each semester and participate in Student Life activities.

Kirkley took courses through GC THRIVE, including media literacy and

theatre appreciation, along with a variety of classes from the Department of World Languages & Cultures, the outdoor education program and the creative writing program. Kirkley also interned with Georgia College Athletics, the Milledgeville Fire Department and Wolf Country radio 97.5 FM.

GC THRIVE was founded by Rob Sumowski, associate professor of education; Stephen Wills, professor of special education; and Nicole Declouette, professor of education and interim associate dean of the John H. Lounsbury College of Education.

While all three faculty remain deeply involved as co-directors, Heather Cox, lecturer of special education, runs the day-to-day operations as the program's academic coordinator.



Spencer Kirkley

"I've had a professor tell me this, after having his second THRIVE student this semester, that it has really helped him grow as a professor, which meant a lot to me," Cox said. "He

said, 'It's challenging me, it's pushing me to think outside of the box. It's changing the way I teach, and I'm happy about it.'"

Cox helps modify the courses students take, helping them develop the skills they need to be successful and employable. Currently, GC THRIVE has three students enrolled and hopes to expand enrollment to support many more students with intellectual disabilities in Middle Georgia.

Declouette said, "We are really speaking to the mission of Georgia College, the values that Georgia College holds dear, and our strategic plan. ... We foster a sense of belonging in a campus community that values diversity of intellectual thought, experiences and identifications."

Sumowski is quick to point out that GC THRIVE wouldn't have been possible without

the support of Georgia College President Cathy Cox, Provost Costas Spriou, Interim Provost Holley Roberts, University Registrar Kay Anderson and Angela Criscoe, executive director of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies.

While in the program, GC THRIVE students are assigned peer mentors – fellow GC students, who assist with classroom support, social interactions, navigating college life and internships.

Just as the peer mentors foster meaningful relationships and support GC THRIVE students, the special education program plays a vital role in preparing future educators to carry that same mission of inclusion and empowerment in their own classrooms.

— Contributed