

GCSU celebrates 25 year partnership with GEM program

For the past 25 years, Georgia Education Mentorship (GEM) has defined leadership in action.

Nearly 800 Georgia College & State University students completed the program, which pairs undergraduates with state changemakers from the Georgia Chamber of Commerce for a yearlong partnership that benefits mentees and mentors alike.

"Georgia College and the Georgia Chamber are two institutions uniquely positioned to shape the future of Georgia—to build the kind of state we want to have and the communities in which we want to live," said Dr. Harold Mock, director of Leadership Programs at Georgia College. "We're thinking about the next generation of leaders and, through GEM, making a direct investment in their ability to provide leadership on behalf of others."

Program alumna Sarah Rose Harrill ('14, '18) said, "I had a fantastic experience with my mentor. We actually still keep in touch

to this day. GEM was a win-win. It's two people helping one another to learn and grow."

Another GEM alumna, Nancy Leslie Griffin ('19), currently works as the executive office and special projects director for the Georgia Chamber, helping to manage the program she took part in as a Mass Communication major at GCSU.

"I think that our members love to see how we're doing things that really further the students' education outside of the classroom," Griffin said. "When we have the opportunity to bring in a new mentor and say, 'Hey, we have this partnership with Georgia College'... it is exactly what they're looking for."

Georgia Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Chris Clark ('96) agreed, touting the program's focus on addressing a critical state need.

"The No. 1 issue for Georgia business leaders is workforce development," he said. "A lot of our public



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A mentee and mentor speak during the GEM program reception held last month in Atlanta.

policy work, our event programming, 90% of the work that we do with local chambers is all around this issue of preparing the next generation to have the skills that they need to kind of AI-proof their careers."

The key to developing young people into impactful leaders, according to Clark, is access. Ensuring that mentees leave the GEM program with hands-on experience in executive

spaces opens doors they otherwise might not have known existed.

"It's not just theoretical," Clark added of the work mentees do in the program. "We're actually on the ground with students. ... I think that's really where it happens. GEM fits in perfectly with our long-term strategy for growing that next generation of Georgia leaders and career-minded professionals."

After students are

accepted into GEM, they are paired with a mentor from the Chamber's board of directors and then set goals for what they want to accomplish during their year together. Mentees have both individual and group site visits with their mentor and other Chamber partners. Mentees have previously toured agricultural producers in rural Georgia, traveled to Georgia's coastal ports to learn about logistics and supply chain, and to countless businesses in the greater Atlanta area.

"GEM students and mentors see the full range of Georgia's politics, free enterprise and public service," Mock said. "But the nature of GEM is that no two student experiences are the same. They are all surrounded by a team of committed supporters that include me, our public service coordinator, their mentor, the staff at the Georgia Chamber, their cohort and our alumni."

Central to the GEM program's success is the belief that effective

leadership must come from all sectors of society, spanning private enterprise, public affairs, nonprofit and civic life. Another key to the program's success is a 50/50 partnership between the university and the chamber.

Georgia College is the only university in the state to have this type of partnership with the Georgia Chamber, and the program's longevity can be attributed to "the DNA" of the university," Clark said.

"When it's seen as a priority from the very top, from the president all the way down, and you have enthusiastic leaders like Harold [Mock], I think it's kind of infectious," Clark said. "Some of the mentors have been there since the beginning, and if they weren't getting something out of it, they wouldn't be doing it. What I hear from them consistently is that they feel like they learn more from the students than the students maybe learn from them at the end of the day."

— *Courtesy of University Communications*