

GCSU grant seeks to grow rural business

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Students at the revamped Rural Youth In Business summer program learning about entrepreneurship through an agribusiness lens. (Gil Pound/GCSU Communications)

Georgia College & State University has been awarded more than \$700,000 in federal funding to boost business development throughout Georgia, specifically within rural areas.

A total of \$710,000 has been appropriated by the United States Congress — through the offices of Sen. Jon Ossoff and state Sen. Raphael Warnock — for Georgia College to launch the Bobcat Business Incubator, a university-led initiative to nurture startups and cultivate entrepreneurship throughout Middle Georgia.

The incubator space will provide a resource for local businesses and entrepreneurs to connect and find expert support, as well as be available to all Georgia College students, not just those majoring in business programs, to foster innovation through interdisciplinary collaboration, which is at the heart of GCSU's liberal arts mission.

"Entrepreneurship experiences provide an education through creation," said Dr. Holley Roberts, Georgia College provost and vice president for Academic Affairs. "Any student interested in learning more about entrepreneurship will be able to find opportunities for meaningful hands-on learning experiences at the incubator, and the local community will have access to programming and advice usually only available in larger metropolitan areas. Through our talented faculty, we have expertise that can meaningfully contribute to the needs of this region."

The Bobcat Business Incubator will also provide startups with meeting spaces and resources, including a support network that will help write business plans, propose growth strategies and assist in structuring financials. The goal is to host a mix of GCSU students and local startups in the space.

"Nearly half of Georgia workers are employed by small businesses, but even the most successful small businesses and entrepreneurs can use a helping hand," said Sen. Raphael Warnock. "That's why I was proud to work hand in hand with GCSU to get the Bobcat Business Incubator project off the ground. I look forward to supporting Georgia's small businesses as they continue to power our economy."

"I remain focused on strengthening workforce development programs across our state," Sen. Ossoff added. "That's why Sen. Rev. Warnock and I brought Republicans and Democrats together to deliver these resources to Georgia College & State University, to help Georgians train for in-demand jobs."

This funding is in addition to \$130,000 that was granted to GCSU earlier this year from the Knight Foundation to fund complementary programming, establishing the university as a regional hub for business innovation and workforce readiness.

In the spirit of GCSU's liberal arts mission, which encourages cross-campus collaboration, the Bobcat Business Incubator will be directed by associate professor of business law Dr. Nicholas Creel and associate professor of physics Dr. Hasitha Mahabaduge, both of whom have been part of multiple recent grants the university has received to strengthen industry partnerships and spark innovation.

"People often criticize higher education — and business education, in particular — for simply teaching students from a book," said Creel. "With this funding, students will have the opportunity to go out and do it. There's no better prep than doing it yourself. There's value there from a pure educational standpoint."

"Receiving these funds from different sources really shows that multiple entities trust the work we are doing and planning to do," Mahabaduge added.

Expanded access to hands-on learning opportunities that span diverse academic programs is a hallmark of the Georgia College experience, particularly through its unique GC Journeys program. Connecting students with high-impact learning practices both inside and outside of the classroom, the program allows students to design customized academic pathways that develop in-demand career skills, such as communication, critical thinking and teamwork.

The new incubator will provide additional opportunities like these, giving students the chance to put theory into practice by contributing to real-world startups through various projects and partnerships.

Funding has also been used to expand GCSU's Rural Youth in Business program. Previously for area high schoolers, the summer program is now available to Georgia College students, as well, teaching them the economics of Georgia's top industry: agriculture. Participants learn how to start a sustainable agricultural business, including lessons on solar power, hydroponics, soil science along with the principles of entrepreneurship.