In College of Education

New center expands special ed services

The Auburn University Center for Disability Research and Service has officially opened, offering additional resources for Alabama citizens with significant disabilities. Housed in the Dawson Building, the center is an extension of the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, Counseling/School Psychology in the College of Education and will focus on developing initiatives in autism and developmental disabilities, assistive technology, program evaluation and employment and community support.

Department Head E. Davis Martin said the center’s multifaceted nature will enable it to provide meaningful assistance to individuals with significant disabilities in living independently and realizing their career and educational goals. “We’re trying to develop a model that will allow us to better assist those with the most significant disabilities to work, live and play in the communities of their choice,” Martin said.

He added that the center will strive to build a national reputation for advancement in each of the fields it serves, and will be interdisciplinary in nature with many of its research and service activities to include counseling, kinesiology, speech, psychology and human services.

Research relating to autism spectrum disorder will expand on the work previously conducted by the Auburn University Autism Center, which has been absorbed by the new center. In addition, the new center will collaborate on projects with the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute, which provides support to youths with disabilities by providing continuous improvement resources to assist with their transition to adulthood.

One of the center’s current projects focuses on the development of assistive technologies, which aid persons with disabilities. The department recently began collaborating with students in the Department of Industrial Design to develop assistive technology, said Scott Renner, who coordinates assistive technology for the center.

Industrial design and rehabilitation students are paired with a person with a disability, and they work together to develop new product concepts. The design of these technologies aims to improve the quality of life for persons with disabilities.

The center will also host assistive technology classes in the spring and summer, as well as in-service training for professionals throughout the year. In October, Auburn’s Office of Professional and Continuing Education and the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services will sponsor the first Alabama Assistive Technology Expo and Conference, or ALATEC.

“(This) will provide an opportunity to see first-hand the latest in assistive technologies, practices and services for persons with disabilities that will increase the ability of such persons to access education, employment, housing, transportation, health care, leisure and recreation in the community of choice,” Renner said.

ALATEC will also provide an opportunity for vendors, persons with disabilities and their families or loved ones, and professionals to exchange and gather information relative to the accessibility and availability of assistive technology.

“We hope to reach educators, students and parents,” said Margaret Flores, an assistant professor of special education and the center’s coordinator of autism and developmental disabilities. “We’re acquiring more and more pieces (for assistive technology), and we’re looking to bring in consumers.”

Flynn named to lead Interdisciplinary Studies

Kathryn Flynn, a Mosley Environmental Associate Professor in the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, has been named the new director of the university’s Interdisciplinary Studies Program.

Flynn will work with academic programs that include faculty from a diverse range of departments, encourage a culture of collaboration and promote cooperation among academic units across colleges in order to supplement and enhance existing course offerings.

Flynn received a bachelor’s degree in botany from Auburn and both a master’s degree and Ph.D. in wetland ecology from Louisiana State University. For the past 18 years, Flynn has been a professor and an extension specialist in the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences.

The Interdisciplinary Studies Program emerged in response to the changing face of scholarship and research and is aimed at intentionally immersing students in academically integrated experiences to help them make connections across disciplines and into real life.

Patricia Duffy, assistant provost for undergraduate studies, said Flynn’s academic background and knowledge of interdisciplinary opportunities and procedures will provide an immediate boost for the program.
Access blocked
The next step toward extending the Thach Avenue pedestrian corridor is taking place with the closure of the Miller Drive/Thach Avenue intersection. Bollards are being placed to prevent vehicular traffic from accessing Miller from Thach. Later this summer, the Thach pedestrian-only walkway will be extended from Haley Center west to Donahue Drive. The closure to traffic will coincide with the opening of Heisman Drive, which makes a circle around Jordan-Hare Stadium, with intersections in two places on Donahue.

Freshman learning community’s grant-writing project yields foundation funds to buy books for preschoolers

Freshmen enrolled in Auburn’s Liberal Arts and the Public Good Learning Community spent spring semester discussing and learning firsthand how reading enriches the human experience. They recently found out they had earned more than just a grade for their efforts.

As their final project, the students wrote grant applications for a total of $2,000 to provide books to area preschoolers. Later, the Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley and the Central Alabama Community Foundation notified the students that their grant applications have been approved.

The grant funds will be used to buy books for distribution to preschoolers in Chambers and Macon counties through class partner Jean Dean Reading is Fundamental of Opelika.

In class, the learning community students discussed reading materials designed to help them reflect on the arts and humanities. The students then headed out into the community to read to preschoolers at nearby Head Start centers and also to learn about the socioeconomic challenges facing many communities. The next step was to make a public presentation to funders and prepare grant applications outlining the need for young children to have exposure to books and literature.

“Not only were we taught how to work together with those organizations, but we shared in the rewards of their passion and generosity,” student Rachel Little said. “Who would have thought that a skill we all take for granted could bring smiles to so many young faces? We hope our efforts will instill a love for learning among these children.”

Students in Auburn’s Liberal Arts and the Public Good Learning Community take classes together that explore how liberal arts disciplines impact society and enrich the human experience. For additional information about the learning communities, see the website www.auburn.edu/academic/provost/undergrad_studies/support/learning_communities/CLALC.htm.

— Mark Wilson

Hague to lead diversity efforts in College of Liberal Arts

Daydrie Hague, an associate professor in the Department of Theatre and co-director of the Bachelor of Fine Arts Performance Program, is the new diversity officer for the College of Liberal Arts. Hague’s responsibilities as diversity officer include promoting diversity in all its forms, supporting interdisciplinary and collaborative programs that advance an understanding and appreciation of diversity, increasing and cultivating multicultural perspectives, and increasing annual giving that will help to expand a more diverse student population and an array of cultural perspectives.

“Daydrie brings experience from the multitude of initiatives she is involved with, and will help advance the college’s mission of diversity,” Liberal Arts Dean Anna Gramberg said. “I am very pleased that she will be serving the college in this capacity.”

For two years, Hague served as the director of a collaborative theatre program with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Lee County, where they have produced original works such as, “The Story of Harriet Tubman.” She also directed “The Member of the Wedding,” a play about sexual and racial identity, as well as “Speaking Truth to Power, Voices from Beyond the Dark,” a profile of human rights activists with a multiracial cast.
Auburn researchers help restore threatened, beneficial snakes to Southern Coastal Plain

Auburn University is partnering with conservation and wildlife officials to help the eastern indigo snake, the largest snake in the U.S. and a threatened species, once again become a thriving presence in Alabama.

In mid-June, Auburn researchers, along with conservation agencies from both Alabama and Georgia, released 17 juvenile eastern indigo snakes into the Conecuh National Forest near Andalusia. Eight of the snakes were released into 2.5-acre natural enclosures, while the remaining snakes were released into the forest.

“The presence of the eastern indigo snake indicates a healthy and balanced environment,” Auburn professor and herpetologist Craig Guyer explained. “Returning the eastern indigo snake to the South Alabama landscape not only restores a piece of the natural history of the state, but also helps to control the population of venomous snakes like copperheads, which have become prevalent in Alabama.”

Auburn and Zoo Atlanta shared the responsibility of raising the snakes until they were mature enough to be implanted with passive integrated transponders, as well as radio transmitters, which are used to monitor the location and survival of the snakes once they are reintroduced to their natural habitat.

G Guyer and graduate student Jimmy Stiles will monitor the location and survival of the snakes using the transmitters, which send out radio signals specific to each snake.

“I would consider this release a success if we come back to Conecuh National Forest in 10 years and discover eastern indigo snakes that do not have implanted transponders, because that would mean the snake population is increasing on its own,” Guyer said.

Guyer says he also believes that a successful reintroduction of the eastern indigo snake to south Alabama will result in a healthier, more balanced natural environment.

“Copperheads used to be a very rare snake to see in south Alabama,” Guyer said. “Now copperheads are the most commonly occurring snake in the region. Eastern indigo snakes eat other snakes, including venomous snakes like copperheads, and the decline of the eastern indigo snake has corresponded to an increase in copperheads.”

Within the first day of tracking the snakes after their release, the largest of them was found consuming a three-foot copperhead.

Eastern indigos also eat small mammals, lizards and frogs, all of which are abundant in both the natural enclosures and the Conecuh National Forest as a whole.

If the snakes remain in the Conecuh National Forest habitat, their survival rate should increase. Regular prescribed burns in the forest allow longleaf pines, which dominate the area, to mature, resulting in open stands of trees with a healthy understory of grasses. This understory is essential for gopher tortoise survival. Eastern indigo snakes, in turn, utilize gopher tortoise burrows as havens during extreme weather conditions.

Auburn clinic to present latest technology to aid individuals with hearing difficulties

The ongoing project began three years ago when students in Guyer’s lab went to southern Georgia and collected gravid female eastern indigos and brought them back to Auburn to lay their eggs. After they laid their eggs, the female snakes were returned to their native habitat. The eggs were then incubated and 17 eastern indigos were hatched.

Last October, a group of Auburn students active in the Society for Conservation Biology held a weekend workday in Conecuh National Forest, where students, along with faculty and administrators from the College of Sciences and Mathematics, spent the day preparing six, natural but enclosed habitats that would be ideal for eastern indigo snakes. They cut down small trees to build brush piles to shelter the snakes and repaired sections of the fence that had been damaged by falling limbs in preparation for the June release.

Adult eastern indigos can reach lengths in excess of eight feet. They are a glossy bluish-black with lighter, almost reddish coloring around the chin, throat and sides of the face. Although the non-venomous eastern indigo snake is native to Alabama, there have been no verified sightings of the snake since the 1960s. Currently, the eastern indigo can only be found in parts of Florida and South Georgia.

The snakes were classified in 1978 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a threatened species; then they seemed to disappear altogether from Alabama due to a variety of factors, including a dwindling of their natural habitat, changes in forest types and tree harvest cycles, a decrease in the use of fire as a forest-management tool, a decline in gopher tortoise populations, collectors selling the snakes in the pet trade, and road death.

As part of their efforts to reintroduce eastern indigos to Alabama, the researchers have eggs incubating for release next year.

The Auburn reintroduction project is supported by a number of partners including Alabama Department of Conservation, Project Orianne, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Forest Service and Zoo Atlanta.

— Candis Birchfield
Campus News Briefs

Bloomberg Businessweek rankings place Auburn as best education value in state

An Auburn University education is the best value in the state of Alabama, according to new rankings published by Bloomberg Businessweek.

Colleges and universities were ranked based on the projected income to be earned by graduates of the Class of 2010. The schools were ranked on their 30-year net return on investment. The report stated that Auburn graduates will have a 30-year net return on investment of $513,000, an annual net return on investment of 11.5 percent.

Information for the Businessweek rankings came from a study conducted by PayScale, which collects pay information from individuals using its online comparison tools. More about Auburn’s ranking is online at http://images.businessweek.com/ss/10/06/0628_payscale1/2.htm.

Auburn Magazine wins national CASE honors for redesign, feature article

The Washington, D.C., based Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, the primary trade association for higher-education advancement professionals in the United States, is honoring Auburn Magazine with two awards during the organization’s 2010 Circle of Excellence awards ceremony in July.

The flagship alumni magazine of the Auburn Alumni Association, Auburn Magazine will receive a gold award in CASE’s Magazine Publishing Improvement category in recognition of its 2009 redesign. The magazine will also receive a silver award in CASE’s “Articles of the Year” category for a Summer 2009 cover story on the locavore movement written by staff writer Suzanne Johnson.

Auburn Magazine mails quarterly to 45,000 dues-paying members of the Auburn Alumni Association. For a free trial issue, go to the website www.aualum.org/magazine/.

BEST enters partnership to provide new wireless technology for fall program

The Boosting Engineering, Science and Technology middle and high school robotics competition, whose headquarters is at Auburn, has partnered with VEX Robotics Inc., the world’s leading platform supplier for educational robotics in K-12 schools and after-school competitions.

BEST will adopt the company’s powerful new wireless VEXnet control system and compatible programming software in its annual, six-week-long fall program. BEST is co-directed by Auburn’s College of Sciences and Mathematics and the Samuel Ginn College of Engineering. The non-profit organization is the largest school-based robotics competition in the country, with more than 850 schools, 12,000 students and 4,000 volunteers participating at 41 licensed competition sites in 15 states.

College of Agriculture now offering distance education graduate degree program

Professionals in the fields of soil, water, agriculture and the environment now have the opportunity to earn advanced degrees from Auburn University online, thanks to a new distance education graduate degree program developed and offered through the Department of Agronomy and Soils in the College of Agriculture.

Through the web-based program, which officially launches fall semester 2010, enrollees can pursue either master of science or master of agriculture degrees. Courses should appeal to professionals in agribusiness, the turfgrass and golf course industries and agricultural, conservation, natural resource and environmental agencies, construction, environmental management and sustainable agriculture as well, said Dennis Shannon of Agronomy and Soils.

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