

OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND SPONSORED PROJECTS



Annual Report



Fiscal Year 2026

MESSAGE FROM THE AVP

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Associate Vice President of Innovation and Research



Fiscal Year 2026 was a remarkable year for research and sponsored programs at the University of West Georgia. As you explore this report, you will find stories that highlight the many ways research, scholarship, and innovation are making a difference for our students, our institution, and the communities we serve. This year brought record levels of external funding, expanded partnerships, and new opportunities to engage students in meaningful experiences that extend learning beyond the classroom. These accomplishments are the result of the dedication and hard work of faculty, staff, students, and community partners who share a commitment to advancing knowledge and creating positive change. Together, their efforts reflect our vision of serving as a catalyst for transformative research and innovation. I invite you to explore the successes highlighted in these pages and celebrate the people and partnerships that continue to expand the University of West Georgia's impact across our region and beyond.



Affordable Learning Grants

Since the inception of the transformation grant program in 2014, the initiative has generated more than \$4.1 million in student savings, benefiting 22,488 students. During the 2026 reporting year, the program saved students \$1,058,491.63 and impacted 3,080 students. To date, 37 grants totaling \$423,624 have been awarded, producing an impressive return of \$9.78 in student savings for every \$1 awarded, demonstrating the program's significant and ongoing impact on affordability and student success.

- **Dr. Yan Yang** – Awarded a transformation grant in the amount of \$15,000 for the creation of Lifespan Human Development course material including annotated guides, culturally responsible case studies, and instructional videos.
- **Claire Ezekiel** – Awarded a continuous improvement grant in the amount of \$4,000 for repurposing French instructional materials to develop a comprehensive ancillary material repository and cultural expansion projects.
- **Dr. Corey Maggiano** – Awarded a continuous improvement grant in the amount of \$4,000 for the creation of Biological and Forensic Anthropology Lab Manuals.
- **Dr. Susie Jonassen** – Awarded a transformation grant in the amount of \$30,000 for the development of Professionalism & Ethics in Nursing, Person-Centered & Compassionate Care in Nursing, Holistic Health & Physical Assessment in Nursing Practice, and Pathophysiology & Pharmacology I instructional materials.
- **Dr. Neema Noori** - Awarded a transformation grant in the amount of \$17,700 for the development of open-access interdisciplinary studies textbooks.
- **Dr. Agnieszka Chwialkowska** - Awarded a transformation grant in the amount of \$4,400 to integrate an artificial intelligence module into select courses and ensure sustainability of the learning materials.
- **Anne Barnhart** - Awarded a research grant in the amount of \$5,000 to study LibraryDens long-term impact and support its broader adoption.

Muscogee Ancestral Lands

As part of the ongoing Muscogee Ancestral Lands research project supported by a UWG seed grant (2025-2026), Dr. Patrick Erben, professor of English at the University of West Georgia, organized a public humanities event supported by a grant from Georgia Humanities. Along with the broader project, the event was designed to deepen public understanding of the region’s Indigenous history and the enduring connection of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation to its ancestral homelands. The event was supported by an interdisciplinary research team that included Dr. Andrew Ivester (Earth and environmental sciences), Dr. Nathan Lawres (anthropology), and Dr. Gary VanValen (history), with support from the UWG School of Humanities, School of Social Sciences, the Dr. James ‘Earl’ Perry College of Mathematics, Computing, and Sciences, and Ingram Library.

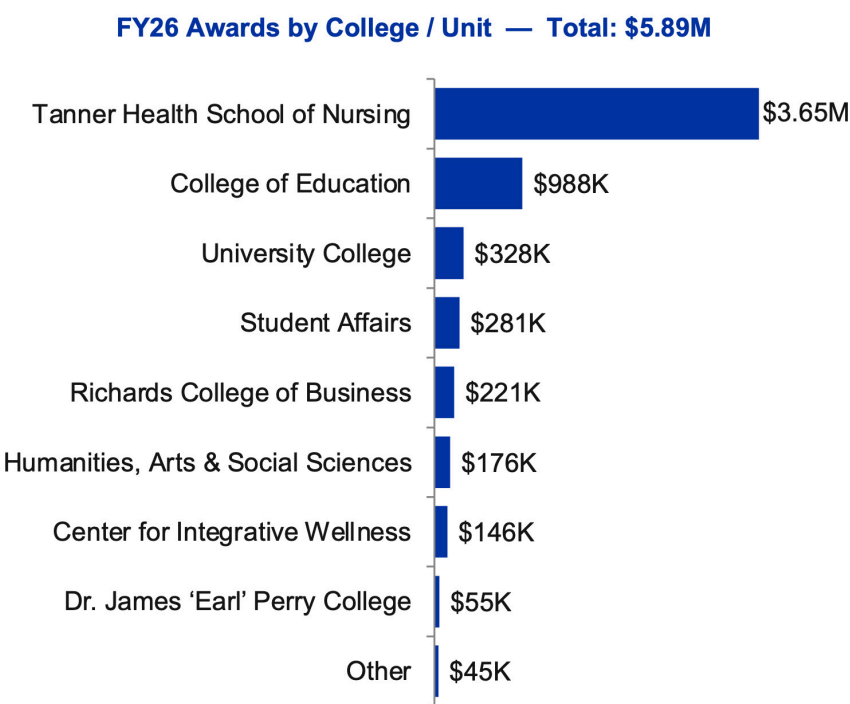
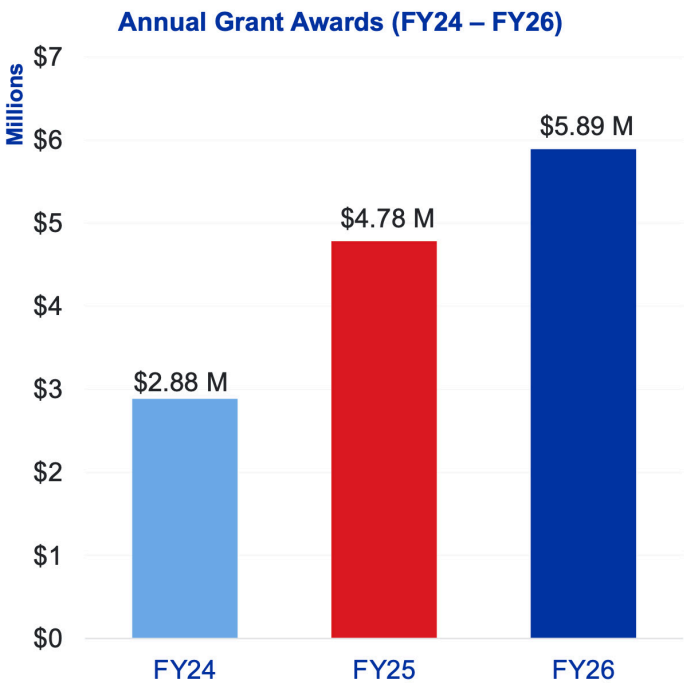


Held in Ingram Library, the public event showcased the initial findings of a collaborative research effort between UWG faculty and representatives of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, including former Principal Chief James Floyd, Carol Floyd, and the nation’s official oral historian, Midge Dellinger. Through presentations, oral histories, maps, documentary screenings, and community discussions, the project centered Indigenous perspectives and highlighted the continued significance of Muscogee history in West Georgia. Special programming also featured a reading by Rosemary McCombs Maxey of the College of the Muscogee Nation from her novel "Papa’s Pills".

The project coincided with the 200th anniversary of the founding of Carroll and Coweta counties, encouraging community reflection on the historical events that led to European American settlement, including the contested 1825 Treaty of Indian Springs and the removal of the Muscogee people from their ancestral lands. By bringing together scholars, tribal leaders, and community members, the initiative fostered meaningful dialogue about the lasting impact of the past on the present.

“We hope it instills a desire to understand difficult elements of the past in a way that opens productive conversations in the present. In addition, we hope it imparts a greater understanding between contemporary residents of West Georgia and the Muscogee (Creek) people, whose connection to their ancestral land can help foster an ethos of care for a place and region undergoing tremendous change,” Erben concluded.

Annual Comparison of Awards





UWG Secures \$3.6M HRSA Grant to Strengthen Nursing Pipeline in Rural West Georgia

The University of West Georgia secured a \$3.6 million grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)—the largest grant in UWG history—to expand nursing education opportunities and strengthen the healthcare workforce across rural West Georgia. The initiative focuses on increasing the number of students earning a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) at UWG and associate degree-prepared nurses at West Georgia Technical College's Murphy Campus, creating a stronger pathway to address Georgia's critical nursing shortage. During the first year, the program enrolled 10 UWG students and five West Georgia Technical College students, bringing together participants from multiple academic disciplines and both the Carrollton and Newnan campuses. Building on this momentum, the program recently selected an additional 10 UWG trainees and three RN-to-BSN students who will begin participating in August.



Led by Dr. Kelly Dyar, associate professor in the Tanner Health School of Nursing and project director, the grant provides scholarships, technology stipends, living expense support, peer mentoring, and academic resources to help students persist and complete their nursing degrees.

"By providing scholarship funding and a stipend to defray expenses, students can focus on learning instead of financial barriers," Dyar said.

The program prioritizes support for students in Carroll and Haralson counties, where economic and educational challenges can limit access to higher education and healthcare careers. The grant also advances workforce diversity by supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds, including men, veterans, and other populations historically underrepresented in nursing. According to Dr. Amy Yarbrough, Tanner Health School of Nursing associate professor and project team lead,

"By providing financial and academic support, students are more likely to complete the program. Research shows there is a specific need to increase the number of nurses with bachelor's degrees."

The initiative builds on UWG's longstanding partnership with West Georgia Technical College and positions both institutions to make a lasting impact on regional healthcare.

As Dr. Jon Preston, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs, noted, "This grant represents a significant investment in both our students and the communities we serve. By expanding access to nursing education and strengthening the pipeline of highly trained professionals, we are fulfilling our mission to prepare graduates who will make an immediate and lasting impact on healthcare across west Georgia."

UWG Secures More Than \$164,000 to Support Student Wellness

The University of West Georgia received \$164,000 in funding from the Georgia Opioid Crisis Abatement Trust (GOCAT) to establish Wolves RISE (Recover, Inspire, Support, Empower), a collegiate recovery program designed to support students impacted by substance use disorders. Led by Karrie Gilroy, health promotions lead in UWG Health Services, the program launched in January 2026 and provides a comprehensive, peer-led support system focused on promoting student wellness, academic success, and long-term recovery.



Wolves RISE established an Addiction Recovery Support Center that serves as a dedicated space for peer meetings, sober social activities, and leadership development opportunities. The program also expanded access to harm-reduction resources, including naloxone training and distribution, while advancing campus-wide prevention and education initiatives aimed at reducing stigma and increasing awareness of substance use recovery.

“This grant allows us to create a safe, stigma-free environment where students in recovery can thrive academically and personally,” said Gilroy, project director. “Wolves RISE is more than a program – it’s a lifeline that empowers students to succeed while building a healthier campus community.”

The program addresses a critical community and student need, as substance use continues to impact college-aged populations both locally and nationally. Through evidence-based recovery support services and prevention efforts, Wolves RISE is helping create a supportive, stigma-free environment where students can thrive academically and personally while contributing to a healthier campus community.



Mars Expo Project

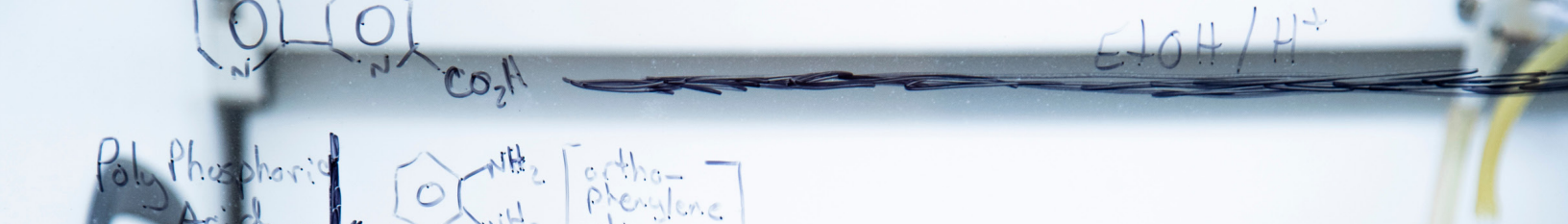
The Mars Expo Project, supported by \$15,000 in grant funding from Yamaha and NASA's Georgia Space Grant Consortium, engaged more than 120 first-year University of West Georgia students in an innovative, interdisciplinary learning experience that culminated in the university's first-ever Mars Expo. Held at UWG's Newnan campus, the event featured 20 student teams presenting original Mars colony concepts to community leaders, educators, and the public while competing for more than \$2,500 in prizes.

The grant-funded initiative brought together students from multiple academic disciplines and from both the Carrollton and Newnan campuses. What began as individual classroom assignments evolved into a large-scale collaborative project requiring students to address complex challenges related to governance, economics, sustainability, health, and technology in a fictional Martian society. Through research, problem-solving, teamwork, and public presentations, students connected classroom learning with real-world applications and career readiness.

Developed by Melissa Jackson, assistant professor of First-Year Writing, along with Brian Brodsky and Dr. Andy Walter, associate dean of University College and professor of geography, the project exemplified the transformative impact of experiential learning.

“We wanted to create an experience where students could see how the skills they’re developing in their freshman classes translate directly to career readiness,” said Jackson. “Whether they’re writing persuasive arguments, analyzing data, or solving complex problems, students are discovering that these aren’t just academic exercises; they’re preparing for professional life.”

As Kristen Webb, manager of communications and corporate social responsibility for Yamaha, noted, “We’re excited to support an initiative that helps first-year students build the leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills that create real pathways to career readiness and workplace success.”



FACULTY SEED GRANT AWARDEES

The following faculty members were awarded internal funds through the competitive seed grant process for their innovative research projects in the upcoming academic year. The competitive nature of the submissions underscores the exceptional quality and creativity of these projects, highlighting their potential to secure external funding.

Dr. Tsu-Lin Yeh and Dr. E. Su Jara-Pazmino, “Career Competencies for the Future Sport Management Workforce: Perspectives from Collegiate Athletics, Alumni, and Mega Events”

This faculty seed grant will support the development of a long-term research agenda focused on workforce development in the sport industry. The project will generate insights that strengthen career readiness among UWG sport management students while contributing to research on sport careers, organizational behavior, and human resource practices. It will also place additional emphasis on career opportunities connected to megaevents such as the FIFA World Cup, Talladega Superspeedway, and similar events. By examining the evolving and increasingly diverse sport workforce, the initiative will produce pilot data and scholarly outputs that guide future research and support the next generation of sport industry professionals.

Dr. Martin McPhail and Dr. Md. Shirajum Munir, “Development of Software-Assisted, Benchtop Method for Tracking Chemical Functionalization of Nanoparticle Thin Films”

Through a new collaboration between chemistry and computer science faculty, this project is developing innovative software that automates the analysis of nanoparticle thin films from video recordings. Faculty from both programs will leverage their relevant expertise in nanoparticle chemistry and image analysis software. Successful development of this software package will enable the rapid analysis of ligand exchange reactions in nanoparticle thin films.

Dr. Kyunghye Moon, “Refining a Precalculus Unit on Rate and Strengthening Assessment Validity Evidence: Preparatory Work for an NSF IUOE Proposal”

This project will develop and refine instructional materials and an assessment system that help students build a deeper understanding of rate of change, a critical concept for success in calculus and STEM fields. By addressing common learning challenges and creating tools to measure student progress, the project aims to improve calculus readiness and support long-term success in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Dr. Kyndel Tarziers and Dr. Carey Crawford, “A Needs Assessment to Identify Mental Health Service Gaps for Children and Adolescents in Rural West Georgia”

This project will conduct a needs assessment of child and adolescent mental health services in rural West Georgia by gathering feedback from healthcare providers and personnel to identify gaps in care. Findings will guide efforts to expand counseling access, strengthen training for student clinicians serving rural communities, and support UWG’s mission to improve community health and well-being.

Bru: Enhancing Campus Safety and Community Connection

Through funding secured by UWG Police Chief Dr. Ned Watson through the 2023 State Homeland Security Program, the University of West Georgia Police Department (UPD) acquired Bru, a black Labrador retriever trained as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) detection dog. Bru is certified through the Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency (GEMA) and is trained to detect explosives, firearms, and ammunition.



Partnered with Investigator Dylan Detman, Bru supports campus safety by screening large-scale events, including commencement ceremonies, athletic events, and Homecoming activities. The addition of an in-house detection team has expanded UPD's capabilities, allowing the department to support external partners through activities such as high school graduation sweeps, joint operations with Capitol State Police EOD teams, and assistance to the Carroll County Sheriff's Office SWAT team.

Beyond her security role, Bru serves as a valuable community engagement resource, helping foster positive interactions between UPD and students, faculty, staff, and community members. Her presence at campus events has strengthened relationships and increased opportunities for meaningful engagement, supporting UPD's commitment to both safety and community trust.

National Conference on Undergraduate Research

One of the highlights of the year is the opportunity for University of West Georgia students to present at the most prestigious undergraduate research conference in the country: the National Conference on Undergraduate Research. This year, UWG had 22 students accepted to present at NCUR in Richmond, Virginia.



Students and Faculty Mentors:

- Lainey Barden mentored by Dr. Elaine MacKinnon
- Autumn Brown, Kaitlyn Sullivan mentored by Dr. Patrick Erben
- Madison Brooks mentored by Dr. Aleah Brock
- Jahyrah Davis, Trystyn Hovey mentored by Dr. Fengrong Wei
- Ava Fasone mentored by Dr. Marjorie Snipes
- Gabriella Goff mentored by Dr. Beheruz Sethna
- Ethan Gray, Felix Mensah, Jake Miranda, Matthew Shirley, Abigail Sneve, Ryan Stubbs mentored by Dr. Md Shirajum Munir
- Braelynn Mooney mentored by Dr. Claire Joa
- Aique Mvondo, Brailey Sharpe mentored by Dr. Ana Stanescu
- Brock Robertson mentored by Dr. Nathan Lawres
- Ulises de la Sierra, Matthew Stitz mentored by Dr. Ganesh Pokharel
- Rylea Swafford mentored by Dr. David Newton
- Kamryn Williams mentored by Dr. Walter Riker



UNIVERSITY OF WEST GEORGIA