



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

# IMPACT REPORT

IMPACT IN ACTION:

# 2024

**1,100  
STUDENTS IN  
UWG SPECIAL  
EDUCATION  
PROGRAMS**



OUR IMPACT ON DISPLAY

DONATE

PAGE 3  
STUDENT STORY

PAGE 9  
LEADING THE PACK

# LETTER FROM OUR CHAIR

Dear Colleagues, Students, and Supporters,  
Reflecting on our Department of Special Education's progress this past year fills me with pride and gratitude. Your dedication has been truly inspiring. The 2024 Impact Report showcases our achievements and the profound difference we make in our students' lives and the community.

This year, we've celebrated milestones that highlight our mission:

- Launched the Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) concentration, welcoming 28 students into this innovative program.
- Expanded our Ed.S. program, offering more opportunities for Tier 1 Leadership Certification and personalized electives.
- Continued partnerships like GaBEST and the Paraprofessional to Teacher Pathway, addressing critical shortages in special education across Georgia.
- Redesigned the MAT program for efficiency and to include the science of reading as every student's area of concentration.

Our commitment to excellence is evident in the numbers:

- Over 1,100 students enrolled in the Department of Special Education alone.
- \$2 million in grants submitted and \$33,000 secured.
- 13 mini-grants awarded, totaling \$6,500, to equip new teachers with assistive technology and classroom resources.

The stories in this report remind us why we do this work. Graduates like Linh Wight, who journeyed from Vietnam to earn her B.S.Ed. in Special Education, inspire us to continue breaking barriers and creating inclusive opportunities.

Looking ahead, I am excited about the future. With new programs, faculty innovations, and growing partnerships, we are poised to make an even greater impact. Let's continue working together to ensure our programs reflect the best practices and values that define our department.

Thank you for your unwavering support and dedication. Together, we are transforming lives and shaping the future of special education.

With gratitude and best wishes,  
Dr. Katy Green

Interim Chair, Department of Special Education  
University of West Georgia



## FACULTY

**DR. MORRIS COUNCIL**  
**DR. TONI FRANKLIN**  
**DR. TRINA WOOD**

**DR. JAMES SCHWAB**  
**DR. TALIA CAMPESE**  
**MS. ASHLEY SUTTON**

**DR. BRANDY LOCCHETTA**  
**DR. SAM MRSTIK**  
**DR. MARY SAWYER**  
**DR. JENNIFER CAMPBELL**



# FIND OUT HOW WE'RE TRANSFORMING SPECIAL EDUCATION

STUDENT STORY: LINH WIGHT	3
UNVEILING NEW PROGRAMS	5
GEORGIA'S BEST	7
BY THE NUMBERS	8
LEADING THE PACK	9
FALL CELEBRATION	10
AWARDS, AWARDS, AWARDS	12
FUTURE FOCUSED	13
FACULTY SPOTLIGHTS	14
FACULTY RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS	16

# Student Story

## Linh Wight

### B.S.Ed Graduate 2024

I grew up outside Saigon city, in a small town in Vietnam. The village I lived in was very old and poor. My neighborhood was just outside of Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City. My father is a retired Army soldier from the U.S. government. He was sent to jail for 15 years after the North Vietnamese took over South Vietnam in 1975. My mother left me when I was four months old. A loving grandmother raised me. I came to the United States in 1992 when I was 19 years old. After living in Virginia for fifteen years, I moved down to Georgia in 2005 with my husband and two daughters.

My first job was when I was eight years old. I would get up at 5 a.m. every day to sell a local newspaper. I earned 25 cents per day. Usually I went to work without any breakfast. For me, going to school and learning how to read and write seemed an impossible goal. As a girl, I struggled to survive in South Vietnam during and after the Vietnam War, and the Asian culture was not kind to women. I never dreamed that I would one day live the American dream. However, through faith, determination, and hard work I was offered the incredible opportunity to live the American dream through my aunt, Thuy Hugo.

I came to America just like many other refugees in 1992 with no job, no money, and I could barely speak English. I only spoke Vietnamese and had no idea what the future held for me. In Vietnam, then, the only thing I knew was to work hard and earn money to live.



At that time, I thought education was impossible for someone like me. I was female, and only the firstborn sons in the family could attend school. There was no freedom and no opportunities for education for girls and women.

I was able to immigrate to America under my aunt Thuy Hugo's sponsorship, and after fifteen years of waiting and going through every possible obstacle, I became a U. S. citizen. During that time, I married my husband and had two daughters. As a result of my background, I cherished the opportunity offered to me to achieve my dream of being an educator, but first, I made sure my daughters were attending universities to complete the education I was not allowed to achieve.





In December 2008, I enrolled in the West Georgia Technical College GED program. I wanted to achieve the most important goal in my life, and that was to obtain the basics of education: reading and writing. When I entered the GED program, I tested at the 2nd grade level of academic knowledge in my middle 30's. I was told I would probably not be able to learn enough to earn the GED.

With determination and hard work, and after many early hours and late nights searching for definitions from English to Vietnamese, I was able to read and write English. This hard work paid off, and I completed my GED within 19 months. In February 2007, I received my GED diploma. I was honored at this graduation as the Eagle delegate from Coweta County.

My continuing education ambitions were again realized when I earned my basic technical college diploma from West Georgia Technical College in 2010. Then, I had the opportunity to attend Troy University in Troy, Alabama, where I earned an Associate's degree. In 2012, I was accepted into the Special Education undergraduate program at the College of Education at the University of West Georgia where I obtained my B.S. Ed. in Special Education Adapted Curriculum.

I chose to become a Special Education teacher because I have felt a lot of negative cultural bias because I am an Asian female and different. The students I choose to teach are also different and experience negative bias. They, like me, deserve to be treated as a person and not as what they are seen as. I want people to see them for their 'ability', not their 'disability'. I want to help make that difference in their lives.

I advise others who are working towards their GEDs, high school diplomas, or undergraduate degrees to work hard, believe in yourself, and NEVER, NEVER give up hope.

-Linh Wigh

# UNVEILING NEW PROGRAMS

## APPLIED BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS

The ABA area of concentration launched in Fall 2024 with an inaugural cohort of 28 students across the M.Ed., Ed.S., and Ed.D. programs.

### ABA THE WEST GEORGIA WAY!

- School-focused
- Trauma-informed
- Neurodiversity affirming
- Equity driven



Admitting new students in Fall and Summer!

**SCAN TO APPLY!**



Brandy M. Locchetta, PhD, BCBA-D  
ABA Program Coordinator

## TIER 1 LEADERSHIP

Beginning Fall 2024, newly admitted students in our Ed.S. program could elect to complete Tier 1 Leadership Certification as a part of their advanced degree.

### ED.S. CONTINUES TO DIVERSIFY OFFERINGS

In response to student and community requests, we expanded our Ed.S. program, allowing students to customize electives or add an ABA concentration.



Admitting new students in Fall, Spring, and Summer!

**SCAN TO APPLY!**



Morris R. Council, III, PhD  
Assistant Chair



# UNVEILING NEW PROGRAMS

## B.S.E.D.

The Dual Concentration track was added to allow students to become certified in Elementary Education and Special Education. Students across all tracks will now complete RBT coursework as part of our revised behavior courses.

### Bachelors of Science in Special Education tracks offered:

- General Curriculum- PreK-12
- Adapted Curriculum- PreK-12
- Dual Concentration- Elementary Education and Special Education- PreK-5



Admitting new students every Fall!

**SCAN TO APPLY!**



Ashley Sutton  
Undergraduate Program Coordinator

## M.ED. PROGRAM

The revised M.Ed. program equips all students, regardless of the area of concentration, to provide inclusive behavior support in Georgia public schools. The program also supports current classroom teachers by offering 8-week courses, allowing students to focus on only one course at a time and complete the program in 5 semesters.

### Three areas of Concentration

- Autism Endorsement
- Dyslexia Endorsement
- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)



Admitting new students every semester!

**SCAN TO APPLY!**



Toni Franklin, PhD  
Assistant Chair



## #1 Choice by Georgia Educators for Special Education

### **GROWING GEORGIA'S BEST SUPPORTING SUCCESS**

The Department of Special Education prioritizes partnerships with school districts to create sustainable pathways for teacher preparation and provide high-quality instructional support.

Through initiatives like the GaBEST program, faculty serve as Instructional Support Mentors, engaging in team teaching and guiding new district leaders as they transition into their supplementary roles as university instructors. This innovative partnership with the Cobb, Coweta, and Gwinnett County School Districts offers district employees tuition-free opportunities to pursue advanced degrees and provides qualified district employees opportunities to teach college-level courses.

These partnerships also allow our faculty opportunities to share expertise through mentorship and expand UWG's role in the educational landscape.

Similarly, the department has partnered with Paulding, Carroll, and Harralson County School Districts to establish Paraprofessional to Teacher Pathway cohorts. These initiatives provide paraprofessionals with tuition support, individualized program plans, and comprehensive faculty guidance, ensuring successful transitions to licensure. Graduates of these programs not only fill critical teaching shortages but also contribute to their districts as highly qualified special educators.





# DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION BY THE NUMBERS

Academic excellence is at the core of everything we do, driving our mission to create a meaningful impact on both our community and students. Our faculty leverage their expertise to address educational and societal challenges, resulting in programs that lead the state in both enrollment and quality. With this unwavering commitment to generating and sharing knowledge, we are unstoppable.

**13**  
mini grants awarded to  
West Georgia  
Special Educators!

**1,100**  
students enrolled

**\$2M**  
in grants submitted!

**\$33,000**  
in grant funding secured!





# WE ARE LEADING THE PACK.



2024 College of Education Excellence in Online Teaching Award  
*Dr. Trina Wood - Assistant Chair*

## M.A.T. in Special Education

2024 College of Education  
Program of the Year



Admitting new students in Fall,  
Spring, and Summer!  
**Scan to Apply!**





# 2024 Fall Celebration Event



October 5, 2024  
UWG vs Austin Peay  
Hall of Fame Game



## SO MUCH TO CELEBRATE

We hosted our first Fall Celebration Event aimed at celebrating our grant recipients and providing a space for collaboration with local stakeholders. We awarded 13 grants this Fall totaling \$6,500. These grants were provided to educators seeking funding for Assistive Technology and novice special educators to buy classroom and instructional supplies.



13 MINI GRANTS  
AWARDED TALLING  
**\$6,500**

### NEW TEACHER MINI-GRANTS

This grant aimed to assist novice special education teachers by providing funding to purchase classroom supplies or instructional materials, helping to alleviate their out-of-pocket expenses.

### ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY MINI-GRANTS

This grant was designed to provide funding for special education teachers and service providers to purchase Assistive Technology (AT) materials with the goal of reducing barriers and improving access to instruction for students with disabilities.

# BY THE NUMBERS



23K

IN GRANT  
FUNDING  
AWARDED



25%

INCREASE IN  
ENROLLMENT  
FROM  
F23 TO F24



1

ENDOWED ABA  
SCHOLARSHIP



# Faculty Awards

## The Best Teach West



The University of West Georgia's Department of Special Education stands at the forefront of academic excellence and innovation in the field. Known for its unparalleled dedication to fostering the next generation of educators, the faculty within this department not only lead the pack but also consistently set records in both teaching and research.



### 2024 Mid-Year Recognitions:

- Emerald Award: BSEd in Special Education
- Program Recognition: MEd in Special Education
- Gold Award: MAT in Special Education
- Gold Award: EdS in Special Education
- UWG Nominee for the 2025 Regents' Teaching Excellence Award for Department or Program: MAT in Special Education
- UWG Nominee for the 2025 Regents' Teaching Excellence Award for Online Teaching: Dr. Trina Wood
- Focus on the Future Award: Dr. Talia Campese
- We are West Award: Ms. Ashley Sutton

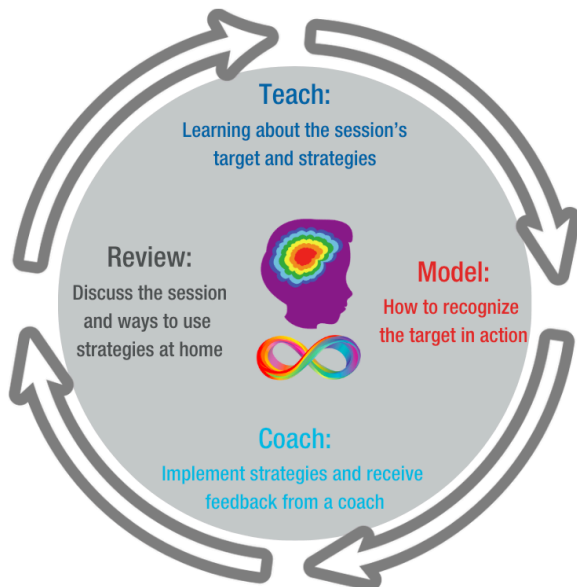


# Future Focused

## SPED Department Brings ABA Services to the West Georgia Community

### IGNITE

Through a seed grant from the West Georgia Community Foundation, the Department has been able to bring much needed ABA services to the West Georgia region. These FREE therapeutic intervention sessions are designed for children with Autism (or developmental delay) between the ages of 2 and 5 years and their caregivers. Through IGNITE, caregivers will complete an 8-week intervention program where they will learn about targeted social communication and play targets, how to recognize the behaviors associated with those targets, and strategies they can use to support their child's progress toward those targets, all in the context of PLAY. Sessions will be facilitated by graduate students with mentorship from certified faculty members through collaboration between the ABA and SLP programs. Each intervention session will last 1 hour, during which caregivers and their children will complete the following cycle:



Interested in supporting

**IGNITE?**

Donate here



The goal of IGNITE is to increase caregivers' confidence to recognize and facilitate their child's social communication and play skills in ways that affirm their child's preferences and validate their needs for engagement. For more information on IGNITE, please contact Dr. Brandy Locchetta (blocchetta@westga.edu).

## NEW FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

# DR. SAMANTHA MRSTIK



Dr. Samantha Mrstik is an assistant professor in the Special Education Department at UWG. She taught students with disabilities at the secondary level for fifteen years in Orlando, Florida prior to earning her Ph.D. Dr. Mrstik has taught students with disabilities in South Africa and English Language Learners in Chile, Argentina, and Peru. Prior to her work at UWG, she worked preparing preservice special educators for seven years at Georgia Gwinnett College. Her areas of interest are technology in the classroom and international special education.

## NEW FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

# DR. JENNIFER CAMPBELL



Dr. Jennifer Campbell is the Co-Director in the Office of Field Experiences for Special Education, Speech/Language, and Counseling and an assistant professor in the Special Education Department at UWG. She taught students with disabilities at the elementary level and was a building and district-level administrator for over 15 years in the upstate of South Carolina. Additionally, Dr. Campbell spent 10 years in higher education, working with aspiring special education teachers at universities in South Carolina, Colorado, and Arizona. Her areas of interest include high-incidence disabilities, teacher retention, and due process.

## FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

# DR. TALIA CAMPESE



Dr. Talia is a clinical assistant professor in the Special Education Department at UWG. She works closely with the special education department and reading department to ensure all initial certification students in the College of Education at UWG have a strong foundation in teaching reading to a diverse set of learners across all grade levels. She was recently awarded the “Leading the Pack: Focus on the Future” award by the College of Education for pushing the department forward through updating courses to align with updated High Leverage Practices from the CEC and reading objectives from the State of Georgia.

## FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

# DR. TRINA WOOD



Dr. Trina Wood, recipient of the 2024 College of Education Excellence for Online Teaching Award and the 2025 UWG nominee for the Regents’ Teaching Excellence Award for Online Teaching, is recognized for her innovative use of Virtual Teaming (VT) in online courses. As Provost Preston noted in his nomination letter, Dr. Wood “has leaned into the most innovative practices in teaching online graduate and undergraduate courses, creating collaborative, scenario-based learning experiences that empower students to apply their knowledge to real-world contexts.” This recognition reflects the department’s dedication to advancing teaching and learning through innovation. Dr. Wood also proudly served as the UWG Mace Bearer at the Fall Graduate Commencement!



# 2024 FACULTY RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS!

DIVE INTO THE INCREDIBLE WORK OUR FACULTY ARE LEADING IN THE DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION! FROM LITERACY AND MATH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION AND DISABILITY STUDIES, **WE'RE SHAPING THE FUTURE OF SPECIAL EDUCATOR PREPARATION.** DISCOVER HOW OUR EXPERTISE IS MAKING AN IMPACT!

**Preparing exceptional special educators is**

**not just what we do—**

**it's our *passion* and**

**the  of our research!**

# 2024 FACULTY RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS!

## TOPIC: IN-SERVICE AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHER PREPARATION

Baylen, D. M., Ponder, T. & Wood, T. (2024, April). Developing professional knowledge and skills Using online scenario-based simulations. TCC Worldwide Online Conference.

Blalock, G. & Franklin, T. (2024, November) Forge Ahead! Teacher Induction for our Alternative Pathway Special Educators. Presented at the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the Council for Exceptional Children, Pittsburg, PA.

Cauthen, J., Mrstik, S., & Cooper, R. (2024, September). Becoming the Technology Leaders of Tomorrow with Teacher Candidate Training [Conference presentation] Kennesaw State University: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Summit, Kennesaw, GA., United States.

Council III, M. (2024, May). Building a sense of community in online courses. Presentation at the Innovations in Pedagogy Conference, Carrollton, GA.

Cooper, R., Mrstik, S., Cauthen, J., & Schreffler, J., (2024). Preservice teachers learning to teach online: Developing teacher leaders. *International Journal for Leadership in Learning*, 24(1), 36–58.

Fisher, K. M., Teasdel, A., Green, K. B., & Driver, M. (2024, March). Mastering Mentorship and Supervision: Skills Needed to Guide New Teachers [Conference session]. Council for Exceptional Children International Convention, San Antonio, TX, United States.

Franklin, T., & Campese, T., (2024, November) Forging Innovative Partnerships to Tackle the Special Education Teacher Shortage. Presented at the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), Pittsburg, PA.

Laser, A., Acar, S., Brown, K. H., Green, K. B., Chapman, L. A., Morris, C. T., ... Macy, M. (2024). Meaningful and Engaging Learning Experiences in Early Childhood Special Education Preparation Programs. *Journal of Special Education Preparation*, 4(1), 68–84. <https://doi.org/10.33043/7959d86z>

Locchetta, B.M., Campese, T., Sutton, A., & Bowman, R. (2024, May). Grading for equity: Lessons learned from a faculty book study. University of West Georgia Innovations in Pedagogy Conference. Carrollton, GA.

Mrstik, S. (2024, May 13-14). Universal design for learning. [Invited Speaker]. Georgia Gwinnett College, Center for Teaching and Learning, Summer Institute. Lawrenceville, GA., United States.

Mrstik, S., & Cooper, R. (2024, June). An evolution of preparing preservice teachers to teach students with disabilities online. [Conference Presentation]. International Association of Special Education. Prague, Czech Republic.

Mrstik, S. & Cooper, R. (2024, January). Teaching in a simulated classroom. [Conference Presentation]. Georgia Gwinnett College Teaching, Learning, and Research Symposium. Lawrenceville, GA., United States.

Mrstik, S., & Cooper, R. (2024, April 12) Teaching online in higher education: Accreditation, laws, and best practices [Poster presentation]. Georgia Gwinnett College 2024 Teaching and Learning Day, Lawrenceville, Georgia. USA.

Mrstik, S. & Peterson-Ahmad, M. (In press) A Systematic Literature Review of Mixed-Reality Use in Special Education Preparation Programs. GATEways.

Mrstik, S., & Cooper, R. (2024). An evolution of preparing preservice teacher to teach students with disabilities online In Ferguson, B. T. & Napier, A. F. (Eds.), *Proceedings International Association of Special Education* (pp. 13-18). Pilsen, Czech Republic: International Association of Special Education (IASE).

Peterson-Ahmad, M.B., Franklin, T., Addo, A. (March, 2024). Elevating high impact teaching through continuous program improvement. *Faculty Focus*.

Sawyer, M. R. (invited paper, under review). Assisting preservice teachers in identifying and implementing evidence-based practices to address their students' needs. *Education Sciences*.

Wood, T. (2024, November 8). Virtual Teaming: Leveraging the High Impact Practice of Collaborative Learning. COE New Faculty Program - Innovative Tools. Carrollton, GA.

# 2024 FACULTY RESEARCH & PROFESSIONAL GROWTH HIGHLIGHTS!

## TOPIC: LITERACY & MATH

Schwab, J. R., & Houchins, D. E. (Accepted 2024). The effects of schema-based instruction for students with EBD in an alternative school. *The High School Journal*.

Smith, C. (chair), Starlin, C. M. (discussant), Sawyer, M. R., (CE instructor), Newsome, K. B., & Newsome, D. (2024, May). Charting the course for racial equity and community and support: Equitable literacy instruction for underserved communities. Presented at the 50th Association for Behavior Analysis International Annual Convention. Philadelphia, PA.

Yurick, A., Council III, M., Telesman, A., Musti-Rao, S., Gardner III, R., G., & Cartledge. (2024). On the science of reading: How social justice, behavior analysis, and literacy instruction converge. *Behavior and Social Issues*, DOI: 10.1007/s42822-023-00154-1/



## TOPIC: DISABILITIES, EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION

Bailey, D., Sawyer, M. R., Newsome, K. B. (2025, March). Invited Symposia: Precision Teaching Increases Outcomes for Vulnerable Learners. To be presented at APBA Shine, the 15th Annual Convention of the Association for Professional Behavior Analysts, Dallas, TX.

Barton, E. E., Winchester, C., Velez, M., Todt, M., Locchetta, B. M., & Skiba, E. (2024) Field testing the Family Behavior Support Mobile Application (FBSApp) during a global pandemic. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 10803024063738.

Joseph-Busek, J. & Locchetta, B. M. (2024, October). Rightful Presence, Realized Potential: Equitable Inclusion and IEP Teams. Presentation at South Carolina Early Childhood Inclusion Conference. Columbia, SC.

Locchetta, B.M., & Green, K. (2024, April). Creating a positive classroom climate for all children. National Training Institute (NTI). Tampa, FL.

Locchetta, B. M. & Taylor, A. L. (2024, October). Cultivating True Belonging and Friendship in Early Childhood – Why Peer Mediated Intervention Isn't the Answer. Presentation at South Carolina Early Childhood Inclusion Conference. Columbia, SC.

Mrstik, S. (2024, February). Hidden disabilities: What is neurodiversity? [Invited Speaker]. Georgia Gwinnett College Center for Teaching Excellence. Lawrenceville, GA., United States.

Taylor, A. L., Granger, K. L., Hemmeter, M. L., & Locchetta, B. M. (2024, June). Exploring playmate preferences in preschool classrooms implementing Stay-Play-Talk. Poster Presentation. National Research Conference in Early Childhood Education (NRCEC), Arlington, VA.

Taylor, A. L. & Locchetta, B. M. (2024, September). An Antibias Approach to Peer Mediated Interventions. Presentation at Division for Early Childhood Conference. New Orleans, LA.





Council for  
Exceptional  
Children

**GEORGIA**

# ANNUAL CONFERENCE

\*formerly IDEAS

# Plug In &

# POWER ON

## JUNE 6-7, 2025

Hosted by the University of West Georgia



UNIVERSITY OF  
WEST GEORGIA

[WWW.WESTGA.EDU](http://WWW.WESTGA.EDU)

 UWG SPECIAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT