

Life Scholars

Background & Overview

As a land grant university, MSU is committed to widening access to higher education and ensuring equality of opportunity for all; committed to inclusion, social justice, equity, and diversity by creating and sustaining an environment that welcomes, respects and nurtures all students, staff, faculty and community; and believes that a more diverse and inclusive institution will contribute to the highest level of excellence that ultimately benefits all members of the university community in becoming outstanding citizens and leaders in local and global communities. As part of that commitment, the university launched the LIFE (Learning Is For Everyone) Scholars program in the fall of 2018.

Nationally, there is a growing interest in postsecondary education as a way to improve employment and other key life areas for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In Montana, many barriers keep individuals with disabilities from pursuing their employment and independent living goals, such as the lack of IDEA funding beyond age 18, long waiting lists for adult services, low expectations, and a lack of postsecondary options in which students can learn and gain skills. Positive student outcomes have been reported from over 268 inclusive higher education programs at universities and colleges across the US. Best practices have been developed and standards and quality benchmarks have been identified. The MSU LIFE Scholars program offers an inclusive college experience to eligible students in a geographic region with few opportunities.

Campus Engagement

LIFE Scholars are encouraged to get involved in all aspects of the campus community. Students can choose to attend sporting events, join clubs, participate in service outings, eat in the dining halls, hang out in the SUB with their peers and more! Campus Engagement is required for earning a LIFE Scholars Certificate of Completion. *Requirement 60 hours.*

Peer Partners for Social Support

Peer Partners, traditional MSU students, support LIFE Scholars with academics and/or campus engagement to help them succeed in their classes, get involved in the campus community and have a successful college experience. All Peer Partners are required to complete an online application, participate in an interview with the program director and complete online training modules. Resources and ongoing support will be provided to ensure a successful and mutually beneficial partnership.

Career Development

LIFE Scholars participate in campus internships to prepare them for competitive employment upon graduation. The majority of students engage in meaningful work experiences through the nationally recognized Project SEARCH (<https://www.projectsearch.us/>) internship model.

Project SEARCH is a unique, ten-month, internship program for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Interns are immersed in a workplace on campus or in the community to explore careers through hands-on learning. They participate in daily classroom instruction and rotate through three, 10-week internships to learn relevant, marketable skills. Interns complete complex and systematic tasks, gain confidence and independence and develop professional relationships. Student interns work in MSU offices, labs, auxiliary and facility services with on-site support from a college or business mentor and a LIFE Scholars job coach.

Interns graduate with a career portfolio, which contains a resume, letters of recommendation and a competency profile. The goal of the Project SEARCH model is for graduates to obtain meaningful, competitive employment for a minimum of 16 hrs./week for minimum wage or more.

LIFE Scholars are required to complete a capstone project presentation during their final semester detailing their experience as a LIFE Scholar. The presentation must include specific skills gained in the areas of academics, campus engagement and career exploration.

Completion of 2 internship rotations and the capstone project presentation is the Career Development requirement for earning a LIFE Scholars Certificate of Completion. Alternative internship experiences will be provided to accommodate students who are already employed in the community or who have participated in Project SEARCH prior to their acceptance into MSU as a LIFE Scholar.

The LIFE Scholars program offers a path for students to earn a non-degree LIFE Scholars Certificate with a focus on academics, to gain knowledge in their chosen career path; campus engagement, to develop social networks; and career development to gain marketable work experience to obtain meaningful, competitive employment upon graduation. LIFE Scholars participate in the college experience by taking classes and engaging in campus activities, just like traditional MSU students. To be eligible for the program, students must be 18 years of age, have completed all of their high school requirements, be identified as an individual with an intellectual/developmental disability and have a strong desire to attend college. Students must complete an application packet which includes education and work history, student and guardian inventories, documentation of disability and two letters of recommendation. A selection committee reviews the application packet and interviews each student and their guardians prior to acceptance into the program. Once accepted, students are then registered as MSU students.

All LIFE Scholars participate in a person-centered planning process to identify their strengths, interests, and goals. This information is used to develop an action plan with specific goals and objectives in the five key areas of academics, campus engagement, career development, independence, and self-determination. Scholars also use the planning information to identify a career pathway (the equivalent to choosing a major), such as education, agriculture, hospitality, etc. Scholars audit 1-4 classes each semester, which allows them to engage with course content in a way that is meaningful and appropriate to their skill level. As an auditing student, they are expected to complete course assignments and demonstrate their learning, but may do so with modifications provided through the LIFE Scholars program. For example, a scholar may be matched with a Peer Partner to provide in-class support, or a lengthy writing assignment may be shortened to enable a scholar to successfully participate in the assignment. The academic rigor of a course is never compromised and professors are never asked to adjust their instruction to include a LIFE Scholar in their class. Instead, the LIFE Scholars staff identifies and puts into place the support that is needed for each scholar to have a successful experience.

Peer Partners are traditional MSU students who volunteer to "partner" with LIFE Scholars to support them with their academic goals and to facilitate social engagement on campus. Academic Peer Partners may attend class with scholars to support them in accessing the course content or may meet with them outside of class time to assist with homework and test preparation. Social Peer Partners meet with scholars once a week to engage in campus activities together (e.g., work out in the fitness center, attend a sporting event, watch a movie, meet for lunch).

Scholars complete 2 semesters of internships in campus or community businesses during their final year of the program. The nationally recognized Project SEARCH internship model that prepares young adults with significant disabilities for success in integrated, competitive employment is used to provide work experience in their chosen career paths. For example, a student with an early childhood education career pathway would participate in internships in the Child Development Center and the ASMSU Day Care Center.

Example of an Academic Plan for a Career Pathway in Early Childhood Education

Freshman Year	Credits	
	Fall	Spring
EDEC 160 - Early Childhood Development	3	
COLS 103 - College Learning Strategies	1	
ACT 150 - Beginning Yoga	1	
ACT 104 - Beginning Bowling		1
HDFS 101IS - Indiv and Fam Dev: Lifespan		3
EDEC 288 - Signing for Early Childhood Educators		3
Year Total:	5	7
Sophomore Year	Credits	
	Fall	Spring
COMX 111US - Introduction to Public Speaking	3	
EDEC 253 - Nutrition & Physical Activity in Early Childhood	3	
ACT 165 - Power Cycling: Indoors	1	
EDEC 350 - Play and Learning in Early Childhood		3
EDU 222IS - Educ Psych & Child Development		3
ACT 156 - Beginning Aikido		1
Year Total:	7	7
Total Program Credits:	26	

LIFE Scholars Certificate Requirements

The MSU LIFE Scholars Certificate is awarded to students upon successful completion of the requirements in academics, campus engagement, and career development, as well as individualized goals in self-determination and independent living. Students are expected to demonstrate satisfactory progress in each of the five categories of their individual plans. Satisfactory progress is assessed using a proficiency scoring scale.

Length of program: 3 years

Students may complete the program in as few as 2 years and a maximum of 4 years.

Minimum Academic Credit Requirements: 20 (14 academic credits, 6 internship credits)

Minimum Campus Engagement Credit Hours: 60

Academic Career Pathway Courses

Students identify a career pathway through the STAR Person-Centered Planning process.

Students select four or more courses identified in their program of study. One foundation course is recommended.

Minimum required credits: 12

Electives

Students select a minimum of two 1-credit activity classes or other classes of interest.

Minimum required credits: 2

Career Development

Students participate in three, 10-week internship rotations.

Students attend the daily Project SEARCH Employability Skills class.

Students complete a final capstone project.

Minimum required credits: 6

Campus Engagement

Students engage in a minimum of 10 activities each semester (e.g., Peer Partner meetings, sporting events, clubs, speakers, music).

Students document engagement on the program blog 10 times per semester.

Minimum required credit hours: 60

Self-determination and Independent Living

Students identify individual goals through the STAR Person-Centered Planning process.

Co-curricular Learning

Students may participate in supplemental learning opportunities (e.g., volunteer work, part-time work on campus, supplemental non-credit classes or workshops).

Minimum required credit hours: N/A

Student Learning Outcomes

Students will:

Identify a career pathway through a person-centered planning process.

Develop self-determination and independent living skills to achieve their individual personal and professional goals.

Acquire knowledge and skills in their chosen career path by auditing academic courses.

Explore careers and gain marketable job skills through Project SEARCH internships.

Expand social networks by engaging in regular campus activities and events with peer partners.

Earn a MSU LIFE Scholars Certificate by meeting all program requirements.

Obtain meaningful, competitive employment upon graduation.