

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 post-secondary 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 waiting lists for adult services, low expectations, and a lack of post-secondary options in which students can learn and gain skills. Positive student outcomes have been reported from over 300 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.

LIFE Scholars is a 3-year, fully inclusive, non-degree certificate program designed for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Students gain knowledge in their chosen career path, develop authentic social relationships through campus engagement, and explore careers through campus work and internships and obtain meaningful, competitive employment upon graduation.

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 and participate in an interview process. Accepted students are registered as MSU students.

Academics

LIFE Scholars audit 1-4 classes each semester in their chosen area of interest. Individualized modifications and supports are provided to ensure a successful experience.

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.

Career Development

LIFE Scholars participate in campus internships in their chosen career path to prepare them for competitive employment upon graduation.

Peer Partners

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 are provided to ensure a successful and mutually beneficial partnership.

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

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

Minimum Campus Engagement Credit Hours: 48

Academic Career Pathway Courses: 14 minimum required credits

Career Development: 6 minimum required credits

- Students participate in two 10- to 12-week internship rotations
- Students attend the daily Project SEARCH Employability Skills class
- Students complete a final career portfolio

Campus Engagement: 48 minimum required credits

- Students engage in and document a minimum of 8 activities each

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

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

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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.