

Continuation and Expansion of College Learn-to-Hunt Programs in Georgia

Final Report (2019 – 2020)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *Continuation and Expansion of College Learn-to-Hunt Programs in Georgia* project was conducted by the Georgia Wildlife Federation (GWF) using funds from the National Shooting Sports Foundation Hunting Heritage Trust Grant Program. Additional funding and support were provided by Delta Waterfowl Foundation, Georgia Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Resources Division (GADNR), National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf), Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA), Safari Club International a Georgia Corporation (SCI), University of Georgia (UGA), Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), and Georgia Southern University (GS). This project was truly a collaborative effort and is evidence of the recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) progress that can be made when working outside of organizational silos.

We would also like to individually thank the Georgia R3 Initiative Steering Committee members Jennifer Pittman (GADNR), Ricky Lackey (NWTf), Hank Forester (QDMA), and Louis Cole (SCI) for allowing us to pursue this project under the Georgia R3 Manager's Scope of Work.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The information contained in this summary highlights the results from the *Continuation and Expansion of College Learn-to-Hunt Programs in Georgia* project funded by the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) Hunting Heritage Trust Grant Program and conducted by the Georgia Wildlife Federation (GWF). This project was part of the Georgia Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3) Initiative and sought to build upon the success of Academics Afield (AA), a college learn-to-hunt program started by GWF to recruit students from nontraditional backgrounds into hunting and shooting sports as they relate to hunting.

Thanks to funding from NSSF, AA partnered with two colleges in 2019 and added a third in 2020 to provide R3 programming to students with limited or no hunting experience. Each program included classroom curriculum, shooting training, a mentored hunt, and a follow up meal. Additionally, participants were required to register through an event registration system and fill out pre and post-event evaluations.

Specific results contained in the report include:

- Hosted 10 AA hunting-focused events with an average of 8.6 participants (students) per event from February 2019 through February 2020. Additionally, three shooting-focused events were hosted with 179 participants (43 students). Multiple follow-up hunts and shooting experiences occurred outside of official events as a result of the community-based mentoring model pushed by AA.
- Post-event evaluation from AA participants suggests that participants are likely to continue hunting and feel well equipped to do so:
 - 98% reported they were “likely” or “very likely” to hunt in the future.
 - 93% reported they were “confident” or “very confident” that they could hunt on their own or with limited guidance after the event.
- Hunting license database analysis suggests that AA participants are more likely to come from non-hunting backgrounds and fall outside of the current demographics of hunters than participants in traditional hunter recruitment programs (as a baseline for comparison we analyzed Georgia Department of Natural Resources Hunt and Learn [HNL] events):
 - 22% of AA participants had a license at least one of the two years prior to the event compared to 46% of HNL participants.
 - 50% of AA participants were female compared to 21% of HNL participants.
 - Median age of AA participants was 22.
- Media exposure of AA likely provided further engagement of participants and their communities, and had an impact on how the existing base of hunters thinks about recruitment:
 - GWF published 20 social media posts (combined reach of 52,602), six blog posts, and five news releases covering AA.
 - Program participants and mentors created many of their own social media posts highlighting their AA experiences, additional hunts, and equipment purchases, likely having a ripple effect within their community.
- Switching from a completely volunteer-operated model to one where paid staff were involved in each event resulted in an increase in event frequency, messaging consistency, quality of participant experiences, and quality of data collected through evaluation and tracking.

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BACKGROUND

The *Continuation and Expansion of College Learn-to-Hunt Programs in Georgia* project funded by National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) and conducted by Georgia Wildlife Federation (GWF) is a product of a larger effort, the Georgia Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3) Initiative. The Georgia R3 Initiative is a novel partnership-based R3 approach between GWF, Georgia Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Resources Division (GADNR), National Wild Turkey Federation, Quality Deer Management Association, and Safari Club International a Georgia Corporation. The objectives of the Georgia R3 Initiative are to 1) increase participation/diversity in hunting and shooting sports as they relate to hunting and 2) increase societal acceptance of and support for hunting and shooting sports. The partnership has produced a strategic approach in the form of a state-specific plan ([Georgia Hunting Action Plan](#)), broken down barriers between organizations (agency, industry, and nongovernmental organizations) to facilitate a cooperative approach, and piloted R3 programs focused on adult audiences from nontraditional backgrounds.

Project Mission

Research suggests that colleges are an excellent place for R3 efforts. During this time, recreation levels peak and activities adopted often contribute to an individual's identity as they progress through life making colleges an ideal setting for recruiting new participants. Additionally, college is typically the time when many existing hunters and shooters lapse, which creates a need for retention and reactivation. Therefore, the mission of this project was to complement NSSF's +ONE Movement and further the efforts of the Georgia R3 Initiative by diversifying and increasing hunting participation in Georgia through an R3 program aimed at college students. The name of the program focused on by this project is Academics Afield (AA).

Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives of AA surround diversifying hunting and shooting by focusing on college students. Specifically, the program addresses Strategies 5, 6, and 7 in the *Georgia Hunting Action Plan* which discuss adding evaluation and outcome tracking, redefining target audiences, and creating pathways to next steps, respectively. By implementing AA programs at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), University of Georgia (UGA), and Georgia Southern University (GS), we planned to:

- Introduce college students from nontraditional backgrounds with interest, but no avenue, to hunting and shooting as it relates to hunting.
- Provide opportunities for retention and reactivation of students that have lapsed.
- Make hunting relevant among college students.
- Educate the existing base of hunters on why people from all backgrounds should be welcomed and encourage volunteers to shift from youth-only programs to programs that target adults.
- Educate participants and current hunters on how hunting and shooting are important to conservation to create a ripple effect in both communities.
- Reintroduce past program participants as mentors in future years to ensure we continue to build a network of mentors relevant to people from nontraditional backgrounds.
- Provide an internship that will advance the student's understanding of hunting and shooting sports impact on conservation and encourage them to seek future work in the R3 realm.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION and RESULTS

Structure

To facilitate the on-the-ground implementation of AA, GWF hired three part-time student employees to serve as AA Coordinators on the UGA, ABAC, and GS campuses. These positions were supervised by the Georgia R3 Manager and we established an academic advisor on each campus to help them navigate the school policies.

The Georgia R3 Manager handled coordination with partners, program design and registration, and built the initial relationships with school officials. Academics Afield Coordinators were responsible for setting up events, coordinating with campus faculty and staff, recruiting participants and mentors, and hosting each event. All AA Coordinators attended and passed shotgun coach certification training.

Events

To align with the goals of the program, events were mainly focused on hunting, but we did engage in shooting events when opportunities were presented. We hosted 10 AA hunting-focused events with an average of 8.6 participants per event. Hunts included deer, dove, squirrel, and waterfowl. Academics Afield Coordinators facilitated follow-up opportunities for participants by hosting unofficial follow-up hunts and encouraging mentors to take participants back out on their own. All hunting-focused events required a hunting license and followed the schedule below:

- Hunter Safety Course: participants were instructed to complete the Georgia Hunter Safety Course online.
- Classroom Curriculum: biology and hunting strategy for the target species and an overview of conservation history was taught on campus by a faculty member, GADNR biologist, or the AA Coordinator.
- Firearms Training: provided firearms training at a local range. All firearms used in an event were the same model to make training more efficient and facilitate a safe experience.
- Mentored Hunt: participants were paired with mentors (students with hunting experience) and participated in a hunt on private or public land within reasonable distance to campus.
- Follow-Up Meal: hosted a wild game meal for participants and mentors to share experiences and discuss next steps.

In addition to hunting, AA Coordinators assisted with or hosted shooting-focused events with a total of 179 participants:

- Assisted with training 80 participants in the Leadership Georgia Shoot. While these were not students, they were mainly young professionals with limited or no shooting experience that are currently in or will likely soon hold influential leadership roles in the state.
- Co-hosted the UGA Warnell Alumni and Friends Sporting Clays Tournament that had 99 participants. Twenty-five participants were students with seven of those being new shooters that received training.
- Hosted the ABAC Skeet Tournament that had 18 participants. All participants were students with nine of those being new shooters that received training.

Evaluation and Tracking

We designed measurement into AA from the beginning to ensure a data-driven R3 program aimed at outcomes rather than outputs. To ensure outcomes were measured and programs met the needs of the participants, we used evaluation and tracking. Given that the focus of AA is hunting and by nature shooting does not require a license, the shooting events were not evaluated and tracked to the degree that the AA hunting events were and as such are not discussed in this section.

Evaluation

For each AA hunting-focused event we conducted pre-selection, pre-event, and post-event evaluations. Questions in our evaluations were mostly adapted from the *National Hunting and Shooting Sports Action Plan* and templates can be found in the appendices of the [Georgia Hunting Action Plan](#). Deviations from these templates occurred on two occasions:

1. UGA and ABAC February 2019 squirrel hunts were evaluated using surveys from Dr. Lincoln Larson (Assistant Professor, North Carolina State University) to contribute data to the *National College Students and R3* project.
2. Waterfowl hunts conducted in 2020 with assistance from Delta Waterfowl Foundation used a combination of our evaluations and theirs to meet both guidelines.

All evaluations were delivered electronically to increase data collection efficiency. The pre-selection evaluations were sent to any students that expressed interest in participating in an event after it was advertised. This enabled us to ensure we were accepting the most suitable candidates for the event (students with limited or no hunting experience) and maintain a waiting list when demand exceeded our capacity. Once selected, the students were instructed to complete pre-event evaluations as part of the

How confident are you that you could hunt on your own or with limited guidance after this event?

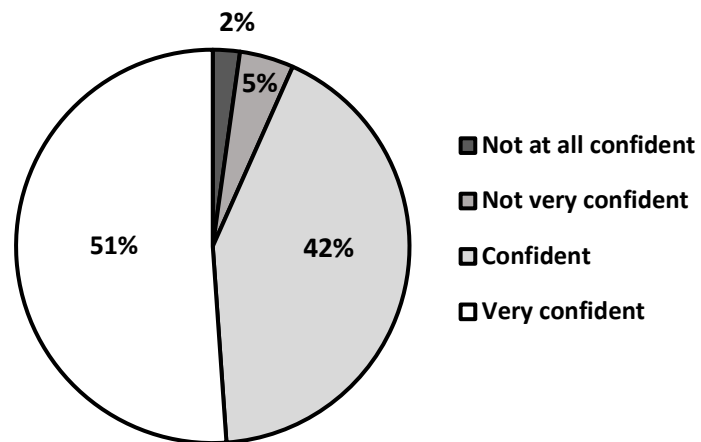


Figure 1: Academics Afield participant responses from the post-event evaluation question “How confident are you that you could hunt on your own or with limited guidance after this event?”

How likely do you think it is that you will hunt in the future?

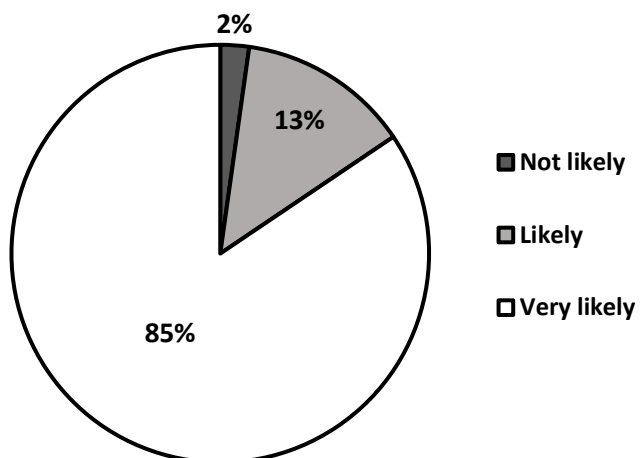


Figure 2: Academics Afield participant responses from the post-event evaluation question “How likely do you think it is that you will hunt in the future?”

registration process and post-event evaluations within a week of the event end date. Academics Afield Coordinators sent follow-up emails and delivered in-person reminders to students that had not yet completed evaluations. This strategy proved fruitful as our response rate on pre and post-event evaluations was typically over 90%.

Evaluation responses from AA participants were overwhelmingly positive with minimal negative feedback. All feedback was reviewed by AA Coordinators and changes were made to the events as necessary to better meet the needs of the participants. Post-event evaluation suggests that AA participants are likely to continue hunting and feel well equipped to do so:

- 93% reported they were “confident” or “very confident” that they could hunt on their own or with limited guidance after the event (Figure 1).
- 98% reported they were “likely” or “very likely” to hunt in the future (Figure 2).

Tracking

All AA hunting-focused events used the GADNR online event system as the registration site. This system is run by Brandt Information Services and is integrated with our license database to facilitate tracking of previous and future license buying behaviors of program participants (via their Customer ID Number).

We used the registration system to analyze each AA event by pulling age, sex, and license buying behavior of all participants. License holding data were recorded for two years prior to the event as an indication of whether that participant had prior, recent hunting experience in Georgia. To serve as a baseline for comparison, we also analyzed data from 13 GADNR Hunt and Learn (HNL) events conducted in 2018 and 2019 that had an average of 4.9 participants per event. Our analysis suggests that AA participants are more likely to come from non-hunting backgrounds and fall outside of the current demographics of hunters, than HNL participants:

- 22% of AA participants had a license at least one of the two years prior to the event compared to 46% of HNL participants (Table 1).
- 50% of AA participants were female compared to 21% of HNL participants.
- Median age of AA participants was 22.

Table 1. Percent HNL (2018 and 2019) and AA (2019 and 2020) participants with a valid hunting license two years, one year, and combined (either year) prior to the year of the event they were enrolled in.

Time Prior to the Program	Participants Holding a Valid Hunting Privilege (%)		
	Two Years	One Year ^b	Combined
GADNR Hunt and Learn ^a	32	46	46
Academics Afield	9	21	22

^a HNL estimates are likely low and should be considered a minimum given that 67% of the participants were youth that are not required to buy a license. These data solely represent those youth that bought an optional license or obtained a harvest record and the adult participants.

^b From survey data, we know that some participants purchase licenses the year prior to the event in an effort to learn, but do not actually participate. This is typically not true two years prior.

Long-term license purchasing behavior of AA participants has not yet been analyzed since not enough time has passed to yield any meaningful results.

Table 2. Number of programs, total participants, and percentage female of the HNL (2018 and 2019) and AA (2019 and 2020) events analyzed.

	Number of Programs	Total Participants	Female (%)
GADNR Hunt and Learn	13	63	21
Academics Afield	10	86	50

However, this analysis will continue to be conducted annually and after several years we will be able to analyze license purchasing behavior of past participants. This will shed light on the percent that continue hunting in GA after their introduction through AA.

Digital Impact

In addition to AA having a direct impact on participants, GWF published content through our social media accounts, blog, and news releases to highlight the program, NSSF’s involvement, and educate our existing constituents on the importance of targeting college audiences. Anecdotal evidence suggests this published content also further engaged program participants desire to continue to hunt and impacted their friends and family as they shared this content through their own outlets.

Social Media

We published twenty posts between Instagram and Facebook using the hashtags [#letsgehunting](#), [#plusonemovement](#), and tagging NSSF (Figure 3). As of 12 PM on March 24, 2020 the recorded combined reach of these posts was 52,602.

Blog Articles

Our AA Coordinators published six blog articles highlighting various aspects of the programming and participant experiences. Links to the blog posts are included below:

- [University Hunting Program Strengthening Family Ties](#)
- [You don’t have to be Annie Oakley to have fun engaging in shooting sports](#)
- [ABAC students take a break from the books to burn some powder!](#)
- [Leadership Georgia Class of 2019 Kicked-off Their Visit to Albany with a Bang](#)
- [Campus R3 Coordinator Continues Warnell Learn-to-Hunt Program](#)
- [Hunting, it’s for the birds!](#)



Figure 3. A screen shot of a social media post about AA that was shared by NSSF.

News Releases

We published five news releases highlighting the program; each one was featured on our website, sent to approximately 250 news outlets, and included in our newsletter that goes out to our members and partners. Links to the releases are included below:

- [Academics Afield Expands to Georgia Southern University](#)
- [College Program Gets a Facelift and Hires New ABAC Coordinator](#)
- [Georgia Wildlife Federation Partners with Delta Waterfowl to Expand Hunting Opportunities for College Students](#)
- [Georgia Wildlife Federation Hires Calvin Ellis as New Campus R3 Coordinator for University of Georgia](#)
- [Georgia Wildlife Federation Partners with National Shooting Sports Foundation to Hire Campus R3 Coordinators](#)

DISCUSSION and FUTURE DIRECTION

Our experience with this project yields many interesting discoveries as exhibited by the data and anecdotal evidence presented throughout this report. We close with a few final observations.

Prior to NSSF's involvement, this program was designed to be implemented solely by volunteers and the first year's events operated in that manner. While the program did gain traction, we quickly realized that the volunteer model resulted in inconsistent messaging and participant experiences during events and a reduction in the quality of data collected. While volunteer mentors still remain the backbone of AA, hiring students through support from NSSF gave us the ability to hold programs and programming accountable. This resulted in an increase in the number of events each semester, consistent messaging that aligned with our goals, a better-quality participant experience, and quality data collection through tracking and evaluation of each event. Additionally, offering employment opportunity to students seemed to make the universities more engaged and willing to assist with the program.

Partnership was a key ingredient in the success of AA. This program involved support from all of the Georgia R3 Initiative partners, NSSF, universities, industry, many local landowners, and we were able to provide additional opportunity in the form of waterfowl hunts thanks to financial support from Delta Waterfowl Foundation as part of their University Hunting Program. All of these organizations working together outside of their own organizational silos allowed us to focus on a data-driven R3 approach hitting a more diverse demographic. All signs point to a high percentage of participants continuing to hunt in the future.

We look forward to continuing and expanding AA within the state as we have demonstrated it has the potential to be a significant piece of the R3 puzzle. While the introduction of COVID-19 has brought on-campus activities to a halt for the Spring 2020 semester, we still have our AA Coordinators working on plans for the Fall 2020 semester and they are planning to hit the ground running once school is back in session. We have also received inquiries from other states and we look forward to helping expand college-focused programming nationally following the AA model.