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# Georgia Southern establishes new institute to better address challenges related to water and human interactions

December 10, 2021



Asli Aslan, Ph.D., associate professor in Georgia Southern's Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health Department of Biostatistics, Epidemiology and Environmental Health Sciences, and director of the University's new Institute for Water and Health.

Georgia Southern University has established a new research and outreach center, the Institute for Water and Health, to investigate the complex interactions between water and human activities, and protect and restore public health in a changing environment.

As part of the University's focus on public impact research, the center will foster collaboration among scientists, government agencies, industry, nonprofit organizations and communities.

Coastal Georgia is the perfect location for such an institute to conduct interdisciplinary research because it lies at the intersection of many social, economic and ecological issues. The center supports the region through research, workforce training for students, and actively involving

communities in water resource management decision-making process, said Asli Aslan, Ph.D., associate professor in Georgia Southern's Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health Department of Biostatistics, Epidemiology and Environmental Health Sciences.

Now also director of the Institute for Water and Health, Aslan is a water microbiologist, and her research program bridges ecosystem and human health. She has ongoing funded projects on tracking sources of water pollution and assessing health risks associated with exposure to chemical and microbial contaminants. She works with local communities and non-profit organizations to encourage water stewardship behaviors. Aslan has served in various federal and state agencies and organizations as an adviser, reviewer, scientific committee member and affiliated faculty. She is also the founder and currently the co-chair of the Water and Health Committee of the American Public Health Association.

“We want to create a nationally recognized institution that provides meaningful solutions for community needs,” said Aslan. “Our immediate plan is to develop a coalition with all stakeholders in the region to address issues related to increased water demand, impact of sea-level rise on water resources, and potential emerging contaminants in our urban and rural water infrastructure. We are in the process of establishing a community advisory group consisting of scientists from academic institutions, representatives from local and state governments, community leaders, non-profit organizations and businesses to identify and prioritize community needs in water research and education.”

For example, she said, although one in every six households in Georgia has a private well, few residents realize any water testing, treatment or well maintenance is the sole responsibility of the property owner as per the Safe Drinking Water Act. Aslan said the Institute for Water and Health will work with the homeowners to help them recognize potential risks and provide solutions that will keep families safe in the long term.

“We also look at sources of contaminants using state-of-the-art-methods. And if you know where the pollution is coming from precisely, it's easier to go fix that problem once and for all, which has a direct impact on the decision-making process to protect water resources.” she said.

These new techniques allow researchers with the institute to provide test results within a few hours, which helps end-users to be informed the same day instead of days where most water testing methods currently take about 48 hours. The implications of these methods are broad, as they can be used to identify pathogens in storm water or in household drinking water pipes; assess how new sustainable water treatment technologies efficiently remove contaminants, or provide same-day results for recreational beach monitoring.

“We can do all this fancy research in the lab, but it will be very important for us to go out into the community and talk to people, ask them what their immediate needs – our goal is to involve communities from the very beginning of our research so that we co-develop meaningful solutions that will improve the quality of their everyday lives,” Aslan said. “Our group at Georgia Southern consists of established researchers from multiple disciplines such as environmental education, public health, social and behavioral sciences, environmental and computational engineering, coastal ecology, and we are growing everyday”.

Carl L. Reiber, Ph.D., Georgia Southern's provost and vice president for academic affairs, said the center will pull together faculty from across the University, many of whom have already established themselves as water experts within their own discipline. He expects the center to take a very visible role for the University and is renovating space in Savannah near the Armstrong campus to house the center and its labs.

"The Institute for Water and Health will bring to southeast Georgia an awareness of the importance of water quality, water management and how tightly these areas are aligned with our health," Reiber said. "The public impact of this institute is immeasurable and will ultimately increase the quality of life in our community."

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