Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: Young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities will have a chance to experience college life thanks to a new program at Missouri State University called Bear POWER. The first group of up to 10 students will begin their two- year, five-semester inclusive college education in January 2019. I'm Emily Yeap.

Here with me today to offer more insights about Bear POWER is its director, Rachel Heinz.

Rachel Heinz: POWER stands for “Promoting Opportunities for Work, Education and Resilience,” and the program was created with the intent to offer a college opportunity for students transitioning out of high school. What we're doing with our program is offering them the supports that they need to be successful in a college environment, and also making modifications to the typical application process for students to apply for college.

Emily Yeap: Bear POWER will immerse students in four key areas.

Rachel Heinz: The first area would be academic, so they will be enrolled in the equivalent of 12 credit hours while they're in the program. That will be through traditional courses that are offered at Missouri State, where the course work will be modified for the students, and they will be receiving an audit for that course. They'll take two of those each semester. They'll also have Bear POWER support sessions that will help provide them more support in areas, such as introduction to college life, interview skills, job readiness, different things that a student with intellectual disabilities would need more supports to be successful, and then also we have an internship program, and that is going to give them that hands-on experience in the area that they're interested in, that they want to get a job when they graduate.

And within our academic component, they could choose anything that a typical college student would want to study. And then socially, which is our other component, we're really pushing them to be integrated into the college experience, so we have a volunteer organization called Bear Blazers, and those are typical Missouri State students that are going to be paired to support Bear POWER students in the areas of academic, social and health and wellness. So for every Bear POWER student, we'll have five to six Bear Blazer volunteers who will be providing a circle of support to them in the college environment.

And then independent living is another area that we're really focused on with our goals of the program, so it is a requirement of Bear POWER for the students to live on campus. The first semester they're going to be living in a Living Learning Community in Hutchens Hall, and we're really focused on them learning those independent living skills that they need to live independently once they graduate. So after that first semester, they can then choose if they want to stay in the Living Learning Community, or if they want to live elsewhere on campus.

And then the last goal for the program is job readiness, so we're really focused on what do you want to do when you graduate. From the minute that they start in the program, that is what everything is built around is getting a job when they graduate.

Emily Yeap: Bear POWER is a comprehensive transition program approved by the United States Department of Education.

Rachel Heinz: Currently, there's about 260 programs across the country that are similar to Bear POWER. They're not all CTP approved, but they're listed on the Think College website. Every program is a little bit different, and what we've seen from the research of these programs is that students are graduating, and many of them are getting jobs and living independently.

There's not really a lot of opportunities in our community and really throughout the country for students that fall into this category, so the more opportunities that we can provide after high school for students transitioning, it's really only going to make a good experience for everybody.

Emily Yeap: Heinz believes this program will enrich diversity on campus.

Rachel Heinz: I think the Bear POWER students are going to learn a lot from those experiences, but also the students at Missouri State are going to learn just as much, if not more, from having those experiences with a student that's not "a typical college student" and I think diversity on that level really does help shape our perspective moving forward, and learn how to work and live with people of all abilities.

Emily Yeap: Bear POWER has received funding from grants and private donations. Students accepted into the program will pay about 4,000 dollars per semester. Donations can be made online to help sustain the program, or to support scholarships for students. To find out more about Bear POWER and the application process, visit MissouriState.edu/bearpower. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer: For more information contact the office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at KSMU.org.