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

Emily Yeap: This past January, the first batch of eight Bear POWER students began their education at Missouri State University. Bear POWER is a two-year, five- semester, inclusive college program for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I'm Emily Yeap.

Joining me today from Missouri State are Kim Roam, faculty advisor for Bear POWER ambassadors, Natalie Olson, Bear POWER ambassador, and Susie Dains, Bear POWER student. They're here to talk about the program and how it's going so far.

Roam.

Kim Roam: The POWER stands for Promoting Opportunities for Work, Education and Resilience, so the goal of the program is to give students skills so they'll be ready to go out and work in the workforce. They're attending regular classes. They live on campus. They are involved in other things on campus, like other students would.

Emily Yeap: She says the program is progressing well.

Kim Roam: All eight students are completing the program successfully. Some of them have switched from auditing courses to actually getting college credit for those that could apply for a college degree later on. We have students that are involved in campus. We have one student that is on SGA as a senator representing the Bear POWER program. We have another student in the College of Education on the Student Advisory Board representing Bear POWER. We have a student that is on the club golf team. We have another student that has been a manager for the football team for the spring season. In the short amount of time that the students have been here, from January until now, the growth, the confidence, the independent living skills that these students have gained has just been tremendous. It's been an awesome opportunity for the students, for the families, for us that are directly working with the program, and then also the campus community as a whole as well.

Emily Yeap: For Dains, her first semester at Missouri State has been wonderful.

Susie Dains: I've learned lots of amazing things and I've made lots of friends. I like the opportunity to grow as an adult and learn new things. I love Bear POWER.

Emily Yeap: To help Bear POWER students navigate college life is a group of Missouri State students known as Bear ambassadors. Olson explains.

Natalie Olson: My role as a peer mentor and a Bear POWER ambassador is really just to provide friendship and be a positive role model. Ambassadors focus on three different aspects of the college experience, so academics, social life and then health and wellness. Technically, I am Susie's academic ambassador, but I think all of the ambassadors really help every aspect of the college experience … helping navigate conflicts or organizing their planners, just everything that typical college students do, we work on it together.

Emily Yeap: Olson is grateful to be part of the program.

Natalie Olson: Being a Bear POWER ambassador has benefited me significantly. Not only has it provided me with an opportunity for more friendships through the Bear POWER students and other ambassadors, but it has helped me grow in the career field that I would like to go into. My goal is to be a special education teacher, so having this opportunity is really unique for me. It's helped me improve my communication skills between Susie and I, between other students, ambassadors, the leadership of the program. I feel like I've been able to express not only my needs, but the needs of the students as well, so that's been really unique. The students have strengthened my honesty, compassion, and also just reminded me that it's okay to be super silly sometimes.

Emily Yeap: Roam believes the Bear POWER program has enriched the campus community.

Kim Roam: I think bringing Bear POWER to the campus community has really helped with the three pillars – cultural competence, community engagement, and ethical leadership through the Bear POWER staff, through the Bear POWER ambassadors, providing that inclusive environment for the Bear POWER students to get involved. So it's not only helped the Bear POWER students, the ambassadors, but it's also helped the general student community on campus as well.

Emily Yeap: The second batch of Bear POWER students will start the program in January 2020. Up to 10 students will be selected. Bear POWER has received funding from grants and private donations. To help sustain the program or to support scholarships for students, donations can be made online. To find out more about Bear POWER, 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.