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## Student starts at WKU as senior in college

By AARON MUDD [amudd@bgdailynews.com](mailto:amudd@bgdailynews.com) 48 min ago

Western Kentucky University senior Alex Banaszak, 18, of Oldham County, poses for a picture Tuesday, September 5, 2017, at WKU's Downing Student Union. (Bac Totrong/[photo@bgdailynews.com](mailto:photo@bgdailynews.com))

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After starting his first year at Western Kentucky University with enough credit hours to be a senior, it's safe to say that Alex Banaszak isn't your typical college student.

Banaszak, an Oldham County native, has studied Chinese in China through a U.S. State Department program and found a passion for physics, all before graduating high school. He credits his success to the experiences he got at WKU's Gatton Academy.

"It really makes you feel like a regular college student," said Banaszak, now studying physics and Chinese through WKU's Chinese Language Flagship program.

After first discovering the academy in the seventh grade through a family friend, Banaszak liked the idea of getting a headstart on the college experience.

"I thought it was really cool (that) as a junior and senior you could go to college," Banaszak said.

The experience, Banaszak said, allowed him to explore a budding interest in the Chinese language through a trip to China his junior year and pursue research opportunities in physics after discovering that computer science wasn't for him.

“He is just a do-it-all sort of person,” said Derick Strode, the Gatton Academy’s assistant director of academic services.

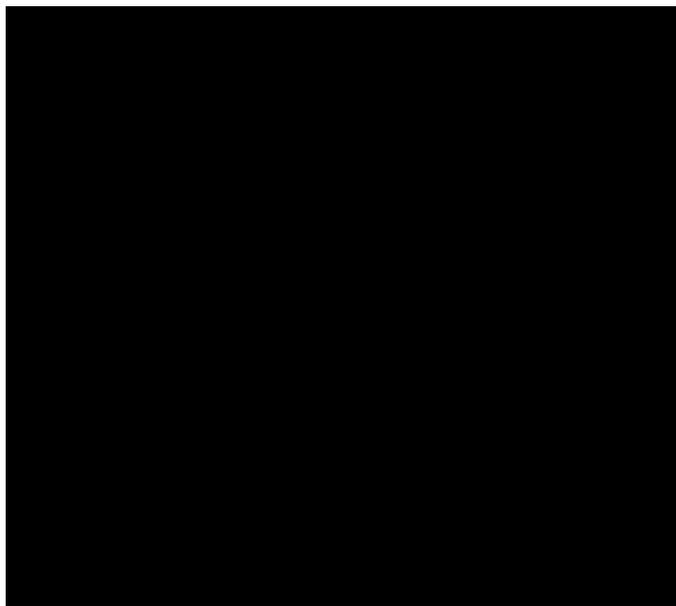
Most Gatton Academy students decide to either get involved in a research project or language study, Strode said.

“Alex did both,” he said.

Banaszak first visited China in his junior year.

“It really reaffirmed that I wanted to continue learning Chinese,” Banaszak said.

Last summer, he spent six, intense weeks of language study in China through the National Security Language Initiative for Youth program, which is funded in part by the U.S. State Department.



“It was just constant exposure to Chinese,” Banaszak said of the experience.

Through the program, Banaszak met Chinese high school students, traveled to various Chinese cities and experienced Chinese calligraphy, dance and even native instruments like the ocarina.

“It really helped expand my worldview,” he said.

Now, continuing his education at WKU, Banaszak is thankful for the academy and his parents for helping him get to where he is.

For students thinking about attending the academy, Banaszak recommends checking out a preview day and going for it.

“If you think Gatton’s a good fit for you, go ahead and apply,” he said, adding that he wouldn’t be where he is otherwise.

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## **Aaron Mudd**

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.