“The greatest gifts you can give your children are the roots of responsibility and the wings of independence.” – Denis Waitley.

This is the philosophy that Michele Bredow, mother of UMSL SUCCEED student Taylor Russell, follows and what led Russell ultimately to enroll in the SUCCEED program.

Russell recently completed her first year of the program and has already noticed major growth in her maturity and level of independence- “I’m more responsible and making friends and being more social. I speak up for myself when I don’t understand in class. I’m more responsible by keeping notes in my planner and I also get my homework done… Before [SUCCEED] I was quiet and not very talkative. Now I am more social at meeting new people. I try to make new friends by saying ‘hi’ first and starting up a conversation.”

Bredow also has noticed these positive changes and progression in Russell. “My daughter’s interactions with our family are at a more mature level and have a happy tone. Taylor is becoming more independent and is not afraid to advocate for herself.”

SUCCEED is not all fun and games. Like any university experience, it comes with its challenges. The program requirements are rigorous and program faculty and staff have high expectations for students. Russell finds college academics to be quite challenging, but rewarding. “The biggest challenge is getting through my UMSL elective, Human Growth and Development. It is harder than my other classes. I talk to the teacher if there is something I don’t get or a homework assignment I need clarification on. I also come get help with homework at the SUCCEED office.” Russell has gained the confidence in her communication and advocacy skills by seeking assistance in order to be successful. SUCCEED has no shortage of supports available for students: one-on-one tutoring, staffed study hall hours, College of Education student volunteers embedded in SUCCEED classes, and individualized accommodations and modifications.

Living on campus and student life can be fun, but also stressful at times. Bredow shared, “The biggest challenge that Taylor has had to overcome this year is learning to live with her peers. Taylor is learning to get along with suitemates. They need to accept and accommodate differences in personalities and habits.” This invaluable opportunity for growth is consistent with the experiences of all college freshmen living in university residential halls in addition to learning how to negotiate the complexities of sharing a living space.
Russell has also learned how to take advantage of campus activities, organizations, and events. She discussed some of her favorite campus activities from this year, “I liked the pool party at Oak Hall because it was fun to swim with my friends. I went to a root beer pong event also with a friend and that was really fun. Homecoming dance was fun, too.”

Russell is looking forward to summer break, but will be ready to return to school this fall for her senior year. She is already planning for her future beyond SUCCEED. Working at the University Child Development Center located on UMSL’s campus confirmed Russell’s passion to work with children and she is using her experiences to pinpoint potential career paths. “I’m thinking about going to community college after SUCCEED to become a preschool teacher. I want to live in an apartment with high school or college friends.”

Bredow also is excited to see what Russell’s future holds. Bredow shares, “My expectations for Taylor after she graduates from the SUCCEED program is that she be independent, start her own home, and have a vocation. I am hopeful she will learn skills [that] she will need to accomplish her dreams, like get a job in child care. I look forward to Taylor’s person centered planning presentation at the end of her first year where all of her goals will be addressed and plans are made, allowing Taylor to continue on her path to success.”

Since enrolling in the SUCCEED program Russell has fine-tuned her abilities, acquired new skills, and had experiences that helped develop responsibility and independence. The combination of Russell’s ambition and motivation, in concert with the skills she is gaining from SUCCEED, will undoubtedly provide Russell a strong foundation that will allow for her to truly succeed in all facets of life after graduation.