



A PATH FORWARD – TOGETHER  
**Campus Culture**

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**Campus Culture Action Team**  
Preliminary Report



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Our charge as the Campus Culture Action Team was to assess the current culture at Georgia Tech and determine how it affects this vast community consisting of students, faculty, staff, and administration. Our team has focused on defining, understanding, and piecing together various subcultures to try and decipher a common overarching Georgia Tech culture. Due to the inherently extensive scope of campus culture, our observations and recommendations are not necessarily complete, and further study is required. Our Action Team recognizes that our understanding of campus culture will continue to evolve as we further learn from the various subcultures, task forces, surveys, and reports. Our goal is to establish the basis of a strategic plan so we as a community can reflect, understand, and take this culture-redefining journey together.

- The Campus Culture Action Team

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## Our Approach

We began gathering qualitative data from Action Team discussions with students, faculty, staff, and administration. Using this, as well as preexisting surveys and reports such as the Climate Action Survey and the Student Experience Survey, we managed to come up with several key themes that serve as overarching principles for our team. Though we gathered many different opinions and perspectives from across campus, more information needs to be collected.

Based on these concepts and our understanding of campus culture, we divided the problems and our solutions into four key buckets. These buckets are:

### 1. Transition and Integration

*The transition and integration of new members of the Yellow Jacket family (students, staff, faculty, administration, and other members of our community).*

### 2. Engagement and Alignment

*Encouraging engagement outside of the classroom that aligns with what is taught at orientations.*

### 3. Classroom, Curriculum and Labs

*Flexibility and creativity in class and with curriculum choices.*

### 4. Holistic Values and Promotion

*Identifying and promoting Georgia Tech's values in order to grow the Yellow Jacket family in a holistic manner. How is this shared when new members arrive? How is it enforced while they are here?*

These four categories or buckets come together to form the acronym TECH.

Using these, we worked toward developing a plan for critical areas of campus that can be affected in the short term and long term. Culture develops over time, and we realize that change will be gradual, but actions can be taken or designed today. Our focus is to create an implementable plan that includes action items and also begins to foster longer-term

conversations on critical issues. We believe that the questions, topics, and ideas mentioned in this report serve as an actionable plan to improve campus culture, not only for today's issues but tomorrow's as well.

## Culture versus Strategy

The first step that the Action Team took was to generate a working definition of culture: *By definition, culture is an institution's traditions, norms, and values.* Strategy is a plan of action designed to shape an institution to reach its desired goals and aspirations. Georgia Tech has a robust Strategic Plan to guide the Institute to 2035, with actionable steps along the way. Our discussions, based on these critical definitions, established that strategy is where our institution wants to be, while culture is where our institution is currently, and Peter Drucker observed that *“culture eats strategy for lunch.”* The Action Team realized that if the Institute’s strategy ignores our current culture, we will not be able to progress.

There exist several variations in culture and subcultures that are born through this bigger picture, and this team tried to keep all in perspective. Using the above as a basic definition of culture, we found the following overarching themes.

## Overarching Principles

These overarching principles were identified from discussions and qualitative data collection. The principles guided our recommendation process as we looked at our culture and began to recommend areas to improve.

1. There are both positive and negative aspects to the culture at Georgia Tech. The positive must be celebrated and the negative addressed and changed.
2. There is an unhealthy obsession with rankings. (Cite Politico study.)
3. There is an unhealthy competition among students and faculty.
4. There is a perception of a lack of mutual respect between students, faculty, and staff.
5. There is a broad sense of “shared despair.”
6. The language that is used to characterize the Institute can be powerful traditional memes but counterproductive for our current culture (e.g., “rigor,” “getting out,” etc.).

As mentioned in the approach, we used these overarching principles and condensed our conversations, ideas, recommendations, and vision into four key buckets.

## Short-term Recommendations

# Transition and Integration

*The transition and integration of new members of the Yellow Jacket family (students, staff, faculty, administration, and other members of our community).*

### Key Problems

1. The core values of Georgia Tech's Mission Statement and Strategic Plan are not integrated into the daily student and faculty experience at the Institute, resulting in a campus culture that is not emblematic of the values.
2. With a compulsive focus on rankings by the Institute, new members within the Georgia Tech community perceive a campus culture centered around competition at the expense of innovation through collaboration.
3. The focus of curriculum at Georgia Tech, starting with first-year classes including GT1000, promote academic rigor and competitiveness over holistic student development.
4. The departmental isolation of graduate students is established the first day students are on campus, with orientation and integration programming conducted by individual programs. The lack of Institute-wide new student programming leads to limited cross-departmental experiences and diminished buy-in to Georgia Tech's core values.
5. Orientation programming has a pronounced focus on academics, resulting in an internalized assumption that the value of faculty, staff, and students is directly derived from academic success rather than their holistic contributions as people.

### Recommendations

1. Extract a statement of core values from the Strategic Plan. Integrate these into all student messaging (FASET, GT1000, etc.) (See the Auburn Creed, Harvard Student Handbook.)
2. Teach inclusive pedagogical practices to all new faculty at new faculty orientation. Make that a part, and an expectation, of our culture. Modify the Course Instructor Opinion Survey (CIOS) to include questions that measure how inclusive our classrooms are.

3. GT1000 should have a standardized curriculum that focuses on holistic development of the student while allowing for the flexibility of instruction that currently makes GT1000 appealing. (Refer to GT1000 Task Force.)
4. Lengthen and deepen the information provided for graduate students with a full orientation to Georgia Tech and its resources, support, and engagement opportunities. This would be similar to FASET for new undergraduate students and transfers.
5. Include graduate students in New Student Convocation.
6. There is a need to develop more comprehensive orientation programs in the near future for both graduate and undergraduate students, focused on the resources and the experience of a lifetime that Georgia Tech has to offer. The basic goal of these orientation sessions should be to brief the students about the campus resources as well as to develop a “sense of ownership” in the students about Georgia Tech.

## Engagement and Alignment (Incentives)

*Encouraging engagement outside of the classroom that aligns with what is taught at orientations.*

### Key Problems

1. A relentless focus on grade point averages – reinforced by students’ perception of employer expectations – forces a demand for course objectives structured around quantifiable assessment methods, which in turn restricts project-based learning opportunities that encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration, creativity, and innovation.
2. Excellence in teaching and student development is undervalued in tenure decisions, contributing to a general lack of respect between faculty and students, and among students and their peers.
3. Students often unite around a sense of “shared despair” rather than more productively uniting around the mission, values, and strategic goals of Georgia Tech due to limited exposure and integration of these values into the student experience.

### Recommendations

1. Expand the culture of innovation, creation, and inspiration beyond simply Senior Design and into every aspect of a student’s life. Each course that a student takes should relate back to a central identity. Look at adding these ideals into every course syllabus.
2. Expand the value of teaching experiences and excellence in tenure decisions. Make teaching, respect, and inclusiveness a greater part of the tenure process.
3. In the spirit of student engagement, promote events and programs that aim to unite Tech students around a central identity – for example, a speaker series or similar large program that allows students to develop a “signature memory.” (Refer to the SCPC - ODK SPAG Speaker Proposal for further details.)

## Classroom, Curriculum, and Labs

*Flexibility and creativity in class and with curriculum choices.*

### Key Problems

1. While feedback and evaluation are essential for the improvement of teaching methods, the anonymity of the CIOS evaluations leaves room for explicit bias without recourse. Removing these biases understates the issue, minimizing the need for the implicit promotion of inclusivity in all courses.
2. Limited understanding of specific course requirements prohibits department chairs from identifying opportunities for improvement and collaboration in and between existing courses.
3. Restrictive graduation requirements and limited promotion of cross-departmental course registration narrow opportunities for students to engage in ideas and research outside of their declared program of study.
4. Explicitly valuing publication and research over excellence in teaching, primarily as the means toward improved rankings, has undervalued the faculty-student relationship and inflated the faculty-student ratio beyond an acceptable level.
5. Official recognition of student achievements at the Institute level is exclusively done through a GPA designation on transcripts. This practice reinforces the perception that GPA is entirely representative of student achievement, directly incentivizing competitive academics over extracurricular achievements that are often representative of more holistic personal development.

### Recommendations

1. Results from CIOS Question 16 (“respect for students”) should be shared with school chairs and the general Georgia Tech community.
2. The recommendations of this year’s CIOS Task Force – such as charging the Faculty Senate to undertake a campaign for “collegiality, civility, and respect in the educational environment” and continuing the inquiry into sharing CIOS comments – should be pursued.
3. As CIOS evaluations are shared with school chairs, make students and faculty aware of the importance of constructive feedback and how to give and receive it.
4. Syllabi audits to ensure that current policies are mentioned and implemented.

5. Students should have more flexibility in taking courses that stimulate their intellectual curiosity and learn about opportunities outside of their core curricula. Experiments such as mini-mesters (described by CNE); Expo Days, in which faculty give short lectures on topics they are passionate about; and early-semester “shopping days” should be available to students at all levels.
6. Revisit the Task Force on the Learning Environment’s (TFLE) report and implement the most compelling ideas. The syllabus audit listed as item 4 above was a recommendation of the TFLE.
7. Rededicate ourselves to reducing the student-faculty ratio. (Refer to the strategic plan subcommittee created in 2010.)
8. Implement co-curricular Institute transcripts that include students’ involvements, leadership activities, and engagement on campus. This was originally proposed by Creating the Next so that all students can be recognized by the Institute as more than their GPA and the numbers on their transcripts.

## Holistic Values and Promotion

*Identifying and promoting Georgia Tech's values in order to grow the Yellow Jacket family in a holistic manner. How is this shared when new members arrive? How is it enforced while they are here?*

### Key Problems

1. Institute Communications currently primarily focuses on announcements highlighting rankings rather than promoting stories of faculty, students, and alumni achievements that reinforce Georgia Tech's motto and core values. This underscores the campus-wide obsessive identification as students, faculty, and staff first, people second.
2. Georgia Tech does not clearly publicize the motto and core values of the Institute, impeding the integration of these values into everyday experiences on campus.
3. Unclear promotion of core values restricts opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to unite around the Institute's shared traditions and values.
4. Lack of promotion of holistic excellence leads to obsessive competition strictly in academics, hindering potential growth opportunities for all students.

### Recommendations

1. Institute Communications should carefully and faithfully balance news stories and press releases ensuring that every boast about rankings will be accompanied by coverage of the amazing things our students and faculty do to show science and engineering in service to humanity.
2. The concept of "What Does Georgia Tech Think?" should be continued and even enhanced to reinforce that our commitment to innovation and excellence is evidence of leadership in action, far outpacing any rankings.
3. Identify and define what Georgia Tech's core values are and what it means to live for "Progress and Service." Georgia Tech does not currently advertise or have a list of core values easily accessible to the public. Once identified, the values should be woven into the Georgia Tech community and publications. The values can be used during reviews, including staff performance reviews, CIOS, and student experience surveys, to assess whether the core values are being lived out in the Georgia Tech culture year-round.
4. The principles of the Total Person Program, created by Dr. Homer Rice and recently reinvigorated in Athletics to improve the academic, spiritual, emotional, and personal

well-being, should be expanded to the entire student body. (Refer to GT1000 recommendations.)

5. Look at reviving the “To Know, To Do, To Be” statement of Georgia Tech and work toward a holistic learning experience.

### **Long-term Recommendations**

1. Use additional qualitative and quantitative data metrics and surveys to further understand Georgia Tech’s culture over the next 12 months.
2. Every five years there should be an assessment of campus culture and a realignment of the buckets/recommendations.
3. Further the concept of peer institutional learning as opposed to comparison. Benchmarking with a focus to learn as opposed to compare.

### **Additional Reports/Surveys Used**

1. 2013 Georgia Tech Campus Climate Assessment
2. 2010 Georgia Tech Culture Subcommittee Report
3. 2015 Task Force on the Learning Environment
4. 2014 National Survey of the Student Engagement Survey
5. 2014 Undergraduate Student Experience Survey: Smart and Happy
6. 2017 Graduate Student Government Association Feedback Form
7. GT1000 Task Force
8. 2010 Student Faculty Strategic Plan Report