

ADVANCE-CoE Retreat
Collaboration, Culture, and Community
National Center for Civil and Human Rights
May 9, 2022

On May 9, 2022, 29 faculty members in the College of Engineering at Georgia Tech came together for a retreat on “Collaboration, Culture, and Community.” All faculty committed the entire day to be fully present in the event, from 9 am until 5 pm. In addition, Mimi Blacker (CoE) supported the event and participated in the discussions. Dean Raheem Beyah and Associate Dean Kim Kurtis attended for parts of the day, to listen and to participate in discussions. The retreat was held at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, located near Georgia Tech in downtown Atlanta. The participants toured the center in the late morning, having a private tour, which allowed them to reflect individually and as a group on Georgia Tech’s place, as a public institution in the City of Atlanta and the State of Georgia. The purpose of the retreat was to gather as a community, making time for dialogue, to discuss how our community can move forward together.

Each of the 30 participants was assigned to one of five small groups. These small groups engaged in discussion periods throughout the day on the topics of collaboration, culture, and community. The small groups then reported back to the full group. Notes from the small groups and the full group discussion helped to document the dialogue, which is summarized below.

The retreat was organized by Joy Harris, Tequila Harris, Raghu Pucha, and Martha Grover, with logistical support from Mimi Blacker and LaJauna Ellis, and financial support from the College of Engineering.

Collaboration

Collaboration drives productivity and creativity, by exposing individuals to new ideas and perspectives. Through collaboration we can more efficiently utilize resources and we can create synergies. Collaboration also enhances visibility and community.

Research collaborations are common at Georgia Tech, while collaboration in teaching is perceived to be more difficult, due in part to the unclear reward structure and the use of survey opinion surveys as the sole measure of teaching effectiveness. Collaborations with minority serving programs should have more emphasis, for collaborations with organizations both inside and outside of Georgia Tech.

Collaboration is promoted by personal relationships, psychological safety, and trust. Collaborations require time to think and to develop the collaborative relationships. Collaboration can be enhanced by co-advising students; an additional benefit of co-advising students is the exposure to different mentoring styles. Co-advising students can also be a good way to build a collaboration. Physical presence on campus helps to promote new collaborations. Collaboration can also be fostered with formal programs like seed grants.

Barriers to research collaboration at Georgia Tech that were mentioned include the evaluation and reward system that may be uneven in its value of collaborative research (especially a concern for junior faculty and for faculty from underrepresented groups). Additional barriers include the lack of time, the lack of

information about possible collaborators, and seed grants that are overly constraining. While there is interest in collaborating with the larger community outside of Georgia Tech, especially on broadening participation, this is a huge undertaking and is not the area of expertise of most CoE faculty, making it difficult to know how and where to start.

Some ideas that were suggested to promote research collaboration include hiring undergraduate students to update faculty webpages and having events such as poster sessions to explicitly communicate needs for collaboration (i.e. not only research accomplishments). Teaching collaboration may be easier when the College of Engineering moves beyond student opinion surveys as the sole metric for evaluating teaching. There is great interest among faculty to engage in broadening participating through collaboration inside and outside Georgia Tech, which is an opportunity to be harnessed. Communication of successful collaborations can aid in fostering our culture of collaboration. Continued use of seed grants is another way to foster collaboration, and care should be taken to ensure that the calls are not overly constraining to exclude promising new ideas and partnerships.

Culture

There is no one culture at Georgia Tech or even in the College of Engineering. Each department or subgroup has its own culture. Some cultural descriptors that were noted are: hard working, dynamic, hierarchical, risk-averse, can-do attitude, innovative. Some described the culture as collegial, while others described adversarial dynamics and a lack of transparency. The cultural dynamics among and between faculty, staff, and students may also be distinct, as well as generational differences. One group described junior faculty as being more collaborative in their experience. Several groups noted problems with the culture of faculty/staff relationships and faculty/student relationships. Another group described the experience of appreciating the many caring individuals at Georgia Tech, yet feeling that “Georgia Tech does not care” about them. Some did feel that their school cares about them, if not “Georgia Tech.” The new USG policies were also noted, as imposing different cultural norms, distinct from those within Georgia Tech. New USG policies were described as having punitive consequences, yet no reward structure.

It was noted that culture is defined by the metrics that we use. Metrics should align with our cultural desires, such as allowing a faculty member to take a class periodically as well as supporting informal research leave, if not sabbatical. Decisions should be made based on data and metrics, considering the impact of decisions on culture. Some items in the strategic plan appear aspirational, but not the reality or aligned with current evaluation metrics. Work-life balance and wellness are among the concerns noted by faculty.

Some groups discussed how individuals can play a role in promoting an inclusive culture, such that members have psychological safety. Ideas mentioned include: asking for and being willing to help, creating time to connect, not spreading bad news and gossip, asking our chair how we can help with their goals, offering solutions and alternatives when presenting problems, and looking for “win-win” solutions.

College-wide ideas for promoting culture include placing a renewed priority on faculty demographics (hiring, retention, leadership), in the short term and looking over the next 20 years. During the past 20 years since ADVANCE began, the rate of faculty hiring in underrepresented groups has been stagnant. Resources can be provided for professional development to improve culture. Recognition of faculty and staff is another specific mechanism to enhance culture.

Small group discussions, social hours, and wellness events were all noted as helpful mechanisms. Many groups discussed the intentional design of inclusive community events, which will be discussed more in the next section.

Community

There are many communities at Georgia Tech, which can be based on location, affiliation, working groups, and personal networks. It was suggested that a “community” is a group that is less transactional.

Financial resources are important for organizing community building events, but intentional design of inclusive events is also required. Schools should have staff with event-planning skills, and organize events intentionally at accessible times and that promote wellness. Activities should be planned to encourage participation and inclusion from a broader cross-section of community members, incorporating ice-breaker activities and other ways for introverted members to comfortably engage. Small group gatherings like meals are also important, in addition to department-wide events. Internal seminars are a good way not only to get together but also to learn what our colleagues are doing. Partnering with local chapters of professional societies is another mechanism for identifying resources and engaging with new communities.

Individuals can support their own communities by making time for people, checking in, and being open and respectful. Individuals can foster community by engaging with new groups (e.g. affinity groups or new committees), encouraging their students to do so, and simply by sitting next to someone at an event who they don’t know well. Georgia Tech should support students by making sure that each student belongs to a community, via intentional advising. Staff should be supported as community members, recognizing that many are overworked and not compensated at market rates. Staff members should be promoted to appropriate job titles for their duties and should have a clear development path. Research and academic faculty should also have a clear professional development path and be included in opportunities for professional service.

A challenge to building community is that our community members may already feel overworked and lacking in time. Community-building initiatives should be rewarded, including in annual evaluations. Being physically present on campus is also important for building community. Sustained attention is required, so that we do not keep trying to reinvent the wheel, yet not provide a continuity of support. Financial resources are also needed, especially for individuals engaging in DEI initiatives, which should not be considered “volunteer” work.

Summary

An overall challenge for Georgia Tech is to create a culture that facilitates fostering collaborations and building community. It was suggested that once culture is in place, collaboration and community will follow.

Recommendations

The College of Engineering should

- Collect and share best practices for creating inclusive events at Georgia Tech, curated and shared via school chairs and the DEI committees. Specific examples of events, including contacts, schedules, and budgets, should be included so that groups can learn from each other and not have to continually reinvent the wheel.

- Develop and communicate the CoE strategic plan for outreach outside of Georgia Tech, with the participation of all key stakeholders including CEED, CEISMC, OMED, and the CoE D&I Council. Adequately resource the plan, not relying on faculty volunteer time and the “free” labor of graduate students from underrepresented groups. Make clear how individuals can contribute to the mission.
- Lead Georgia Tech in defining and adopting measures of teaching for use in evaluation, based on data-informed best practices.

Participants

<i>First name</i>	<i>Last name</i>	<i>Unit</i>
Julia	Babensee	BME
Steven	Biegalski	ME
John	Blazeck	ChBE
Victor	Breedveld	ChBE
Darius	Carter	AE
Julie	Champion	ChBE
Brandon	Dixon	ME
Lauren	Garten	MSE
Dave	Goldsman	ISyE
Martha	Grover	ChBE
Joy	Harris	ECE
Tequila	Harris	ME
Jennifer	Hasler	ECE
Laura	Haynes	ECE
Peter	Hesketh	ME
Chris	Jones	ChBE
Kyriaki	Kalaitzidou	ME
Akanksha	Menon	ME
Eugene	Ndiaye	ISyE
Anant	Paravastu	ChBE
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Observers

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